

Introducing CEFR pre-A1 descriptors for language instruction and assessment: Consequences, opportunities and responsibilities

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Das Niveau "Pre-A1" im *Companion Volume to the CEFR* ist vor allem für Lernende gedacht, die in unterschiedlichen Kontexten des Sprachenlernens und in Abhängigkeit von den Lerngelegenheiten, die darin wahrgenommen werden können, ihre ersten Schritte in eine neue Sprache gehen. Das Pre-A1 Niveau eröffnet Perspektiven für die Diagnose und Förderung eines plurilingualen Repertoires und beschreibt Kompetenzen, die als Orientierung für den Anfangsunterricht genutzt werden könnten. Der Beitrag diskutiert diese Potentiale vor dem Hintergrund der Frage, welche Aufgaben sich daraus für Lehrende und in der Entwicklung von Curricula und Sprachlernangeboten Beteiligte ergeben.

1. Introduction

The development and publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in 2001 marked a significant milestone in the Council of Europe's strategy and policy on language learning. The launch of the Companion Volume to the CEFR in 2018 (Council of Europe 2018a) restates and reinforces key messages on the social and cultural value of language learning to EU citizens and the beliefs and best practices regarding purpose and pedagogy. The Companion Volume also presents several strands of work to develop new illustrative descriptors for aspects of language learning that were previously unexplored or to expand existing descriptors in elements that were under-represented. The publication of descriptors for the new pre-A1 level of the CEFR, and the collation of illustrative descriptors for young learners (in two volumes, for ages 7-10 and 11-15) represent two major achievements of the Companion Volume. This paper focuses on the inclusion of descriptors to capture the capabilities of those learners who are just starting out on their journey in learning a new language and could be classified at the pre-A1 level. This heterogeneous group of learners may spend significant time at the beginning levels of language acquisition. They may be at very different stages in their cognitive and L1

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development, or have learning difficulties that impact their progress. Many such learners may not participate in formal learning, but instead learn through their day-to-day life in a place where a particular language is spoken, from proximity to speakers of the language, or through watching television or interacting with online media. For those who do receive formal instruction, it is often for only a few hours each week, which results in relatively slow progress in developing competence.

In 1997, Cambridge Assessment English launched Young Learners English (recently renamed as Young Learners), a suite of three exams assessing speaking, listening and reading/writing designed to provide a fun and motivating introduction to learning English. Working with young learners requires special consideration of their cognitive and linguistic development, the impact of teaching, learning, and assessment on the language learning progress, and their broader academic self-concept. Young learners face challenges from the institutional and educational contexts in which they learn, including traditional conceptions of language teaching, which treat individual languages as separate and independent of each other. This paper will focus on the pre-A1 descriptors and those collated for use with young learners. The development of these new descriptors, including those for mediation, and their potential impact on teaching, learning and assessment, provides a number of opportunities for improvement and innovation, as well as highlighting particular responsibilities of educators and assessment organisations in ensuring positive impact. These areas will be discussed in the context of Learning Oriented Assessment (Jones & Saville 2016), and exemplified with aspects of a recent Young Learners revision.

2. Background to the development of the pre-A1 and young learners descriptors

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (Council of Europe 2001) adopts a practical, action-oriented approach to language learning, positioning the learner as the language user in all aspects of language proficiency assessment, and curriculum and teaching material design.

Taking a historical perspective on the changing approaches to language assessment policy in Europe (Gutierrez Eugenio & Saville 2016; Saville & Gutierrez Eugenio 2017) helps to illustrate the rationale for the original CEFR and situate the inclusion of the pre-A1 and young learners' descriptors in the new Companion Volume. From 1989, increasing mobility and economic growth

highlighted the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity, and the need to develop coherent European standards. Language learning from an early age was emphasised with the aspiration of learners attaining "mother tongue +2" (European Council 2002: 19).

The second period, from 2002 to 2015, saw increased focus on monitoring and benchmarking linguistic competences in school children. Findings based the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) indicated that progress with the goal of "mother tongue +2" was variable across member states but on the whole limited (for a more detailed discussion see Jones 2016).

More recently, there has been a shift from measuring language learning progress to supporting teachers and learners at local levels in developing language learning skills with a focus on innovative pedagogies, and modernising teaching and assessment systems. The measures also explicitly include "promoting a more extensive and intensive use of the CEFR, not only as part of the assessment methods but also as the rationale behind any language education system in Europe" (Saville & Gutierrez Eugenio 2016: 21). With this renewed focus on language learning in context, the development of pre-A1 descriptors, and those for mediation and intercultural competence, assumed new importance. As children form a large cohort of pre-A1 learners, these descriptors are of particular interest for teachers of school-aged children, especially when used in conjunction with the collated list of descriptors for young learners.

The set of descriptors for young learners was compiled from numerous sources including the established European Language Portfolios and *Cambridge English: Young Learners* (Council of Europe 2018b). The CEFR illustrative descriptors have been "developed, validated and calibrated irrespective of specified age groups" (Council of Europe 2018b: 10), indicating a desire to be broad and suitable for learners of all ages and levels. However, given the particular features of children's cognitive development that impact learning, the descriptors for this group, with their specified relevance to age and context and adaptations of the existing CEFR descriptors, are particularly useful for educators. The sources of the descriptors mean that they are embedded within the specific context and experience of working with young learners, and the Council of Europe's documentation describes the intended uses, including as a "roadmap of options for educators, with exemplars mapped from a selection of existing portfolio and assessment sources" (Council of Europe 2018b: 14). The publication of these descriptors elicits opportunities for sharing best practice, mapping the teaching of young learners against lifelong learning aims, and developing curricula that align learning with assessment (Council of Europe 2018b).

2.1 Characteristics of children as beginning language learners

The development of the pre-A1 descriptors on the CEFR offers numerous opportunities for beginning language learners. However, the reason for learning a second language and the needs and strategic competences available to the learner are very different for children compared to adults and should be considered when exploring the possibilities and limitations offered by the new descriptors.

Young learners' general cognitive abilities, first language skills, and language repertoire are still in development; therefore, some components of the second language will be inaccessible to young learners (Field 2018a). Specifically, young children's more limited working memory capacity (Meadows 2006), metacognitive awareness (Mills & Keil 2004) and world knowledge (Goswami 2008) impact their processing of language input, effective use of strategies, and ability to plan speech or use interactional skills (Casillas 2014; Field 2018a). Importantly, young learners' first language skills are also developing and impact on development of second language skills (Ziegler & Goswami 2005; Field 2018b). Additionally, educational experience such as learning a language in immersion settings will affect the rate of developing competence. These factors have a considerable impact on teaching approaches and learning objectives. Ensuring that they are accounted for in assessment is also central to the validity and fitness-for-purpose of a test for young learners.

2.2 The *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams and the context of the revision

The Cambridge English pre-A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers exams take into account young learners' more limited cognitive skills and L1 language development in a number of ways. The amount of reading and writing in the exams is limited and tasks for all four skills are supported by illustrations. Test tasks are scaffolded, gradually progressing from controlled tasks/questions to more open-ended ones. Task content focuses on concrete, rather than abstract, ideas.

In keeping with the low-stakes nature of the Young Learners exams, high-level results are reported as a number of 'shields'. A maximum of five shields can be awarded in each of the three papers. As part of the Cambridge Assessment English continual improvement cycle (Cambridge English 2016), a revision project commenced for pre-A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers in 2014 to

ensure that the exams give young learners the maximum opportunity to demonstrate their English language skills (Albrecht & Dunlop 2018).

Taking a mixed methods approach (Moeller, Creswell & Saville 2016), qualitative and quantitative data was gathered from a range of sources, including questionnaire and interview data from teachers, parents and candidates as well as examiner and test developer evaluations, content and psychometric analysis of the tasks and papers, and finally reviews from language assessment experts. The revised assessments were launched in January 2018. In the sections that follow, key aspects of the revision and its links to the new descriptors are discussed with reference to the opportunities provided by the new pre-A1 and young learners' descriptors for language teaching, learning and assessment.

3. Opportunities in teaching, learning and assessment provided by the pre-A1 level and descriptors for young learners

There are two major benefits of the launch of the new descriptors for pre-A1 level on the CEFR and those for young learners. Firstly, teaching, learning and assessment for younger learners can be more closely aligned to make their early experiences more coherent and to reinforce the action-oriented approach to language learning. Secondly, they also serve to promote and champion plurilingual approaches to teaching and learning as part of this alignment. These benefits are framed in terms of the Cambridge English approach to Learning Oriented Assessment.

3.1 Learning Oriented Assessment (LOA)

Several authors use the term Learning Oriented Assessment to describe the idea that assessment of all types generates evidence about learning that can be used to sustain and inform further progress (e.g. Purpura 2004; Carless 2007; Turner & Purpura 2016). Jones and Saville (2016) advanced a systemic approach to language assessment that comprises all of the major stakeholders involved in the learning process, including assessment organisations. Their model links the functions of assessment in a coherent way to improve learning processes and outcomes. The authors refer to this model as Learning Oriented Assessment (LOA).

This systemic approach is represented in two ways. Figure 1 shows the roles of teacher and assessment provider. The vertical dimension characterises progression through lower to higher proficiency levels, aligned with an interpretive framework of reference such as the CEFR. The individual differences of the learner with respect to experiences, learning needs, language skills profile and cognition are represented on the horizontal.

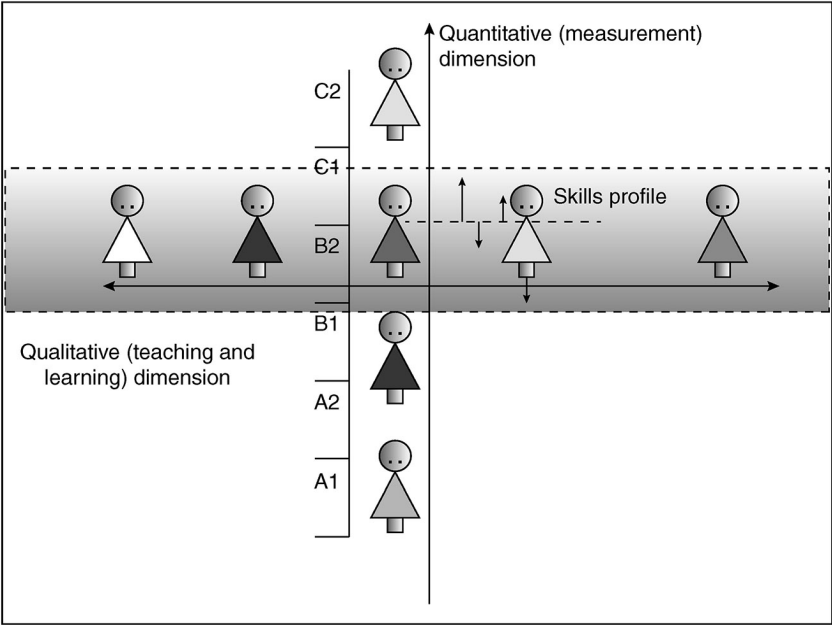


Figure 1: Relationship between classroom and large-scale assessment in Learning Oriented Assessment

Figure 2 depicts four intersecting 'worlds' of learning; alignment of these worlds ensures a focus on coherent high-level learning goals, with common understanding of how learning outcomes relate to the interpretive framework.

The *personal* world describes factors in the individual's cognition that affect learning such as intrinsic motivation, confidence, interest and experience. The *social* world depicts learning outcomes in real-world contexts as well as the extrinsic motivation, opportunities and needs of the learner. The world of *education* is where most types of assessment traditionally happen in subject areas defined by curricula, and comprises the formal structures and experiences to promote effective learning. The world of *assessment* is complementary to the

world of education and enables language learning progress to be predicted, measured and described through defined constructs.

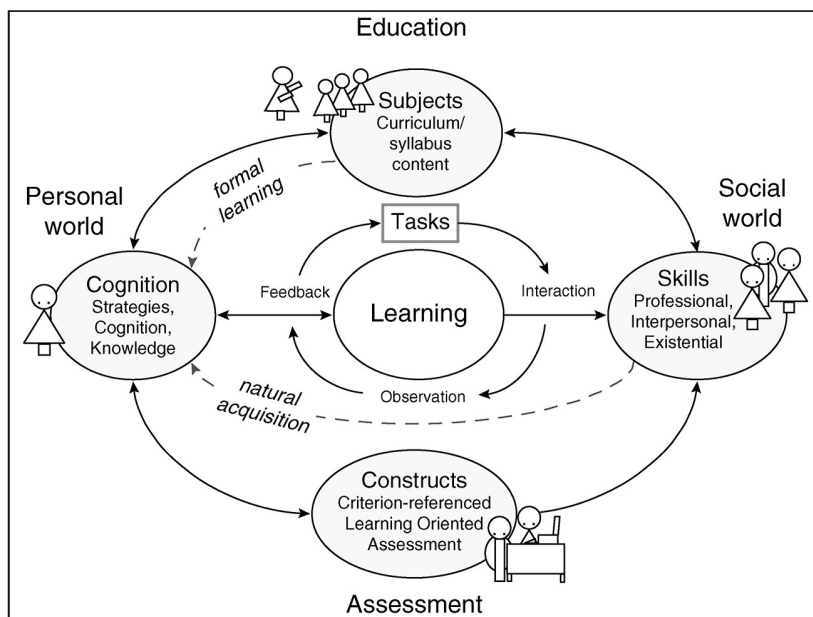


Figure 2: The four worlds of learning in the Learning Oriented Assessment model

3.2 Promoting plurilingual repertoires

In describing the organisation of language provision in compulsory education, Saville (in press) and Kunnan and Saville (in preparation) comment on the tension between contemporary views of language learning and curricular as well as pedagogical practices. Language teaching approaches are traditional, introducing foreign languages in addition to the language of schooling as discrete curriculum subjects, with limited teaching hours and little acknowledgement of the student's competence in, and use of, other languages. It has been argued that in order to progress young language learners' skills and competence beyond the level outlined in the ESLC⁴, greater emphasis on the development of plurilingual repertoires and the ecology of the learning and assessment system is needed (Gutierrez Eugenio & Saville 2017; Saville in press). In terms of LOA,

4 (First) European Survey on Language Competences (see Jones 2016).

pedagogical approaches that embrace plurilingualism encompass the personal and social worlds of the learner, as well as aspects of the educational world (Jones & Saville 2016).

Plurilingualism has always been central to the approach to language learning advanced in the CEFR. It acknowledges the interrelationship and connections between languages at the level of the individual and more broadly, and recognises that mastery across various languages can be uneven and dynamic. Descriptions of plurilingual competence mirror modern conceptions of children's cognitive development and current thinking on best practice in teaching, making the approach particularly appropriate for younger learners. The idiosyncratic nature of developing plurilingual competence, involving different personal trajectories, representations and relationships (Coste 2002), aligns with post-Piagetian conceptions of cognition, which describe the extent of inter- and intra-individual variability in development (Karmiloff-Smith 1979; Siegler 2006). Piccardo (2013) notes that teachers adopting plurilingual approaches can draw on students' crosslinguistic and crosscultural competences and emphasise the metalinguistic and metacognitive abilities they possess. This has the potential to raise learners' self-esteem, agency and self-efficacy. As teachers may not speak the students' first language, plurilingual approaches have the added advantage of situating the learner as the expert and prompting autonomy and reflection on learning.

Cambridge English (2016) argues that better outcomes for school language learning can be achieved by taking account of the micro-level realities of how languages are used in daily life. For younger learners, the richness of plurilingual approaches and acceptance of code-switching as an important communicative strategy is key.

The new Companion Volume scales on mediation are particularly relevant in this regard, although descriptors of pre-A1 mediation are limited, perhaps in part because children's cognitive development limits the extent to which they can mediate effectively, making it difficult to describe performance in this domain.

3.3 Embedding action-oriented approaches

The CEFR Companion Volume is explicit in its aims to promote and positively influence education, curriculum reform and pedagogy, as part of the Council of Europe's mission to ensure the right to quality, inclusive education (Council of Europe 2018a). The action-oriented model outlined in the CEFR of language learners as social agents interacting with a social world and with control over their learning has already had significant impact on language instruction in Europe and beyond. This highly practical approach focuses on real-life tasks and interactions,

in contrast to linear progression through a curriculum focusing heavily on language structures and grammar. The descriptors emphasise the learner's ability and communicative competence rather than focusing on deficiencies in their language learning. According to the Companion Volume, the action-oriented approach

[...] clearly suggests planning backwards from learners' real-life communicative needs, with consequent alignment between curriculum teaching and assessment. A focus on co-construction of meaning between student and teacher, or amongst students indicates the centrality of communicative language activities and strategies that also occur in the real world (Council of Europe 2018a: 30).

Relating to LOA, this aspect of learning and teaching combines the social and educational worlds.

The descriptors also allow for current good practice to be embedded more widely. The European Language Portfolio (ELP) initiative, from which some descriptors have been taken, was introduced in 2000 and many versions are in use, and often implemented in parallel. The collation of the set of young learners' descriptors provides a framework for the ongoing sharing of good practice in the use of ELPs themselves and the associated collateral such as user manuals, research reports and studies, and professional development training. As the CEFR seeks to promote positive attitudes to language learning for all learners of all ages, the young learners' descriptors, while not calibrated to the CEFR illustrative descriptors, nonetheless align the skills, tasks and challenges that young learners might develop with those encountered by more cognitively mature learners working on the same area of competence. Areas where the level of cognitive or conceptual challenge indicated in illustrative descriptors of the CEFR is unsuitable for young learners can also be pinpointed. This allows progression pathways to be mapped for young learners to move from one CEFR level to the next.

For learners of all ages, the value of the pre-A1 descriptors is clear within this context. Learning a language is a long journey, and a new beginner can be somewhat daunted. The pre-A1 descriptors provide structure for those first months or years in learning a language. They illustrate highly practical tasks that the learner is likely to face in their day-to-day life and provide a framework for teachers to plan and outline a curriculum and devise authentic tasks that reflect these communicative needs. For those learning a language for only a few hours a week, the pre-A1 descriptors provide a roadmap to measure progress which previously may have been more opaque. Rixon and Papp (2018) comment that descriptor-based assessment highlights to all stakeholders that language use is more than knowledge of linguistic items such as vocabulary or grammatical structures. For certain groups of learners, such as newly-arrived immigrants, the

practical and action-oriented approach endorsed by the descriptors is particularly important in mapping out authentic situations driven by a clear need to communicate.

3.4 Emphasising the role of mediation

Despite the limited linguistic resources available to pre-A1 learners in their chosen language, the illustrative descriptors of mediation are important. Isolating language use into one of the four skills, while useful for assessment contexts, is not representative of real-world contexts. The CEFR instead categorises communicative language strategies as relating to reception, production, interaction or mediation. Mediation encompasses all three former strategies. Mediation activities include supporting communication between persons who are unable to communicate directly, such as being an intermediary between speakers of different languages. The complex cognitive requirements of mediation make it difficult to define descriptors at the pre-A1 level, and particularly for children, that are attainable. However, the inclusion of two related to writing and speaking, and the clear progression that is evident to the A1 level descriptors, is important. Given that pre-A1 learners may be using language for travel, business and managing contexts where family or colleagues are not able to use the target language, these descriptors provide a focus for curriculum design that emphasises these language uses. For children, it is often assumed that the mediation descriptors are less relevant. However, greater adoption of plurilingual classrooms brings mediation to the fore. And outside of the classroom, immigrant children, for example, may often have to act as mediators for parents or guardians in a wide range of situations, and the inclusion of descriptors at the pre-A1 level recognises this responsibility.

4. Responsibilities for teachers, policy makers and test providers related to the pre-A1 level and young learners' descriptors

The potential positive impact of the work contained in the new Companion Volume to the CEFR is far-reaching for learners and teachers. The opportunities that emerge from the publication of the new pre-A1 and young learners' descriptors have been outlined in earlier sections. However, the particular characteristics of this subset of language learners also gives rise to a set of

responsibilities related to learning, teaching, policy and assessment to safeguard their positive impact. The revision of the *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams will be discussed in this context.

In the Cambridge English model of LOA, the world of assessment is recognised as an influence in shaping the other worlds that the learner inhabits. An important consideration of the introduction of the pre-A1 and young learners' descriptors is the potential consequences of their use in assessment, the washback that they have on teaching and learning, and the wider social impacts. Cambridge Assessment English has long adopted the principle of impact by design (Cambridge English 2016) to ensure from the outset that test design and production processes consider how the test might be used in practice, allowing positive impacts to be planned and negative or unintended consequences to be anticipated and mitigated as far as possible. These potential impacts include washback effects in the classroom and curriculum developments, the appropriate reporting and use of test scores, and how candidates prepare for the test.

For teachers, the action-oriented approach of the CEFR offers the opportunity to underpin curriculum development with practical tasks and learning situations that are driven by a need to communicate and reflective of highly practical situations. The descriptors provide a scaffolding for designing appropriate authentic tasks for younger learners to contextualise their learning, and a framework for diagnostic and formative feedback to learners (and for young learners, their parents). However, for young learners who may be less confident, particularly in productive language skills, it is important that the descriptors do not function merely as checklist to serve rote memorisation of language, and that assessments do not reward solely this type of learning. The descriptors indicate typical or likely performances and require further elaboration particularly with a view to the quality of performance and contextual factors (Rixon & Papp 2018). Thus, the descriptors have a role in supporting the development of curricula and teaching materials by teachers, assessment providers and publishers that are age- and context-appropriate, and that support the action-oriented approach, reflecting the personal and social worlds of the learner. Furthermore, if plurilingual approaches are to be truly embedded, then using different languages to communicate meaning and understanding, particularly in mediation activities, could be permitted.

In the broader context, test providers and educators must be mindful of the messages – intentional or unintentional – given about the relative value of learning some languages over others, and the impact this may have on minority languages (Kunnan & Saville in preparation). This is particularly pertinent for the collation of young learners' descriptors, including those at pre-A1, as despite their derivation from a wide range of sources across Europe, the majority are in

English. The renewed focus of the Companion Volume on plurilingualism is timely and looks to celebrate and integrate the variety of languages in the classroom. Cambridge Assessment English has continuously highlighted the benefits of adopting models of language learning that embrace the range of plurilingual competences that younger learners could capitalise on (e.g. Saville in press).

Finally, test providers have a responsibility to communicate the purpose of an assessment in a clear and transparent way to potential customers, and conversely to be clear about what the assessment cannot do. This communication is a central pillar of the test's fitness-for-purpose. It is important that summative reporting is at a level of granularity that is reflective of the limitations of testing younger learners, particularly with respect to their intra-individual variability in language production and their engagement with the assessment situation.

5. The *Cambridge English: Young Learners* revision and alignment to the CEFR

From the outset, the Young Learners exams sought to ensure the action-oriented approach to learning was built into their design. Great care is taken with these exams and their associated curricula to ensure that every aspect is situated in the world of the child – vocabulary, contexts and tasks are firmly rooted in the experience and understanding of children. Children may have different (or more limited) cultural experience and knowledge and in tandem with their developing reasoning and inferencing skills, this may influence how they perform in assessment tasks to a greater extent than it might with adults (Shaw & Weir 2007; Rixon & Papp 2018).

The pre-A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers revision project involved a number of modifications to the tasks to provide further opportunity for young learners to demonstrate their English skills appropriately (Albrecht, Davies & Cullen 2018). For example, the genre of the text in pre-A1 Starters Reading/Writing Part 4 was changed from a riddle to a short, semi-factual text, to ensure it reflects the types of texts that primary school-aged children are familiar with. New A1 Movers and A2 Flyers Reading/Writing tasks were introduced to encourage further the types of productive writing that A1 and A2 level learners are capable of according to the CEFR descriptors (Davies & Dunlop 2018). Several revisions were made to the speaking tests to support more spoken production, and thus to allow performances to better reflect the capabilities suggested in the CEFR descriptors and Can Do statements.

Furthermore, the vocabulary lists were updated and words were added to complete the lexical sets that are included in the exams and teaching materials. New high-frequency words were added, as well as other words that reflect how young learners naturally use English (Stevenson, 2018). Overall, the vocabulary lists increased by 137 words (11%); the new vocabulary size is in line with the expectations for each CEFR level (Milton & Alexiou 2009).⁵

While Cambridge Assessment English research has shown that the Young Learners exam certificates provide useful feedback to learners and are viewed positively by teachers (Ashton, Salamoura & Diaz 2012; Breeze & Roothoof 2013), adoption of LOA principles indicated they could be further improved. New statements of results have been developed which will provide more detailed information about learners' strengths and areas for improvement, as well as suggested learning activities to help improve English language skills. These statements of results will complement the more summative information on achievement provided in the certificates (Dunlop, Elliott & Wright 2018).

During the revision of the *Cambridge English: Young Learners* exams, a number of the responsibilities discussed above were considered and accounted for in the process. A particular concern in the assessment of young children is the extent to which the results of any assessment performance can be securely linked to the CEFR via standard-setting, and the educational decisions which might be made on the basis of that linking.

We have already discussed the purpose of Young Learners exams, and how the task design accommodates the child's developing cognitive and linguistic competence. However, the magnitude of individual differences can be particularly impactful in younger children. Furthermore, the affective and social demands of a testing situation may affect children more than adults; hunger, tiredness or rapport with an examiner may have a relatively greater impact on test performance. The extent to which the sample of productive language generated in a task is sufficient to confidently allow for alignment to the CEFR may vary. Other challenges relate to the methods available for standard-setting. The standard-setting process typically requires an expert panel to come to a shared understanding of the criteria of reference, in this case the CEFR descriptors, and agree upon the key characteristics of a "minimally competent" candidate at different CEFR levels (Khalifa & French 2009). Experts are instructed to make their judgements of test items or candidate responses with the minimally competent candidate in mind. Even with sufficient standardisation, such judgements can be difficult as a minimally competent candidate may be

5 Further examples of the types of revisions made can be found at <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/Images/419671-young-learners-2018-exam-update.pdf>.

particularly hard to imagine at the lowest levels of proficiency (cf Jones 2016). The limited amount of detail provided in the CEFR pre-A1 descriptors adds further difficulty to characterising pre-A1 level performance. Thus for Young Learners exams, Cambridge Assessment English has tended to focus less on formal standard-setting, taking instead a wide-ranging approach to assembling the validity argument. A detailed discussion of these issues can be found in Papp (2018).

Despite the challenges in appropriately reporting outcomes, part of the *Cambridge English: Young Learners* revision addressed the need for a clear explanation of the alignment of the number of shields for the pre-A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers exams with other exams assessing the same proficiency level and to the CEFR pre-A1 to A2 levels.

Several projects were undertaken to inform this alignment: The assessment scales for speaking were revised (Dunlop 2016; Dunlop & Cullen 2018). New speaking scale descriptors were drafted which were linked to the new CEFR descriptors for young learners where possible, and revised for consistency across the three exams (Papp 2015). The new scales underwent external review by language assessment experts, and subsequent trials revealed that examiners were able to assess young learners' speaking assessments with more accuracy using the revised speaking assessment scales. However, there were very few candidates with the lowest levels of speaking performance so it was not possible to draw firm conclusions about the extent to which the speaking scales could discriminate candidate performance at this level (Dunlop 2016). Further data from the revised Young Learners examinations, supplemented by increasing use and understanding of the young learners' descriptors, may allow more confident judgements at the lower levels in future.

The task types in Reading/Writing and Listening papers were modified to increase consistency across Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers exams and to ensure appropriate progression across all three. In addition, a psychometric scale alignment study linked scales across the three exams and determined CEFR boundaries (see Figure 3) using hybrid examinations, comprising combinations of items from the Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers, A2 Flyers and A2 Key for Schools exams (Elliott & Dunlop 2018).

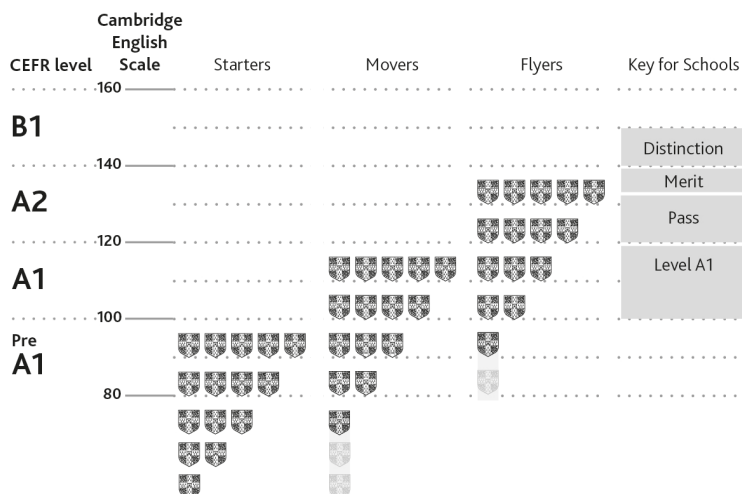


Figure 3: Design of alignment between Pre-A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers, A2 Key for Schools, the CEFR, and the Cambridge English Scale

6. Conclusions and future opportunities

The introduction of the new pre-A1 level descriptors in the CEFR Companion Volume has the potential to support a wide range of learners as they begin to learn a language through structured classroom activities or less formally through exposure to contexts and speakers of that language. In particular, the pre-A1 level descriptors can provide diagnostic and instructional support for adult learners with limited time or a lack of formal education, those who have an L1 very dissimilar to the target language they are learning, and those with learning disabilities. Together with the new sets of descriptors for young learners, and for mediation, the descriptors emphasise the strengths and challenges of children's language learning and offer support for further embedding of plurilingual approaches in school language learning. Furthermore, the descriptors serve to support and sustain learning-oriented assessment approaches through the opportunities for diagnostic feedback and mapping progression in learning. The revision of the *Cambridge English: Young Learners* examinations reflected the pre-A1 and young learners' descriptors where possible. As more data is gathered on the new exams, opportunities exist to investigate how the descriptors support teachers and to collate examples of good classroom practice directly related to

their use. A particular challenge for the future is to further define and describe mediation at the pre-A1 levels. Learners at this level undoubtedly use mediation strategies in real-world communication scenarios and the concept of mediation is central to the plurilingual approaches discussed throughout this paper.⁶

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