

Assessing progress in language learning at Key Stages 2 and 3

Rationale

The framework has the look and feel of a proficiency assessment framework, providing illustrative descriptors of what learners can do when they apply their knowledge in communicative tasks. As such the descriptors describe emerging linguistic competence as evidenced through performance in each of the skills, as well as their applied use of grammatical structures. The supporting vocabulary strand describes a repertoire of knowledge that learners draw on, but it is also framed within the context of the act of either understanding or producing that vocabulary. In most respects, it avoids too close an orientation to the specific content of a course. It does not specify anything that could be interpreted as the week's or term's work.

However, in the detail concerning the number of words, or the listing of specific structures, or the number of topics or length of interaction time, the aim has been to give teachers more specific guidance about the broader features of progression within classroom language learning, in which breadth of topic coverage, length of utterance or interaction or extent to which written language is generated independently (to name just a few) are all very significant indicators of progress.

One thing I have tried to avoid is providing descriptors that can be reduced to a list of 'things to do to reach the next level'. There is a fine line between description and prescription. That is not to say that teachers and learners should not look at the descriptors for the next step to help inform their target-setting, but that the descriptors do not provide an itemised checklist of things learners need to 'do' to move up to the next level. Each step describes the features of competence representative of approximately 30 hours of learning, which is approximately a term's language lessons at KS3 and KS4, such that drafting a weekly, half-termly or termly target directly from the next step's descriptor would not be fit for purpose.

Existing frameworks

In the development of the illustrative descriptors in this framework, I drew heavily on several key documents that already describe progression in language learning. These are as follows:

1 The Common European Framework

I borrowed the suggested guided learning hours (GLH) for the first three levels A1, A2 and B1 to inform the overall shape of progression. There are some variations in the suggested GLH, but I used the Alliance Française model (<http://www.alliancefr.ph/en/how-long-will-it-take-me-to-speak-french>) as it refers to one of the main foreign languages taught in schools in England.

	GLH
A1	60-100
A2	160-200
B1	360-400
B2	560-650
C1	810-950
C2	1060-1200

For reference, there are other GLH for comparison here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages#Common_reference_levels

The GLH were helpful in deciding the approximate progress we can expect during each key stage. All primary and secondary schools vary in their allocation of curriculum time for language learning, but here I have taken as a starting point 30 minutes per week in Years 3 and 4, 60 minutes in Years 5 & 6, and 150 minutes per week across KS3 and KS4. (This equates to 3 x 50 minute lessons across KS3 and KS4. This is a rough average. In fact, our dual linguists have less and our single linguist classes have slightly more than this.)

Year	Hours of tuition	Cumulative hours	CEFR Level
3	19	19	
4	19	38	
5	38	76	
6	38	114	A1
7	95	209	A2
8	95	304	A2+
9	95	399	
10	95	494	B1
11	95	589	
12	190	779	B2
13	190	969	C1

We can see from the table that, with this number of GLH, we might reasonably expect learners to achieve at least A1 competence by the end of KS2, and at least A2 by the end of Y8 (assuming the curriculum allocation hours given), making significant progress towards B1 but not reaching it by the end of Y9. I used this information to peg the key progression points A1 and A2 within the new framework.

For further comparison, it is worth remembering that the CEFR levels have been equated to other frameworks, including former national curriculum, the Languages Ladder levels, and current GCSE levels. Those equivalences are as follows:

CEFR Level	Languages Ladder	NC	current GCSE / AS / A2	new GCSE
A1	1-3	1-3	Entry 1-3	
A2	4-6	4-6	F-D	1-3
B1	7-9	7-8 + EP	C-A*	4-8
B2	10-12		AS/A	9
C1	13-15		Degree	
C2	16-17		Degree +	

NB: The positioning of the new GCSE grades has been done as a result of information received about the alignment of the new grades with current (i.e. that the current C = the new 4). I have aligned the new 9 with B2, as result of comparing the new GCSE assessment objectives (available from www.education.gov.uk/nationalcurriculum) with the CEFR.

2 The Languages Ladder and the former National Curriculum levels

Both the Languages Ladder and the former NC level descriptors have informed the descriptors in this new framework, which is unsurprising as they themselves borrow heavily on the CEFR. However, as the starting point for the new framework had to be the statutory Programmes of Study at KS2 and KS3, additional strands have been included. In addition, there has been an attempt to address some of the difficulties in the former NC level descriptors.

The National Curriculum levels were initially supposed to give you an idea of how your child was doing at the end of each key stage. These were supposed to be approximations reached by teacher judgment considering all their work over the previous years, and based on reasonable expectations of achievement based on the national profile. They were never intended either to be used to mark individual pieces of work, assigned to single assessments or to set lesson objectives! Over time the drive for measurement has meant that NC levels have been put to increasingly reductionist use, including in most schools the use of invented 'sub-levels', over which there is the haziest understanding and consistency!

Furthermore, there were several difficulties in the formulation of the descriptors themselves. First, they do not describe anything close to equal progression steps in learning and yet, teachers and departments are expected to produce linear progress of, on average two sub-levels of progress per year, two full levels of progress across Key Stage 3. This is problematic in languages where the distance between level 4 and 5, say, is far greater than between level 3 and 4. Second, the need to apply levels to individual tasks and tests inevitably meant a reductionist interpretation of each level, such that a pupil producing a piece of work with an example of two tenses is awarded a level 5 or a text book passage with a smattering of three time frames is instantly branded level 6, even where other features (e.g. the speed of delivery, the predictable nature of the material, the straightforward sentence structure) might make it more indicative of a lower level overall. These distortions have not been helpful. The preoccupation with tenses as the main indicator of linguistic progression has been problematic and there has been an effort to address this within the new framework. Finally, it has been extremely unhelpful to describe achievement at the upper end of the spectrum only attainable in reality by those with native level ability. Levels 8 and EP have been virtually unused in most schools at KS3 for assessment and reporting of progress within modern languages.

3 The draft APP (Assessing Pupils' Progress) Assessment Guidelines

Although never published, there was an attempt in 2009 to create a languages version of the APP guidelines. These are still in use in many schools in English and Maths and have formed the basis of a new assessment framework in several schools that I am aware of. I referred also to the wording in these descriptors in the formulation of those in this framework.

4 The renewed KS3 Framework

This non-statutory revised version (2009) of the original KS3 Framework for

Languages (2003) is under-used in my view. No money was provided for its dissemination and it therefore got rather lost.

5 The Professional Development Consortium in Modern Foreign Languages (PDC in MFL) assessment framework

The PDC's work has been a highly positive development for teachers of languages. It has set out to distil from empirical research some core principles of language teaching and learning. Following on from this, the group has developed an alternative assessment framework, which I have drawn on heavily, particularly on some of the features of its supporting strands.

6 The KS2 Framework

It would have been nonsense to generate descriptors for progression within language learning at KS3 without using the KS2 Framework to underpin the statements. Whilst non-statutory, it remains the best source of guidance to teachers planning their curriculum, their teaching and their assessment at KS2.

The 10 language learning steps

i) Framework structure

The 10 steps framework sets out to define progression in terms of the attainment targets in the new Programmes of Study at KS2 and KS3. Each 'step' consists of illustrative proficiency descriptors, a set of 'can do' statements. The PoS attainment targets have been set into strands, where they refer to sufficiently different aspects of linguistic proficiency. There are two strands for listening, two for speaking (with two further sub-strands for each) that correspond to interaction and production respectively, three for reading, two for writing, one for grammar and one for vocabulary. The intention is not that each strand would be reported on separately, but that at all times a more holistic 'best fit' judgement would be made for each skill.

Recognising (with some reluctance) that in the current climate the drive for the linear measurement of progress is a dominant factor, and that achievement-focused assessment is here to stay, the creation of this new framework has attempted to describe roughly equal steps, whilst taking into account the different time allocations at KS2 and KS3. The result is that Steps 1-4 are a little further apart (representing approx. 114 hours of learning at KS2), Steps 5 – 7 are a little closer together (representing the next 142.5 hours) and Steps 8 – 10 represent a further 142.5 hours. The KS3 steps are therefore fairly equally spaced with 47.5 hours of teaching (or six months of lessons) between them.

ii) Expected progress and predictions

In each academic year we must anticipate a spread of achievement. The majority of learners whose entry point is Step 4 might expect to achieve Step 7 at the end of Y8, with the most able achieving Step 8. Those same learners would progress to Step 9 by the end of Y9, with the most able achieving Step 10. The range of expected rates and levels of progress are more easily captured in tabular form:

Year	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Steps range KS2 & KS3	1-2	1-3	2-4	2-4(+)	3-6	5-8	6-10

By the end of KS3, it should be possible to generate an expected range of future performance in the new GCSE exams (first teaching September 2016 to current Y8). This will, of course, be at best highly speculative, until we have had the first cohort through the examination in 2018, but we will nevertheless still need to generate these sorts of predictions:

Year 9 Step	6	7	8	9	10
new GCSE predicted grade range	1-4	4-6	6-8	7-9	8-9

iii) Additional requirements

To enable the framework to function as a useful assessment tool within a school, several additions are required. These would most likely form key parts of the scheme of work:

- 1) a list of 200 non-cognate words for each language taught
- 2) an overview list of the main topics and sub-topics to be learnt throughout the key stage
- 3) a list of the types of text to be included in listening and reading tasks
- 4) a list of the grammatical structures to be learnt, including when they are first introduced, subsequently re-used, and when independent use is expected. Note that the grammar strand included within the framework itself is not as generic as it might at first sight appear, being informed by the KS2 and KS3 Spanish schemes of work in use in our schools.