

Identifying A Learner's Level of Foreign Language: Proficiency Tests and Underlying Cognitive Processes for Receptive Skills

Yaroslav Vladimirovich Golovko

English teacher at Primary Education faculty, Chirchik State Pedagogical University, Tashkent region, Uzbekistan

Abstract: One of the most frequently asked questions among foreign-language teachers of new groups of students deals with the ways to identify the level of target language proficiency of the learners. Modern resource databases propose numerous ready-made tests for that, which often causes the teachers to hesitate about the choice. This article aims to distribute receptive language skills of reading and listening across the proficiency levels of CEFR framework, thereby answering the 'how' question about the principles of comprehension and supplying necessary data for the further design or selection of proficiency tests.

Keywords: proficiency tests, receptive skills, CEFR, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, cognitive processes.

Introduction

The reasons why it is important to know a learner's level of foreign language. Learning a non-native language is a long process, which often involves changing several language-teaching programs and teachers. For obvious reasons, learning should not start anew with every change of this kind. To ensure the continuity of the process, design and administer a language course to non-beginner learners appropriately, it is critical to identify their existing level, which is a necessary condition for the learning experience to be at its best. It is also important to track the development of the learner's proficiency during the course as an indication of progress and possible source of ideas to adjust the course to the needs of the learner. Level assessment can take a number of forms, which shall be chosen depending on the nature and stage of the course and the individual features of a particular learner.

Language proficiency test. The most widespread and reliable way to identify the current language skills of a foreign-language learner is a proficiency test. Before designing or selecting one, a teacher needs to understand the concept of language proficiency. A good working definition can be proposed, which is based on the Common European Framework of Reference CEFR description (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 9-10): "Foreign language proficiency is the ability to use a foreign language to communicate effectively. It requires a combination of communicative language competences and general competences that allow the foreign language learner to perform communicative language activities (reception, production, interaction and mediation), which involve one or a combination of the following skills: reading, listening, speaking or writing." As seen from the definition, the four language skills form the foundation of proficiency alongside competences. CEFR proposes six basic levels to label a foreign-language learner's proficiency in the four skills, each having its set of 'can-do' descriptors, or the descriptors of cognitive processes. The descriptors can, and should, be used as the criteria to select/design an appropriate proficiency test as well as interpret its results. This article will narrow its scope on receptive skills only as its format does not allow covering productive skills due to the existing subdivision of each of the latter into productive and interactive subtypes.

When it comes to reading, CEFR provides the following subdivision of cognitive processes by proficiency levels:

CEFR level	Overall reading comprehension
C2	Can understand virtually all types of texts including abstract, structurally complex, or highly colloquial literary and non-literary writings. Can understand

	a wide range of long and complex texts, appreciating subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning.
C1	Can understand in detail lengthy, complex texts, whether or not these relate to their own area of speciality, provided they can reread difficult sections. Can understand a wide variety of texts including literary writings, newspaper or magazine articles, and specialised academic or professional publications, provided there are opportunities for rereading and they have access to reference tools.
B2	Can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low-frequency idioms.
B1	Can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to their field of interest with a satisfactory level of comprehension.
A2	Can understand short, simple texts on familiar matters of a concrete type which consist of high-frequency everyday or job-related language. Can understand short, simple texts containing the highest frequency vocabulary, including a proportion of shared international vocabulary items.
A1	Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words and basic phrases and rereading as required.
Pre-A1	Can recognise familiar words/signs accompanied by pictures, such as a fast-food restaurant menu illustrated with photos or a picture book using familiar vocabulary.

The focus of Levels Pre-A1 to A2 is on short, simple, non-abstract texts, which means that these learners can handle the lower-level reading processes (not beyond establishing propositional meaning). Careful reading is the main purpose at this level due to the limited grammatical and lexical knowledge. Word recognition, lexical access and syntactic parsing leading to the establishment of propositional meaning make up the general focus of learners at these reading levels. B1-level learners are able to handle the comprehension of a wider range of texts and engage in making straightforward inferences and building a mental model, for example, to identify the author’s purpose or identify attitudes or opinions, i.e. they indicate the ability to decode the basic meaning. The awareness and choice of reading strategies characterize Level B2, where learners choose to read quickly or in detail at different text levels depending on the task and the range of texts they can deal with is wide. B2-level learners also engage into higher-order thinking to generate propositional meaning of the text. Level C1 indicates learners’ ability to understand how the ideas in a text are related and to construct a mental model and textual representation. This ability greatly broadens the range of text genres that can be comprehended in both academic and literary spheres. C2-level learners shift up to the level of intertext and are able to compare or contrast multiple texts, as well as become appreciative of “subtle distinctions in style” contained within these texts (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 54). Finally, learners at this level are more able to employ the global text organization to aid understanding and build the structure of a text on different levels of meaning conveyed. CEFR listening comprehension proficiency levels provide the following breakdown of the cognitive processes involved:

CEFR level	Overall listening comprehension
C2	Can understand with ease virtually any kind of language, whether live or broadcast, delivered at fast natural speed.
C1	Can understand enough to follow extended discourse on abstract and complex topics beyond their own field, though they may need to confirm occasional details, especially if the variety is unfamiliar. Can recognise a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms, appreciating register shifts. Can follow extended discourse even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly.

B2	Can understand standard language or a familiar variety, live or broadcast, on both familiar and unfamiliar topics normally encountered in personal, social, academic or vocational life. Only extreme [auditory/visual] background noise, inadequate discourse structure and/or idiomatic usage influence the ability to understand. Can understand the main ideas of propositionally and linguistically complex discourse on both concrete and abstract topics delivered in standard language or a familiar variety, including technical discussions in their field of specialisation. Can follow extended discourse and complex lines of argument, provided the topic is reasonably familiar, and the direction of the argument is signposted by explicit markers.
B1	Can understand straightforward factual information about common everyday or job-related topics, identifying both general messages and specific details, provided people articulate clearly in a generally familiar variety. Can understand the main points made in clear standard language or a familiar variety on familiar matters regularly encountered at work, school, leisure, etc., including short narratives.
A2	Can understand enough to be able to meet needs of a concrete type, provided people articulate clearly and slowly. Can understand phrases and expressions related to areas of most immediate priority (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment), provided people articulate clearly and slowly.
A1	Can follow language which is very slow and carefully articulated, with long pauses for them to assimilate meaning. Can recognise concrete information (e.g. places and times) on familiar topics encountered in everyday life, provided it is delivered slowly and clearly.
Pre-A1	Can understand short, very simple questions and statements, provided they are delivered slowly and clearly and accompanied by visuals or manual gestures to support understanding and repeated if necessary. Can recognise everyday, familiar words/signs, provided they are delivered clearly and slowly in a clearly defined, familiar everyday context. Can recognise numbers, prices, dates and days of the week, provided they are delivered slowly and clearly in a defined, familiar everyday context.

The focus of Levels Pre-A1 to A2 is on the tasks requiring learners to cope with the lower-level cognitive processes while listening: decoding, lexical search and parsing. Their minds are mainly able to focus on understanding concrete, factual information that is topically familiar. The natural rate of speech needs to be made slower for them to comprehend, the availability of choice from among optional answers and immediate contextual grammatical forms must aid in comprehension, which suggests learners at these levels do not have sufficient automaticity of the lower-level processes to engage in the higher-level processes involved in enriching meaning. B2-level learners indicate the ability to reconstruct the parts of the utterances they have misheard to restore the intended meaning, lead by understanding main ideas and following the sequences of argument, which also applies to abstract topics. Levels B2 and C1 suggest the evidence of understanding cultural knowledge to help enrich the meaning and build up the overall discourse.

Discussion and Conclusions. This article has focused upon proficiency tests as the most widespread method to identify a learner’s current level of foreign language. The above findings can help a teacher answer the question: “How do foreign language learners read and listen?” The answers provided herein shall be subject to further processing on the part of the teacher/test designer to guide him/her in selecting appropriate texts and scripts, as well as tasks, to come up with a proficiency test that would be valid and reliable in identifying the current level of a specific learner’s foreign language reading and listening skills. The answers provided can be especially effective when devising threshold tests in cases when choosing between two adjacent levels is problematic. The scope of the secondary study conducted in the process of writing the article did not allow coming up with associated sub-skills and input texts/scripts, which the test designer is expected to handle on

an individual basis in the context of a specific group of learners using the data provided in the article.

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