Reading and understanding CEFR

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When I say CEFR...

... what do you think of?

C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

So ... what is CEFR?

common (European) framework of reference for languages

intended to help people from different countries and educational contexts being their policies and practices closer together

A set of principles and guidelines that people can use when designing policy (but **not a standard**)

Is relevant to languages – but not any language in particular

The contents of CEFR

In the 273-page PDF version, you can find...

Chapter 1: The Common European Framework in its political and educational context

Chapter 2: Approach adopted

Chapter 3: Common Reference Levels *(A1-C2)*

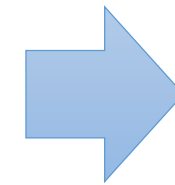**Chapter 4:** Language use and the language user/learner

Chapter 5: The user/learner's competences

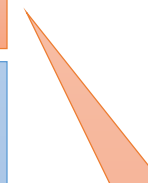**Chapter 6:** Language learning and teaching

Chapter 7: Tasks and their role in language teaching

Chapter 8: Linguistic diversification and the curriculum

Chapter 9: Assessment

These were supposed to be the "core" of CEFR.

This part is now almost always what people think of when they mention "CEFR".

The new CEFR Companion Volume (2018)

- In 2018, the CEFR Companion Volume was released by the Council of Europe

- It contains:
  - Many revisions to the existing descriptions of the six reference levels (e.g. avoiding using 'native speaker' as a reference point)
  - Many additions to existing descriptions (e.g. providing new examples, more detail)
  - Various additions of new descriptions (esp. for 'mediation', 'plurilingual/pluricultural competence')
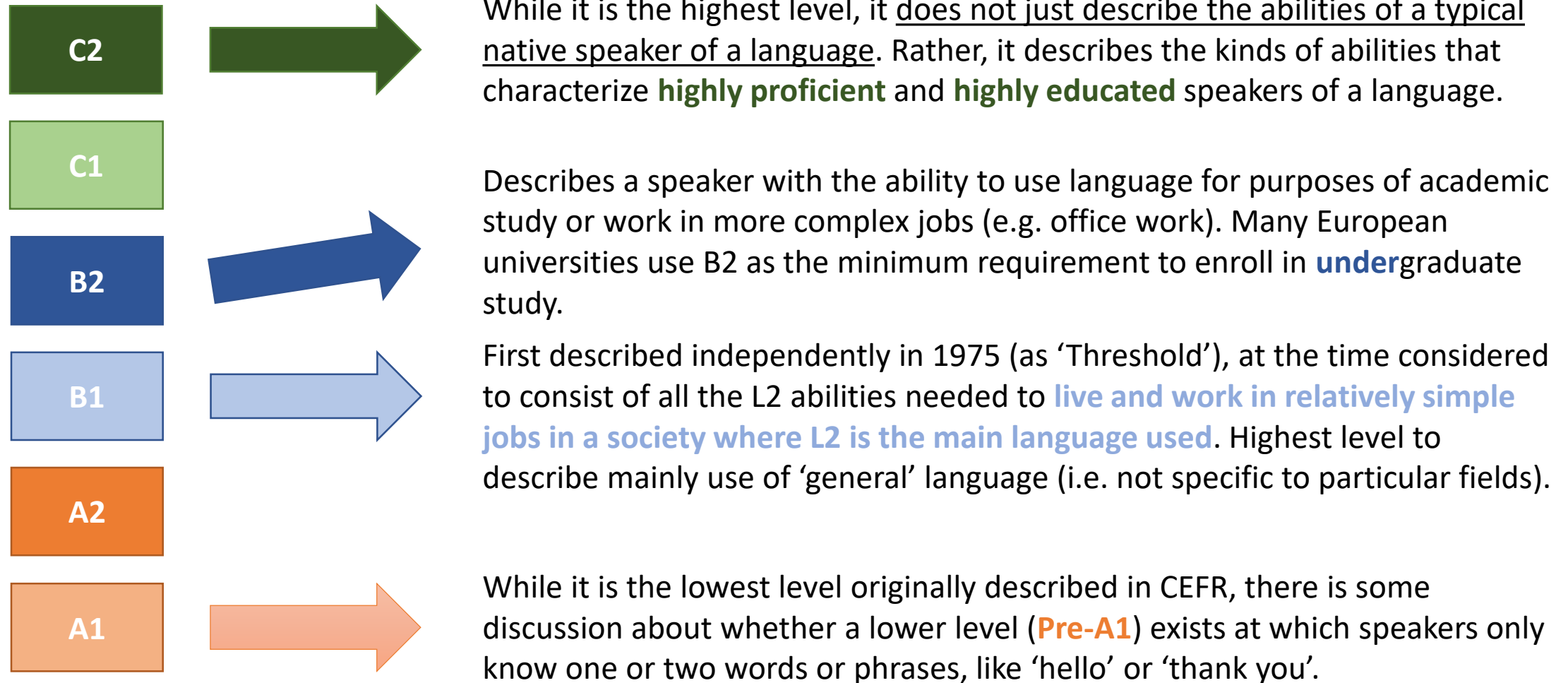 - A revised (*easier to read?*) introduction to the framework

The CEFR proficiency levels

The six levels reflect the traditional words to describe language proficiency
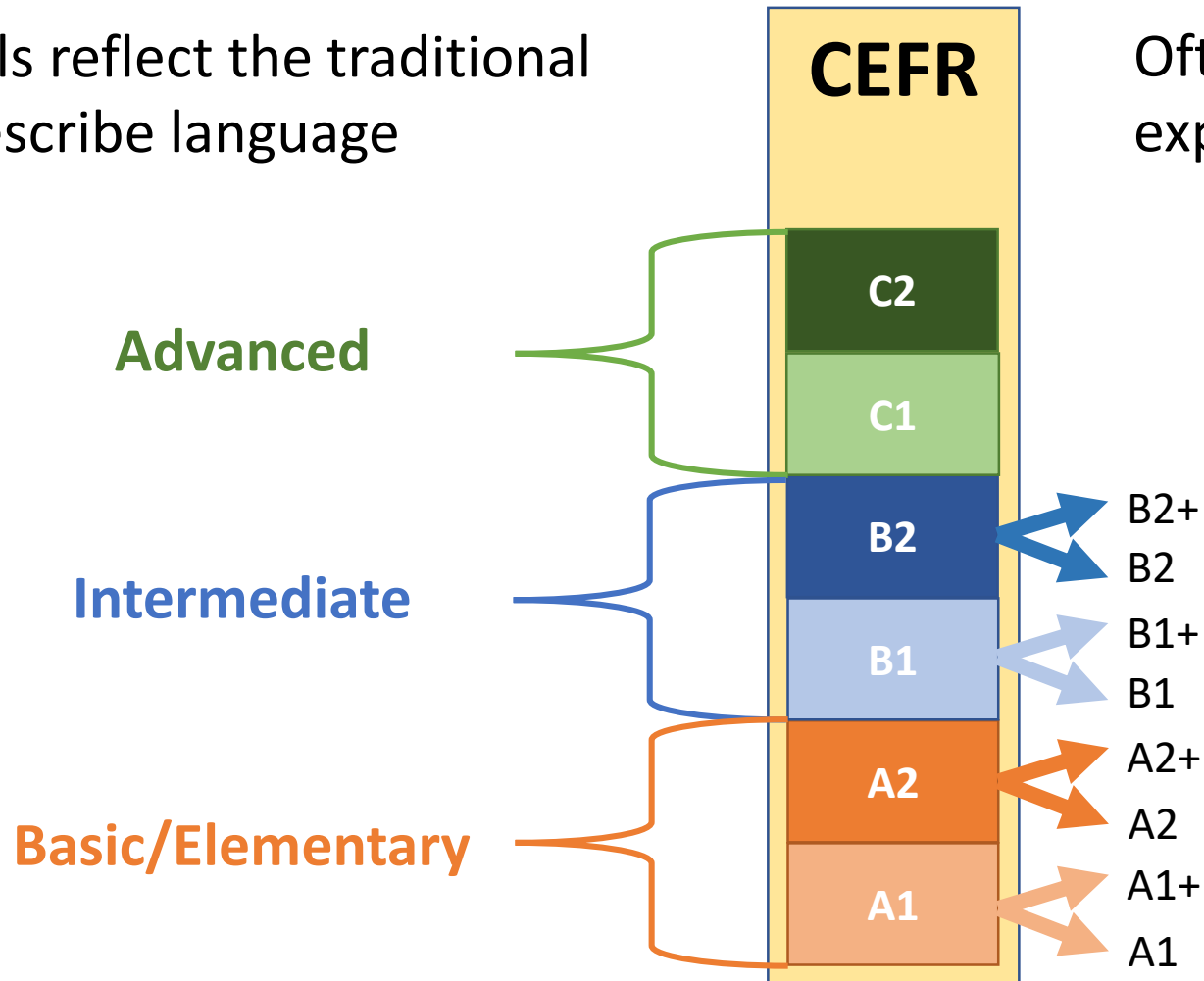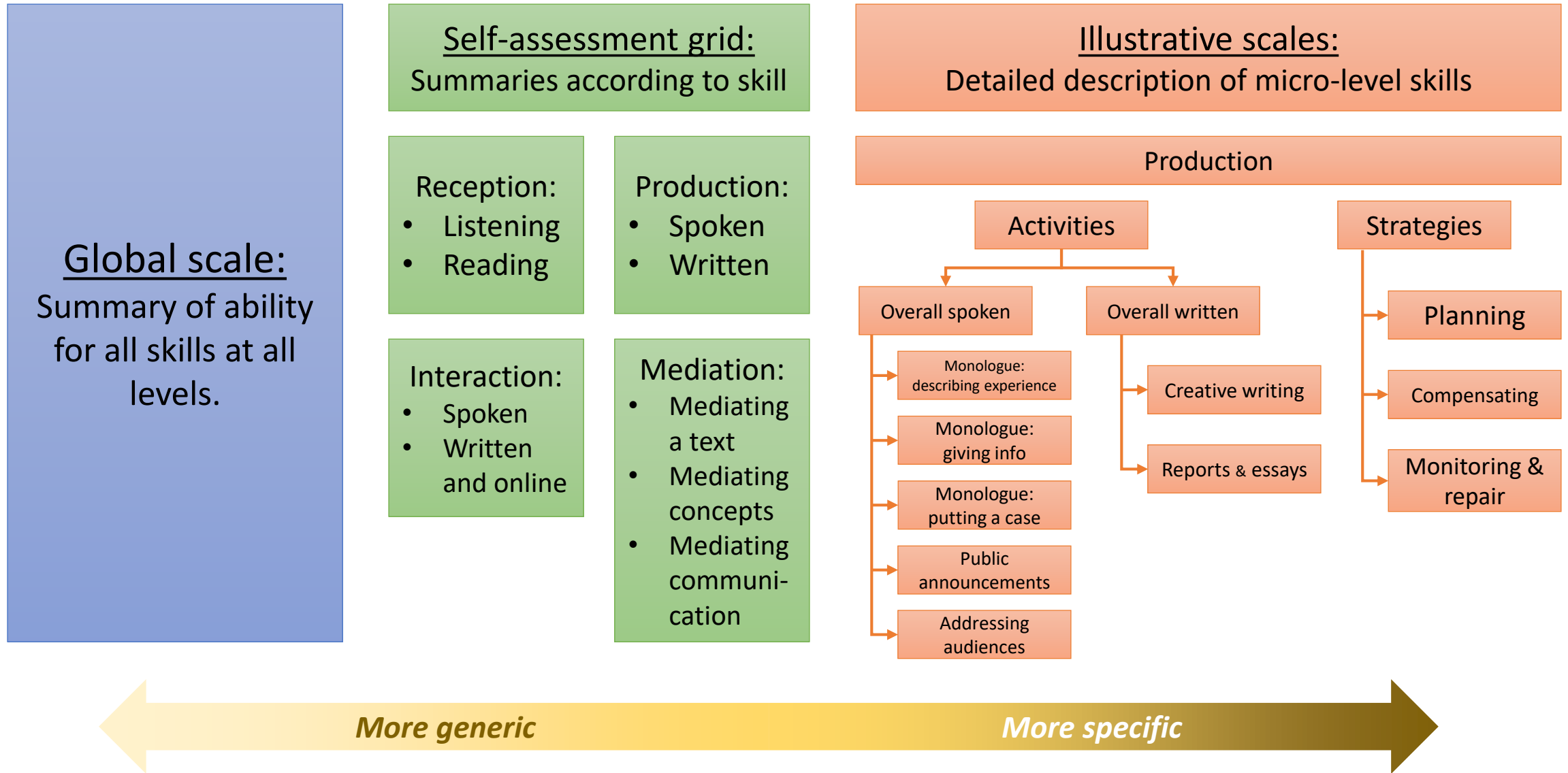
Often the first four levels are expanded by adding 'plus levels'

Some notes about the context of these levels

C2

While it is the highest level, it <u>does not just describe the abilities of a typical native speaker of a language</u>. Rather, it describes the kinds of abilities that characterize **highly proficient** and **highly educated** speakers of a language.

C1

B2

Describes a speaker with the ability to use language for purposes of academic study or work in more complex jobs (e.g. office work). Many European universities use B2 as the minimum requirement to enroll in **under**graduate study.

B1

First described independently in 1975 (as 'Threshold'), at the time considered to consist of all the L2 abilities needed to **live and work in relatively simple jobs in a society where L2 is the main language used**. Highest level to describe mainly use of 'general' language (i.e. not specific to particular fields).

A2

A1

While it is the lowest level originally described in CEFR, there is some discussion about whether a lower level (**Pre-A1**) exists at which speakers only know one or two words or phrases, like 'hello' or 'thank you'.

The CEFR reference scales

Global scale:
Summary of ability for all skills at all levels.

Self-assessment grid:
Summaries according to skill

Reception:
- Listening
- Reading

Production:
- Spoken
- Written

Interaction:
- Spoken
- Written and online

Mediation:
- Mediating a text
- Mediating concepts
- Mediating communication

Illustrative scales:
Detailed description of micro-level skills

Production

Activities

Strategies

Overall spoken

Overall written

Monologue: describing experience

Monologue: giving info

Monologue: putting a case

Public announcements

Addressing audiences

Creative writing

Reports & essays

Planning

Compensating

Monitoring & repair

More generic   *More specific*

Global scale at B1:

- Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.
- Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken.
- Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest.
- Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

"Spoken Interaction" at B1:

- Can exploit a wide range of simple language to deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling.
- Can enter unprepared into conversation of familiar topics, express personal opinions and exchange information on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).

"Conversation" at B1:

- Can enter unprepared into conversations on familiar topics.
- Can follow clearly articulated speech directed at him/her in everyday conversation, though will sometimes have to ask for repetition of particular words and phrases.
- Can maintain a conversation or discussion but may sometimes be difficult to follow when trying to say exactly what he/she would like to.
- Can express and respond to feelings such as surprise, happiness, sadness, interest and indifference.

More generic ← → *More specific*

Usefulness of generic vs. specific descriptors

Generic descriptors are useful for:

- Describing ability of speakers in the broadest sense (e.g. on a certificate)

- Articulating learning outcomes/objectives of a curriculum as a whole (PLOs)

Target audience: general public

Specific descriptors are useful for:

- Diagnosing ability of speakers (either through [self]observation or testing)

  Inc. task design

- Setting learning outcomes/objectives of individual courses and lessons (CLOs and LLOs)

  Inc. lesson planning

Target audience: teacher & learner

Understanding a CEFR scale

- CEFR scales are generally written from the perspective of teachers

- They were developed by
  1. Collecting existing descriptors from various different sources (and developing some new ones)
  2. Asking several groups teachers (*in Switzerland*) to sort the descriptors according to the difficulty level that they represent
  3. Using statistics (Rasch modeling) to create scales based on the difficulty levels assigned by teachers on average

- The resulting scales often (**but not always**) contain descriptors that are similar and can be compared

Can report straightforward factual information on a familiar topic, for example to indicate the nature of a problem or to give detailed directions, provided he/she can prepare beforehand.

C2	Can keep up his/her side of the dialogue extremely well, structuring the talk and interacting authoritatively with effortless fluency as interviewer or interviewee, at no disadvantage to other speakers.
C1	Can participate fully in an interview, as either interviewer or interviewee, expanding and developing the point being discussed fluently without any support, and handling interjections well.
B2	Can take initiatives in an interview, expand and develop ideas with little help or prodding from an interviewer.
B1	Can take some initiatives in an interview/consultation (e.g. to bring up a new subject) but is very dependent on interviewer in the interaction.
	Can describe symptoms in a simple way and ask for advice when using health services; can understand the answer, provided this is given clearly in everyday language.
	Can use a prepared questionnaire to carry out a structured interview, with some spontaneous follow up questions.
A2	Can answer simple questions and respond to simple statements in an interview.
	Can indicate in simple language the nature of a problem to a health professional, perhaps using gestures and body language.
A1	Can reply in an interview to simple direct questions spoken very slowly and clearly in direct non-idiomatic speech about personal details.
	Can state in simple language the nature of a problem to a health professional and answer simple questions such as 'Does that hurt?' even though he/she has to rely on gestures and body language to reinforce the message.

"Interviewing and being interviewed"

Understanding the language of CEFR

- CEFR uses textual descriptors to give its users an idea of what speakers are able to achieve when using a second language like English

- The descriptors it uses typically have a set structure, with particular elements being repeated

- Being familiar with these elements can help us make use of CEFR

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 speech is clearly and slowly articulated.

'detailed'

'factual'

'straightforward'

'simple'

'basic'

Can report straightforward factual information on a familiar topic, for example to indicate the nature of a problem or to give detailed directions, provided he/she can prepare beforehand.

Can give simple directions using basic expressions such as 'turn right' and 'go straight' along with sequential connectors such as 'first,' 'then,' and 'next.'

Can communicate detailed information reliably. Can give a clear, detailed description of how to carry out a procedure.

The problem with words like 'simple', 'basic', 'detailed', 'clear' ..... is that they are extremely vague – what is 'simple' to one reader might be 'complex' to another!

• While we tend to notice these words first when working with CEFR, the other, more concrete and clear parts of the descriptors, are actually much more useful

Examining the language of CEFR

CEFR descriptors have a set structure and usually contain:

- The **action** that the speaker can perform (What can they *do*?), the **object** of this action (What can they read/write/listen to/say?) and its **characteristics** (How well can they do it?)

- The **context** of the action (field/domain, interlocutors, purpose, etc.)

- The **condition(s)** under which the speaker can perform this action.

		B2
UNDERSTANDING	Listening	Can understand the main ideas of propositionally and linguistically complex speech on both concrete and abstract topics delivered in standard speech, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can follow extended speech and complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar, and the direction of the talk is sign-posted by explicit markers.

Essay or report	Exposition; report, article or dissertation	Texts	Report or poster

Comparing what speakers can produce

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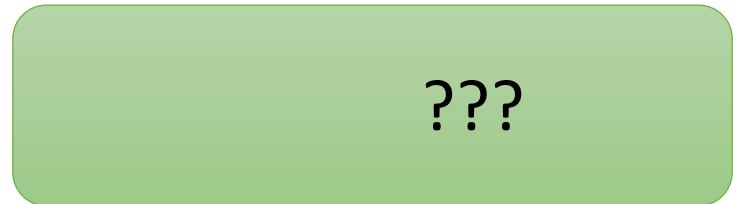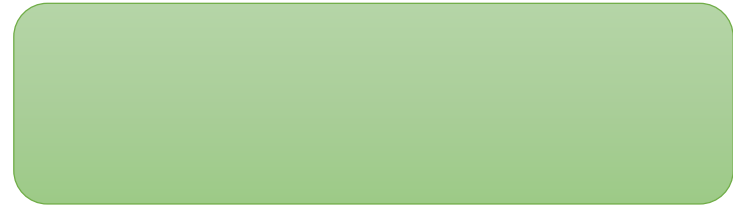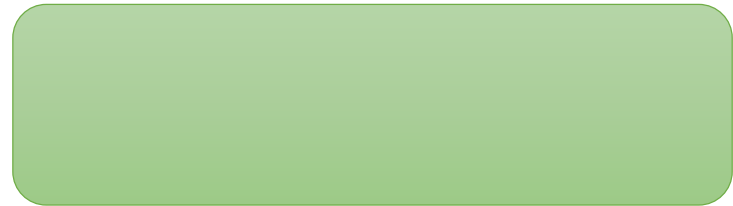
C1	Can write clear, well-structured **expositions** of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues. Can expand and support points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples. Can write a suitable introduction and conclusion to a **longer report, article or dissertation** on a complex academic or professional topic provided that the topic is within his/her field of interest and there are opportunities for redrafting and revision.
B2	Can write an **essay or report** which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and <u>explaining</u> the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources.
B1	Can write very brief **reports** to a standard conventionalised format, which pass on routine factual information and state reasons for actions. Can present a topic in a short **report or poster**, using photographs and short blocks of text.
A2	Can write simple **texts** on familiar subjects of interest, linking sentences with connectors like 'and,' 'because,' or 'then.' Can give his/her impressions and opinions in writing about topics of personal interest (e.g. lifestyles and culture, stories), using basic everyday vocabulary and expressions.

"Written reports and essays"

Comparing contexts speakers can deal with

C1	Can easily keep up with the debate, even on **abstract, complex unfamiliar topics**. Can restate, evaluate and challenge contributions from other participants about **matters within his/her academic or professional competence**.
B2	Can participate actively in routine and non-routine formal discussion. Can follow the discussion on matters **related to his/her field**; understand in detail the points given prominence by the speaker.
B1	Can take part in routine formal discussion of **familiar subjects** which is conducted in clearly articulated speech in the standard form of the language and which involves the exchange of factual information, receiving instructions or the discussion of solutions to practical problems. Can follow argumentation and discussion on **a familiar or predictable topic**, provided the points are made in relatively simple language and/or repeated, and opportunity is given for clarification.
A2	Can say what he/she thinks about things when addressed directly in a formal meeting, provided he/she can ask for repetition of key points if necessary.

"Formal discussion (meetings)"

Comparing conditions speakers need

B2	Can understand announcements and messages on concrete and abstract topics **spoken in standard speech at normal speed**.
B1	Can understand public announcements at airports, stations and on planes, buses and trains, **provided these are clearly articulated in standard speech with minimum interference from background noise**.
A2	Can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements. Can understand basic instructions on times, dates and numbers etc., and on routine tasks and assignments to be carried out.
A1	Can understand instructions **addressed carefully and slowly to him/her** and follow short, simple directions. Can understand when someone tells him/her **slowly and clearly** where something is, **provided the object is in the immediate environment**.

"Listening to announcements and instructions"

Understanding what CEFR is (and is _not_)

- CEFR's textual descriptors describe ability, they do not measure it like tests do (or like tests try and claim to)
  - Almost nothing in CEFR is described precisely, plenty of room for interpretation

- The CEFR scales give examples of what a speaker can do, but they do not give a full list of everything the speaker can do

- It is **WRONG** to read CEFR as a list of everything that someone **has to** be able to do at a particular level

Don't simply adopt CEFR, learn how to adapt it.

- CEFR is incomplete – it often provides only part of the information we need as teachers when designing curricula and courses

- In some scales, descriptors are missing at some of the levels

- In some cases, there is a lot of detail at one level and not much at another

- Teachers should feel confident about interpreting and even extending CEFR for their own purposes

C2	Can keep up his/her side of the dialogue extremely well, structuring the talk and interacting authoritatively with effortless fluency as interviewer or interviewee, at no disadvantage to other speakers. **Can engage in dialogue with a health professional on near equal footing, including asking critical questions and using elements of highly specialized language.**
C1	Can participate fully in an interview, as either interviewer or interviewee, expanding and developing the point being discussed fluently without any support, and handling interjections well. **Can participate fully in an interview with a health professional, including asking and answering questions fluently and precisely, with some use of specialized language.**
B2	Can take initiatives in an interview, expand and develop ideas with little help or prodding from an interviewer. **Can take initiatives when interacting with a health professional, ask for advice and understand the answer, though he/she might need to confirm the meaning of specialized terms.**
B1	Can take some initiatives in an interview/consultation (e.g. to bring up a new subject) but is very dependent on interviewer in the interaction. Can describe symptoms in a simple way and ask for advice when using health services; can understand the answer, provided this is given clearly in everyday language.
A2	Can answer simple questions and respond to simple statements in an interview. Can indicate in simple language the nature of a problem to a health professional, perhaps using gestures and body language.
A1	Can reply in an interview to simple direct questions spoken very slowly and clearly in direct non-idiomatic speech about personal details. Can state in simple language the nature of a problem to a health professional and answer simple questions such as 'Does that hurt?' even though he/she has to rely on gestures and body language to reinforce the message.

But what about assessment and validity??

- You might fear that adapting CEFR will create problems of validity – since your adaptations will be different from those of other teachers

- People who are concerned with CEFR validity are usually language testers, who tend to try and stick quite closely to CEFR descriptors
  - Quite a difficult task because of how vague CEFR often is!

- The point about using CEFR in this way is that you as a teacher set your goals *locally* – and assess students based on those goals

- Very different way of using CEFR when compared to high-stakes testing, where everyone has to use the same reference

Summary of the talk in three points

When working with CEFR…

     … be active

     … be critical

     … be creative

Thanks for your attention!

If you are interested in CEFR, you can read more in these two papers:

Savski, K. (in press). Local problems and a global solution: examining the recontextualization of CEFR in Thai and Malaysian language policies. *Language Policy*.

Savski, K. (2019). Putting the plurilingual/pluricultural back into CEFR: reflecting on policy reform in Thailand and Malaysia. *Journal of Asia TEFL, 16* (2), 644-652.

You can find both papers and this Powerpoint on my website: https://kristofsavski.org/ (slides available under 'Talks')