



# Speaking the same language

**Deshini Chetty** explains how the HR and training profession can benefit from robust and independent benchmarking of second language competence

**H**ome to more than 450 million people from different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the European Union (EU) recognises 20 official languages and approximately 60 other local and non-native languages that are spoken over the geographical area.

The EU's mission is to create a single community with a diversity of cultures and languages. The European Commission has therefore adopted multilingualism, to promote a healthy multilingual economy; to give all EU citizens access to its legislation, procedures and information in their own language, and to encourage language learning.

The creation of a substantial, skilled and mobile multilingual workforce is an enormously attractive proposition, for advancing social harmony and understanding as well as for hard economic reasons. The benefits of speaking a foreign language are unquestionable: not only does language create a path to accepting other ways of living, but such



skills enable businesses to build rapport with, and show respect for, potential foreign partners.

The introduction of Europe-wide policies, coupled with international business dynamics, are helping to drive language training to the top of the agenda. UK businesses are starting to recognise that it is no longer sufficient to depend on the assumption that English will be the universal language of business.

With businesses themselves becoming increasingly multinational, employers need to ensure that their employees are equipped to deal with any obstacles and are able to embrace the business opportunities available within multilingual commercial environments.

Leonard Orban, the EU commissioner for multilingualism, pointed out in an article in *The Observer* last September that Britons could be losing out on jobs due to their inability to speak languages other than English. If UK-based organisations truly want to do business with continental

Europe, they need to set their sights on more demanding, and therefore more rewarding, linguistic requirements.

However, employers may not have sufficient familiarity with the languages to ensure that correct standards are set. What is needed is accurate assessment and benchmarking against an independent, robust and recognised standard.

It may come as a surprise to our UK readers that such

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a standard already exists: the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Developed by the Council of Europe, it is, according to Kathy Girling, learning manager at language training company Communicaid, “fast becoming an integral part of the language training and assessment strategies for international organisations based in continental Europe”.

Here in the UK, however, research that we carried out last November among the FTSE Top 100 companies that recruit English-speaking foreign nationals revealed that, astonishingly, only 15 companies had heard of the CEFR and just four of them said they had actually used it.

Girling explains: “The CEFR framework is undoubtedly the most comprehensive and academically-supported set of descriptors that exists.

“In the past we have used our own set of descriptors for our customers, which are based on a scale of one to four. We made the decision to move to the CEFR

standard because it is important for us to be able to actually describe what somebody can do in the target language and relate this back to the business need. The CEFR also provides us with the ability to speak in such a way that the learner understands what progress he or she is making.

“Not only is it a useful descriptor for us, but it is proving to be extremely motivational for our delegates.”

Language skills are not one-dimensional, they are multi-dimensional: you need to be able to speak, read and write; you need to be able to listen and understand. These skills can be learned and deployed with increasing levels of complexity and with increased appreciation of nuance and cultural awareness. It is important to be able to identify and measure all of these attributes so that, over time, both you and the learner understand, and can value, the progress being made.

The CEFR provides a series of descriptions of abilities that can

be applied to any language and can be used to set clear targets for achievements within language learning, which can be readily aligned with the business needs – this is where it is the most potent.

A detailed description of the CEFR levels A1 – C2 can be found in the table below.

Responsibility for addressing and overcoming the operational challenges surrounding the assessment of second language competence and language training will ultimately fall to the HR and training departments.

The main issue HR managers face when looking to recruit people with second language competence is how to assess the language skills of the candidate effectively. Although a candidate may sound like he can communicate effectively, how can an organisation be sure that he is able to communicate to the appropriate level of competence that the appointment requires? After all, being able to pass the time of day or order a meal in a

foreign language is a far cry from drafting, discussing and negotiating complex subjects, under pressure, in the same language.

Much emphasis and plentiful resource is placed on measuring candidates’ knowledge, abilities, attitudes and personality traits through the use of psychometric assessment, but insufficient commitment is sometimes given to screening self-claimed multi-lingual applicants to ensure they meet the company’s needs in line with the job they have applied for. One needs to question whether the reason is because HR managers are unaware of the existence of relevant tools, or that they are aware but reluctant, because it could require further involvement with outside agencies that may consume more of their time and money.

Training managers will sympathise with HR departments as they almost certainly face similar challenges. More and more companies recognise that, in

level	description
A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at meeting needs of a concrete type. Can identify what he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way, provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.
A2	Can understand sentences and frequently-used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (eg very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple exchange of information in an immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
B1	Can understand the main points of an oral message on familiar matters in which the speaker is making a statement, giving an opinion, or providing brief explanations. Can deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected oral and written text. Can briefly give reasons for, and explanations of, opinions and plans.
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.
C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts and recognise implicit meaning. Can express himself/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.
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 himself/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.



today's global economy, language skills can provide businesses with a significant competitive advantage. Companies are investing in language training for this reason.

This may involve an organisation partnering with an external training provider to deliver the courses but how is progress then being measured? If the training partner is reporting on its own achievements concerning the learner's progress, the outcome is a foregone conclusion! If the organisation has its own benchmarking and assessment approach, this is likely to be based on intelligence it has received from previous training providers – where else will the expertise come from?

Such evaluation is rarely job-function-specific and training managers put themselves in a vulnerable position if they are unable to demonstrate objectively that the investment has achieved specific business needs. When this happens, they may find that future budgets come under greater scrutiny or may be cut all together.

However, the value of the



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Level	CEFR Level	Description
Upper advanced	C2	Fully operational command of the language in most business and work situations, eg can argue a case confidently in the workplace, justifying and making points persuasively.
Advanced	C1	Good operational command of the language in a range of business and work situations, eg can participate effectively in discussions and meetings.
Upper Intermediate	B2	Generally effective command of the language in a range of familiar situations, eg can make a contribution to meetings on practical matters, but is unlikely to follow a complex argument.
Intermediate	B1	Limited but effective command of the language in familiar situations, eg can take part in a routine meeting on familiar topics, particularly in an exchange of simple factual information.
Elementary	A2	Very limited command of the language in a range of familiar situations, eg can understand and pass on simple messages.
Beginner	A1	Very limited command of the language. Candidates at this level may know some phrases.

CEFR can only be demonstrated to businesses when it is aligned to their needs. Although it provides an internationally recognised standard, it will only be effective if the tests conducted to assess, then measure, progress align with this standard.

Cambridge ESOL developed BULATS to provide HR and training departments within international organisations with quick and easy access to a global benchmark for their workplace language skills. Organisations use BULATS globally to assess candidates across the six levels of the CEFR to help accurately benchmark abilities and, more importantly for businesses, pinpoint CEFR levels against real-life skills needed in the workplace.

The table left demonstrates how BULATS complements, and aligns with, the CEFR.

Whether you are recruiting staff, planning a promotion scheme or developing a language training programme, it helps to know that your people have the right language skills. The importance of having an internationally-recognised standard in order to benchmark language training cannot be underestimated.

Whatever stage your organisation is at, you can gain that all-important competitive advantage by having a universal standard of measurement that has meaningful interpretation when promoted within the general business world. This will, in turn, help increase confidence throughout the business and ensure that every opportunity is being appropriately addressed, while communicating with your international colleagues and customers in the most effective way. ■

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