

# Background to the validation of the ALTE 'Can-do' project and the revised Common European Framework

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This article includes excerpts from the Appendix to the Council of Europe Framework document due to be published in 2001.

## The ALTE Framework and the Can-do project

### The ALTE Framework

The ALTE Can-do statements constitute a central part of a long-term research programme set by ALTE, the aim of which is to establish a framework of critical levels of language performance, within which examinations can be objectively described.

Much work has already been done to locate the examination systems of ALTE members in this framework, based on an analysis of examination content and task types, and candidate profiles. A comprehensive introduction to these examination systems is available in the *ALTE Handbook of European Language Examinations and Examination Systems*.

### The ALTE Can-dos are user-orientated scales

The aim of the Can-do project is to develop and validate a set of performance-related scales, describing what learners can actually do in the foreign language.

In terms of Alderson's (1991) distinction between constructor, assessor and user-orientated scales, the ALTE Can-do statements in their original conception are user-orientated. They assist communication between stakeholders in the testing process, and in particular the interpretation of test results by non-specialists. As such they provide:

- a. a useful tool for those involved in teaching and testing language students. They can be used as a checklist of what language users can do and thus define the stage they are at
- b. a basis for developing diagnostic test tasks, activity-based curricula and teaching materials
- c. a means of carrying out an activity-based linguistic audit, of use to people concerned with language training in companies
- d. a means of comparing the objectives of courses and materials in different languages but existing in the same context

They will be of use to people in training and personnel management, as they provide easily understandable descriptions of performance, which can be used in specifying requirements to language trainers, formulating job descriptions and specifying language requirements for new posts.

### The ALTE Can-dos are multilingual

An important aspect of the Can-dos is that they are multilingual, having been translated so far into twelve of the languages represented in ALTE. These languages are: Catalan, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish. As language-neutral descriptions of levels of language proficiency they constitute a frame of reference to which different language examinations at different levels can potentially be related. They offer the chance to demonstrate equivalences between the examination systems of ALTE members, in meaningful terms relating to the real-world language skills of people achieving a pass in these examinations.

### Organisation of the Can-do statements

The Can-do scales consist currently of about 400 statements, organised into three general areas: Social and Tourist, Work, and Study. These are the three main areas of interest for most language learners. Each includes a number of more particular areas, e.g. the Social and Tourist area has sections on Shopping, Eating out, Accommodation etc. Each of these includes up to three scales, for the skills of Listening/Speaking, Reading and Writing.

Each such scale includes statements covering a range of levels. Some scales cover only a part of the proficiency range, as of course there are many situations of use which require only basic proficiency to deal with successfully.

## Assumptions of the Can-do approach

### Levels describe typical patterns of ability

The Can-do scales have been subjected to an extended process of empirical validation. The validation process is aimed at transforming the Can-do statements from an essentially subjective set of level descriptions into a calibrated measuring instrument. This is a long-term, ongoing process, which will continue as more data become available across the range of languages represented by ALTE.

So far data collection has been based chiefly on self-report, the Can-do scales being presented to respondents as a set of linked

questionnaires. Nearly ten thousand respondents have completed questionnaires. For many of these respondents, additional data are available in the form of language examination results. This is believed to be by far the biggest collection of data ever undertaken to validate a descriptive language proficiency scale.

Thus it is the typical response patterns of this large sample of respondents which define the meaning of a given level in can-do terms. In other words, the definition of a level is not based on a priori prescriptive, absolute criteria, but is rather descriptive of the experience of a large number of foreign language users.

So far respondents have been predominantly European language speakers, and it is likely therefore that the Can-do scales reflect European patterns of foreign language skills. The levels describe profiles of language skill which are typical for Europeans, and speakers of European languages – in terms of their relative abilities in reading, writing or face-to-face communication, for example. This makes for ease of use, because in a European context (and probably in many other contexts) the simple level classification constitutes a rich description of a learner's probable skills profile. Of course, this does not preclude a more analytic use of the levels, so that an individual could be described as, say, 'Level 4 generally but only Level 2 in writing.'

### **Respondents should be matched to appropriate questionnaires**

Questionnaires have been administered in the subjects' own first language, except at very advanced levels. Respondents have been matched to appropriate questionnaires – the Work scales given to people using a foreign language professionally, the Study scales to respondents engaged in a course of study through the medium of a foreign language, or preparing to do so. The Social and Tourist scales are given to other respondents, while selected scales from this area have also been included in the Work and Study questionnaires as an 'anchor'.

The systematic use of anchor statements is necessary to enable the relative difficulty of the areas of use, and particular scales, to be established. The use of Social and Tourist scales as an anchor was based on the assumption that these areas call upon a common core of language proficiency and can be expected to provide the best point of reference for equating the Work and Study scales.

### **Can-do scales are language neutral**

A rather fundamental assumption is that it is possible to construct Can-do descriptions of language level which are valid irrespective of the language background of the learner or the target language being studied.

However, it is possible to imagine that speakers from particular linguistic or cultural groups may experience particular language tasks as being more or less difficult – paying compliments, complaining about service, or making small-talk, for example. The data-based validation of the Can-dos allows this interesting question to be investigated.

### **Relating the Can-dos to ALTE examinations**

Following the initial calibration of the Can-do statements, and the textual revision described above, attention has turned to

establishing the link between the Can-do scales and other indicators of language level. In particular we have started looking at performance in ALTE examinations, and to the relation between the Can-do scales and the Council of Europe Framework levels.

Beginning in December 1998, data were collected to link Can-do self-ratings to grades achieved in Cambridge EFL examinations at different levels. A very clear relationship was found, making it possible to begin to describe the meaning of an examination grade in terms of typical profiles of Can-do ability.

A conceptual problem to be addressed in this context concerns the notion of mastery – that is, what exactly do we mean by 'can do'? A definition is required in terms of how likely we expect it to be that a person at a certain level can succeed at certain tasks. Should it be certain that the person will always succeed perfectly on the task? This would be too stringent a requirement. On the other hand, a 50% chance of succeeding would be too low to count as mastery.

The figure of 80% has been chosen, as an 80 per cent score is frequently used in domain or criterion-referenced testing as an indication of mastery in a given domain. Thus, candidates achieving an ordinary pass in an ALTE examination at a given level should have an 80% chance of succeeding on tasks identified as describing that level.

By defining 'can do' explicitly in this way we have a basis for interpreting particular ALTE levels in terms of Can-do skills.

While the relation to examination performance has so far been based on Cambridge EFL examinations, data linking Can-dos to performance in other ALTE examinations will continue to be collected, allowing us to verify that these different examination systems relate in essentially the same way to the ALTE 5-level framework.

### **Anchoring to the Council of Europe Framework**

In 1999 responses were collected in which anchors were provided by statements taken from the *1996 Council of Europe Framework document*. Anchors included:

1. the grid of major categories of language use by level identified as 'Table 7' in Council of Europe (1998), 133
2. 16 statements from scales relating to spoken interaction (Fluency)

Table 7 was chosen because in practice it is achieving wide use as a summary description of levels. ALTE's ability to collect response data in a large number of languages and countries provided an opportunity to contribute to the validation of the scales in Table 7.

The Fluency statements had been recommended because they had been found to have the most stable difficulty estimates when measured in different contexts in the Swiss project (North 1996/2000). It was expected that they should thus enable a good equating of the ALTE Can-dos to the Council of Europe Framework.

### **Levels of proficiency in the ALTE Framework**

At the time of writing the ALTE Framework is a five-level system. The validation described above confirms that these correspond broadly to levels A2 to C2 of the CE Framework. Work on defining a further initial level (Breakthrough) is in progress, and the Can-do

project is contributing to the characterisation of this level. Thus the relation of the two frameworks can be seen as follows:

Council of Europe	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
ALTE	Breakthrough	1	2	3	4	5

The salient features of each ALTE level are as follows:

- **ALTE Breakthrough Level:** a basic ability to communicate and exchange information.
- **ALTE Level 1 (Waystage User):** people are able to deal with simple, straightforward information and begin to express themselves in familiar contexts.
- **ALTE Level 2 (Threshold User):** in familiar situations, users can express themselves in a limited way and deal in a general way with non-routine information.
- **ALTE Level 3 (Independent User):** the salient feature is instrumental, functional ability – people can achieve most goals, and express themselves on a range of topics.
- **ALTE Level 4 (Competent User):** the salient feature is how well people can do it, in terms of appropriacy, sensitivity, and the capacity to deal with unfamiliar topics.
- **ALTE Level 5 (Good User):** moves beyond purely instrumental ability (that is, the capacity to get things done). The salient feature is linguistic. It indicates a capacity to deal with material which is academic or cognitively demanding, and to use language to good effect. That is, it describes a level of performance which may in certain respects be more advanced than that of an average native speaker.

#### References and further reading

- Alderson, J C (1991): 'Bands and scores' in: Alderson, J C and North, B (eds.): *Language testing in the 1990s*, British Council/Macmillan, Developments in ELT, 71–86
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