

# International Standards in the Assessment of Teacher Trainees' Language Proficiency in The Netherlands

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## Introduction

International standards in the assessment of language proficiency have been with us for years. Recently the necessity of international standards of English language proficiency for aviators as an essential condition for safety was stressed. "Aviation safety depends on accurate pilot-controller dialogue.... Communicative competence in aviation English means that airmen have common and standardized proficiency levels in their use of the English language." as Mitsutomi (2001) pointed out. She continues:

*In 1977, the world was shocked by the collision of two, new, giant Boeing 747 aircraft at Tenerife. A Pan Am 747 missed or misunderstood taxi instructions which required a turn off the active runway at taxiway three. At the same time, a KLM 747 initiated a fog-shrouded takeoff in the opposite direction. The two aircraft met on the active runway with the KLM at approximately 160 Knots. Five hundred eighty two (582) died in the crash.*

It was estimated that "in the decade 1982 -1991, pilot controller miscommunication contributed to at least 11 per cent of fatal crashes worldwide" (Crystal 1997, 101), some of which might have been avoided if standardised proficiency levels in English had been imposed.

The standards that are probably used most frequently now are the six reference levels for language proficiency in three skills areas (understanding, speaking and writing) of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). A first version of the CEFR was initiated in 1991, a first draft was circulated in 1997 and, although the official version was only published in 2001 (Council of Europe 2001), its scales have been used for a much longer time, often for the self-assessment of language learners, but also e.g. for testing overseas students' eligibility for admission to university courses in English-speaking countries and for testing applicants' suitability for positions in the workplace.

Other standards that are used frequently are the five levels in three skills areas (listening/speaking, writing and reading) of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), where each level is worked out in 'can do' statements. In the 2001 CEFR document an attempt was made to align the five levels of the ALTE with those of the CEFR (see Council of Europe 2001, Appendix D, 249). In the following table the correspondence of the ALTE and the CEFR levels is indicated. It must be pointed out that the decision to align the five ALTE levels with the highest six CEFR levels rather than with the five lowest levels was not uncontroversial.

CEFR				ALTE
A	Basic User	A1	Breakthrough	
		A2	Waystage	1
B	Independent User	B1	Threshold	2
		B2	Vantage	3
C	Proficient User	C1	Effective Proficiency	Operational 4
		C2	Mastery	5

Table 1. Correspondence of CEFR and ALTE levels

To enable users to make finer distinctions each CEFR level contains two subdivisions: A 1.1, A 1.2 etc. so that a total of 12 levels is available.

CEFR		ALTE
Understanding	Listening	Listening/Speaking
	Reading	Reading
Speaking	Spoken interaction	
	Spoken production	
Writing	Writing	Writing

Table 2. CEFR and ALTE skills areas

Since the CEFR and ALTE arrange the skills in different skills areas, there is no straightforward one-to-one equivalence, as can be seen in the following table.

Although objections can be raised against the use of the CEFR in language testing (cf Weir 2005) and although the comparability of the ALTE framework and CEFR can be questioned, an important provider of tests, University of Cambridge ESOL examinations, has indicated the relationship of its tests to the CEFR in the following table and on its certificates since 2004.

CEFR		Cambridge ESOL examinations (main suite)	
A1	Breakthrough		
A2	Waystage	KET	Key English Test
B1	Threshold	PET	Preliminary English Test
B2	Vantage	FCE	First Certificate in English
C1	Effective Operational Proficiency	CAE	Certificate in Advanced English
C2	Mastery	CPE	Certificate of Proficiency in English

Table 3. Relationship of CEFR and Cambridge ESOL examinations

The use of international standards is of great advantage, both to teachers and to students. For teachers it is essential to know at what level they should aim and what they can require from their students; for students it is very useful to know in advance what level of proficiency will be expected from them; with the help of the scales and the accompanying 'can do' statements they can estimate their proficiency levels and thus their chances of success prior to enrolment; the use of international standards combined with a language portfolio (see Schneider 2003) is shown to contribute to learner autonomy (see Little 2002). Finally, at an institutional level it is in the interest of all those concerned that there is some agreement on the standards; it may well be that students desert the institute that sets and maintains higher standards in favour of the institute that sets lower standards or is less rigorous in enforcing the standards.

In particular for future teachers the use of internationally agreed standards seems of great benefit; it is obvious that they should be confronted with these standards in the course of their own training, if they are to hold up these standard in dealing with their future pupils and students. The training of future teachers in the use of the language portfolio in combination with the various levels of the CEFR will no doubt be beneficial to both the teachers and their future students and pupils.

The use of internationally agreed standards facilitates teacher mobility. At the moment it looks as if there is very little teacher mobility within the European Union. Increased mobility would be a solution for the problem of teacher shortage in certain countries (e.g. the Netherlands, the Flemish community of Belgium, Sweden and the UK) and over supply in other countries (e.g. Germany and many of the new member states). Although in the Netherlands outward mobility of teachers seems to be a matter of personal preference rather than economic necessity, the use of these standards can facilitate the mobility of those teachers who wish to work on their personal development, e.g. through employment in a country where the target language is spoken. As far as mobility towards the Netherlands is concerned, barriers to the influx of qualified teaching staff from other countries, in particular the neighbouring countries, can be removed through the use of these standards (see e.g. [www.eurydice.org/documents/keytopics3/en/frameset2.htm](http://www.eurydice.org/documents/keytopics3/en/frameset2.htm)).

In this paper we will present our findings on the use of international standards in the assessment of the English language proficiency of teacher trainees in the Netherlands and of university students in the Netherlands and Belgium.

We will show that, although many teacher-training institutes pay lip service to the CEFR, relatively few actually use its scales as standards against which to measure trainees' language proficiency.

## History of CEFR in Netherlands teacher training

For those who are not familiar with the organisation of teacher training in the Netherlands it may be helpful to point out that there are two tracks: "2nd grade" teachers, who will often teach in the lower secondary sector, are trained in polytechnics in 4-year courses, now usually leading towards a Bachelor's degree; after having obtained their 2<sup>nd</sup> grade diploma, they may decide to go and train for the "1st grade", which enables them to teach in the upper secondary sector; many 1st grade teachers, however, are trained in universities, where they first obtain their degrees, now usually a Bachelor's degree, in e.g. English language and culture, and a Master's degree, after which they follow a post graduate teacher training course, which usually lasts one year and may lead to a second Master's degree.

In 1997 the process management *lerarenopleidingen* (a body created by the NL government department of education in order to improve teacher training) made an important recommendation for the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher training courses for future teachers of modern foreign languages: their language proficiency should be at level C1 of the CEFR, except for the writing skill, which could be at level B2 (Process Management *Lerarenopleidingen*, 1998). They did not give arguments why they recommended level C1 rather than B2 or C2, neither did they indicate what instruments should be used to assess the level. It is to be remembered that at that time the ALTE members did not indicate what the relation of their examinations to the proficiency levels of the CEFR was.

Although it seems as if this has received less attention than it deserves, an interesting feature of the CEFR is the fact that it shows that the language competences are part of a larger set of competences, called the user/learner's competences. The general competences distinguished by the document are found in table 4.

Declarative knowledge	Knowledge of the world
	Socio-cultural competence
	Intercultural Awareness
Skills and know-how	Practical skills and know-how
	Intercultural skills and know-how
Existential competence	
Ability to learn	Language and communication awareness
	General phonetic awareness and skill
	Study skill
	Heuristic skill

Table 4. the user/learner's competences; general competences

The communicative language competences are shown in table 5.

When the Amsterdam Faculty of Education was established in 1997, its department of languages embraced the CEFR. An ambitious curriculum was created in which integration of language competences and more general competences was an important feature (see e.g. Overmaat 1998). Unfortunately the general competences found in the CEFR were not adopted, so that in this curriculum the language competences were not embedded in a coherent set of general competences. Nevertheless students were trained in the use of the reference

Linguistic competences	Lexical competence
	Grammatical competence
	Semantic competence
	Phonological competence
	Orthographic competence
	Orthoepic competence
Sociolinguistic competence	Linguistic markers of social relations
	Politeness conventions
	Expressions of folk wisdom
	Register differences
	Dialect and accent
Pragmatic competences	Discourse competence
	Functional competence

**Table 5. The user/learner's competences; communicative language competences**

levels of the CEFR and they used the language portfolio as part of their general portfolio of competences. Very soon it was decided that students needed to obtain the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency (grade C) as evidence that their language competence was at level C1 and, although some students, in particular part-time students who had started the course before the introduction of the CEFR, managed to obtain their diplomas with grade D, the vast majority of graduates of the Amsterdam Faculty of Education English course did in fact obtain the CPE.

In 1999 the first of a series of meetings of co-ordinators of the several 2nd grade English teacher training courses in the Netherlands took place; the required level of language proficiency was always on the agenda; during these meetings several of the co-ordinators decided that they would require students to have obtained the CPE level before graduation; some co-ordinators decided to require Cambridge Advanced English as the minimum level for students wishing to continue after their first year. Soon afterward it transpired that Cambridge ESOL examinations had been aligned to the CEFR as indicated in table 3, their CPE level to C2 and their CAE level to C1, which to many practitioners seemed an inflation of the CEFR levels.

## The implementation of CEFR and international standards in teacher training

Following a national conference of English teacher trainers in April 2005, a study of the programmes of the various teacher-training courses was undertaken. In September 2005 data from the various courses were collected from the Internet and from written publications. In table 6 there is an indication of what the various institutes communicate about the required level of language proficiency in their publications for students about the courses offered in the year 2005 – 2006. Where such a

	entry level	1 <sup>st</sup> year	graduation	
HAN		CAE	CPE (A of B)	
HAN part-time	CAE (A of B) & reasonable pronunciation		CPE (A of B)	
HR		CAE	CPE	
HVA English		B2, CAE	C1, CPE	CPE at University of Cambridge testing centre
HVA IDEE		B2		
HU	B1	B2	C1	

**Table 6. Required levels of language competence in polytechnics 2nd grade English teacher training courses**

description was not yet available, the 2004 - 2005 descriptions were used.

From the above table it appears that of the nine institutes only four refer to either the Cambridge ESOL examinations or the CEFR or both in their official documents. This does not necessarily mean that they do not use these standards; they may well use them but they do not explicitly mention them in their publications. Interesting differences are to be observed between the four institutes that do refer to international standards.

The Hogeschool Arnhem/Nijmegen (HAN) differentiates between full-time and part-time students. In the part-time English teacher training course only students who already have language competences on a level comparable to Cambridge Advanced English, grades A or B, and have a fair pronunciation are admitted. In order to graduate both part-time and full-time students need to show that they have obtained a level comparable to Cambridge Proficiency in English, grades A or B.

The Hogeschool Rotterdam (HR) requires Cambridge Advanced English for students to progress beyond the foundation year and Cambridge Proficiency in English for 2nd or 3rd-year students. Interestingly, they impose an extra requirement as to the quality of the pronunciation in addition to the CPE.

The Hogeschool van Amsterdam offers two courses: English and the International Degree in English and Education (double degree course with the University of Wolverhampton, IDEE). English requires Cambridge Advanced English (equated with B2) from students wishing to progress beyond the foundation year; tests are 'old' CAE tests administered and assessed by HVA tutors, native speakers of English who are also qualified Cambridge ESOL assessors. In order to graduate students need to pass the actual Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English examination administered at an official Cambridge ESOL testing centre, students receiving a subsidy towards the examination fee. At the end of the foundation year IDEE requires level B2 for all the language competences apart from reading, where it requires C1.

Hogeschool van Utrecht (HU) estimates entry levels as B1 (average), requires B2 or substantial progress towards B2 by the end of the foundation year and C1 before graduation. Interestingly, HU explicitly requires the use of a language portfolio.

## CEFR in Dutch and Belgian universities

The information of the Netherlands WO (universities) Bachelor's phase - as retrieved from their web sites - is presented in table 7.

	entry level	1 <sup>st</sup> year	graduation
UL		B2	
VU		B2	C1

**Table 7. Required levels of language proficiency in Netherlands WO (universities) BA English courses**

From the above table it appears that only two WO institutions (universities) in the Netherlands refer to the international standards in their course descriptions for students. The Universiteit Leiden (UL) introduced a reference to the B2 level in its module description for the 2005-2006 1<sup>st</sup> year course. The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), by contrast, refers to the B2 level for its 1st-year courses and the C1 level for its second-year courses. Hannay (2003) indicates that it is the aim for students in this university to reach C1 or C2 by the end of the bachelor period.

For the sake of comparison the information of the universities in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium - as retrieved from their web sites - was included in table 8.

	entry level	1 <sup>st</sup> year	higher years
KUL	B1	B2	C1
KULAC	B1		

Table 8. Required levels of language proficiency in Dutch language Belgian universities BA English courses

Students at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL) - and in Belgian universities in general - are not allowed to study English only; they study combinations of two languages, e.g. English - German, English - French, etc. Usually the programme for English consists of three parts: literature, linguistics and language proficiency. Here it appears that the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven specifies the entry level as B1, the 1<sup>st</sup>-year level as B2 and the graduation level as C1; interestingly, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven's Campus at Kortrijk (KULAK) does specify entry level but does not specify 1<sup>st</sup>-year level, although their students will need to go to the KUL for their final year. This institution is unique in that it offers a module 'Taal en tekst' (language and text) rather than proficiency, where language proficiency is practised with the help of texts about the social and cultural context within which the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century British novel developed (illustrated with fragments from Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*).

The information from the francophone Belgian universities, which was retrieved from their websites, is presented in table 9.

	entry level	1 <sup>st</sup> year	higher years
FUND		A2	B1
ULC	B1		

Table 9. Required levels of language proficiency in francophone Belgian universities BA English courses

Of the francophone universities in Belgium two refer to the CEFR, the Facultés Universitaires Notre Dame de la Paix (Namur, FUND) requiring A2 in the 1<sup>st</sup> year and B1 in the higher years and the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL) requiring an entry level of B1, which is the same as the level required for the higher years at the FUND.

As far as the Flemish polytechnics are concerned, most of which offer a bachelor's programme 'teacher secondary education' with teacher of English as one of the options, we were unable to find any information about the required proficiency levels on any of the web sites.

## Conclusion

From the above it appears that few institutions in the Netherlands and Belgium specify one or more of the three levels (entry, 1<sup>st</sup> year and final) in terms of the CEFR levels. It also appears that the Netherlands 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher training institutes have made more progress towards the implementation of the CEFR than the universities in the Netherlands and Belgium. A lot work is still to be done on the implementation of international standards in the assessment of teacher trainees' language proficiency.

## Excursus: CEFR in primary, secondary and further education

We have not sketched a rosy picture of the implementation of the CEFR in higher education. The situation in secondary

education, however, is worse. True, in recent proposals for the attainment targets in lower secondary education, reference is made to the CEFR but this only concerns the five groups of language activities; no attempt is made to relate the attainment targets to the levels (Taakgroep vernieuwing basisvorming 2005). Requirements for the examinations do not mention the CEFR levels, neither in those for the more academic types of schools (havo and vwo), nor those for the more vocational types of schools (vmbo) ([www.eindexamen.nl](http://www.eindexamen.nl)). This is the more disappointing since the levels of language proficiency required in the examinations were studied as early as 2001 (see van Hest, de Jong and Stoks 2001). The levels for the English examinations for the reading, listening and speaking skills were estimated as is indicated in table 10.

Skill	Type of school	Estimated level examination programme
Reading	vwo	B 2.2
	havo	B 2.1
Listening	vwo	B 2.2
	havo	B 2.1
Speaking	vwo	B 2.1
	havo	B 1.2

Table 10. Estimated levels vwo and havo examinations (adapted from Hest et al. 2001, p. 22 - 24)

It appears that little has been done with these findings. Proposals for the further education sector (bve), by contrast, do not only explicitly refer to the CEFR but also relate the required levels of language proficiency to each of the four levels within the further education sector as follows: A2 at levels 1 and 2 and B1 at levels 3 and 4 (Driessen, M. et al. 2004). Proposals for the attainment targets in the primary sector also refer to the levels A1 (at the end of primary education) and A2 at the end of lower secondary education (see <http://home.planet.nl/~bodde009/pages/oudnieuw/nieuws28.htm>). If all these proposals are accepted we may well find the correspondence as found in table 11 some time in the future.

NL attainment targets	CEFR
Primary	A1
Lower secondary, BVE levels 1 & 2	A2
Upper secondary, BVE levels 3 & 4	B1
Higher education 1st year	B2
Higher education, higher years	C1
Higher education, postgraduate level	C2

Table 11. Possible future correspondence of NL attainment targets for language proficiency and CEFR levels

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