Language scales and language tests: development in languages other than English

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1. Introduction

In this brief paper I shall not be able to cover the range of scales and tests which have been developed in recent years to assess proficiency or achievement in languages, nor the range of issues which emerge from their development, validation and use. What I can do is to describe one of the current initiatives which is taking shape in the schools sector in Australia, namely the initiative which has seen the development of the languages Statement and Profile for Australian Schools. (Curriculum Corporation 1994a, 1994b). The component called the Statement is intended to provide a common framework for curriculum development. As stated in the introduction:

> 'They (statements) define the area, outline its essential elements, show what is distinctive about it and describe a sequence for developing knowledge and skills...'

> 'Profiles describe the progression of learning typically achieved by students during the compulsory years of schooling (Years 1–10).' (1994b:1).

The languages Profile for the school sector can be seen as a profiling scheme which attempts to address the same requirement as behavioural proficiency scales like the ASLPR or ACTFL, namely, to provide a framework for describing language progress over time across language learning populations. Its major difference lies in the fact that it is broadly curriculum-related and therefore linked to achievement or attainment rather than proficiency. Given its nature, however, as generalised (across populations) and generic (across languages), the distinction become somewhat tenuous.

I shall briefly describe the Profile initiative and address some issues which pertain to the nature of the descriptors, and their ordering into levels.

2. Approaches to describing long-term progress in learning

> 'How do I know if my perception of the steps in the understandings is correct. Now I can check.'

This is how a practising teacher sees the Curriculum Profiles for Australian Schools. The Profile constitutes the Australian response to the international trend in education to focus on educational outcomes and standards. A range of systems of 'benchmarks', 'attainment levels', 'pathways' and 'profiles', with related assessment procedures, have emerged in the past few years. The schemes which have been developed in different countries in a range of curriculum areas, including languages, attempt to provide descriptions of long-term, progressive achievement in learning in the school setting.

A number of different conceptions of progressive achievement have emerged. The difference in approaches is perhaps best exemplified in the difference between the Australian Statements and Profiles and the Toronto Benchmarks Program (Larter, 1991). The Australian Profiles aim to chart development along the K–12 continuum across tasks, learners, programs and year-levels on a progressive scale.

The Toronto Benchmarks program describes performance on tasks in language (L1) and mathematics for Grades 3, 6 and 8 and provides five levels of holistic scoring criteria for each individual task. The tasks are closely tied to curriculum objectives. The criteria and descriptions for each score are derived from actual student performance. The descriptions, with accompanying video and print samples of learners' work, for each score level, form the Benchmark library which is used for assessment of standards and also for teacher development.

The key difference is, on the one hand, the Australian attempt to depict an hypothesised learner trajectory from early to advanced states of knowing and on the other, the Canadian attempt to take a snapshot at a particular point in time. Further, the Toronto descriptions are tied to selected tasks and are based on actual student performance, whereas the Australian descriptions are generalised across tasks and contexts. Issues of generalisability pertain in different ways in both examples.

[The approach taken in the National Curriculum of England and Wales, the National Curriculum of New Zealand and the National Standards in Foreign Language Education in the USA (1994:draft version) is not unlike the Australian one].

3. The Languages Profile for Australian schools

Let us consider a small section of the languages Profile. The Profile is divided into three strands (oral interaction, reading and responding and writing) and into eight levels of achievement. Strands are described as the major 'organisers' of a learning area. Many questions arise from this development. Why was this particular configuration of strands chosen? Do they have sufficient conceptual power to provide the framework for the specification progressive levels? About the eight developmental levels, Masters (1993), who was given the task of 'validating' the development process in the Profiles initiative, states:

> [The levels in] an achievement continuum are inevitably somewhat arbitrary...eight levels were chosen for convenience, but any number could have been chosen. [The levels are] best conceptualised as convenient but arbitrary markers on a continuum of increasing achievement.

The eight levels of the Profile are intended to cover the spectrum of Years 1–10 of schooling though they are not tied to specific years of schooling. In the local version of the Profile developed by the Board of Studies in Victoria (1995), seven levels are described and these levels have been tied to years of schooling. For example, Level 4 is equated with the end of Year 6. The languages curriculum area, however, is an exception. In languages the Victorian Curriculum and Standards Framework (1995:16) states that:

> The levels in LOTE relate to the *developmental stages* in learning a language and not to year levels of schooling...The levels reflect the process of language acquisition through out-of-school experience, and schooling from Prep to Year 10. (my emphasis)

A number of labels have been created for the levels in the Victorian framework; level 4 is called intermediate A, level 5 is advanced B, level 6 is advanced A, etc. The notion of real-life inside and beyond

the school is highlighted explicitly in the Victorian version, as is the concept of developmental stages.

In both the parent document and the local, Victorian version, progress is described through 'outcomes' and pointers. Outcomes as defined in the Profile:

> describe in progressive order the various skills and knowledge that students typically acquire as they become more proficient in an area...Pointers are indicators or signals of the achievement of an outcome. Unlike outcomes, pointers are only examples   (1994b: 5).

We can conclude from these definitions then that in the minds of the developers the 'outcomes' are firm and fixed, while 'pointers' are negotiable. Table 1 sets out the outcomes as described in the languages Profile for levels 4 and 5 (1994b:6).

4.1 Interacts in familiar social and learning situations, using familiar language with some flexibility.	4.2 Reads and understands short texts of one or two paragraphs containing familiar language and some unfamiliar vocabulary.	4.3 Writes texts of several linked sentences, experimenting with some linguistic patterns and structures to convey information and ideas.
5.1 Interacts in familiar social and learning situations, using connected speech to respond to longer and continuous spoken texts.	5.2 Reads texts containing familiar and some unfamiliar language and presents the information in a variety of ways.	5.3 Writes texts of one or more paragraphs, applying familiar linguistic patterns and structures to link and sequence information and ideas.

Table 1. Outcomes for levels 4 and 5 of the languages Profile for Australian schools.

Even on the basis of a preliminary reading of the outcome statements, further questions come to mind. In relation to oral interaction , for example, what exactly are 'familiar social and learning situations?' How much flexibility is 'some?' Is the 'familiar language' in level 4 not 'connected', which seems to be the

requirement for level 5? There is no mention of other dimensions of conversation which impact on the nature and extent of communication, for example, the respective roles of the interlocutors, the number of participants and their relationship, the context and purpose of the interaction, the nature of the subject matter being discussed and the learners' familiarity with it, etc.

The pointers are designed to add another layer of detail but, as noted earlier, their status is that of being 'examples' only. At level 5, in oral interaction, it is stated that the outcome is evident when students:

'• Respond to longer spoken texts without necessarily understanding all of the text.

• Recount main ideas and some detail from spoken texts.

• Give a series of instructions that involve interrelated steps.

• Take part in longer exchanges with others, including exchanging of several linked ideas or items of information.

• Take part in conversations with little rehearsal and which require some spontaneity.

• Retell parts of a familiar simple story or relate a series of events in a time sequence.'   (1994b:53)

Because of the generalised and generic nature of the outcomes, the pointers can only feature selected dimensions of the realisation of the outcome. The basis for the selection of the dimensions which are associated with any one outcome is not stated explicitly. Some apply specifically to the stated outcome, while others could in fact apply to any of the stated outcomes. They are described at different levels of generality or specificity. Since they have been derived from language teaching practice, rather than theoretical models of language, language use and language learning, they appear to be somewhat random. Yet, as indicated earlier, the description of pointers is being interpreted, by users, as the pattern of second language development.

In the Victorian version the outcomes focus more directly on the curriculum, with an emphasis on (1) activities related to personal and social purposes and informational purposes, (2) contexts, (3) language style and register, (4) social and cultural knowledge, (5) strategies, (6) level of support required and (7) text-types. Again, the levels relate to established pedagogical practice, rather than to 'developmental stages in language learning'.

A chart which presents 'expected levels of achievement by the end of Year 10' (pp20–21 in the Victorian version) attempts to depict exit levels for students of different backgrounds and in different types of languages, which is of course the reality of learning outcomes in the languages area. Level 5 in this scheme, for example, is seen as adequate preparation for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE); it is the expected level to be achieved by students who enter at upper primary level, in non-character based languages.

In character-based languages it is stated that this level is achieved, for the same entry point, only in listening and speaking. While this process of 'anchoring' the levels will be meaningful to practising teachers in a pragmatic sense, it is not theoretically driven. In short, in both the languages Profile and the Victorian version the question of origin of the descriptions remains.

4. Issues

4.1 Issue 1: basis for developing the framework of descriptors

A major issue in relation to the Profile as a resource for assessing progress relates to the lack of empirical or theoretical basis for the descriptions. The process of development would suggest that they represent teachers' conceptions of what students are expected to be able to do as opposed to what they actually do. (Note here the difference with the Toronto Benchmarks). They are desiderata in a curriculum sense as opposed to actual student performance on tasks within the context of the classroom and beyond.

In the introduction to the languages Profile, the developers describe its conceptual basis as follows:

> 'The profile has been developed on the basis of a communicative *approach* to language teaching and learning' (1994b:2). (my emphasis)

The conclusion to be drawn from such a statement is that the descriptions are derived entirely from classroom practice, and' interestingly, this could well be desired practice, as opposed to actual practice.

Different scales draw on different sets of criteria for the description of levels depending on their purpose. These may include tasks, text-types, content, skills as well as broad features of performance such as accuracy, fluency, intelligibility, flexibility, or specific aspects of language such as vocabulary and grammar. Any attempt to describe cumulative or progressive achievement needs to begin with a consideration of a conceptual framework for presenting the descriptors.

If the object of scales or profiling schemes is to describe increasing levels of use of the target language we must address the question of what it means to know how to use a language (Spolsky 1986). Scales or profiling schemes need to be informed by a theoretical model of language, language use and language proficiency and, particularly for school language learning , I would add a model of learning and second language acquisition. In the development of a proficiency scale it is a question of specifying in operational terms the concepts, skills and abilities which constitute knowing and using the target language. Similarly, developing profiling schemes for schools involves defining what it means to know, use and learn a particular language and establishing levels through which performance is judged. This, however, is highly complex.

In the languages Profile the domain is defined by the three strands. Questions which arise include: Why are listening and speaking conflated? Is there a place for the areas of knowledge as described by Bachman, for example, organisational knowledge, pragmatic knowledge or strategic knowledge? (Bachman 1990; 1991). In school language learning it is important to consider underlying abilities

since in we are concerned with both language using and language learning, ie performance as well as language diagnosis and development. This is not to say that Bachman's proposal to develop levels in relation to the underlying abilities which make up proficiency would necessarily suffice. He describes cohesion, for example, on a scale which ranges from no cohesion to excellent cohesion. Scales along these lines display the same problem of relativity as behavioural scales such as the ACTFL or ASLPR eg how little is 'little'? how much is 'moderate'?

In the development of the languages Profile then, strands were not selected on the basis of a model of language, or language use or underlying abilities which constitute proficiency. Similarly, there is no explicit discussion of the concept of progression and the basis for the organisation of the descriptions into levels.

4.2 Issue 2: basis for the ordering of descriptors

As indicated by the teacher's comment which I quoted earlier the profiles are interpreted by users as the pattern of *development*. Masters (1993) describes the concept of development as it relates to the Profiles as follows:

> Each strand is conceptualised as a progression (or continuum) of increasing achievement within the sub-area of learning defined by the strand.

Though not stated in explicit terms the languages Profile then is seen to provide descriptions of what its developers think learners do as their language develops. Collins (1994a) raises the significant question of what or who is 'developing' in the Australian initiative? the curriculum itself, the learner, knowledge? She warns that:

> unless we see the profiles for what they are, they will come to constitute what developmental 'progress' means for the next generation of Australian children, just as IQ scores did a generation ago. Teachers will learn to operate inside the profiles' constructs, seeing children through them, as a verification, as a measuring stick of the way development ought to be   (1994b:48).

With regard to the basis for ordering descriptors as levels, a major difficulty arises from their linear nature, which in turn reflects a lack of consideration of learning theory. Current conceptions of learning (Glaser 1992) suggest that it involves acquiring and changing one's framework of knowledge to impose and construct meaning through the interpretation of situations. The concept of a 'framework of knowledge' suggests not only a consideration of degrees of knowledge and skill but also the sequence, the logistical prerequisites and interdependencies among different aspects of knowledge. The spiralling of concepts, procedures and representations, which is the image often used to replace the linear view, involves drawing connections and relations. In addition, students bring to any task their own configurations of knowledge, skill, understanding, attitudes and values. It is this conception of learning, that leads Mislevy (1993) and others to propose the need for a new generation of tests. He states:

> A learner's state of competence at a given point in time is a complex constellation of facts and concepts, and the networks that interconnect them; of automatized procedures and conscious heuristics, and their relationships to knowledge patterns that signal their relevance; of perspectives and strategies, and the management capabilities by which the learner focuses his (sic) efforts. There is no hope of providing a complete description of such a state   (1993:28).

A complete and nuanced description such as that implied here would indeed be impossible, yet there is a need for individuals and educational systems to develop stronger conceptions of *language learning over time* and a rich resource is needed to support this aspect of teachers' and students' work.

Resnick (1989) emphasises that the kinds of tasks associated with higher-order thinking are not limited to advanced stages of development. Indeed they form a part of even the most elementary learning. With regard to the concept of development, there has been a move away from the notion of discrete, developmental stages, towards a notion of broad trends in which learners' success depends, to a large extent, on the nature of a particular task. This is the single most important finding in cognitive science (Glaser 1992) and needs to be considered in any attempt to depict long-term progress in school learning.

In the profile, as in other scales, the 'level' is carried by elements such as texts, tasks and skills. The increase across levels is generally presented hierarchically yet *it is the relationship of the elements among themselves and the cognitive demand the particular configuration of elements within a task poses the particular learner* (given background knowledge, cultural background etc) *that influence complexity*. The task draws a sample of what a person can think and do at a particular point in his/her development. The task, and therefore the sample, at any level may be simple or complex, broad or narrow, familiar or novel, for the particular learner. This conception puts into doubt the notion of hierarchy.

Bialystok suggests that students:

> will in fact exhibit a *range of proficiency* with the language that is determined by the impact of the task demands on the processing abilities of the learner.   (1991:75).

The current linear descriptions which have been developed for the languages Profile do not account for the impact of task demands. Nor does the languages Profile account for plateauing and regression which is likely across the span of language learning. As indicated in Table 1, it is difficult to distinguish among levels. This problem is compounded by the fact that the descriptions are generic, across languages. There is a mishmash of outcomes and pointers; some of the latter appear to relate to a particular task which developers of the descriptions had associated with a particular level; others could relate to any tasks at any level.

If teachers are to assign levels to students' performance in languages as is likely at least in some Australian states, it will be impossible as well as meaningless to do so on the basis of the current descriptions provided in the Profile. All that can be said of the Profile in its current form is, as Collins states:

> [the levels in the Profiles] are simply a map of the order of learning of the majority of children in the trial schools in Australia in Anno Domini 1993   (1994a:14).

4.3 Issue 3: complexity of the relationship among different theoretical strands

Having questioned the theoretical basis of the languages Profile, it is important to highlight a further layer of complexity. I have suggested that a variety of theoretical inputs are needed in the process of attempting to describe progressive achievement in school language learning over time. Since each of these theoretical strands is derived from a different discipline, a question arises as to the interrelationships among strands. More specifically, what is the basis for aligning a descriptor derived from one theoretical universe with another? We do not have a 'theory of theories' which would serve to unify the different strands.

5. Conclusion

From an empirical as well as a theoretical point of view the languages Profile, in its current form, is inadequate as a resource for profiling student performance in languages in the school setting. The positive side of the current initiative is that it is inviting teachers to think of language learning beyond the one-off episode, and that, through professional development, they are reflecting deeply on issues related to long-term progress in language learning. What is needed is support for questions to be discussed and for systematic programs of research to help us move forward in a manner which is sound in theoretical, as well as practical terms. This is not a simple agenda given the range of theoretical strands which need to be drawn together, and yet, it cannot be ignored.

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