



Language learning

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Today: What does it mean to know a language? How is this knowledge acquired? + some review

- Different kinds of knowledge
- CEFR levels and criteria
- Rules or patterns? Two theories of language acquisition
- Construction grammar approach to second language learning



What does it mean to «know» a language?

Distinction between two types of knowing (in general, not only of language):

- «**declarative knowledge**» – I know that vegetables are healthy.
- «**procedural knowledge**» – I know how to / I can cook a vegetable curry

CEFR, ALTE: describes procedural knowledge (CAN DO), has no interest in declarative knowledge

ALTE Association of Language Testers in Europe; contributed essentially to the level descriptions of CEFR; „Can-do statements” (1992-2002)

<https://www.alte.org/Materials>

ALTE level descriptions: What CAN you DO?

- **ALTE Breakthrough Level:** a basic ability to communicate and exchange information in a simple way. *Example: CAN ask simple questions about a menu and understand simple answers.*
- **ALTE Level 1 (Waystage User):** an ability to deal with simple, straightforward information and begin to express oneself in familiar contexts. *Example: CAN take part in a routine conversation on simple predictable topics.*
- **ALTE Level 2 (Threshold User):** an ability to express oneself in a limited way in familiar situations and to deal in a general way with non-routine information. *Example: CAN ask to open an account at a bank, provided that the procedure is straightforward.*

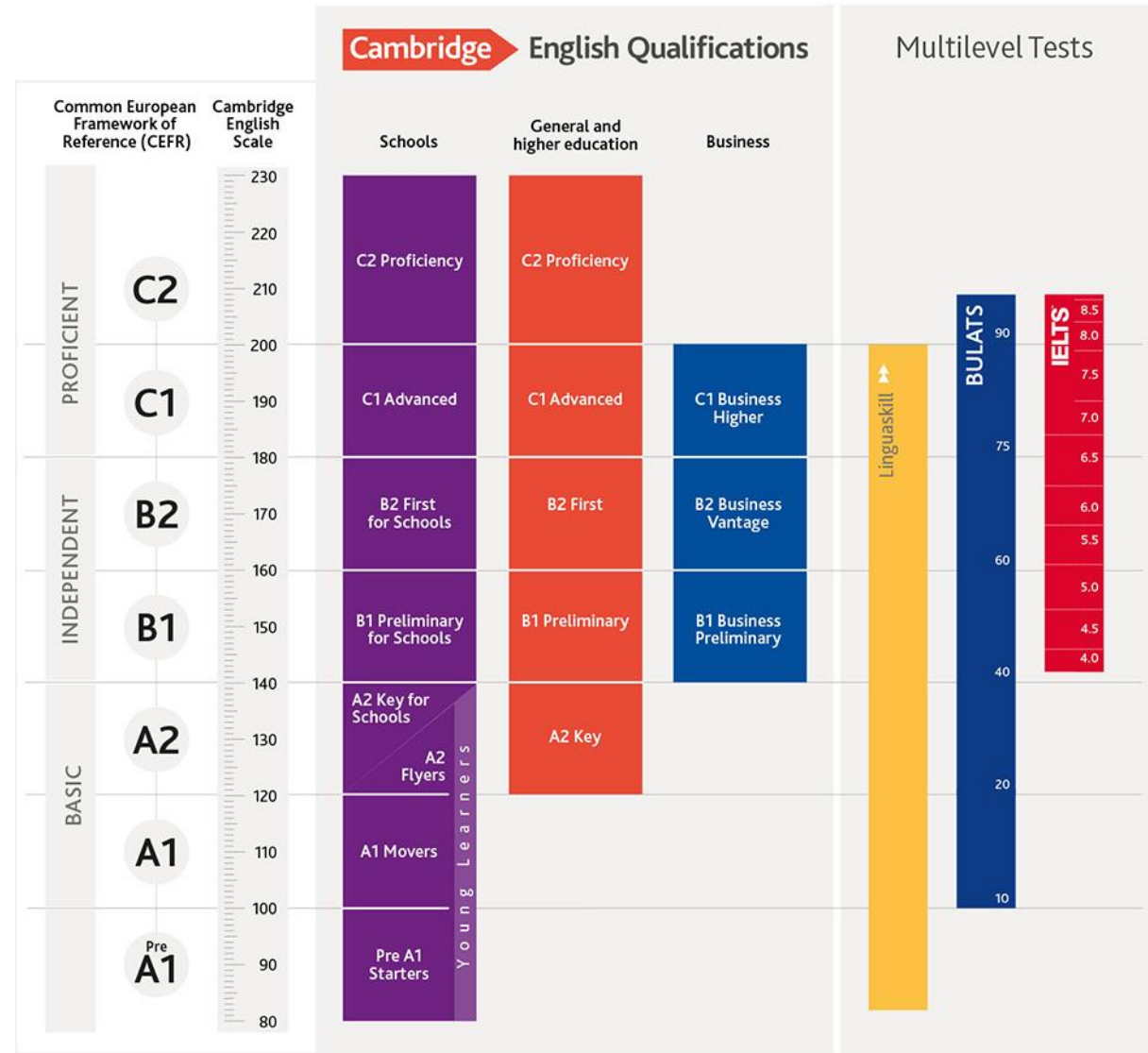
- **ALTE Level 3 (Independent User):** the capacity to achieve most goals and express oneself on a range of topics. *Example: CAN show visitors round and give a detailed description of a place.*
- **ALTE Level 4 (Competent User):** an ability to communicate with the emphasis on how well it is done, in terms of appropriacy, sensitivity and the capacity to deal with unfamiliar topics. *Examples: CAN deal with hostile questioning confidently. CAN get and hold on to his/her turn to speak*
- **ALTE Level 5 (Good User):** the capacity to deal with material which is academic or cognitively demanding, and to use language to good effect, at a level of performance which may in certain respects be more advanced than that of an average native speaker.

Example: CAN scan texts for relevant information, and grasp main topic of text, reading almost as quickly as a native speaker.

CEFR Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment

1. Let's talk about our experience with the language passport!
2. On which approach to language learning is CEFR based? How do we know?

CEFR and Cambridge Certificate – equivalence

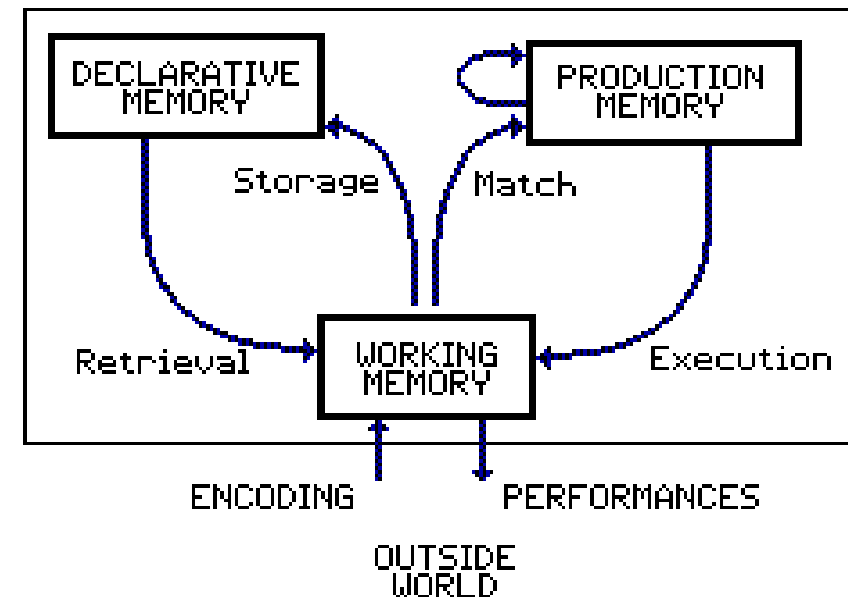


From: <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/cefr/>

(How) Are declarative and procedural knowledge related? The traditional view

Ideas and models put forward around 1980 by John R. Anderson, professor of psychology and computer science in Pittsburgh; <http://act-r.psy.cmu.edu/people/ja/>

«Learning a language is similar to any other skill learning and involves transforming declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge which enables efficient language use.» (Trawiński 2005)



“When we learn a foreign language in classroom situation, we are aware of the rules of the language, especially just after a lesson that spells them out. One might argue that our knowledge of the language at that time is declarative. We speak the learned language by using general rule-following procedures applied to the rules we have learned, rather than speaking directly, as we do in our native language. Not surprisingly, applying this knowledge is a much slower and painful process than applying the procedurally encoded knowledge of our own language. Eventually, if we are lucky, we can come to know a foreign language as well as we know our native language. At that point, we often forget the rules of the foreign language. It is as if the class-taught declarative knowledge had been transformed into a procedural form.”
(Anderson 1980, cited after Mitchel and Miles 1998)

Is this
really so?

Two rival theories of first language acquisition

1. Abstract rules first! (Chomsky, UG)

"The language faculty provides the child with an algorithm (i.e. a set of procedures) for developing a grammar of any language". (Chomsky, cited after Radford)

- We are born with an abstract system underlying language - "Universal Grammar", (UG), which contains abstract categories ("Verb", "tense") and general principles of language structure
- On the basis of UG children discover / build the abstract rules of the grammar of a particular language.
- To do so, only minimal (even chaotic) input is needed. Communication plays a minor role. Imitation plays no role at all.
- Grammatical rules are abstract from the very beginning and present at a very early age.
- Acquisition of grammar is independent of acquisition of vocabulary.

Two rival theories of first language acquisition

2. Concrete patterns first! (Tomasello, Constructionism)

"young children begin language acquisition by imitatively learning linguistic items directly from adult language, only later discerning the kinds of patterns that enable them to construct more abstract linguistic categories and schemas." (Tomasello 2001)

- At the beginning, imitation is important for the acquisition of grammar.
- The acquisition of words and structures is connected to communicative interaction.
- Grammatical acquisition is connected to lexical acquisition.
- Children build abstract rules gradually, based on concrete utterances.
- To do so, they use general cognitive skills.

Can these theories also be used to describe second language acquisition?

- UG theory – no, because according to Chomsky it is available only to children before a “critical age” (puberty); later, languages cannot be acquired in this way but have to be learned by studying.
- Constructionist, usage based theories: yes, second language acquisition is partly similar to first language acquisition, but there are also important differences

Basic assumption: Languages consists of (a very large number of) constructions, which are stored in memory

"Our language does not expect us to build everything starting with lumber, nails and blueprint, but provides us with an incredibly large number of prefabs, which have the magical property of persisting even when we knock some of them apart and put them together in unpredictable ways." (Bolinger 1976, cited after Ellis 2003)

"we process faster and most easily language which accords with the expectations that have come from our unconscious analysis of the serial probabilities in our lifelong history of input" (Ellis 2003)

Grammar is not “flying around” abstractly — it is riding on constructions

“Constructions are form-meaning mappings, conventionalized in the speech community, and entrenched as language knowledge in the learner’s mind. They are the symbolic units of language relating the defining properties of their morphological, syntactic, and lexical form with particular semantic, pragmatic, and discourse functions [...]”

(Ellis 2013)

Consequence: we don't need abstract rules in language acquisition

"Constructivist views of language acquisition hold that simple learning mechanisms operating in and across human systems for perception, motor action, and cognition while exposed to language data in a communicatively rich human social environment navigated by an organism eager to exploit the functionality of language are sufficient to drive the emergence of complex language representations."

(Ellis 2003)

So what is needed for the “emergence” of (grammatical) structures?

- a lot of input
- high token frequency of the construction – frequent exemplars get stored and become accessible; they can be prototypes
- types and type frequency – generalize over different tokens
- salience of the construction and/or its parts

“selective attention, salience, expectation, and surprise are key elements in the analysis of all learning, animal and human alike” (Ellis 2013)

Differences between first and second language acquisition wrt constructions

- L2 learners rarely have as much input as children acquiring their first language(s)
- The construction of learners' first language (or other known languages) shape the expectations and may «blind» the learner for the constructions of the new language.
- Already having a language makes people less «eager» to aquire a language (for children, first language acquisition is essential in a way second language acquisition for adults never can be; for teenagers it is still possible).
- Teenagers and adults have more (other) possibilities of learning than infants.

«since they have previously devoted considerable resources to the estimation of the characteristics of another language [...] L2 learners' computations and inductions are often **affected by transfer**, with **L1-tuned expectations** and selective attention [...] blinding the acquisition system to aspects of the L2 sample, thus **biasing** their estimation from naturalistic usage and producing the limited attainment that is typical of adult L2A. Thus, L2A is different from L2A in that it involves processes of construction and **reconstruction**.»
(Ellis 2013)

Your presentations?

- 22.05. Karonia Walkusz:
- 22.05. Martyna Przybysz:
- 29.05. Saim Inayatullah:
- 29.05. Hanna Kasperek:
- 05.06. Karolina Motylińska:
- 05.06. Anna Barchańska:

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