THE THRESHOLD LEVEL FOR MODERN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SCHOOLS
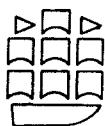
J A van Ek

for

THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

The Threshold Level

for Modern Language Learning in Schools

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with contributions by L. G. Alexander

Preface

The present study is based on the author's earlier publication, *The Threshold-Level in a European Unit/Credit System for Modern Language Learning by Adults*, Strasbourg, 1975. For the extent of his indebtedness to contributions by numerous colleagues the reader is referred to the introduction to the earlier document. In preparing the present study the author has again benefited from the encouragement and advice generously provided by a great many government officials, teachers and researchers in several European countries. He would like to express his gratitude to those who organized meetings for him and to all those who participated in them. Without these consultations it would not have been possible to give the "threshold level" the form in which it is now presented. The author can only hope that when reading the present document all those who in any way contributed to it will feel their advice has not been wasted. He also hopes they will forgive him for not referring to them individually. A full list would contain so many names that this preface would have to cover several pages. Special thanks, however, are due to the Austrian Ministry of Education, who, in the best European spirit, have once again taken the lead in initiating practical experimentation. The author would also like to thank the Dutch Minister of Education and his staff for enabling him to carry out his present task. Without the facilities provided by them *The Threshold Level for Schools* would not have been written.

The author is particularly indebted to the Schools Council Modern Languages Project of the University of York, whose draft examination syllabuses, made available to him by Mr. Antony Peck, have provided some of the behavioural specifications used in the present document. He would also like to thank Mr. L. G. Alexander for permission to include the "structural inventory" originally prepared by him for the "threshold level for adults". A further contribution by Mr. Alexander is added as a supplement. It constitutes the first major analysis of various methodological implications of the approach used in *The Threshold Level*, some of which are summarily dealt with in the study itself (1.4). Strictly speaking, a document devoted to the specification of an objective is not the right place to deal with methodology. Yet, if an objective is to be considered for incorporation into educational curricula, insight into the problems involved in enabling learners to reach

this objective is obviously required. Mr. Alexander's contribution on the sub-
ject should provide at least some of this insight.

Bussum, March 1976   Jan. A. van Ek

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0   Introduction

0.1   European background

Although at times it may seem as if the European community is characterized
by diversity rather than unity, there are broad areas where an increasing con-
vergence of views and attitudes may be observed. In these areas the same
ideas tend to develop simultaneously and in similar fashion in several places
in different countries, so that it would seem to be justified to speak of a Euro-
pean development rather than of a multitude of national ones. One of these
areas is education. Although emphases may differ from one country to
another there is a remarkable degree of agreement as to the roles of education,
the rights to education, and the forms in which educational opportunities
are to be offered. Educational reforms in several countries tend to follow
parallel lines and there is a growing awareness of the benefits to be derived
from mutual consultation, exchange of views and experiences, and intensified
collaboration. It is not surprising that, in an endeavour to promote European
unity and coordination in the field of education, foreign language learning
should have been given special attention.

Even as early as 1954, when the European Cultural Convention was signed
in Paris by the representatives of the member states of the Council of Europe,
it was agreed that foreign language study was to be promoted because "a
greater understanding of one another among the peoples of Europe" would
further the Council's aim, which was the achievement "of a greater unity
between its Members". Since then successive conferences of European
Ministers of Education have reaffirmed this decision, stating that knowledge
of foreign languages is to be considered "indispensable both for the indivi-
dual and for Europe as a whole" and emphasizing "that ways and means
should be devised of extending the teaching of modern languages to the
greatest extent possible to children and adults to whom it is not yet given".

Foreign language teaching, we may conclude, is one of the educational
priorities of European governments. At the same time it is the subject *par
excellence* for international cooperation in education. Whatever the ulterior
aims of foreign language teaching all member states of the Council of Europe
recognize at least one common aim, which is the ability to *use* the foreign

language in one way or another. Moreover, foreign language teachers are, by virtue of their subject, more apt to look beyond national boundaries for enlightenment, guidance and teaching-materials than teachers of many other subjects.

0.2   Concrètization

What proved to be the most significant concrete step towards the implementation of the decisions made by the European Ministers of Education with regard to foreign language teaching was the constitution in 1971 by the Council for Cultural Cooperation of a small multinational group of experts who were invited to examine the feasibility of the development of a unit/ credit system for foreign language learning by adults as proposed by a Council of Europe symposium held in the same year. The work of this group has meanwhile resulted in a number of fundamental studies and practical applications. Because of the fundamental place of objectives in any learning-system the highest priority was given to the development of a model for the specification of foreign language learning objectives and to the application of this model in the construction of at least one objective. In order to give the work of the group the widest possible relevance it was decided to choose the objective which was likely to appeal to the largest single group of potential adult learners, those who would wish to be able to communicate non-professionally with foreign language speakers in everyday situations on topics of general interest. These learners, it was felt, would not only wish to be able to survive, linguistically speaking, as tourists in a foreign country, or in contacts with foreign visitors to their own country, but they would also require the ability to establish and maintain social relations of however superficial a kind. The attempt to define for this class of learners what they would minimally need to be able to do in the foreign language resulted in the specification of what has since come to be known as the "threshold level", developed by the present author and exemplified for English.

0.3   Application to school-education

After publication of the "threshold level" the Committee for General and Technical Education convened a meeting of experts on foreign language learning and teaching with a view to examining the potential of this objective for school education. This meeting resulted in a request to the present author to undertake the development of an objective for foreign language learning

in compulsory education comparable to the threshold level previously developed for adult education. This objective, it was decided, would

1. be such as to enable the great majority of pupils to reach it;
2. correspond to a minimum level of proficiency;
3. make possible communication, especially oral communication, with children or adults in the language studied;
4. be based on the exploitation of everyday real-life situations;
5. include a methodological initiation which would, on the one hand, facilitate continued study of the language and, on the other hand, make it possible to acquire a sufficient understanding of the learning-processes used, so that these may be profitably applied to the study of other languages.

0.4   Relevance

The request was of particular interest because, if it would prove to be possible to define in terms of the model constructed for the unit/credit system for adult education a basic objective acceptable to the various member states of the Council of Europe, this would serve a variety of purposes:

1. it would provide the great majority of pupils in a very large part of Europe with an objective in terms of practical communicative ability;
2. it would give meaningful direction to foreign language teaching and contribute to increased efficiency and motivating power;
3. it would be a basis for the harmonization of foreign language teaching in the member states of the Council of Europe;
4. it would form a foundation for international cooperation in educational innovation, the production of learning-materials, tests, the exchange of experiences, the conduct of experimentation, etc. etc., on a hitherto unprecedented scale;
5. it would fall within the same system as that developed for adult education and thus fulfil an essential condition for the implementation of any scheme of permanent education or recurrent education;
6. as a low-level objective in its own right it would provide a useful learning-aim for pupils unable to receive more than a minimum – say three years – of instruction in a foreign language;
7. it would enable curriculum-planning, particularly the definition of successive terminal objectives, to start at the logical end, i.e. at the lowest objective, rather than starting at the highest – academic – objective and derive lower objectives by means of a process of elimination.

0.5   Feasibility

One question of special importance, and crucial to the whole project, was that of feasibility. Would it be feasible to define one single foreign language learning objective which would be equally relevant to countries as far apart as Norway and Italy, England and Austria? Would it be possible to make a principled selection of situations, topics, etc., which might be acceptable in each of these countries as probably the most useful choice for their learners? An additional complication was that the objective would have to be formulated in such a way that it would apply to a variety of languages, at least the languages most commonly used in the member states of the Council of Europe. Finally, the objective would have to be relevant to children of various age-groups: in some countries foreign language learning begins at a considerably younger age than in others.

The question of multinational relevance of one and the same objective was easily settled by eliciting reactions from groups of language-teaching experts in some ten different countries to one and the same provisional list of selected items. Somewhat surprisingly there were hardly any negative reactions to the selection proposed except for the almost general wish that the flexibility inherent in the model should be made more explicit.

The non-language-specificity of the definition, in the sense that it can be used for a variety of different languages, has meanwhile been demonstrated for the parallel version for adults, where on the basis of the master specification and the English exemplification, draft versions for various other languages have been successfully developed.

A more difficult requirement is that the objective should be relevant to children of different age-groups. It has been attempted to satisfy this requirement by introducing the possibilities of strictly controlled adaptation of the objective, so that it may be adapted to the needs and interests of different age-groups without affecting the general communicative ability which is the essential aim of the specification.

0.6   Presentation

In this volume we present the full specification of the "threshold level for schools" as a basic foreign language learning objective for compulsory education. Chapter 1 describes the model used in the specification, the choices made in the selection of items, the place the objective may be given in a curriculum, and methodological implications of the principles underlying the objective. Chapter 2 presents the objective itself, with exemplification for English. Chapter 4 contains a lexical index, a structural inventory and a grammatical survey of the language-forms used in the English exemplification.

1 The development of the objective

1.1 The model

1.1.1 Behavioural objectives

The basic characteristic of the model used in our definition is that it tries to specify foreign language ability as *skill* rather than *knowledge*. It analyses what the learner will have to be able to *do* in the foreign language and determines only in the second place what *language-forms* (words, structures, etc.) the learners will have to be able to handle in order to *do* all that has been specified. In accordance with the nature of verbal communication as a form of *behaviour* the objectives defined by means of this model are therefore basically *behavioural* objectives. To preclude misunderstanding it should perhaps be pointed out right at the beginning of our presentation that a behavioural specification of an objective by no means implies the need for a behaviouristic teaching-method. The way in which the objective has been defined does not impose any particular methodology – behaviouristic or otherwise – on the teacher.

1.1.2 Explicitness

Objectives defined by means of the present model have a high degree of *explicitness*. Yet, they are not explicit in an absolute sense. Language learning objectives can never be defined with absolute explicitness because language-use is neither fully predictable (except perhaps in the most restricted situations) nor fully describable. Nevertheless, definitions based on our model are more explicit than most definitions of language learning objectives. This has obvious advantages in that it gives all those involved in the teaching/learning process, including the learner himself, a clear view of just what is expected of them. The result of this should be a considerable increase of efficiency.

1.1.3 Functions and notions

In essence, the model is a very simple one, in that it analyses verbal behaviour into only two components: the performance of *language-functions* and the expression of, or reference to, *notions*. What people do by means of language

can be described as verbally performing certain *functions*. By means of lan-
guage people assert, question, command, expostulate, persuade, apologize,
etc. etc. In performing such functions people express, refer to or – to use a
more general term – "handle" certain notions. They will, for instance, apolo-
gize for *being late*, for being late for a *party*, for being late for a party *yester-
day*, etc. etc. Other *notions* are less directly correlated with lexical items, e.g.
the notion of "possession", which may be expressed by means of a verb (*have*,
possess, etc.), but also by means of a prepositional construction (*of* + nominal
group), a genitive case or a possessive pronoun.

Our task, then, in defining a language learning objective, is to determine
what language-functions the learners will have to be able to perform and
what notions they will have to be able to handle.

1.1.4   Determining factors

It will be obvious that we can only perform our task if we have some insight
into what may be expected to be the communication needs of the learner.
This, in turn, would seem to depend very much on the learner himself, on
the type of contacts he may be expected to have which necessitate the use
of a foreign language. The first step towards the specification of an objective
is, therefore, the selection of a target-group and a general characterization
of the type of foreign language contacts its members may be expected to
engage in. Subsequently we attempt to describe the nature of these contacts
more precisely. We may determine whether the learners will be expected to
have mainly (or even exclusively) *oral* contacts or *written* contacts, whether
they will use the foreign language mainly (or exclusively) *receptively*, as lis-
teners or readers, or also *productively*, as speakers or writers. In other words,
we determine the *language-activities* the learners are expected to engage in.
We may also determine *where* they may be expected to use the foreign lan-
guage. Especially for target-groups with restricted (e.g. professional) needs
this may be highly relevant. If a telephone operator is expected to use a
foreign language almost exclusively in front of a switchboard, this *setting*
is obviously an important factor in determining what language-functions she
will have to fulfil and what notions she will have to handle. Another factor
is the *roles* the learner may have to play. Will he have to be able to play
mainly subordinate roles or will he have to command, to instruct? Apart
from these *social roles* we may distinguish *psychological roles*. A "gentle per-
suader's" language-needs will, to a certain extent, differ from those of a
"bully", to mention two extremes. Then, of course, the *topics* the learner
may be expected to deal with will have an important influence on, particu-
larly, the notions he will have to be able to handle. It will make a lot of
difference whether a learner will deal mainly with the topic of public trans-
port, as a railway employee may do, or with the topic of health, ailments,
accidents, as may be the case with a nurse. To a certain extent we can integrate
the various factors mentioned above by specifying for each topic just what
the learner may be expected to *do* with regard to it. This relates language-
activities, settings and roles directly to the topics.

To sum up: we determine what language-functions the learner will have to be able to fulfil and what notions he will have to be able to handle on the basis of:

- a general characterization of the type of language-contacts which, as a member of a certain target-group, he will engage in;
- the language-activities he will engage in;
- the settings in which he will use the foreign language;
- the roles (social and psychological) he will play;
- the topics he will deal with;
- what he will be expected to do with regard to each topic.

It goes without saying that, except in extreme cases, our decisions with regard to each component will only be based on estimates. We cannot possibly predict with certainty exactly what a learner is going to do with a foreign language once he has mastered it to a certain degree. We can, however, make useful estimates and prepare the learner for those foreign language contacts he is most likely to engage in. Moreover, such is the transfer-potential of linguistic ability, once the learner has been successfully prepared for certain foreign language contacts he will find that he can also cope more or less adequately in numerous other foreign language situations.

If the above components play an important role in determining our choice of language-functions and of notions for a certain objective, they also influence – in many cases even decisively – our choice of *exponents* for the various functions and notions. By exponents we mean the actual language-forms by means of which the learner will fulfil each function and express each notion. It will be obvious that, for instance, the actual *language-forms* the learner will be taught to use in order to fulfil the function "asking others to do something" will depend to a large extent on the social and psychological roles he will be playing. In this respect, too, the specification is learner-oriented in that, in each decision we make, we ask ourselves what is most appropriate to a particular class of learners, what will most adequately satisfy their individual foreign language communication needs.

1.1.5 Common core and specific notions

It cannot be said that each of the above components is equally influential in each choice we make. This applies particularly to the component which we called "topics". Some parts of the specification will be more directly affected by our selection of particular topics than others. The linguistic needs for asking, inviting, apologizing – in short, for the functions – will be less stringently determined by the choice of a particular topic than those for expressing certain concrete notions. Whether the learner will need to be able to express the notion "peanut-butter" or the notion "airport" will depend more directly on the situations he will find himself in, particularly the topics he will deal with, than the need to refer to past, future, present or to say whether something is located before, behind, under or above something else. This is a reason for making another subdivision in our specification. We

subdivide the notions into general notions and specific notions. The specific notions are those that are directly determined by our choice of individual topics, whereas the general notions are appropriate to a large variety of topics, to a large variety of situations. This generality with respect to the topics also characterizes the language-functions. We can therefore group the language-functions and the general notions together and refer to them as the "common core", to distinguish them from the strictly topic-related specific notions.

We have now successively made the following subdivisions in our intended specification:

a	language-functions	notions	

b	language-functions	general notions	specific notions

c	common core		specific notions
	language-functions	general notions	
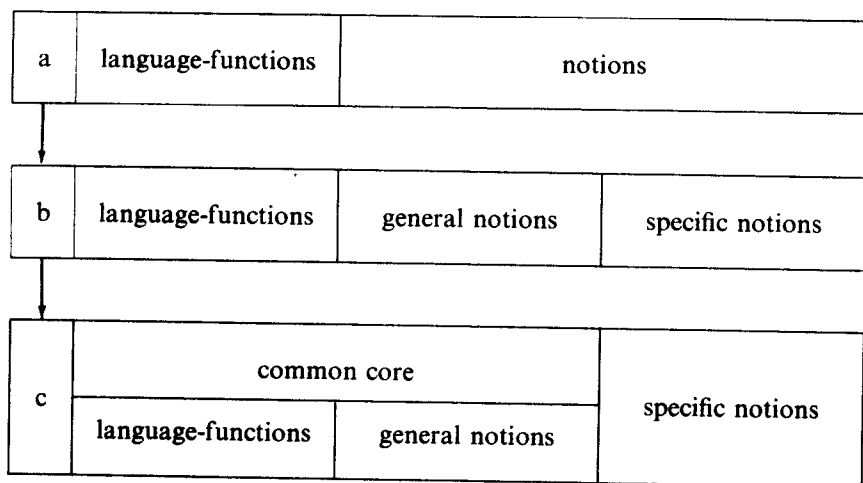
1.1.6   Variability

The last subdivision offers the clue to the reconciliation of the need for comprehensive learning-systems and the individual requirements of a variety of sub-groups within a target population. The organization of large-scale learning systems is, on the whole, only practically viable if (potential) learners can be grouped together into large target-groups. All the members of such target-groups will show the same general characteristics and will have the same overall language needs. Yet, the larger the target-group, the greater the differences in specific needs and interests will be. In other words, a large target-group will inevitably consist of a number of sub-groups whose needs and interests are largely identical but at the same time in some respects significantly different.

The distinction within the specification of an objective between a common core and a category of specific notions makes it possible to adapt an objective for a large target-group to the requirements of each individual sub-group within this target-group without changing its identity in any essential way. It simply means that, with perhaps certain minor reservations, the common

core will be the same for all members of the overall target-group but that the category of specific notions will be adapted to the needs and interests of each individual sub-group by replacing certain topics from which they have been derived by other topics and making the corresponding changes in the specific notions. Thus the overall communicative ability as specified in the objective will be common to all learners, both in level and in range, but certain sub-groups will be more competent in dealing with certain topics than other sub-groups, and the reverse. We shall make use of this feature of our model in the development of one single objective for our target-population, pupils in compulsory education, exploiting those needs they have in common and simultaneously making full allowance for the heterogeneity of various sub-groups within our target-population.

1.2　The application

1.2.1　Task
The application of the model in the construction of an objective involves making a number of successive choices. As described in 1.1 these choices have to be made with regard to:

- target-group
- language-activities
- settings
- roles
- topics
- language-functions
- general notions
- specific notions
- exponents

The choices to be made in the specification of the present objective were partly dictated by the brief the author was given.

The target-group was to be "the great majority of pupils in compulsory education". The language-activities were to be "especially oral communication". The specification was to be "based on the exploitation of everyday real-life situations", which places constraints on the selection of topics. The level of the objective was to be "a minimum level of proficiency". Finally, the objective was to be "comparable to the threshold level previously developed for adult education".

1.2.2　Procedure
In view of the last condition the obvious way to set about the construction of the required objective was to examine the threshold-level specification for adults and to determine to what extent it could simply be copied in the

specification of the new objective and where the two objectives would have to differ from each other. In the following sections we shall deal with each of the items mentioned in 1.2.1. successively.

1.2.3   Target-group

It was clear from the start that, in spite of obvious differences in age and, probably, interests, the target-group for which the original threshold level had been developed and "the great majority of pupils in compulsory education" had very much in common. In the "threshold level for adults" the members of the target-group were characterized as follows:

1. they would be temporary visitors to the foreign country (especially tourists); or:
2. they would have temporary contacts with foreigners in their own country;
3. their contacts with foreign language speakers would, on the whole, be of a superficial, non-professional type;
4. they would primarily need only a basic level of command of the foreign language.

This characterization seemed to fit the new target-group as well as the one for which it was first set up. Perhaps the parenthetic addition to the first characteristic could be omitted, but apart from this it seemed to apply to the large majority of school-children and adolescents as well as to adults. This conclusion was hardly surprising since in both cases we were dealing with beginners needing a minimum general proficiency in a foreign language with strong emphasis on oral communication.

The main difference between the two target-groups is probably that the school-pupils are in the process of receiving a general education and that, hence, foreign language learning would function in a wider educational context. We shall return to this in 1.3, but right now it can be said that this difference does not necessarily affect the content of the objective as such. The threshold level is a level of *communicative ability*. The definition of this objective specifies what the learner can *do* at this level and what *language-forms* he will be able to handle. Whatever the ulterior aims of foreign language teaching, communicative ability remains an essential condition. So whether the learner only learns in order to communicate or also in order to achieve more comprehensive aims, a specification of what is needed in order to communicate is equally required in both cases.

If the characterization appears to fit both target-groups, there is one characteristic which, according to several consultants, should be added to those of the school-population. They pointed out that although in a minimum objective for the first foreign language the ability to use the language orally was of primary importance there was no denying that, especially in more isolated areas of Europe, the possibilities for establishing foreign language contacts orally were very much smaller than those for establishing contacts