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The use of descriptors in learning, teaching and assessment

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The use of descriptors in learning, teaching and assessment

The purpose of this section of the platform is to provide an overview of a range of issues related to the use of descriptors, particularly in the languages of schooling, when used either as a focus for assessment or to support teaching and learning. The discussion also provides an introduction to concrete examples of descriptors provided by different countries and regions.

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1. Introduction

A key challenge when formulating policy on the teaching of language is how expectations of achievement and intended learning outcomes should be structured and described. This is not a straightforward question. Underlying what appears on the surface to be largely a practical issue, are more general theoretical questions related to the nature of language itself and the inevitable problems that are encountered when attempting to reduce complex, integrated wholes to constituent parts.

An important insight underlying much philosophy, literary theory and cultural study of the twentieth century is that it is wrong to conceive language as a simple, transparent device to communicate meaning. Language has different meanings, connotations and nuances in different contexts. It may be interpreted differently from the intended meaning, depending on the context or prior experience and expectations of the listener or reader. The utility of curriculum descriptors depends in part on them being clear, easily understood statements of learning expectations or outcomes. However, because of the nature of language, the practical need for simplicity and brevity may make them prone to different interpretations thus reducing their practical value. This does not make the use of descriptors invalid but it suggests that they should be developed and used with caution, and that their effectiveness is likely to depend on interpretation through negotiation within 'communities of practice' (a term used to apply to a group of practitioners who work and learn together around a certain topic over an extended period of time). It is important to guard against formulating lists of descriptors that provide merely the illusion of common understanding and agreement with no basis in actual practice.

An illustration of the different meanings that can accrue to language in use can be illustrated by considering the word 'competence', a term which describes achievement in language at different levels of specificity, sometimes in confusing ways. The word 'competence' sometimes describes a form of undifferentiated, global ability as in the broad generic term 'language competence'. It can also refer to broad categories where language is broken down into a small number of dimensions such as linguistic, strategic, sociocultural which are also described as competences. Another use of the term refers to the familiar distinction between language 'modes' or 'skills': reading, writing, speaking and listening competences. There are also narrower uses of the term when employed in the creation of competence frameworks designed for assessment purposes. This is when 'competence' refers to actions or behaviours often in the form of 'can do' statements. These are all legitimate and increasingly narrower uses of the term but inadvertent switching from one category to another can be misleading, particularly in a teaching context.

The word 'descriptors' can also be used in different ways. It is most commonly found in the context of assessment where it specifies what is expected of students at each level of performance for a particular criterion. Descriptors are often formulated in terms of behaviours or 'can do' statements, equivalent to the narrow use of the term 'competence'. They are also often employed in assessment schemes to provide the assessor with guidelines for what is or what is not acceptable. They thus may take a specific form that is relevant to one assessment task: e.g. "the writer identifies the problem accurately and argues for at least one solution". The term 'level descriptors' sometimes refers not to specific itemised achievements, but to a broad indicator of learning appropriate to attainment at a particular level. Thus the term 'descriptors', while most commonly referring to atomised statements of achievement either as outcomes or as aspirations, is also sometimes used to refer to broader, more inclusive

statements. The difference between broad and narrow approaches to the specification of outcomes is a key tension when formulating descriptors that can relate to fundamental differences in beliefs about learning and assessment.

There is therefore general agreement that there is a need to break down very broad concepts into constituent components both for assessment and teaching purposes. Without a more detailed sense of what a broad term like 'language competence' means, there may be insufficient concrete detail to guide practice. However it is the degree of precision required that is often the subject of dispute. The move from a broad to a more analytic description of precise learning goals brings dangers. The first of these is that important aspects that are implicit in the broad concept may be lost when translated into more atomised statements; in this case, the whole is not necessarily exactly equivalent to the sum of the parts. The second danger is that the teaching may, as a consequence of the atomised approach, become episodic and mechanistic. In practice the teaching of language needs to take place in an integrated way; it is important therefore that the separation of different dimensions (such as reading, writing, speaking and listening and knowledge about grammar) in written schemes of work does not mean that they should be always treated independently. The problem is even more apparent when considered in relation to narrower dimensions. The specification of a range of achievements related to reading such as 'decode text', 'identify stylistic devices', 'select key information', 'relate to personal experience' may lead to highly mechanistic and unproductive teaching if these are addressed discretely.

The need for integration is even more apparent in the context of language in other subjects. In science a pupil may need to be able to 'write a report' but it is important in practice not to isolate report writing as a skill separate from the development of understanding in science.

In addition to 'competence' and 'descriptors' a range of other terms are used to describe achievement in education contexts such as 'standards', 'grade criteria', 'levels of achievement'. These terms often overlap in use, but providing prescriptive definitions governing the use of such terms is not always helpful. What is more important is to develop an awareness of the issues and contrasting perspectives underlying their use.

All this is made more complex still when terms are translated and the development of common understanding can become even more challenging, requiring more awareness and readiness to negotiate meanings in a multilingual community of practice.

2. Describing achievement in language

It is clear that language learners make progress over time from very basic to more advanced uses of language. However an individual's progress in language development does not necessarily take place in a simple, linear fashion: learners may make basic errors when they attempt more complex forms of language that they would not have made with more limited ambitions. A teacher who applies a list of descriptor statements to classroom activity in a mechanistic way may severely limit the potential performance of the pupils. Trying to formulate language achievement and progression in simple statements is difficult because so much is necessarily left unsaid. For example, the claim that a learner can 'write a letter' does not say whether the intended language use is formal or informal, whether the subject matter is familiar or unfamiliar, whether the key focus is pragmatic communication or accuracy. A partial solution is to make the statements of learning outcomes more complex and nuanced (e.g. 'can write an informal letter to a friend on a familiar topic at a level of accuracy that does

not inhibit communication') but this process, when extended to whole range of statements, can detract from their practical utility because they become too complex. There is a compromise to be found between brevity and simplicity on the one hand and expansion and complexity on the other.

While recognising the challenge of interpreting outcome statements and the importance of not taking their meaning for granted, it is also important not to exaggerate the lack of transparency in their use. Negotiation of meaning is always possible and usually necessary and the fact that meaning is negotiated in cultural contexts inevitably contributes to understanding. Take for example the statement 'can write a simple postcard' that might be used as one element in a set of writing descriptors. The activity itself, stated this baldly, could in fact be turned into a fairly demanding writing task ('write a postcard home that inadvertently betrays homesickness'). At first sight this seems to question the level of transparency in the short descriptor. However most people know what 'write a postcard' means, particularly if identified as a low level writing achievement. It is worth noting that there are cultural assumptions, contextual clues and a level of implicit understanding that help the underlying interpretation of the descriptor and the difficulty of interpretation should not be unduly emphasised.

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) provides illustrative descriptors of competences for planning and assessing progress in language learning which are widely used. Given the success and popularity of the CEFR, it could be argued that the desirability of a similar common set of competencies at a European level for the language as subject (and by extension language in other subjects) is self-evident. However, to what degree is the difference between first and second language acquisition a factor in determining whether the same approach should be adopted? Some commentators articulate this difference as being of a fundamental nature. The view is that children acquire their first language naturally but because other languages have to be specifically learned when acquired later in formal educational settings, the task of describing levels of achievement is more straightforward. Describing 'basic', 'intermediate' and 'advanced' proficiency in language competence appears to be less complex in the context of foreign language learning. A related argument is that second language learning can be described in more functional and objective terms whereas first language acquisition is so closely integrated with the development of personal characteristics and identity, that its goals and stages of development are more elusive.

These arguments are concerned with whether the goals of language as subject are too complex to allow them to be expressed as simple descriptors, rather than the issue of having common descriptors at a European level, but the arguments are clearly related: the more challenging it is to describe stages in development at a local context, the more difficult it is likely to be to agree common standards.

The difference between first and second language learning should not be ignored, but it is important that it is not exaggerated. It is a mistake to view second language education learning in purely functional terms as being only about the acquisition of narrowly defined knowledge and skills; for example the development of identity through intercultural understanding is also a significant element. It is equally a mistake to assume that first language acquisition is an entirely natural process; many aspects of language, including, significantly, the use of higher levels of language for academic purposes, have to be specifically taught and learned. It is also important to recognise that for many learners, language as subject and language(s) in other subjects is not equivalent to mother tongue or

first language; this is a central tenet of the languages of education perspective. The difference between first and second language acquisition then is not in itself sufficient reason for rejecting the task of describing achievement in language as subject in a systematic way. However there are other challenges which do need to be considered.

An underlying principle of the 'languages in education – languages for education' project is that language as subject should be conceptualised as a component of the broader notion of languages of schooling. The development of descriptors for language as subject ideally needs to be considered in relation to descriptors for language in other subjects. This compounds the challenge.

There are two major reasons then why it is helpful to describe standards of achievement in the languages of schooling: for the identification of educational goals as a focus for the development of syllabus content and programmes of study and for assessment purposes. These two purposes are often seen as equivalent on the grounds that assessment frameworks should provide the focus for testing what has been taught in the classroom. However assessment levels in the form of descriptors are not necessarily exactly equivalent to the learning goals that drive teaching and learning, although they should necessarily be derived from them.

3. Descriptors as a focus for assessment

In its simplest formulation, assessment provides information on whether teaching/learning has been successful. However the information it provides has a number of potential different audiences whose precise requirements may vary. Classroom teachers need regular information on how pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding are developing, both to inform how they should adjust their teaching and to determine what kind of feedback is needed to improve pupils' learning. On the other hand, school principals and policy makers need additional, broader information on the quality of education in a school or country. The sort of comparative data required for this purpose needs a high level of reliability and uniformity. Employers and society at large also need reliable information which can help certify achievement and provide a basis for selection. Parents too require information which can help them understand their children's achievements and limitations. Learners themselves need to know how they are progressing and how to improve their performance but they may need to be protected from the potentially demotivating effects of negative assessment. The different purposes of assessment have implications for the use of descriptors.

In order to understand some of the key issues related to the use of descriptors for assessment purposes, then, it is helpful to distinguish between assessment and testing. For testing purposes it is important to have detailed descriptions of levels of achievement in order to ensure sufficient reliability in the judgments being made.

National and international testing procedures need to follow fairly sophisticated procedures, since the stakes are high. There is likely to be need for a definition of the construct of what is tested (e.g. reading literacy) and a recognition of the limits of what is being attempted, since it is generally recognised that some subject aims do not lend themselves to being formulated as assessment targets. Response items corresponding to a construct need to be devised. Some tests use multiple choice items which have been developed to quite a sophisticated level and consistency in marking is guaranteed, but open ended responses need to be marked consistently; here the use of fairly narrow descriptors is important to support the judgments being made. The process of testing then requires an element of selection of subject elements

to ensure a degree of reliability and effectiveness. To accuse a testing procedure of failing to address everything that is important in a subject is to miss the point; a degree of breadth needs to be sacrificed in order to guarantee reliability and utility. Of course if the object of the testing is too restricted that also raises problems, and the testing may be accused of insufficient validity; a balanced judgment of what is appropriate for the specific purpose is needed.

This kind of use of descriptors in the context of testing is sometimes part of a process operating at two related levels, at a specific level and then a more general level. Broad 'level descriptors' provide a more holistic and general account of what it means to say that an individual has achieved a particular level. However it is not always easy to apply these general statements to specific tasks and hence the more focused set of descriptors expressed in clear and succinct ways is often needed for this purpose.

However, when translated to a teaching as opposed to a testing situation, the need to narrow and focus the assessment objectives in clear language may be in danger of diminishing the richness of the educational goals and may ultimately have a detrimental effect on the teaching and learning if they are allowed to determine what happens in the classroom. In the classroom context other, more valid forms of assessment are required that address a wider range of achievements than may be possible in a narrow test designed for high reliability. Different approaches to assessment, such as the use of portfolios, may be better able to represent a broader range of achievement, and may be more compatible with formative, assessment for learning and peer assessment when the learners assess each other's performance. Even so, it is still worth keeping in mind that important aspects of the goals of language as subject (such as the genuine enjoyment of reading) are not easily assessed.

Broad assessment frameworks (as opposed to marking schemes designed for specific tasks) may confuse if it is assumed that total transparency in atomised statements is a realistic goal. Such statements therefore need to be accompanied by examples of what they mean in practice and they need to be interpreted and understood in local contexts through dialogue and negotiation. There is a danger that the precision required for detailed descriptors will either become unwieldy or will not adequately represent the real standards of achievement that are being pursued in the classroom. For this reason broad descriptor statements may be an appropriate alternative to highly atomised descriptors. What is important is the actual *use* made in practice of whatever approach is adopted.

4. Descriptors as a focus for education as a right

It must also be recognised that statements of learning outcomes for assessment purposes may not necessarily reflect the full range of experiences to which language learners are entitled. They may for example be expected to read a wide range of texts (novels, poetry, drama, newspaper articles, reports, letters, diaries, media, etc) and to develop a range of skills (information retrieval, skimming, textual analysis, etc) but it might be impractical to identify all of these elements in assessment schemes. If teaching content is determined purely by what can be assessed reliably there is a danger that the learning will become restricted and narrow.

There is therefore a use for descriptors in identifying the types of learning that facilitate the exercise of the pupils' right to education. This can be illustrated by a very simple example. Oral competence, in addition to reading and writing, is an essential element of language proficiency but in some situations where assessment pays little or no attention to it, this

element needs to be identified explicitly as a right to ensure that it is an important element in language learning. At a more detailed level, different elements of what is involved in developing reading competence (e.g. reading for a range of different purposes, know how to select particular reading strategies appropriate for the purpose, identify different genres, and recognise and explain techniques used by writers to convey meaning) may need to be spelled out. Once again there is a question of whether discrete lists of achievements are desirable or whether integrated, holistic statements are more appropriate for capturing the spirit of what is intended in practical terms.

As a support for teaching and learning, the identification of descriptors in languages of schooling has the potential to make the activities more focused and purposeful. They provide a valuable reminder of the need for the acquisition of skills and competences beyond mere surface knowledge. They can make the process of learning more transparent for pupils and can thus aid in the setting of targets and expectations. With subjects that are not seen as primarily language based, descriptors can identity the significant language elements that might otherwise be ignored. They can also, if described in a sequence, help identify the progression that pupils need to make in a subject over time. Descriptors then can have both a horizontal and vertical dimension. A focus on the way descriptors operate in a horizontal way can highlight commonalities and differences in terms of expectations and outcomes across subjects. The vertical dimension provides a focus for tracking progression, although there may be a tension between the general expectation of progression embodied in general descriptors and the way an individual pupil actually makes progress. There is however no simple formula, once descriptors have been identified and agreed, for translating these into effective classroom practice. Sensitive, contextual judgment by teachers is necessary to determine when it is appropriate to make explicit particular goals and outcomes.

A common assumption is that pupils learn best when they know what they are trying to achieve and why. While this view is largely true, there are exceptions. In the context of language development, learners do not always need to be fully focused on specific aspects of their performance in order to improve. In fact too much focal awareness on performance can make them too self-conscious: speakers can appear too groomed and artificial; the writer who has been told to strive for effect by using more adjectives may develop a highly artificial and awkward style. These insights do not negate the importance of transparency as a principle but highlight the fact that in pedagogical practice it needs to be interpreted and implemented with care. Pupils who are driven by specific targets to the extent that they lose intrinsic motivation, genuine engagement and any interest in meaning are inevitably less likely to make the required progress.

When intended learning outcomes are formulated in a very detailed way, it is difficult to capture in such statements those aims which are a vital aspect of teaching language as subject (and in many cases languages in other subjects), related for example to personal growth and aesthetic awareness. Key aspects that are central to plurilingual and intercultural education related to values, attitudes, identity and the affective dimensions of learning are difficult to capture in descriptors. In order to make progress, language learners in educational contexts need to enjoy using language for different purposes in challenging and varied contexts. They need to be enthused and stimulated by being engaged with meaningful content. Bald statements of outcomes say little about the important educational process that makes for successful language teaching.

It is important therefore to distinguish between (i) the specification of attainment for assessment purposes, (ii) the teaching programmes or syllabus which ensure an entitlement for learners, and (iii) the educational process that ensures a dynamic learning and teaching context. These aspects are inter-related and all are important for ensuring successful learning.

5. Terminology

As discussed above, the terms 'descriptors' and 'competences' can be used to refer to broad or narrow statements of achievement. The word 'standards' is also sometimes used in different ways. A less common but important use of the term refers to 'learning opportunity standards' in relation to education rights/entitlements.

The more common usage relates to the specification of levels of performance expected at particular ages, e.g. by the end of primary school pupils are expected to have reached level x on a range of achievement levels. The word 'benchmark' is sometimes used in this context. However the word 'standards' is also sometimes used as a term that gives a holistic summary level of achievement (equivalent to broad level descriptors) as opposed to the use of itemised criteria. When a series of standards or levels of achievement are used to judge performance, a holistic impression judgement is made which matches the output being assessed with the general statement.

There are parallels here with 'analytic' marking of work (where the whole is separated into criteria that are examined separately) and 'holistic' marking (where an overall assessment of performance is provided against an inclusive statement). Many commentators take the view that a holistic approach which relies on matching generic statements to output provides on the basis of general impression more reliability in assessment of language performance because of its integrated nature. It has been widely recognised that an apparently more systematic approach which allocates specific marks for different aspects of a performance may produce distorted effects.

The different terms used alongside 'descriptors' often represent a hierarchy of degrees of precision. Progression in language proficiency may be conceived in broad 'dimensions' or 'attainment targets' such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Each of these can be further sub-divided (e.g. into 'production' and 'reception') or may be treated in an integrated way. However it is usual at a next stage to identify a range of 'levels of achievement', 'criteria' or 'grade descriptors' which may either be treated holistically or broken down further into more specific descriptors. The terms are sometimes used interchangeably; for example 'criteria' is sometimes used to refer to the more detailed descriptors.

6. Developing and using descriptors

Human judgment, including decisions about priorities based on values, are necessary elements in the formation of descriptors. Empirical research and scientific approaches can play a significant role in their formulation but it is important not to deny the element of human judgment that is invariably involved. That does not mean descriptors are based on arbitrary whim. Theoretical perspectives on the nature of language acquisition and development have a key role to play. Where human judgment is needed in determining priorities it is customary to call on experienced professionals in a systematic way (a process which can itself be viewed as a form of research). Empirical research can support the process in a number of other ways, for example in determining the level of difficulty of descriptors or in determining suitable

descriptors in a school context based on common uses of language in adulthood. However human judgment invariably comes into play in making key decisions on priorities.

Human judgment is even more significant with regard to the *use* made of descriptors. As suggested above, it is difficult to capture highly complex human achievement in a series of atomised statements. However the fact that the task is difficult does not mean that the principle is wrong. The view that descriptors are reductive is often voiced as a criticism of their use but it is the nature of all language to be in some sense reductive. Descriptors can be seen not as static claims to certainty but more as forming a framework for communication and negotiation within particular communities of practice. Complex activities need to be 'reduced' and simplified to some degree in order to talk about, teach and assess them. The question is not whether descriptors are reductive but whether they are too reductive for the purpose they are intended to serve.

A key concept in using descriptors is the idea of 'exemplification', meaning that such statements need to be interpreted and understood in relation to concrete examples of what they mean in practice. The transparency of descriptors is not necessarily achieved by constant refining of the statements themselves, it is rarely possible to achieve total transparency and consistency of interpretation in this way. It is by sharing and negotiating through examples of practice that agreement in judgement is more likely to be reached.

7. Summary

At the start of this discussion two key issues were identified as underlying the challenges involved in developing and using descriptors. The nature of language is such that a list of descriptors needs to be seen not as an end point but as the beginning of a process of interpretation, application and shared understanding. It is the *process* (i.e. how descriptors are used in practice either for assessment or to support learning in the classroom) that is as important as the list of descriptors themselves. The challenge involved in reducing complex, integrated wholes to constituent parts is evident as soon as an attempt is made to formulate descriptors, yet they have an important role both in assessment and in supporting the notion of education as a right. To say that young people have a right to 'language education' does not provide sufficient detail of what that right involves.

Thus more detailed descriptors are needed, as long as their impact on assessment and teaching is positive and not negative.

The following links provide examples of descriptors from different countries and regions. There is also a link to a list of descriptors for the end of primary and compulsory education that have been developed by integrating the approaches of four countries. The purpose of these examples is to enable member states to benefit from the experience and expertise of other member states in formulating their programmes relating to languages of schooling.