

The historical frame of reference

Cyril J. Weir

Historical literacy

Not to know what happened before one was born is always to be a child.

—Marcus Tullius Cicero *De Oratore* (XXXIV)

The historical approach signifies recognition of the importance of the 'big picture' to serve as a holistic frame of reference into which present phenomena can be fitted.

‘The process of defining CEF levels started in 1913 with the Cambridge Proficiency Exam (CPE) that defines a practical mastery of the language as a non-native speaker. This level has become C2. ... The existence of LCE (later FCE) since 1939 also helped in defining B2 level’.

North, B (2008) *The educational and social impact of the CEFR in Europe and beyond: a preliminary overview, paper presented at the 3rd ALTE Conference, Cambridge, April 2008*

1913-1945: Eclectic influences from the past on CPE in 1913

- **The traditional approach: grammar, translation**
- **The reform movement: phonetics, speaking, the essay**

1913

1945

1970

2011

Formalism versus Activism

Stern argues that in teaching:

- *where aims are scholarly there will be an emphasis on written and analytical skills;*
- *where social objectives are dominant there will be an emphasis on communication especially oral.*

An academic view of language

“The prime object of scholastic education is **the training of the mental faculties...**The mental training is never forgotten; on the contrary, the powers so developed increase in grasp and tenacity.

Training by the ear will never do this: it simply cultivates one faculty, memory, and that only for a short time. It is always found that children so trained are the most volatile have not power of application, and in after life seldom settle to any definite pursuit.”

(R.W. Hiley 1887 Journal of Education Vol IX: 308)

Grammar the foundation of all knowledge

Not only was grammar viewed as the “gateway to all of knowledge” it was thought to “**discipline the mind and the soul**, at the same time honing the intellectual and spiritual abilities that would enable reading and speaking with discernment” (Huntsman 1983 p 50) ...

(Hillocks 2008 p311)

Grammatical progression

The GTM, as demonstrated in the textbooks which gave it birth (Meidinger 1783 for French and Fick 1793 for English), had replaced existing grammar manuals, which offered no pedagogical guidance at all, with **an organised sequence of lessons** in which a selection of specific grammar rules were taught and exemplified in a step-by-step manner.

The Reform Movement

Throughout the 19th century the GTM tried to carve out a role in the schools by modeling itself on the classics, but it was not popular with some teachers, and in the 1880s a number of language teachers and academics in Europe instigated a **Reform Movement** which, with the assistance of modern ideas from phonetics, allowed for **a new pedagogical approach rooted in the spoken language.**

Grudging acceptance of spoken language

Schools were being encouraged to include modern languages with an oral component towards the end of the C19th but headmasters, according to Gilbert (1953: 3) *“...consented only because they thereby satisfied utilitarian parents and because the Modern Side enabled them to ‘shunt the empties’ or transfer the dullards from classics to modern languages.”*

Active oral use versus learning by rule

- Attitudes to the teaching of spoken language were to change in the UK in the C20th.
- The needs of the scholar were superseded by the needs of the non scholar **for practical everyday use of the language in a spoken form.**

The Certificate of Proficiency in English 1913

The C2 of its day

1	Translation: English to French/German	2hrs
2	Translation: French/German to English & Questions on English Grammar	2.5 hrs
3	English essay	2 hrs
4	English language & literature paper	3 hrs
5	English phonetics	1.5 hrs
6	Dictation	0.5 hr
7	Reading aloud + Conversation	0.5 hr

A hybrid creation from legacies of the past

- the more or less standardised structure of papers set for **Examinations in Modern Languages** (especially the translation tasks, a legacy of a more traditional view that translation of (literary) texts is the main activity in language learning);
- the inclusion of **a phonetics paper, a speaking paper and an essay paper**, suggesting the influence of the Reform Movement (Viëtor 1882; Passy 1899, Jespersen 1904).
- The first conference on MLT was held at Cheltenham College in 1890 and it passed a resolution that **“phonetics should form the basis of all modern language teaching.”**

English Phonetics 1913

1 Make a phonetic transcription of each of the following passages, illustrating in the case of passage (a) a careful pronunciation, in the case of (b) the pronunciation of educated persons in ordinary conversation:

(a) But, whatever be the profession or trade chosen, the advantages are many and important, compared with the state of a mere literary man, who in any degree depends on the sale of his works for the necessaries and comforts of life. (This passage continues for another 12 lines.)

(b) “ Ah, Mr Holmes. I am delighted to see you.”

“Good morning, Lanner. You will not think me an intruder, I am sure. Have you heard of the events which led up to this affair?”

(This passage continues for another 12 lines.)

2 Describe fully the articulation of the various vowel sounds in the (ordinary) spelling of which the letter o is used (alone or in combination) in the above passages.

3 Explain the terms: ‘glide,’ ‘narrow vowel,’ ‘semi-vowel,’ and give two examples of each in both phonetic and ordinary spelling.

4 How would you teach a pupil the correct pronunciation of the vowel sounds in fare, fate, fat, fall, far?

5 Discuss carefully the articulation of the consonants in quite, huge, dreary.

Grammar 1913

Along with translation into and out of the target language the 1913 CPE grammar items provide clear exemplification of another important facet of the GT approach namely a familiarity with the rules of usage:

- 1** Give the past tense and past participle of each of the following verbs, dividing them into strong and weak; add explanations: tell, wake, buy, eat, lay, lie.
- 2** Write down the abstract nouns connected with the following adjectives and verbs: precise, adhere, apt, predominate, optimistic, crystallise, negligent, hate, attain, detain, betray, ingenious, seize, charitable, zealous.
- 3** Embody each of the following words in a sentence, in such a way as to show that you clearly apprehend its meaning: commence, comment, recommend; incredible, incredulous.

Essay 1913

- The effect of political movements upon nineteenth century literature in England.
- English Pre-Raffaellitism
- Elizabethan travel and discovery
- The Indian Mutiny
- The development of local self-government
- Matthew Arnold

Developments in UK between the wars

- When the purpose of language study had been to know about a language then phonetics may well have been the **“indispensable foundation of the study of our own and foreign languages”** as Sweet argued (1899 *The Practical Study of Languages. A Guide for Teachers and Learners*)
- Where language study is a **“mode of behaviour”** this was not to be the case and by 1932 the CPE paper on Phonetics had disappeared as a formal test and so too the earlier questions on English grammar in the translation paper.

1930's

Richard Smith (2004:229-31) identified a politically motivated focus on lexical content in British ELT from the 1930s until the end of WW2. He describes how:

“Discussions in the emerging UK ‘centre’ from the mid-1930s until the end of World War II had focused quite explicitly and narrowly on needs to propagate English as a world language via simplification of the lexical contents of instruction”

A concern with lexis

- improved reading materials with **graded texts** (West 1926a, 1926b);
- a **standard wordlist** for pedagogical purposes (*Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language* by Faucett, Palmer, Thorndike and West 1936);
- Roach had been keen to **promote research to establish the level of LCE (1939) in terms of vocabulary**. He wanted to aim for a vocabulary level of 2500-3000 words and for this to provide a guide to teachers - the standard to be reached, as well as being useful to publishers in the standardisation of text books and to examiners in their selection of texts. Roach pushed for what is nowadays known as **a wordlist** (Roach 1944 PP JOR 1/1a xxviii).

LCE 1939

- 1939 saw the introduction of the Cambridge Lower Certificate in English (LCE) with **144 candidates** at the first sitting.
- Developing a test at a lower level than CPE with a large potential candidature fits well with **the expansionist rationale for ELT** that Smith describes.
- The attempt in LCE to **control vocabulary** through use of Basic English and **simplified texts** is consonant with the limited vocabulary approach in the ELT materials emerging at the time.

Why LCE?

The decision to introduce the LCE was most likely a response to ***an emerging demand*** for certification at a lower proficiency level than the CPE. This decision may have been influenced by ***the sudden influx of refugees in the 1930s who needed help with their English*** (Smith 2004:67 and 237) and included many who were nowhere near the CPE level (the same events probably motivated publishing projects like Eckersley's *Essential English Course*) which incorporated controlled and graded vocabulary and the planned recycling of new words.

But is it English?

The British Council's initial objections to LCE stemmed from a perception that an English exam at a level below that of the CPE might suggest an acceptance of lower target standards in the language.

An interesting minute from the UCLES British Council Joint Committee meeting in 1941 (Joint Committee 1942:8) confirms continuing concerns about this:

“ Professor Daniel Jones drew attention to the fact that books in Basic English are among those prescribed for the Lower Certificate in English and suggested that the British Council could not associate themselves with an examination in something which might not be English.”

1945 –1970: interest in language becomes “social” rather than “scholarly”

- In the post war period, **economic and social forces** were at work in making English a dominant language around the globe.
- Traditional approaches such as grammar translation and teaching English as an access route to great literature were to succumb to pressing **utilitarian needs for English as a means of communication** between people rather than a rarefied object of academic study.

1913

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Spolsky observes (2008: 450):

“The market forces in the period after the Second World War with growing demand for English Language teaching and testing persuaded the Syndics to take the field seriously”.

	LCE/FCE candidates	CPE candidates
1939	144	752
1946	3656	1379
1966	34046	10442

1970-2011

Testing communicative language ability

1913

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1970

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Language as communication

- The 1970s saw further movement from teaching language as a system to teaching it as **a means of communication** as is detailed in Widdowson's 1978 *Teaching Language as Communication*.
- The emphasis was no longer on linguistic accuracy, but on **the ability to function effectively through language in particular contexts of situation**.

1975 CPE

Paper 1	Composition	3 hrs
Paper 2	Reading Comprehension	1 ^{1/4} hrs
Paper 3	Use of English	3 hrs
Paper 4	Listening Comprehension	0.5 hr
Paper 5	Interview	Approx. 12 mins

Writing Tasks

Writing tasks have a focused functional slant e.g., requiring comparison, argument or narrative description

Either (a) Discuss whether it is possible to solve the problem of pollution without losing too many of the advantages of the modern life.

Or (b) Compare the position of woman today with their way of life in your grandparents' times, and comment on the difference.

These contrast sharply with the open ended essay format of earlier times

- Fascism*
- Good companions*
- Any English writer of the twentieth century*

Stability and innovation in CPE

Phonetics	1913-32	
Dictation	1913-84	
Listening		1975-
Reading aloud	1913-86	
Conversation/oral	1913-	
Translation	1913-75	
Composition	1913-	
Literature	1913-75	
Reading		1975-
Knowledge of grammar	1913-32	
Use of English		1956-

Language Test Specification

An explicit definition of test construct in Cambridge ESOL is a relatively recent phenomenon. Language test constructs had been less explicitly and comprehensively specified in the past. At an early stage in the history of Cambridge examinations, Roach (1945) the Assistant Secretary at UCLES, had obviously been troubled by the **absence of any specifications of performance levels**, described in terms of agreed criterion descriptors.

“The Syndicate did not define standards of attainment to the examiners for the LCE when the examination was started in 1939” notes Roach (1944:8). *“Candidates,”* Roach worried, *“tend to set the standard in any test which has no absolute criterion”* (1944:8). *“Public confidence in the tests is likely to depend for a long time on the extent to which they are felt to be directly controlled by the University and to represent worldwide standards”* (1944:24).

The absence of frameworks

- The importance of standards of attainment was clearly realized, but the conceptual framework and criteria for their definition were *not* researched or investigated beyond a concern with lexical range or structural progression.
- In 1944 the standards of attainment were those *based on candidate performance* without any recourse to external levels other than the remembered performances of candidates in previous years.

Developments in Language Teaching

Stern (1983:109) in his seminal work *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*, identifies the start of an interest in more explicit specification of language objectives only in the 1970's:

“One of the most powerful trends of development of the decade (1970's) was the shift from a concern with teaching methods to one with language teaching objectives, language content and curriculum (or syllabus) design”.

John Munby's 1978 *Communicative Syllabus Design* was a landmark publication in this area (and still is)

The Influence of Socio Economic Forces

Progress towards a European Economic Community brought with it a felt need on the part of governmental agencies to **define language teaching and learning goals more precisely with an obvious effect on the work of examination boards**. In the publications emanating out of the Council of Europe from the 1970s onward, we see numerous significant publications relating to this aim:

- The Threshold Level (Van Ek Council of Europe 1975);
- Notional Syllabuses (Wilkins 1976)

The Influence of Applied Linguists

- An explicit definition of test construct in Cambridge ESOL is a relatively recent phenomenon.
- The influence of **the Cambridge-TOEFL Comparability Study in the late 1980's** (see Bachman, Davidson, Ryan and Choi 1995) was the catalyst for this, with its promotion of **a broad construct of communicative language ability**, first proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) in their seminal paper 'Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing' and later more fully specified by Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996).
- Along with wider socio-economic factors, it served to encourage **the development of a more explicit focus on test constructs and construct validation** at Cambridge ESOL.

Frames of reference

- In the 1990s serious efforts were also made to develop **language performance descriptors**, e.g. the ALTE Can Do Statements (Council of Europe 2001 and Jones 2000, 2001, 2002 and Jones and Hirtzel 2001) as well as **interpretative frameworks of reference**, such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for the teaching, learning and assessment of languages (Council of Europe 2001, North 2000, 2002 and Alderson 2002).
- All of these helped Cambridge to understand better the nature of what they were trying to test and provided a useful external reference point.

The enduring questions for language testing

- Establishing what language proficiency constructs underpin our tests and whether it is possible to identify and measure developmental stages leading towards their mastery are critical for all aspects of language assessment.
- Examination boards and other institutions offering high stakes tests now need to furnish evidence supporting the validity of their interpretation of scores elicited through performances on test tasks that serve as a representation of underlying real life abilities.

SiLT Construct Volumes

- The expectation among stakeholders in high-stakes examinations is for transparent, evidence-based answers to questions on the language construct(s) being measured by examinations rather than just their statistical properties. Test providers need to satisfy stakeholders' expectations concerning the comparability of the constructs measured by each test version as well as their statistical equivalence.
- The publication of **the Constructs volumes** in the SiLT series were a response to this imperative (see Shaw and Weir 2007, Khalifa and Weir 2009, Taylor 2011 and Geranpayeh and Taylor, forthcoming).
- These volumes established **socio cognitive frameworks for evaluating the various components of construct validity** in each of the broad skills areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking and then applied the parameters within these frameworks to Cambridge ESOL examinations at the different levels in the CEFR.

framework

a set of ideas, principles, agreements, or rules that provides the basis or outline for something intended to be more fully developed at a later stage

*Now this is not the end. It is not even
the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps,
the end of the beginning.*

W.S Churchill November 10, 1942

Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment

cyril.weir@beds.ac.uk

CRELLA: www.beds.ac.uk/crella
