

Preface

Threshold is the latest, thoroughly revised, extended, corrected and reset version of *The Threshold Level* by Dr. J. A. van Ek, first published by the Council of Europe in 1975 as part of a project to investigate the feasibility of a unit/credit system for adult language learning in Europe. The Project Group set out to develop conceptual and planning instruments to assist teachers and course planners to analyse the needs of the learners towards whom they had responsibilities and to set, consciously and explicitly, appropriate learning objectives.

Learning objectives will, in principle, be as diverse as the learners and the lives they lead. However, large-scale educational systems have to base their provision on learners' common needs. By far the largest single group of language learners everywhere consists of people who want to prepare themselves to communicate socially with people from other countries, exchanging information and opinions on everyday matters in a relatively straightforward way, and to conduct the necessary business of everyday living when abroad with a reasonable degree of independence. *The Threshold Level* was the first attempt to set out in systematic detail just what such an objective implies in terms of the situations the learners might have to deal with and what they should be able to do by means of language in those situations – what feelings and ideas they would need to express, or ask about, or argue about, and in general conduct personal relations in daily life. It then made recommendations as to the language needed to express functions and notions concerned, whether through the set formulae in which every language abounds, or by the freer use of words in grammatical constructions. What was revolutionary for language teaching, however, was that the apparatus of sentence formation, the grammar and lexicon, were not seen as ends in themselves, but as means to communicative ends. Communicative effectiveness becomes the criterion by which the learners' success (and that of the teaching programme) is to be judged, rather than the error-free performance of formal exercises. The effect was to 'convert language teaching from structure-dominated scholastic sterility into a vital medium for the freer movement of people and ideas' with an emphasis on the use of language in direct person-to-person encounters.

Since 1975, *The Threshold Level* has been used on a large scale by the designers of syllabuses of all kinds: for curricular reform, for examination development, for textbook writing and course design. Functional and notional categorisation has been fully assimilated into the established framework of language learning and teaching. The selection of situations and topics, with the associated specific notions, has stood the test of time reasonably well, as has the framework of

general notions and functions less closely tied to particular situations. Over the years, analogous descriptions have been published for Basque, Catalan, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, French, Friulian, Galician, German, Italian, Latvian, Lebanese, Lithuanian, Maltese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Welsh. Those for Greek and Irish are approaching completion and work has started on Czech and Hungarian. It is most likely that others will follow. These versions have not been mere translations. In each case the priority objectives have necessarily taken account not only of the semantic categories obligatorily represented in the grammar of the language concerned, but also of the differences in the cultural concept. In addition, the researchers concerned have frequently contributed new ideas to the development of the basic model. *The Threshold Level* is not itself a syllabus but a statement of objectives. Users have invariably adapted it accordingly and have always felt free to use their own judgement, adding and subtracting categories and exponents as they have seen fit.

It was, however, apparent to the Project Group responsible for the Council of Europe Modern Languages Projects 4 and 12 that the existing model for the specification of objectives did not exhaust the objectives which language learners should set themselves. In 1979 it set up a working party to consider an overall model for the specification of language learning objectives more complex than those set out in the threshold level documents, taking into account the development of the individual as a communicator, learner, social subject and person. Working teams were set up, co-ordinated by the Project Adviser. One, co-ordinated by H. Holec, was concerned with the development of the learner as a communicator and as a learner. The second, co-ordinated by D. Coste, was concerned with the personal and social development of the learner. The papers produced were published by the Council of Europe in 1984, together with analytical summaries by the co-ordinators and a 'consolidated report' by the Project Adviser, as *Towards a more comprehensive framework for the definition of language learning objectives*. On the basis of these preliminary studies, J. A. van Ek was commissioned to organise the various elements into an overall model for the specification of language learning objectives, and to consider the nature and educational implications of each of its components. His study: *Objectives for Foreign Language Learning* was published by the Council of Europe in two volumes: Vol. I *Scope* (1986) and Vol. II *Levels* (1987). In Vol. I, Chapter 6, he presents a *Framework for comprehensive foreign language learning objectives* distinguishing the following components:

- communicative ability:
 - linguistic competence
 - sociolinguistic competence
 - discourse competence

- strategic competence
- socio-cultural competence
- social competence
- optimal development of personality:
 - cognitive development
 - affective development

Following the successful completion of Project 12 in 1987, the Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe launched a further Project: *Language learning for European citizenship*. Among its priority themes in the area of language learning and teaching methodology was 'revising the original threshold level specification as applied to English to take account of developments in the 15 years since it was conceived as a first pioneering experiment'. A number of institutions concerned with the promotion of English as a foreign language: the British Council, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and BBC English expressed their readiness to support the work of revising and extending both *The Threshold Level* and *Waystage*. We should like to take this opportunity of thanking them warmly for this. Accordingly, the Council of Europe commissioned a thorough revision, which was undertaken in 1989–90 and published as *Threshold Level 1990*. This edition is closely based upon that publication, but the opportunity has been taken to make corrections and to improve the presentation.

We wish here to acknowledge our indebtedness to L. G. Alexander for his contributions to the original specification. It will, however, be seen that the present work is, echoing van Ek's Introduction to the 1986 volume: 'one of the results of many years of intensive collaboration and genuine interaction with colleagues from several European countries brought together in the framework of successive modern language projects of the Council of Europe. The number of those who in some way or other, directly or indirectly, have contributed to our study is so large that we can only say to them, collectively, "Thank you all".'

J. A. van Ek

J. L. M. Trim

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Introduction

1 Target Group

Spread all over the world, there are hundreds of millions of people for whom English is the key that may unlock the door of the space assigned to them by birth and upbringing. A command of this language will enable them to extend their mental horizons beyond almost any geographical or cultural limitations, and, if so desired, also physically to cross the threshold into the world outside. That, in fact, hundreds of millions are prepared to make an effort to this purpose has been shown by the success of the BBC'S multi-media course *Follow Me!*, which in the late 1970s and early 1980s actually attracted such numbers.

It is for this target group that *Threshold Level 1990* has been developed. They will be genuine beginners or so-called 'false beginners' (i.e. those who have acquired some familiarity with the foreign language but feel they need a fresh start). They are interested in acquiring a general basic ability in English even though, individually, each of them may have their own specific needs and wishes and many of them may eventually want to go much further than this basic level. Finally, their motivation is assumed to be practical rather than academic.

2 Criteria

An objective designed for such numbers as referred to above has to be flexible enough to allow of a large variety of concretisations in accordance with the specific circumstances of different groups or individuals. It has to be suitable for utilisation in the design of courses for mass audiences as well as in the development of learning materials tailored to satisfy the needs of small groups or individuals. It has to provide for contacts with native speakers of English as well as with native speakers of other languages who use English as an international medium of communication. And, finally, it has to be manageable within a reasonable time by at least the large majority of those who are prepared to make a genuine effort.

An objective for a target group as large and varied as the one we have in mind is necessarily based on assumptions as to what communicative needs the members of this group are likely to have in common. It cannot, therefore, directly cater for such needs and interests as are shared by only a minority of this group, however large this minority

may be. At the same time, it would fall short of its purpose if it did not at least provide a framework in which any expansions required for such sub-groups might be harmoniously accommodated.

3 Adaptability

By way of exemplification we shall consider, in the present section, the relevance of *Threshold Level 1990* to the needs of what is likely to be a substantial sub-group of the overall target population, namely those who will have to use the foreign language particularly for professional purposes. As a general objective *Threshold Level 1990* does not specifically cater for the needs of this sub-group. Yet, the ability to use English for professional purposes is, first and foremost, the ability to use English. In using English for professional purposes, no less than for any other purpose, people will have to be able to ask questions and to provide information, to elicit opinions, views, preferences, and to express them, to refer to past, present and future events, to express reasons why and conditions under which something may come to pass and to understand others doing so, etc. Also, they will have to be familiar with certain social conventions and common assumptions inherent in manners of expression in the English language, and they will need to be aware of how cultural differences may be reflected in communicative behaviour. And then, of course, they will also need experience in coping with the inevitable occurrence of situations which overtax their linguistic or sociocultural resources. All these elements of communicative ability – and many more – are included in *Threshold Level 1990*. Collectively, they constitute the general basic ability which we have attempted to describe and specify in this objective. In our view, this ability is required by all those who wish to use English with a certain measure of confidence in a range of ‘normal’ communication situations, i.e. in situations for which it is never possible to predict exactly what one will need to be able to say or write and what one will be required to understand. In this respect, then, *Threshold Level 1990* is also an appropriate objective for those who wish to be able to use English particularly for professional purposes. However, it has further potential. Through its comprehensive system of categorisation and the open-endedness of the various specifications it offers virtually unlimited possibilities for such expansions as may serve the purposes of particular sub-groups of the target population. Not only may the various categories be separately expanded, but several of them contain slots for the insertion of further (sets of) elements. Thus, for instance, on behalf of those who wish to learn English particularly for professional purposes, text types of a professional nature may be added to the reading component, the writing component may be

expanded as required, the topic specification may be supplemented with further topics of professional interest, and open-ended lists within the topics can be filled in accordance with the needs and interests of particular learner groups.

4 Flexibility

As was also claimed in the previous section, *Threshold Level 1990* has a high degree of internal flexibility. How this flexibility is to be exploited, depends to a large extent on the educational context in which the learning of the foreign language takes place and the effects that this learning is meant to produce. For the learning of a foreign language is an educational experience which may benefit the learners in several different ways. If undertaken as part of an overall educational programme, foreign language learning may, through the contacts it provides with another culture, play an essential role in widening the learners' horizon, in stimulating their awareness of the potential validity of different value systems, of different ways of organising, categorising and expressing experience, etc. If viewed in the perspective of permanent education, a foreign language course may equip the learners with skills and insights that will facilitate the subsequent expansion of their ability in the foreign language or the subsequent learning of one or more other foreign languages. If pursued in a social context, foreign language learning may contribute to the development of the learners' understanding of the complexities of personal interaction; it may prepare them to function more effectively in social contacts, not only in the foreign language but also in their native language, etc.

Many more of the potential benefits of foreign language learning are listed in van Ek, *Objectives for Foreign Language Learning, Vol. 1: Scope*, Strasbourg 1986. Which of these learning effects, and how many of them, are explicitly or implicitly aimed at in a foreign language course, depends on the educational context in which the course is offered and/or taken, as well as on the educational views of those who provide the course and/or of those who take it.

5 What is new in *Threshold Level 1990*

Threshold Level 1990 is designed to fit into a wide variety of educational contexts and to suit a wide variety of learning aims. In this respect it corresponds to its predecessor, *The Threshold Level in a European unit/credit system for modern language learning by adults*, first published by the Council of Europe in 1975. The main difference is that now those

components of communicative ability which particularly allow it to be related to a wider educational context are identified and explicitly incorporated into the objective. Thus, *Threshold Level 1990* includes discourse strategies, a sociocultural component, compensation strategies, and a 'learning-to-learn' component. In addition, it contains numerous major and minor improvements in the specification of those categories which were already distinguished in the original *Threshold Level* as well as certain adjustments reflecting differences in assumptions as to foreign language needs in the 1990s as compared to the 1970s. Some of the improvements have been designed to make the specification more accessible. They include re-arrangements in the classification of the language functions, a re-designed grammatical summary and the provision of a subject index. Other changes are of a more fundamental nature, such as the explicit treatment of selected intonation patterns, the addition of two new categories of language functions, 'structuring discourse' and 'communication repair', and the introduction of several open-ended items in the list of specific notions.

Such changes and additions as distinguish *Threshold Level 1990* from its predecessor result from experiences gained in various applications of the original version and from the further development of insights into the nature of communicative ability and implications of this for educational practice. Much of this we owe to the rich literature bearing on 'communicative language learning and teaching' that has been produced in the last 15 years or so. As authors of a new threshold-level version we are particularly indebted to all those who, since the original version for English came out, have undertaken the development of parallel versions for other European languages. Based on the same model, each of these versions bears witness to the application of fresh insights to the specification of communicative objectives.

6 Learning load

Threshold Level 1990 has more components than the old one and in some cases – particularly 'reading' and 'listening' – it requires more of the learners than its predecessor did. At first sight, then, it might seem as if it represents a heavier learning load. It is our assumption, however, that in practice this will not appear to be the case. The new components are largely concerned with the acquisition of strategies and the development of insights and awareness. Their incorporation will have a qualitative rather than a quantitative effect. It does not necessarily increase the number of learning items, but it will affect the presentation and practice of these items. It will involve, for instance, the selection of texts not only for (pragma-)linguistic relevance but also for sociocultural relevance or for relevance with regard to 'coping strategies'. It will also mean that learning tasks will have to be made

transparent enough for the learner to understand how the performance of these tasks may contribute to the achievement of his or her aims. The promotion of the development of various types of insight and awareness will require the introduction of teaching/learning procedures which are not yet commonly found in language courses. One such procedure is described in the recently developed 'Stage 3 level' brochure of the International Certificate Conference.¹ It concerns the development of sociolinguistic awareness and appropriate strategies and consists of three steps:

- exposure to a variety of situations in which such features as participant roles, setting, communicative goal, etc., significantly influence the choice of language-forms;
- stimulating awareness of this influence through observation, reflection, discussion;
- involving the learner in similar situations for active practice.

The introduction of such a procedure into a language course, we assume, will make learning more effective rather than more demanding.

No more do higher demands with regard to 'reading' and 'listening' necessarily increase the actual overall learning load. On the contrary: it is increasingly recognised that frequent exposure to texts – or the intensive practice of 'receptive skills' – will contribute substantially to the efficient development of productive ability as well. In fact, what we propose in *Threshold Level 1990* is much more in agreement with current educational practice than the more modest requirements of the original *Threshold Level*.

The increased flexibility of *Threshold Level 1990* makes an assessment of the learning load in terms of 'an average number of learning hours' even more difficult than it used to be. This is particularly due to the inclusion of a fairly large number of open-ended items in the list of topic-related specific notions and to the comparatively low level of specificity in the description of such 'new' components as sociocultural competence, compensation strategies and learning-to-learn. In these cases various concretisations are possible in accordance with the needs and interests of individual learners or groups of learners. The nature of these concretisations may very well affect the weight of the overall learning load and consequently the number of hours required to master it. If pressed to give a general indication,

1 *Foreign Languages in Adult and Continuing Education; Specifications for Stage 3 Level of the International Certificate Conference Language Certificate System: English*, third draft, Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V., Bonn-Frankfurt 1987.

nevertheless, we can only say, at this stage, that we assume the learning load for *Threshold Level 1990* to be similar to that for its predecessor and that there is some evidence that, with adequate guidance, absolute beginners need an average of 375 learning hours – including independent work – to reach the older objectives.

7 Waystage 1990

The estimated learning load for *Threshold Level 1990* may appear to be very formidable indeed, particularly to learners with only little educational experience. Yet, it is our aim to encourage people to learn a foreign language rather than to deter them from doing so. Also, we would not wish to maintain that the achievement of a lower level of communicative ability than *Threshold Level 1990* could not be very much worthwhile to learners. We therefore provide, in a separate publication, a less demanding objective under the name of *Waystage 1990*. *Waystage 1990* has been derived from *Threshold Level 1990*, is based on the same model and contains the same components. It is a coherent objective in its own right, offering the learners a level of ability that may serve many of their language purposes without, however, enabling them to operate in the foreign language with the same measure of freedom as *Threshold Level 1990* is meant to provide. The learning load of *Waystage 1990* is estimated to be about half of that required for *Threshold Level 1990*. For beginning learners who are unable or unwilling to commit themselves right from the start to the expenditure of time and energy required for the higher objective, *Waystage 1990* may be an acceptable alternative. And it is not unreasonable to expect that many of those who have first reached the lower objective may be encouraged by the experience of successful learning to undertake the further learning effort that will take them to *Threshold Level 1990*.

1 The objective: levels of specificity

The objective will be formulated in three stages, or at three levels of specificity:

- 1 General characterisation
- 2 Extended characterisation
- 3 Specification

The *general characterisation* is meant as an overall description for rapid orientation.

The *extended characterisation* is a detailed description for all potentially interested parties, including the learners themselves.

The *specification* is a fully detailed description meant for course designers, curriculum planners, test constructors, etc.