

# Arabic Language Learning

## Part II: The Common European Framework of Reference and Ministry Goals

*by H JohnMark*

One tool many of us have used to help us learn a language is a language grid – a list of levels of attainment. There are many different language grids which give some kind of progression from absolute beginner to native speaker. Most are designed for written languages; few of them fully take into account the realities and complexities of North Africa. The existing Foreign Service Institute scales have served well and have the advantage of being well known as well as being used by the language learning textbook LAMP<sup>1</sup>. The book not only used the FSI scale as an indication of progress, but also had well-worked-out material for language learning, although most of the material seems to be aimed at learning an unwritten language through using a language helper.

The Common European Framework of Reference, the CEFR <sup>2</sup>, is relatively new. It can be summarised in a page (see *Appendix*) or used in its expanded form of over 100 pages. It is more thorough and aims to be

more comprehensive than other scales. It is being used across Europe and by many universities in North America. It is very broad and comprehensive in terms of language skills and it also covers learning culture.

The material is available free on the web<sup>2</sup> and it is offered in many languages (including English, German and French). The end product, in terms of assessment, is actually three products, though only the first one is of interest to us at this point <sup>3</sup>.

**1. A language passport** presents levels for the various skills, starting with five scores for the five basic skills (reading, writing, listening, spoken interaction, and spoken production). In the expanded form each skill and level is broken down into many smaller skills, situations and abilities. These details and scores can be provided as needed. The free testing side is handled by a tool

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1. Brewster ET & Brewster ES, 1976. LAMP. Language Acquisition Made Practical.

2. The main CEFR site is [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp), and the complete framework book can be found at [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf).  
Note the grid presented in this article is the overview: the

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website has expanded versions which go into great detail, along with supporting documentation.

3. One small reservation: because the actual details vary according to the language, there are different versions being prepared for different languages. Nevertheless, the overall framework stays the same across languages. The CEFR, just like the Foreign Service Institute levels will need adapting to the local language.

called Dialang. If you go to [www.dialang.org](http://www.dialang.org), you can download and install a small program, which, with internet access, will test and rate you according to the CEFR framework. Over ten languages are available. The one for French rates you for reading, writing, listening, grammar and vocabulary. It also offers constructive advice and feedback.

**2. My language biography** gives the opportunity to describe the language backgrounds of the students and their language activities in the family and the community. In this way there is an emphasis on what can be done outside the classroom.

**3. A language portfolio/dossier** provides samples of work that can be shown to others.

I find it interesting to see that the French and the Germans lead the way in adopting the framework. For instance, their culture centres actively describe the courses they offer in terms of the CEFR. France has developed official tests such as the DELF for levels A1 to B2, with a DELF Junior version for young people. The DALF is a test of levels C1 and C2. Anyone who has the DALF is not required to pass further French language tests for any French university.

The framework is particularly liberating in the way it separates five skills and allows students to self-assess where they are to a

reasonable level of precision. Then, because the material allows for ample expansion of these skills, smaller specific language goals can be identified. Anyone planning a language programme will find in this framework a wealth of ideas which are well organised and arranged, with progressions of difficulty clearly described for many aspects of language. Reporting one's attainment is also easy; along with the global score and the five scores for the five skills, each skill is further broken down into smaller sub-skills. One can use it with as much detail as desired.

Although institutions such as government culture centres can test according to these levels, the framework is designed for self-testing and measuring small steps of progress, according to clearly set language-learning objectives. This point is important. Most adults, given accurate descriptions of a language skill, can accurately assess their own ability. Therefore, formal extensive and comprehensive language testing is probably not needed for gauging language progress, though the examinations may provide convenient and objective profile statements of current ability. Possibly the main exception is pronunciation because it is often difficult to hear one's own mistakes, and even more difficult to diagnose erratic errors.

At this point, one more technical note will help us. People who speak

Swiss German, when asked how many languages they speak, are often at a loss to reply. Does Swiss German count as one language and High German as another? All Swiss-Germans learn High German at school and are usually fluent in both. In the previous article, I explained that Arabic exists in two basic forms, the high form (the classical) and the low form (the dialects). **When linguists want to count how many forms people know, they call them varieties.** Thus, a Swiss-German who is fluent in French and English is described as being fluent in four varieties.

Let me return to the discussion of the CEFR. The CEFR is not just a grid (passport, biography and portfolio). There is an extensive philosophy behind it. Firstly, it is rooted in the European political scene, where English dominates and yet there is a need to promote and strengthen linguistic diversity. As part of their citizenship in Europe, people are expected to know at least two or three language varieties.

Secondly, and of more interest to us, the concept of **plurilingualism** has been developed. Though the word is a mouthful, it is a very loaded word with a specific approach to what being a bilingual actually means in practice.

Traditionally, until about twenty years ago, the goal of learning a second language was to learn it so well that you could pass as a native

| Table I<br>Total monolingualism |
|---------------------------------|
| L I                             |
| H                               |
| G                               |
| F                               |
| E                               |
| D                               |
| C                               |
| B                               |
| A                               |

speaker, and do everything in the second language as well as you could in the first language. It was expected that you would master your native language and go on to master the second one. This can be illustrated by a series of tables.

Table I shows the monolingual individual who in all areas of life, from A to H, can function totally and well in their only language. Table 2 shows the ideal bilingual, totally and equally at home in all linguistic situations in both languages.

The reality is that most bilinguals, even those regarded as the best examples, often have gaps in the second language, and even worse, some would say, they have gaps in the first language. This is illustrated in Table 3. A good example of a gap might be the language of talking

| Table 2<br>Total (balanced)<br>bilingualism |                    |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| L1<br>(Language 1)                          | L2<br>(Language 2) |
| H                                           | H                  |
| G                                           | G                  |
| F                                           | F                  |
| E                                           | E                  |
| D                                           | D                  |
| C                                           | C                  |
| B                                           | B                  |
| A                                           | A                  |

to babies – this is rarely learned in both languages. Another example is when a professional subject is studied in L2, it can happen that L2 becomes stronger than L1 for that subject.

The situation gets even more complicated when classical and dialect are added to the mixture. The point is that **gaps in a language, even gaps in L1, are normal**. Plurilingualism explicitly recognises this and combines it with the philosophy or attitude that the individual needs to take charge of their language learning, and that most individuals will learn the language they need in order to do or achieve something they want. The plurilingual individual has a range of language skills, like a

| Table 3<br>Bilingualism<br>in reality |    |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| L1                                    | L2 |
|                                       | H  |
| G                                     |    |
| F                                     | F  |
|                                       | E  |
| D                                     |    |
| C                                     |    |
| B                                     | B  |
| A                                     |    |

toolbox, on which they draw for a specific need. This fits well with the classical-dialect reality of the Arabic-speaking world. Arabs will sometimes use classical, sometimes use dialect, and sometimes use a foreign language. Sometimes they will mix classical and dialect, and other times they will mix dialect and one or more foreign languages, and they will do this mixing with skill.

The CEFR framework for learners explicitly works on the assumption that **mistakes are normal** – and that **the most important goal is adequate communication**. Therefore, for a time, learners may be permitted to use simplified grammar, approximate pronunciation and language mixing (code switching), if this helps to maintain the

continuity and flow of communication. At this point, if you have not already done so, I suggest you read the summary of the CEFR presented in the Appendix, and if you know more than one language or language variety, score yourself for them. Get someone who knows you well to score you and see how closely you agree. Educated native speakers of English will be C1 for all five skills. I say educated, because one of the unexpected applications of this framework has been towards helping native speakers improve their first language, and only the educated can achieve C1.<sup>4</sup> French will give you five scores. Dialect refers to the two speaking skills and one listening. Classical could be all five, but for some, it could be just listening and reading, making a short speech in classical, and writing a simple letter.

Then I suggest you ask yourself where you want to be, and consider your local opportunities for making progress. You might want to download the detailed version and find the skills and sub-skills you want to improve, and then use the framework as a guide to planning your language learning programme. The CEFR was designed from the beginning to be a useful tool for learners to use; therefore, while there is as much detail as you want, it is not usually very difficult material. To permit comparison with the materi-

al in Morocco, the ACTFL scale (another language levels scale) has been added alongside the CEFR scale.

### **The time element and reasonable general goals**

It is generally reckoned that around 1200 hours of work are needed to go from zero to B2 in a language related to one's own. I have seen ordinary learners do this in nine months in French, studying intensively. Classical Arabic can take up to seven times longer – over 8000 hours. I have not seen any published estimates for learning an Arabic dialect, with basic reading and writing skills in classical. My estimate is 1000-2000 hours for the average learner who finds languages difficult and whose main skill is the ability to slog. Given good motivation, a little skill and some help, I think it reasonable that ordinary learners aim at the following:

#### **Dialect**

Listening – B2

Spoken Interaction – B2

Spoken production – B1 or B2

#### **Classical**

Listening – B1

Reading – A2

Writing – A2

You will notice that I have given priority to dialect. This is partly

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4. In recognition that children have a different approach to knowledge and to languages compared to adults, separate

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versions of the CEFR are sometimes prepared for children.

because dialect is easier to learn, and partly because, most of the time, even when someone knows both dialect and classical well, dialect will be used for everyday interaction. Plurilingualism explicitly recognises that classical and dialect each have their own priority domains and roles of use, with some overlap. This reality is, unfortunately, not recognised by many language schools. I suffered from Arabs trying to teach me classical as a living language encompassing all areas, even those usually reserved exclusively for dialect. Then when I finally found a language class that taught me classical specifically to read and understand the newspaper, TV and radio, even though all of us had reasonable dialect, the teacher insisted on conducting the class in French! The CEFR provides a framework, an approach, and a resource bank of ideas that can be applied to learning classical for specialised purposes and dialect for general purposes.

### **The CEFR and ministry goals**

The CEFR is entirely secular. I have therefore fleshed it out by presenting a separate list of language goals for ministry. I leave it to you to decide how they line up with the general language goals expressed in the CEFR.

In ministry a common goal is to memorise verses of Scripture.

Some people find this easy to do, and are reasonably fluent from A2 onwards. Other people get to C1 and still stumble and have problems. From personal experience I have noticed that some people can lead an inductive Bible study using prepared questions in dialect, with the local person reading the classical Arabic and explaining it in dialect by B1, but others struggle even at B2. Some people find it easy to memorise a story or tell even a short prepared story without making mistakes, whereas others have to wait until their general language skills and ability to improvise when speaking have advanced sufficiently before they can effectively tell stories. I have seen relative beginners able to repeat memorised verses of Scripture while others at an advanced level cannot do this.

In terms of ministry, it is not always necessary to know classical to be able to do a Bible study. You can ask your Arab friend to read the classical, then continue the discussion in dialect. On the other hand, people writing in dialect put themselves at the level of the totally uneducated. I have seen letters and notes written in dialect, from the home help and the plumber, but this is not appropriate for the foreigner. Fortunately, like French, many letters are so stylised in form and phraseology that it is not difficult to learn a few patterns and to express the con-

tent in simple classical. That is why I rate the writing of letters as a B1 skill – intermediate level. I learned it in French by lifting the phrases from letters I saw, and I read letters in Arabic by totally ignoring most of the words and looking for the subject, names, dates, etc.

Everyone agrees it is important to set specific language goals for ministry at an early stage. There is a tendency to adjust our goals downwards as the difficulty increases and the realities of our own weaknesses hit home. It is easy to get sidetracked into ministry to expatriates,

for instance, and even though such ministry is important, it is not a priority. Once sidetracked, the need for Arabic is less, so less Arabic learning takes place. Therefore, wider ministry in Arabic is restricted. There are a lot of people who have stopped learning Arabic. This is less likely to happen if you achieve B2 or C1, because, paradoxically, with Arabic and French, the higher you go, the easier the language gets, and the easier it is to add in a few more details.

## **A suggested list of ministry goals**

### **A. Interactional witnessing**

1. Can answer simple questions about the common objections
2. Have a range of possible answers for each of the common objections.  
For each option an answer can be a simple sentence, or a paragraph.
3. Able to handle most common and many less common questions, and to do so ranging from a quick answer to an answer lasting five to ten minutes, in open-ended discussions.

### **B. Prayer**

1. Simple memorised prayers, e.g. of thanks for the meal
2. Can pray for someone, simply
3. Can pray for a range of subjects, personally, with feeling, and in depth.

### **C. Bible study**

1. Can use Bible verses to reinforce or make a point. If need be, the verse is found in a bilingual Bible and briefly discussed.
2. Can use the Arabic Bible for making points for evangelism or teaching; again, if needed, using the bilingual Bible to find the verse, the local person then reading the classical, and the discussion continuing in dialect.
3. Can plan and present a simple inductive Bible study of ten minutes.
4. Can plan and lead an inductive Bible study lasting half an hour or more.

### **D. Empathy**

1. Can understand simple relationships and grasp the main point of arguments and problems that are presented to one.
2. Can begin to answer simply the personal problems people share, and can, with preparation if necessary, seek out and apply relevant scriptures to the person.
3. Can fully follow a marriage conflict, hear out both sides, be mediators, and share one's own life with the couple as you help them work through the problem. Or, can fully share the tensions of bringing up children and relate to the tensions in such a way that language, while needing some work sometimes (requests for explanations, etc.), is not really seen as an obstacle to ministry.

### **E. Initiative**

1. Can plan and carry out a simple word of encouragement or rebuke.
2. Can plan and implement a small personal discussion on a delicate issue.
3. Can raise and press home with a full discussion on any topic of teaching or caring, and share truth and life with the people concerned.

In view of the variability of learners, where would you place these ministry goals on the CEFR? What do you think are reasonable goals for you personally? What do others who know you well think?

## **Conclusions**

I submit that all those involved in ministry in Arabic should aim to achieve all the above language-ministry goals. But individuals, because of existing language skills and preferences in their first language, may find some of the ministry goals easier than others. Therefore, I have left it to you to match your ministry goals against the CEFR. A few people will go on to become preachers, in-depth counsellors and expert evangelists. They may learn classical to the point where they are reading books in Arabic. These are exceptional goals, but from observing many learners over many years I think that most people can, regardless of gifting, seek to achieve all of the language goals set here in each of the five ministry areas above.

## APPENDIX

|                           | <b>A1 Breakthrough</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>A2 Waystage</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Listening</b>          | I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.                                                                                                            | I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements. |
| <b>Reading</b>            | I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.                                                                                                                                                  | I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.                                                            |
| <b>Spoken Interaction</b> | I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics. | I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.                   |
| <b>Spoken Production</b>  | I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.                                                                                                                                                                                      | I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.                                                                                                     |

|                         | <b>A1 Breakthrough</b>                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>A2 Waystage</b>                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Writing</b>          | I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form. | I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something. |
| <b>ACTFL Guidelines</b> | Intermediate Low                                                                                                                                                                                            | Intermediate Low/ Intermediate Mid                                                                                                                                                  |

|                           | <b>B1 Threshold</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>B2 Vantage</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Listening</b>          | I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear. | I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect. |
| <b>Reading</b>            | I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.                                                                                                                                 | I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.                                                                            |
| <b>Spoken Interaction</b> | I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).                        | I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.                            |
| <b>Spoken Production</b>  | I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.                                        | I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.                                             |

|                         | <b>B1 Threshold</b>                                                                                                                                          | <b>B2 Vantage</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Writing</b>          | I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions. | I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences. |
| <b>ACTFL Guidelines</b> | Intermediate Mid                                                                                                                                             | Intermediate High                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

|                           | <b>C1 Effective Operational Proficiency</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <b>C2 Mastery</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Listening</b>          | I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.                                                                              | I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Reading</b>            | I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.                                                                                 | I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Spoken Interaction</b> | I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers. | I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it. |
| <b>Spoken Production</b>  | I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.                                                                                                                                 | I can present a clear, smoothly flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.                                                                                                                                       |

|                             | <b>C1 Effective<br/>Operational<br/>Proficiency</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <b>C2 Mastery</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Writing</b>              | I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind. | I can write clear, smoothly flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective, logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works. |
| <b>ACTFL<br/>Guidelines</b> | Advanced Low / Advanced Mid                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Advanced High/ Superior / Distinguished                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |