

Analysis of texts and critique of judgment

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Introduction. For several decades, the *Interagency Language Roundtable* (ILR) *Language Skill Level Descriptions* have provided language-learner profiles in the form of “can do” and “can’t do” statements, including examples of kinds of texts these individuals can produce or understand. These descriptions, useful as they have been for a number of purposes, are not standards in themselves, although they imply standards.

Within the last ten to fifteen years attempts have been made to develop explicit standards. These have taken the form of a scale of *textual* levels of increasing complexity from the perspective of the native speaker/writer, rather than that of the learner, of a given language. They are derived from four modes of language realization (discussed later in this paper).

Finally, studies have been undertaken in the last five years to determine whether the explicit standards as currently drafted are useful in determining skill levels in the context of proficiency testing, hence, supportive of and complementary to the ILR descriptions. Such a determination is obviously a question of judgment as raters work to calibrate standards to the skill level statements and to apply the composite to persons tested (see table 1).

Language levels: degrees of skill attained by learner/users (L/U). These cover base levels 0 through 5, with “plus” levels from 0+ through 4+ for four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing (SLRW). They provide “can do” statements at the beginning of each base- and plus-level description and follow those with notations of inadequacies (“can’t do”), for use in developing profiles for “learner/users”(L/U).

The concept of learner/user derives from the relatively recent practice of using natural texts both in connection with second-language curricula and test development. The progress of learners can then be evaluated in regard to developing communicative skills in their actual use of the language rather than their ability to internalize paradigms. (It should be noted that by the time a learner/user can perform at level 3 the “learner” descriptor can be dropped.)

Table 1. Model-copy matrix: Modes (horizontal axis), skill levels (vertical axis), exercise of judgment (on diagonal): Conversion of textual modes to standards in rating process.

Exercise of Judgment	Orientalational	Instructive	Evaluative	Projective
A. Mastery of Textual Levels	Pure Mode (L1 standard)	Mixed Mode (L2 standard)	Pure Mode (L3 standard)	Mixed Mode (L4 standard)
B. Applying Them as Standards in Rating Skills	Proficiency Rating/ Performance Rating	Proficiency Rating/ Performance Rating	Proficiency Rating/ Performance Rating	Proficiency Rating/ Performance Rating
L0				
L1				
L1 +				
L2				
L2 +				
L3				
L3 +				
L4				
L4 +				
L5				

Implicit standards in current descriptions. The skill-level statements imply standards in citing examples of texts L/Us produce or understand at the respective levels, for example, reading level 2: “news items describing frequently occurring events, . . . formulaic business letters and simple technical material written for the general reader.” Such texts deal with topics that are likely to be familiar to most test takers and are quite accessible to learners with modest control of second language grammar and vocabulary.

These statements take as their point of departure the perspective content/form (C/F) in which the nature and degree of complexity of subject matter is stressed; only later is mention made of form/content (F/C) questions, where syntax and vocabulary are treated in the context of the communication. Turning (again) to reading level 2, for an F/C example: “Generally, the prose that can be read by the individual is predominantly in straightforward/high frequency sentence patterns.” While the communicative nature of textual processing takes precedence (i.e., the C/F direction), the F/C orientation is also very important, especially at the lower levels (level 0+ through level 2).

Citations of this sort are useful as far as they go, but they remain on so high a level of generalization that accurate assessment of a L/U’s progress is difficult. To attempt to remedy the situation, James R. Child published a paper in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages’ *Foreign Language Annals* (1998) relating skill levels, textual levels, and the rating process. The major points of this paper are covered later in this paper.

Language levels: Standards to be met by L/Us. The standards discussed here apply to all skills and levels.

C/F and F/C in the system of text modes. Child’s 1998 paper was based on an earlier one, “Language Skill Levels and the Typology of Texts” (Child 1987), which posited four textual “types” (now referred to as *modes*), classifying these in ascending order of C/F complexity as orientational (O), instructive (I), evaluative (E), and projective (P). This classification was originally intended as a way to codify texts in each language *in that language’s own cultural and formal terms* and to provide language-internal standards for native speakers. However, since the scheme is graduated, as well as roughly compatible with the ILR skill levels, it may also be used as a cross-language standard for L/Us. The basic C/F organization makes subject matter the primary consideration, and the F/C direction concerns the micro- and macrostructures of the L/U’s second language: morphology and syntax, appropriateness of register, functional sentence perspective, discourse marking, and so on. Systems of grammar and lexicon are aligned with the purposes reflected in texts and classes of texts, mode by mode.

Obviously, as soon as F/C direction is introduced into the scheme of modes questions arise regarding the structure of the particular language of the text. To

avoid generating a virtual infinity of standards—one for the relationship of every language of the world to English—it is possible to group individual languages historically or typologically in respect to major syntactic and lexical features, and to indicate what features are prominent in which textual modes. Given the compatibility of the language forms and the intentions of the speaker or writers, one should be able to plan curricula, test language learners, and carry out other operations involving text processing.

Review of modes in ascending order of complexity. The term *mode* as employed here is intended to express the ways in which language is realized according to the purposes of users. As such it is not necessarily intended as a hierarchical system. As a matter of convenience, however, it has been useful to present the modes as a scheme of increasing complexity and, in this context, to refer to them as textual levels corresponding roughly to the ILR skill levels. The modes have been discussed at length in other papers in terms of the purposes underlying them; therefore the emphasis here will be on their use as virtual standards.

ORIENTATIONAL (O) MODE. The purpose of texts covered by this mode is to make information immediately available in the form of simple spoken or written texts to those needing it. Examples of such texts are traffic signs, locations or addresses of business establishments, names and titles of persons, and other indications of identity. Events mainly in the present or immediate future are also included: arrivals and departures of carriers, times and places of meetings, orders to be carried out, and many other fact-centered transactions.

Texts in the O mode are almost always accessible to L/Us who have learned or acquired the rudiments of a second language, because of their brevity and grammatical simplicity. At the same time they are part of the real world, hence amenable to use as standards for skill levels 0+ and 1. The C/F direction has been suggested in the examples above, the F/C direction in the easily memorized words and phrases of the texts to be supplemented on occasion by high-frequency verb and noun forms in inflected languages, a textually modest requirement.

INSTRUCTIVE (I) MODE. Texts are as fact-centered as those in the O mode, but their variety and scope is much greater. Media accounts of domestic and international events are excellent examples, but to quote from the *Foreign Language Annals* paper, “obviously many other text types are equally citable: somewhat detailed instructions on the assembly of a piece of equipment; . . . a topographical description of a geographical area, or a technical description of the properties of a chemical compound.”

Clearly, the extended description or narration characteristic of I texts demands much more formal control of grammar and vocabulary than is the case with O texts. An F/C description of these requires solid treatment of verb forms

and their functions; particles, “function words” marking inter-clause and inter-sentence relationships; and high-frequency vocabulary, all of which inform extended texts. The C/F–F/C relationship here is also more complicated than in O texts, where form and content are generally isomorphic. Nonetheless, the topics considered are usually of a kind that are either intrinsically familiar or resolvable from context, and the formal aspects have few, if any, of the lexical nuancing frequent in evaluative and typical of projective texts. An L/U with some knowledge of national and international affairs and a general awareness of how the world works will be able to process most non-specialized texts if he or she has adequate F/C control of the language studied.

EVALUATIVE (E) MODE TEXTS. These require something like a “quantum leap” in the move from I texts. These compose the standard for skill level 3. To quote once again from the 1998 paper, that standard sets forth “a perspective in which facts are selected and pressed into service in order to develop points of view; explain or apologize for personal conduct; state and defend past or projected policies.” It goes on to say that “the various text types under E have in common a teleology in which the selection process is informed by a social purpose of some kind, as with an editorial disapproving or advocating some action.” It is evident that in these transactions the semantic component of the language has taken on special significance for textual processing. C/F considerations come to the fore, such as coherence on the level of discourse (beyond interclausal or even intersentential coherence) and the role of rhetoric in highlighting or embellishing given items at various points of the presentation. F/C elements by definition include finely tuned lexical collocations on phrase and clause levels and highly specific ordering of elements not normally found in lower level texts.

The L/U, in producing or internalizing the content of E texts, is operating at a quite demanding level. For one thing the sheer quantity of grammatical constructions and vocabulary has exponentially increased, a result, in part, of coming up against a cultural outlook unfamiliar to him or her. The individual, besides mastering a good deal of grammar and vocabulary, needs to have a feel for the cultural imperatives in the use of the language he or she is studying beyond the immediate comprehension of language employed in texts in the orientational, as well as a facility in dealing with most texts in the Instructive mode. The L/U should be able to “think” to some degree in the second language, which means to employ those elements of grammar and vocabulary the L/U has internalized to understand or produce second-language texts in much the same way as a native speaker.

TEXTS IN THE PROJECTIVE (P) MODE. These reflect “an innovative approach to whatever topic the speaker/writer addresses” in terms of C/F. Conception and expression are so intimately connected, however, that C/F–F/C distinctions are at times impossible to finally establish. It is certainly the case that such syntactic de-

vices as functional sentence perspective, in which word order may be employed for various rhetorical effects, as well as the increasingly nuanced wording of E texts are both present in the P mode. Nevertheless, the blend of syntax and semantics is such that the shock of the elements as a whole takes precedence over effects produced in one place or another in the texts, a typical result of *individuation*. For the purposes of the treatment of textual modes generally, and this paper in particular, individuation is to be understood as the continuing process of differentiation of writers and speakers from the “faceless” producers of signs, announcements, and the like in the O mode to the unique voices associated with P mode texts. Examples of texts reflecting this very high form of verbal individuation are to be found in systematic philosophy, literary criticism, lyric poetry, and certain kinds of personal essay.

In the face of so demanding a complex of tasks the user (no longer a learner in the usual sense of the word) must have become highly acculturated to the society in which the language is spoken and written, and sensitive to the ways in which individual writers or speakers follow or diverge from assumed cultural norms of language use. In addition, the user must have a strong cognitive bent in producing or comprehending the kinds of abstract language frequent in P texts. Mastering these diverse requirements virtually demands the ability to handle allusion and metaphor in the target language almost as readily as in one’s own, a truly difficult standard to meet.

Standards and judgment. The ILR level descriptions have been treated from time to time as though they were proper standards. In fact, they actually contain *implied standards* (from which explicit ones may be derived), both in respect to the generalizations they contain and the examples cited in support of these. The implicit standards of the ILR statements are inferred from the kinds of text cited at each skill level *learners of second languages* have shown (through formal testing or other means) that they can produce or understand. The explicit standards specify the C/F–F/C relationships, semantically and grammatically, from the perspective of the *native speakers* of target languages. The acts of judgment informing the ILR statements cover several decades of an evolving system of testing and description (from at least the late 1950s to the present). Those concerned with the explicit standards are the fruit of the deliberations of the ILR Testing Committee over the last fifteen years or so, plus papers by Child (1987, 1998) and Alison Edwards (1996). Boiled down, one might say that the contributors to the ILR skill level statements put themselves in the shoes of second language *learners*, while the drafters of the papers on textual modes were concentrating on the nature of the texts *any* user might confront: pedagogy versus textual linguistics.

Implied standards, ILR descriptions. The kind of judgment implied in the ILR descriptions is largely a matter of experience in testing and common sense.

Reading “very simple connected written material in a form equivalent to usual printing or typescript” means to almost anyone a minimum accomplishment in the learning of a second language; hence the person rated is an R1 in reading.

The level 2 reader is clearly at a higher level in that he or she has “sufficient comprehension to read simple, authentic written material in a form equivalent to usual printing or typescript on subjects within a familiar context.” The judgment here presupposes that the reader is not restricted as the level 1 reader is, to (presumably) very short stretches of texts barely qualifying as “connected material” (and, in fact, often supplemented by visual clues); the person can read “with some misunderstandings straightforward familiar factual material . . . in an expanded temporal and spatial frame of reference.” Considered from a top-down perspective this is a reasonable way of setting forth a qualitative difference.

At level 3 the ability “to read within a normal range of speed and with almost complete comprehension a variety of authentic prose material on unfamiliar subjects” suggests major attainments in several directions. For one thing the reader is no longer limited to reading material of a kind he or she is familiar with but can deal with a variety of texts with something approaching full understanding, and at a normal rate of speed. Finally, the reader is able to deal with texts “including hypothesis, argumentation and supported opinions” (encountered, for example, in many editorials from major newspapers), which speaks not only to variety as such but to a high level of language text.

These factors taken together contribute, again, to a language profile qualitatively superior to that of the next lower level, and the rationale supplied is, as far as it goes, sensible and practical.

The attainments of the relatively few readers at the highest level are great enough to warrant at least one qualitative distinction above level 3. Whether levels 4 and 5 are justifiable or practical has been the source of disagreement among the contributors to the skill level system; to avoid this difficulty level 4 and level 5 citations will be conflated in the following commentary.

The level 4 reader is “able to read fluently and accurately all styles and forms of the language pertinent to professional needs.” In so doing, he or she can “relate inferences [drawn from] the text to real-world knowledge and understand almost all sociolinguistic and cultural references.” These achievements reflect a degree of cultural awareness and sophistication in the use of the second language that certainly justifies the creation of a fourth level. In tandem with the level 5 “can read extremely abstract and difficult prose, for example, general legal and technical writings,” a picture emerges of an extremely well-rounded (if not erudite) and imaginative reader steeped in the culture of the second language.

As with the other levels, the conceptualization of level 4 competence reflects a reasonable approach, especially in the recognition of “unpredictable turns of thought [encountered] in, for example, [certain] literary texts” and the ability to “read and understand the intent of the writer’s use of nuance.” Taken together

with the level 5 “able to read . . . contemporary avant-garde prose, poetry and theatrical writing,” a profile of high language competence emerges that merits the recognition of at least one distinct level.

The overview above of the kinds of judgment associated with the four (five) skill levels subsumes the so-called “plus” levels (level 0+ through level 4+). The reasoning behind plus statements is the same as that for the base levels, except that the persons rated do not consistently perform at the next higher level. Thus, an individual judged to be capable of performing at level 2+ can do, by and large, whatever a level 2 can do, as well as operate at level 3 in certain areas where he or she has considerable knowledge of the relevant subject matter but may be limited to those areas.

With all due respect to the reasoning behind the ILR statements (and their implied standards) as well as their practical value over the years, they need to be buttressed by standards in which C/F–F/C relationships are spelled out for as many types of texts and text levels as possible. The fact is that each of the four modes covers a variety of text types that, in turn, may occupy lower, middle, or upper range within particular modes.

Validity of text modes as explicit standards. In a previous section the system of modes was presented as a means of codifying textual levels in the semantic (C/F) terms of originator intent and as a set of standards for L/Us. How valid is this proposition? To answer this question (at least in part) it will be useful to review the work of the ILR Testing Committee in establishing a full range of textual levels over a period of roughly ten years, as well as extensive parallel studies conducted at the National Cryptologic School in connection with language test design at levels 2 and 3. Finally, in a paper published in the *Modern Language Journal* (vol. 80, no. 3, 1996), Alison Edwards reports findings from her research on Child’s paper on text typology and its possible utility as an explicit set of standards for establishing skill levels through formal testing or other means. To quote at some length from her abstract: “The following question guided this research: Does the Child discourse-type hierarchy predict text difficulty for L2 [second language] readers? Test data were collected from 62 U.S. Government employees having some previously demonstrated French proficiency. Nine authentic French texts and a combination of testing methods were employed. The results suggested that the Child text hierarchy may indeed provide a sound basis for the development of FL reading tests when it is applied by trained raters and when such tests include an adequate sample of passages at each level to be tested” (Edwards 1996: 350).

Whether Edwards’s findings or continuing research on textual questions in the ILR or elsewhere will be valid for all languages and skills remains to be seen. For the present, however, there is sufficient evidence that the system of text modes, and the C/F–F/C standards derived from them, sufficiently undergird the ILR statements. Thus, in any instance where users of these statements desire a

text-oriented slant they can turn to Child's 1987 paper on text typology, at the same time using the skill level statements with a fair degree of confidence.

There are to be sure some questions regarding the "fit" of the four modes to the six base ranges on the skill level spectrum (0–5); textual standards required for plus levels (if separate standards are indicated); the general applicability of C/F standards to F/C production, especially at the lower levels of the ILR system; and mastery of specialized subject matter and the lexicon appropriate to it.

To help resolve the first question, the wording of the P mode readily covers the conflated levels 4 and 5, because these relate to such high levels of personal attainment that they are hard to justify—in the author's opinion—as qualitatively separate entities. As for the very low skill level ranges 0 and 1, the standard for the O (Orientation) mode accommodates.

As for plus-level standards (as distinct from those for base levels), these would have to be crafted as "mixed-mode" statements, for example, "instructive/evaluative" for level 2+. There would, however, be great variation among the mixed mode texts and differences among L/U skills would be daunting. The best course is to use "the next standard up the scale" (which for level 2+ would be the Evaluative mode) throughout the system.

Next, there is the complex relationship of C/F to F/C. Unfortunately the two have not always been kept clear, so that, for example, an instructive mode text may be viewed simply as a passage a level 2 L/U can process rather than one produced for a communicative purpose. At higher levels this difficulty does not obtrude to the same extent, since the L/Us have attained a degree of second-language control roughly comparable (though rarely equivalent) to that of the educated native. Nonetheless, it does remain a consideration in the use of high-level, low-frequency vocabulary.

Finally, mention must be made of subject matter and the register appropriate to it, for the L/U will on occasion have to read (or otherwise process) texts dealing with specialized subject matter he or she does not control. "Control" is certainly a question of degree: It can be a matter of understanding the main thrust of an article on ecology or archaeology or of complete mastery of some aspect of Buddhist philosophy. However, when the L/U has no grasp at all of a specialized subject he or she cannot deal with it in any language, whether foreign or native. That fact does not in itself mean that a given text of, say, a scientific nature is at a high level: many such are in the instructive (level 2) or evaluative (level 3) mode, or some mix of the two. The reader who knows the subject of the text very well, but with a modest control of the source language, may be able to give a decent accounting of it. Neither ILR skill level statements nor detailed presentation of the system of modes can provide reliable guidance or standards in cases where L/Us cannot function with texts by reason of total unfamiliarity with text material. For most cases, however, where general proficiency is at issue, the ILR guidelines and the standards derived from text modes should serve the purposes of language assessment.

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NOTE

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