Measuring academic language proficiency
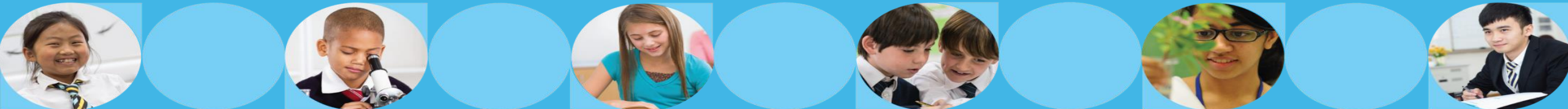
Towards a new scale

Stuart Shaw

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Mónica is an English language learner (ELL) student who, after only a few months of interaction at school with friends and teachers, can basically communicate in English. Mónica can tell her friends about her weekend, she can answer questions about her family, and she can talk about her likes and dislikes.

In short, Mónica has a basic level of social language.

When she comes across maths or science terms in the classroom, however, Mónica is not always comfortable because she is not familiar with such academic vocabulary.

What is the difference between 'social' and 'academic' language?

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Towards an academic scale of academic language proficiency

▸ Increasing use of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages CEFR in international school contexts

▸ Blurring of 1st, 2nd or foreign language distinctions

▸ Potential need for a supplementary scale of academic language proficiency

▸ Many educators tend to focus on the macro scales of the CEFR which only touch on academic contexts as they have to encapsulate other contexts - social or foreign language

▸ Whilst CEFR provides a wealth of specialised linguistic scales, aspects of academic language are found across various scales, which makes it hard to locate and apply them to Content & Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) contexts

Towards an academic scale of academic language proficiency

▶ Assumed that academic language proficiency features in <u>higher proficiency end of the CEFR scale</u>, where there are high expectations for foreign language learners that would not always be met by learners for whom English is L1

▶ An academic language proficiency scale is proposed that would <u>draw together aspects of academic language ability</u> found in other scales and, if needed, could <u>add new skills</u> not currently covered by the CEFR

▶ Reinforce link between CLIL and language learning in subjects using language of schooling as a medium of instruction

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CEFR shortcomings?

CEFR is designed with European adult foreign language learners in mind but was intended to be adaptable to individual contexts

However, whilst CEFR's focus is on foreign language learning there are two foreign language contexts which are <u>not best accommodated</u>:

▸ young learners, because there is no explicit treatment of cognitive stage

▸ CLIL because language for learning is not clearly distinguished from language for social use

Jones, 2014, p.17

Jones, N. (2014). *Multilingual Frameworks: The Construction And Use Of Multilingual Proficiency Frameworks*. Studies in Language Testing 40. Cambridge: CUP.

▸ Two foreign language contexts are related:

  ▸ CLIL - includes a cognitive dimension not explicitly considered in CEFR – entails young learners learning content subjects through medium of a foreign language in a wide variety of L2 learning contexts

▸ To take these two factors into account it is necessary to *expand* the familiar proficiency dimension by an *additional two dimensions*: age and academic content area

▸ 3-dimensional matrix where each cell distinguishes a learner at a

  ▸ at a specific proficiency level

  ▸ at a specific age

  ▸ studying a specific subject

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Academic scale of academic language proficiency: complex and multidimensional

- A descriptor scale for academic language proficiency is a complex and multidimensional notion, to the extent that a functional description of academic language use inevitably introduces a range of factors:

  - cognitive stage

  - general language proficiency (given that language of schooling may not be learner's L1)

  - processes and skills involved in mastering specific curricular objectives of each subject area

  - processes and skills involved in learning in general

- Neither can it be assumed that these processes and skills are the same across countries or cultures, given possibly different educational traditions and modes of discourse

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▸ Research questions

 ▸ What are some of the generic features of an academic language proficiency scale that could be used in the student learning process in a variety of CLIL contexts?

 ▸ How and to what effect can such a scale be used in assessments in CLIL classrooms?

▸ Context: *IGCSE History* - general education qualification for 14 - 16 year olds

 ▸ Programmes of study/assessments delivered in English

 ▸ learners for whom English is an L2 or even an L3

▸ Scale would reinforce link between CLIL and language learning in subjects using language of schooling as a medium of instruction

A social constructivist approach to language learning

▸ Language - fundamental medium through which learning happens - learning is a social act > better learner > Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger 1991)….. Interaction is at the heart of learning

▸ *Cognitive constructivism* (Piaget, 1977)
  ▸ Learners construct their own meaning

▸ *Social-cultural constructivism* (Vygotsky, 1981; 1986)
  ▸ stress social and collaborative nature of learning in development of cognition

▸ Mediation, a key feature of interactions - the learner (& teacher) functions as a social agent creating bridges, conveying meaning either within same language or across languages

▸ Mediation involves use of culturally-derived psychological tools, such as utterances in natural language, in transforming the relations between psychological inputs and outputs

▸ Mediation in cognition considered important for cognitive development

  ▸ "*language mediates children's knowledge of reality*" (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004, p. 89)
  ▸ role of teacher being one of a mediator for student's cognitive development

COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK
OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES:
LEARNING, TEACHING, ASSESSMENT

**COMPANION VOLUME
WITH NEW DESCRIPTORS**

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

- Organised differently
- Enriching descriptors (especially A1, C1, C2)
- New Pre-A1 descriptors
- New sets of descriptors

The user/learner acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language, sometimes from one language to another.

- Underlines, expands and develops 2001 volume

- does not replace it!

- https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989

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CEFR Companion Volume and the concept of mediation

> CEFR rests on a conception of language as action and demonstrates remarkable coherence with a social-constructivist approach to learning

▸ CEFR places "*the co-construction of meaning (through interaction) at the centre of the learning and teaching process. This has clear implications for the classroom. At times, this interaction will be between teacher and learner(s), but at times, it will take a collaborative nature between learners themselves*" (Council of Europe 2018, p. 27)

▸ Relevance to CLIL because "*mediation is increasingly seen as a part of all learning, but especially of all language learning*" (p. 34)

▸ CEFR concept of mediation: "*In both the receptive and productive modes, the written and/or oral activities of mediation make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason to communicate with each other directly*" (p.32)

CEFR 'Mediation' and the relevance of CLIL: a proposed lesson plan

▸ CLIL lesson plan focusses on mediation activities

▸ Use of academic language descriptors based on CEFR mediation scales provides practical means of implementing content-based language learning

  ▸ scaffold of pedagogic and linguistic support allows learners to access curriculum content

▸ Primary role of assessment is to support learning

▸ Key issue central to successful CLIL practice is the achievement of intended content & language learning outcomes (outlined in lesson plan)

  ▸ *Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic,* and *Time-bound* (SMART) (Doran 1981) provide a positive reference point for assessment for learning

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▸ Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE)

▸ Cambridge IGCSE assessment takes place at the end of the course and can include written, oral, coursework and practical assessment

  ▸ broadens opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning, particularly when their L1 is not English

▸ Cambridge IGCSE History explores some of the major international issues of the 19th & 20th centuries, as well as covering the history of particular contexts in more depth

  ▸ emphasis is on both historical knowledge and on the skills required for historical research

  ▸ encourages learners to raise questions and to develop and deploy historical skills, knowledge and understanding in order to provide historical explanations

▸ Two of the syllabus aims encourage development of arguments and communication skills

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Linking IGCSE History English proficiency levels to the CEFR

▸ Shaw and Imam (2013) - aspects of the CEFR relevant to academic language proficiency in IGCSE History

  ▸ syllabuses, question papers, mark schemes (inputs) and candidate performances were analysed (outputs)

  ▸ history necessarily requires academic language (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, CALP) and key academic language skills were identified

▸ language of instructions and questions falls mainly within B2 level (CEFR) in terms of structural and lexical load

  ▸ CEFR level B2 could represent a critical CALP level for this age group (Imam, 2010)

▸ lexical input of accompanying authentic stimulus source material is much higher - students would need to be at least CEFR C1 level to be able to process text fully

  ▸ CEFR C1 level in certain scales influences higher grades for a subject such as History

  ▸ IGCSE History is not an English comprehension test and candidates do not need to understand all the text to perform well

Imam, H. C. & Shaw, S. D. (2013). Assessment of International Students Through the Medium of English: Ensuring Validity and Fairness in Content-Based Examinations, *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 10:4, 452-475

CEFR shortcomings?

Beacco (2007) provides a prototype for a descriptive framework for communicative/linguistic competences involved in the teaching and learning of History

Comprehension vs. interpretation/critical response

It is plain that the specifications of the CEFR relate more to reading as comprehension than as interpretation or critical response. For languages of instruction, the comprehension strategies need to be re-interpreted as a function of the knowledge in the discipline (in this case, critical comprehension)

Beacco, 2010, p.10

Beacco, J.C. (2010). *Items for a description of linguistic competence in the language of schooling necessary for learning/teaching history (end of obligatory education): An approach with reference points*. Language and School Subjects. Linguistic Dimensions of Knowledge Building in School Curricula. No.1.

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▸ Beacco (2007) lists and describes the educational values targeted by history teaching:

  ▸ social situations of communication involving history

  ▸ expected historical knowledge

  ▸ existing in-school communication situations for transmission of history

▸ Beacco (2007) argues that the linguistic-cognitive resources needed for subject competences could be based on CEFR

▸ Approach is to formulate sets of language competence descriptors that integrate CEFR can-do statements e.g.

  ▸ 'place the occurrence under discussion in a broader context (chronological, cultural)'

  ▸ 'distinguish objectified discourse from judgement' (2010, p. 10)

- Designed as a guideline to characterise achievements of learners of FLs across Europe

- "Provides basis for mutual recognition of language qualifications and enables awarding bodies
- to define and articulate language proficiency levels and interpret language qualifications" (Council of Europe,
- 2001, p.1)

- CEFR is coherent with a social-constructivist approach to learning

What students can do with language at 6 levels of proficiency within 3 broad types of language user

The 6 levels and associated scales are intended to inform development of language

Type of language user	CEFR level
Proficient user	C2: mastery
	C1: effective operational proficiency
Independent user	B2: vantage
	B1: threshold
Basic user	A2: waystage
	A1: breakthrough

Research into Cambridge IGCSE History, involving reading (sources) and writing, led to the following beginnings of a scale (Shaw, Imam & Hughes, 2015)

CEFR history level	Quality	Descriptor	CEFR scales
CEFR: C2 history: bonus marks	'Evaluate & create'	*CEFR* Coherent and cohesive. Reconstructs arguments from different sources. Clear, complex, logical. Smooth substitution for specialist words. *IGCSE history mark scheme:* Bonus marks: evaluation of sources	*Pragmatic* Can create coherent and cohesive discourse making full and appropriate use of a variety of organisational patterns and a wide range of connectors and other cohesive devices *Text Processing* Can summarise information from different sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation of the overall result *Overall Written Production* Can write clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points *Reading for Information & Argument* No descriptor available *Strategic* Can substitute an equivalent term for a word he/she can't recall so smoothly that it is scarcely noticeable *Socio-linguistic* Appreciates fully the socio-linguistic and sociocultural implications of language used by native speakers and can react accordingly

1st column (CEFR history level) shows CEFR and history mark scheme levels
2nd column (Quality) relates to a construct of history instantiated in the mark scheme
3rd column (Descriptor) depicts history descriptors that appear to relate to a CEFR description
4th column (CEFR scales) attempts to align the information in column 3 to the most relevant CEFR scale

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'Evaluate' relates to the *Coherent and cohesive* descriptor and aligns with the 'Pragmatic' CEFR scale which addresses the ways in which context contributes to meaning

The next descriptor - *Reconstructs arguments from different sources* - aligns with the 'Text Processing' CEFR scale

Undertaken for each CEFR level

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▸ Key CEFR level for IGCSE History could be B2 - which moves language

  ▸ beyond descriptive realm (B1) into analytic realm

▸ A crucial jump in the history mark scheme is from *explicit* understanding to *implicit* understanding of texts.

  ▸ Understanding implied opinions appear in the CEFR from C1

▸ Clearly:

  ▸ a student at B1 (or lower), using simple, descriptive language, would not have language to be able to access, analyse, evaluate source material

  ▸ another student may have sophistication of language at C2 but may not have sufficient cognitive ability or historical knowledge or examination technique to evaluate history source material (or all) and gain marks at the highest level of the mark scheme

  ▸ conversely, a student with less sophisticated language at C1 or B2 still may be able to grasp content and effectively communicate their evaluation to examiners

IGCSE History grade descriptor and CEFR level

Grade Descriptor	CEFR Scale and Level
Grade A: Recall, select and deploy relevant historical knowledge accurately to support a **coherent and logical argument**	*General Linguistic Range* Upper B2: can express him/herself clearly and without much sign of having to restrict what he/she wants to say. Has sufficient range of language to be able to...**develop arguments**...using some complex sentence forms. C1: ...broad range of language to express him/herself clearly, without having to restrict what he/she wants to say. C2: can exploit a comprehensive and reliable mastery of a very wide range of language to formulate thoughts precisely, give emphasis, differentiate and eliminate ambiguity. No signs of having to restrict what he/she wants to say. *Writing Report and Essays* Lower B2: develops **an argument**, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view ... can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources. Upper B2: develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant point and relevant supporting detail. Can evaluate different ideas or solutions to a problem. C1: clear, well-structured expositions of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues. Can expand and support points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples. C2: smoothly flowing, complex ... essays which present a case, or give critical appreciation of proposal or literary works ... appropriate and effective logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.

Grade A relates to Recall, select and deploy relevant historical knowledge accurately to support a coherent and logical argument

History **Grade A** descriptor aligns with upper CEFR B2 for *General Linguistic Range* descriptor as well as elements of CEFR C1 & C2

Also aligns to elements of upper & lower B2 and instances of C1 and C2 for *Writing Reports and Essays* descriptor

IGCSE History grade descriptor and CEFR level

Grade Descriptor	CEFR Scale and Level
Grade C: Recall, select and deploy relevant historical knowledge **in support of a logical argument**	*General Linguistic range* Mid-B2: expresses viewpoints and **develops arguments** … using some complex sentence forms to do so. *Writing Report and Essays* Lower B2: **develops an argument** … giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view … can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources

History **Grade C** descriptor relates to middle of CEFR B2 on the *General Linguistic Range* descriptor to the lower CEFR B2 on the *Writing Reports and Essays* descriptor

Non-linear correspondence between history and CEFR scales

not a simple task to compare descriptors between scales

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Using academic language proficiency descriptors in the CLIL classroom

▸ Illustration of how an academic language scale may be employed in the CLIL classroom is in the application and use of Learning Outcomes

▸ Both content subject and language used as medium of instruction are similarly involved in defining learning outcomes

▸ Achievement of intended content and language outcomes - key point central to successful CLIL practice (Mehisto & Ting, 2017, p.214)

▸ A lesson plan should include what is to be achieved by learners (outcomes, content, language)

▸ Clear intended content and language learning outcomes afford opportunities for students to:

  ▸ establish their own learning targets and create openings for teachers to plan their lessons

  ▸ facilitate course development and create learning resources

  ▸ provide a mechanism for assessing student learning

▸ Clarity learning outcomes enhanced through academic CEFR descriptors

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Using academic language proficiency descriptors in the CLIL classroom

‣ Pedagogic exploitation of academic, communicative can-do statements has potential to inform planning and delivery of lessons, negotiation of syllabus content with learners and build an effective learning environment

‣ The clarity of content and academic learning outcomes can be enhanced with references to academic CEFR descriptors

‣ Academic can-do descriptors, if clear and specific, not only guide students more effectively in their learning but also provide measurable outputs for teachers

‣ Students would need to be presented with exemplars of the types of language-use in order to achieve outcomes

  ‣ based, in part, on authentic student responses

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Using academic language proficiency descriptors in the CLIL classroom

▶ Effective lesson planning entailing use of academic language proficiency descriptors enables:

- ▶ teacher to set clear targets for content-area learning

- ▶ explicit teaching of the language needed to participate in content-area learning

- ▶ acknowledgement of the needs of CLIL learners

- ▶ learner participation in classroom activity based on an understanding of their language development

- ▶ the use of cognitively challenging tasks that require learners to engage with cognitive academic language

- ▶ provision of models of authentic language in use and opportunities to practise it

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History lesson plan using academic language proficiency descriptors

Learning Outcome(s):

- Learners understand the issues underpinning opposition to Soviet control

- Learners are aware of why and how the USSR reacted the way they did

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Descriptors:

- Can understand in detail a wide range of lengthy, complex authentic historic texts.

- Can summarise in writing and speech long and complex historical source texts, respecting the style and register of the original, interpreting the content appropriately through the meanings of content-compatible language.

- Can use high-level phrases, idiomatic and colloquial language in response to historic stimulus material

- Can use appropriate content-obligatory terminology which could include phrases relating to specific historic periods/events, topics and concepts in the curriculum (mainly nouns and proper nouns).

- Can facilitate understanding of a complex historical issue by highlighting and categorising the main points, presenting them in a logically connected pattern and reinforcing the message by repeating the key aspects in different ways.

- Can recognise a complex historical source text in order to focus on the points of most historic relevance to target audience.

Focus Points

Why was there opposition to Soviet control in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968?

How did the USSR react to this opposition?

History lesson plan using academic language proficiency descriptors

Final Task	Type of Input (Scaffolding)	Instructional Differentiation	Processes	Micro-Tasks (focus on one aspect of language)	Assessment
Present a version of historical facts	L1 and L2 Textbooks, authentic documents	CEFR Level C1: *Reading for information and Argument* History Mark Scheme Levels 4 and 5 C1: Mediation – Conveying clearly and fluently in well-structured language the significant ideas in long, complex historical texts.	Individual work Group work Oral and written production	*Vocabulary*: according to topic *Lexico-grammar*: structures that present an interaction of time and causes and the expression of temporal markers.	Students providing sticky notes with reasons to a whole class diagram for discussion. A small group exercise involving ICT and asking the groups to produce a short script for a radio news bulletin to be broadcast to the West immediately after the Soviet response. Where possible details could be based on authentic material from the time. Following presentations the different approaches could be discussed.

Learner mediation helps to develop historical concepts and ideas by talking ideas through and articulating the thoughts -facilitating understanding and communication

Use of CEFR cognitive mediation scales is relevant for CLIL context where small group, collaborative tasks constitute focus of lesson

Tasks afford class participants opportunities to share disparate input whilst allowing learners to exchange information work collaboratively to accomplish a common objective

Example use of cognitive academic language descriptors based on the CEFR 'Mediating a text' descriptors for *Relaying specific information in speech and writing* and *Processing text in speech and writing*:

- *Can summarise in writing and speech long and complex historical source texts, respecting the style and register of the original, interpreting the content appropriately through the meanings of content-compatible language*:
- *Understanding content-compatible language from co-text*
  - "From very early in 1968, other Communist leaders in Eastern Europe were alarmed by developments in Czechoslovakia. It was clear to them.0 that the growing freedom could be highly <u>infectious</u>."
- *Identifying non-essential language to know in order to understand the text*
  - "Indeed, it was not long before demonstrating Polish students shouted, 'We want a Polish Dubcek!' The first <u>sustained</u> pressure put on the Czechoslovak leadership came at a meeting with five member states of the Warsaw Pact in March 1968."
- *Identifying language that needs to be translated*
  - "The meeting in early August between the Czechoslovak leaders and the Soviet and East European leaders produced a <u>compromise</u> document. At the very time when this agreement was being reached, the Soviet leadership were sent a letter they had been asking for to justify an invasion."
- *Identifying essential to know yet difficult to translate language*
  - "It was a request from the <u>hard-line</u> members of the Czechoslovak leadership calling for intervention. The final decision to launch an invasion was taken between 15 and 17 August."

▶ Mere identification of new bodies of descriptive material - more or less similar to approach taken by CEFR, does <u>not get fully to the heart of the issue</u>

▶ which is

▶ by describing how language operates as the object and medium of learning in the classroom

▶ to <u>find ways of directing its use more effectively</u>

▶ This is what the Council of Europe *Platform* has attempted to address - albeit with varying degrees of success

▶ Multidimensional nature of subject is clear

▶ Would take a drastic degree of abstraction to <u>entirely reduce it to a single dimension</u> describing something called 'academic language'

▶ By accepting this, interesting challenge becomes

    ▶ to identify minimal set of constructs and parameters that would address the complexity of the task

▶ If successful what would emerge would be a more complex, composite picture of an individual's language profile in relation to dealing with academic subject matter

▸ Work described here is in its infancy and needs significant further development

▸ Attempts at developing other proficiency scales besides the CEFR, such as

  ▸ the US WIDA's *English Language Development Standards*

  ▸ the FörMig key-stage descriptors for German as a second language

▸ are already advancing

▸ Council of Europe *Platform* and *European Centre for Modern Languages* are engaged in a related development that is much broader in scope, possibly involving plurilingual and intercultural competences

Further reading

▶ Shaw, S. D., & Imam, H. C. (2012). The Cambridge International Examinations bilingual research agenda. *Research Matters*, 14, 42–45

▶ Imam, H. C. & Shaw, S. D. (2013). Assessment of International Students Through the Medium of English: Ensuring Validity and Fairness in Content-Based Examinations, *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 10:4, 452-475

▶ Shaw, S. D., Imam, H. C. & Hughes, S. K. (2015). *Language Rich: insights from multilingual schools*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

▶ Chapter 2: Achieving in Content Through Language: towards a CEFR descriptor scale for academic language proficiency. Stuart Shaw

in *Assessment for learning in CLIL classrooms: Conceptualisations and practical applications* (Springer, in press)

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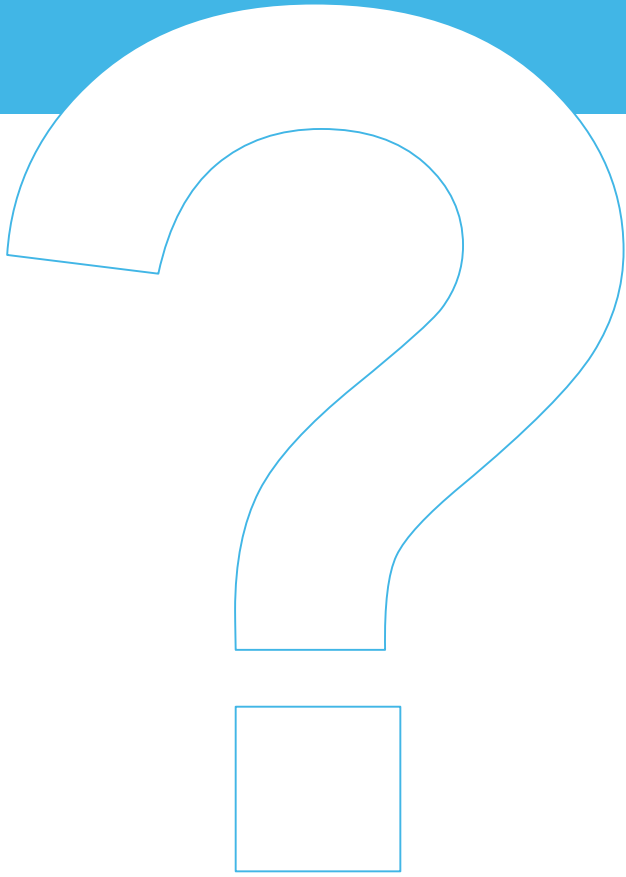
Any questions?

stuart.shaw@cambridgeinternational.org