How (not) to fatten a pig

Scott Thornbury explores the progression of our attempts to determine and define progress.

What is 'progress' in second language learning? That is to say, by what route do learners progress from A to B – or even, for some of them, from A to Z? And, crucially, how do we recognise progress when it happens, so that – among other things – we can measure it?

Grammar and order of acquisition

Traditionally, of course, the long march from zero to native-like proficiency is captured in labels like *beginner*, *intermediate* and *advanced*. Attempts to describe what these levels mean in terms of learner achievement tend to be coloured by the prevailing linguistic theories of the day. So, in 1975, on the assumption that proficiency in a language equates with knowledge of the *grammar* of the language, Louis Alexander and some colleagues drew up a detailed checklist of grammar items (called *English Grammatical Structure*) spread over six 'stages'. Thus, by the end of Stage I, learners were expected to be familiar with the modal verbs *can* and *must*, and the difference between *How much?* and *How many?*, among other things. By Stage V, on the other hand, they were expected to have covered 'modals used to express the speaker's assessment of a situation', and by Stage VI, 'special uses of, and absence of, the definite article with count nouns and proper nouns'.

Alexander *et al* freely admit to having based their structure list on their own teaching experience and intuitions, using criteria such as '*apparent frequency of occurrence, productivity,* *general usefulness, progression from simple to compound and complex, and pedagogical expediency'*. No mention is made of the order in which learners actually *acquire* these items.

However, research into acquisition orders that was being conducted at around the same time – the so-called 'morpheme studies' – somewhat undermined at least some of the structural sequencing proposed by Alexander *et al*. For example, past tense forms such as *she worked* (Stage II in *English Grammatical Structure*) tend to be acquired before present simple forms – *she works* (Stage I). And within the past tense forms, irregular verbs (*she went*) are typically acquired before regular ones. The case for a fixed order of acquisition has been confirmed in further studies – an order, moreover, that is largely impervious to teaching. Nevertheless, the structural grading which was proposed by Alexander and co has largely survived intact, and to this day still underpins the design of most general English courses.

Topics, functions and notions

With the advent of the communicative approach, however, an attempt was made to unseat the hegemonic grammar syllabus. Stages were re-labelled in terms of the learner's degree of communicative competence: *Waystage*, *Threshold* and *Vantage*, for example. (The *Threshold* level was roughly equivalent to late intermediate, and gave its name to the whole project.) Syllabus items were specified as topics (eg *occupation, hygiene*), functions (eg *expressing agreement and disagreement*) and notions (eg *quantity, ownership*) – the synthesis of which was

thought to comprise communicative competence. But proponents of this approach were vague as to which topics, functions and notions should be introduced at which level, and equally vague as to the degree of skill required. According to Jan van Ek, *'The main criterion will have to be whether communication takes place'*, with a secondary requirement that this should be achieved *'with some degree of efficiency'*. These were hardly satisfactory criteria with which to plan a syllabus or measure learners' progress.

True: the so-called notional and functional syllabuses had at least broken free from the strictures of formal grammatical syllabuses. But, in so doing, hadn't they simply perpetuated the same atomistic approach, whereby progress is conceived as the accumulation of lots of 'discrete items'? Chris Brumfit was one of the first to warn against reducing communicative competence to a mere checklist of notions and functions: *'No inventory of language items can itself capture the essence of communication.'* Nor, as I shall argue, can it capture the essence of language development.

Descriptors

In an attempt to redress the vagueness, if not the granularity, of the Threshold Level project, the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR) adopted its own six-tier scheme (A1–C2), but took the bold step of fleshing these levels out with detailed descriptors of what the learner was expected to be able to do at each level. These descriptors – intended to be applicable to the learning of any European language – took the form of 'can do' statements. For example:

- *can produce simple mainly isolated phrases about people and places* (A1 – overall oral production)
- *can express news and views effectively in writing, and relate to those of others* (C1 – overall written interaction)

The architects of the CEFR were quick to point out that *'any attempt to establish "levels" of proficiency is to some extent arbitrary, as it is in any area of knowledge or skill. However, for practical purposes it is useful to set up a scale of defined levels **to segment the learning process** for the purposes of curriculum design, qualifying examinations, etc'* (emphasis added).

Nevertheless – and despite these caveats – the CEFR levels and their descriptors are now widely and uncritically applied (despite sitting uncomfortably with the seemingly indestructible structural syllabus). The terms A1, B2, etc have virtually replaced the old *beginner* and *intermediate* labels. But is such confidence in the new orthodoxy justified? Not according to Glenn Fulcher, who argues that the way that the CEFR has become institutionalised has meant that it has become less a reference than a route map: *'For teachers, the main danger is that they are beginning to believe that the scales in the CEF[R] represent an acquisition or hierarchy, rather than a common perception. **They begin to believe the language of the descriptors actually relates to the sequence of how and what learners learn'*** (emphasis added).

But this isn't so. Why? Because the descriptors were not derived from any empirical studies of how learners actually do learn. As Michael Swan notes, *'For that information about*

development, one needs longitudinal studies of the same subjects or cross-sectional studies of strictly comparable populations'. Like *English Grammatical Structure*, the CEFR descriptors reflect long-held beliefs and intuitions about language development (albeit this time exhaustively corroborated by other professionals), but they lack an empirical basis. This does not invalidate their usefulness as curricular goals. But you cannot just lay them end to lay end and assume they represent development.

SLA research

So, is there no research into language development that teachers, testers and curriculum planners can draw on? Yes, there is a long tradition in second language acquisition research that attempts to tease out 'an SLA index of development' – that is to say, the key indicators of progress in a second language. A meta-analysis, done as long ago as 1998 (by Kate Wolfe-Quintero *et al*), found that the key indicators of progress involve an interplay of such factors as accuracy, fluency and grammatical and lexical complexity. That is to say, progress is not so much the effect of ticking off a checklist of discrete grammar items, functions or competencies, but is a gradual ripening of the entire interconnected system.

Another, more recent study (by Alison Bailey and Margaret Heritage in 2014) tracked the progress, over a one-year period, of school-age English language learners in giving oral and written explanations of maths problems. Key indicators of progress included increases in the quantity of production, greater overall coherence, an expanded range of structures and functions, and increased accuracy. Again, this suggests that progress manifests itself as some very general patterns of development that cut across many different granular learning objectives. Might there not be a case, therefore, for encouraging a more global use of English, on the assumption that the knowledge and skills thus acquired will be transferred to any number of more specific tasks?

Dynamic systems

Despite this more holistic perspective, these studies tend to retain a view of learning that is incremental, unidirectional and linear: one in which progress is best represented as a steady upward curve. More recently, and influenced by the study of dynamic systems in the natural world, this uninterrupted learning curve model has been challenged.

One of its leading critics is Diane Larsen-Freeman, who argues that learning – and language learning in particular – entails a dynamic interplay of multiple factors, the outcome of which is unpredictable: *'Language development is not only uneven but also proceeds at multiple rates simultaneously'* (2008). In other words, *'learning is not climbing a developmental ladder; it is not unidirectional. It is non-linear'* (2017).

Elsewhere (2014), Larsen-Freeman has written that she thinks language is less like a synthetic artifact and more like a biological organ: *'An organ, like the heart, grows from one cell by dividing, multiplying, and differentiating … [Moreover] the life of an organism is not resident in its parts. It is whole from the start, embodied in the global organisation of the living processes.'*

One way that this 'global organisation' is manifested is in the dynamic interplay between vocabulary learning and grammar learning, where the latter only really takes off when there is a critical mass of lexis. In short, trying to segment these interconnected processes into discrete steps is like trying to make an omelette out of tiny bits of another omelette, rather than mixing a few basic ingredients together and letting them interact.

To compound the problem, many research studies of language development focus not on individuals but on large cohorts of learners. They therefore tend to bundle the findings together, in the interests of identifying general trends. (This was a problem with the original morpheme studies too.) A closer look at the data often shows a great deal of individual variation, with different learners taking quite different routes. As Diane Larsen-Freeman observed in 2006, 'learners do not progress through stages of development in a consistent manner'. To plan for the norm without taking individual differences into account may result in some learners being assessed by criteria that simply don't match their learning trajectory.

Reality

None of this, of course, is news to experienced teachers. As they well know, learners progress at varying rates and with different skills and abilities. Nor is their progress always attributable to what they have been taught. Learning can seem to plateau out at times, and then give rise to unanticipated breakthroughs, as if a dam has been breached. The idea that learning is simply jumping through a series of hoops bears little or no relation to reality. Nevertheless, it is a model of progress to which curriculum planners, test designers, many teachers and not a few learners are irresistibly drawn. Wouldn't it be nice, after all, if learning ran to a schedule as punctual and as reliable as a Swiss train?

There is no better representation of this idealised, linear, granular and incremental model of progress than the much-hyped Global Scale of English (GSE). Boasting that it has increased the number of CEFR 'can do' statements exponentially (there are over 1,200 now), the designers have gone further than the CEFR ever did, and (with the help of a great many informants, but with no apparent research into actual developmental paths) they have ranked these into an optimal learning order. Thus, in the words of the website: 'The GSE helps learners answer: How good is my English? Am I progressing? What do I need to do next?'

More worryingly, the GSE helps teachers (and administrators and other stakeholders) answer the question:

*What do I need to **test** next?* A cynic might be forgiven for thinking that the whole elaborate architecture of the GSE (and similar schemes) is simply a pretext for endless cycles of teaching and testing. Certainly, if that was not the intention, it may well be one of its unexpected consequences – given the culture of accountability that pervades education generally. While bite-sized learning objectives might seem harmless in themselves, they may be enlisted towards harmful ends. As the US educationalist Diane Ravitch bemoans: '*How did testing and accountability become the main levers of school reform? … What once was the standards movement was replaced by the accountability movement. What once was an effort to improve the quality of education turned into an accounting strategy: Measure, then punish or reward.*'

As the adage goes, you don't fatten a pig by weighing it all the time. ∎

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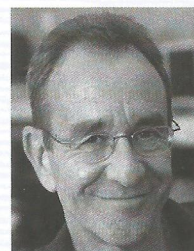
Scott Thornbury teaches on the MA TESOL programme at The New School (NY), USA. He is the author of many books, including most recently the second edition of *About Language: Tasks for Teachers of English* and *30 Language Teaching Methods*, both published by Cambridge University Press.

scott.thornbury@gmail.com