



# Using self-assessment to compare learners' reading proficiency in a multilingual assessment framework



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## ABSTRACT

Can-do statements are commonly used in language education to describe the level of a learner's proficiency. However, there is little research on whether they represent proficiency and progression for non-European languages, particularly non-Latin script or community languages. A self-assessment can-do survey was developed to investigate and compare secondary school learner self-assessments of reading proficiency in German, Japanese and Urdu for the multilingual assessment scheme Asset Languages in England. Findings show that the same three factors best represent learners' self-assessed reading proficiency across all three languages. However, differences were also found raising the need for further research in the way can-do statements represent progression for learners of Japanese and Urdu. Additionally, and in contrast to the findings for German and Japanese, results indicate that learners of Urdu and their teachers underestimated learner proficiency in relation to test scores. Finally, this research demonstrates that the construct of reading in the current National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages is not endorsed by the learners in this study.

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## 1. Introduction

Assessments within a functional framework aim to have levels which are informative to users and scores from tests that are 'comparable across different languages and contexts' regardless of first language (L1), the language studied or the number of learning hours (Bachman & Clark, 1987, p. 28). However, as Alderson (2005) notes, further research is needed on whether functional frameworks represent progression for learners of less commonly taught languages. Most existing research has focused on learners of English or other European languages, and for a single language linked to a functional framework such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), rather than a multilingual assessment context (Jones, Ashton, & Walker, 2010).

The context for this work is Asset Languages, a multilingual assessment scheme in England, which alongside the Languages Ladder, forms one of the overarching objectives of England's National Languages Strategy (2004), the introduction of a 'voluntary recognition system'. The Languages Ladder, owned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (DfES, 2004), consists of can-do statements for reading, writing, listening and speaking at six levels (broken down into 17 grades), while Asset Languages, through Cambridge Assessment, provides voluntary 'low stakes' tests in 25<sup>1</sup> languages against the

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<sup>1</sup> From June 2014 there will be a reduction in the number of language assessments on offer as it was considered to be no longer financially viable to offer assessments in all 25 languages (OCR, 2013; TES, 2012).

Languages Ladder. The aim was to have a functional framework of levels with shared meaning across all languages, representing small positive steps of achievement in can-do terms. This approach contrasts with existing 'high stakes' qualifications available in England which test the ability of learners after taking a set course for a specified number of guided learning hours. Here, assessments can reflect the different learning demands of languages. For example, there is a general consensus that for Japanese, reading and writing are more difficult (Koda, 1994) and take longer, even two or three times as long, to achieve the same basic proficiency compared with European languages for L1 English speakers (de Courcy & Birch, 1993). Comparisons across subjects therefore tend to be based on how well learners of a similar age have achieved set objectives or attainment targets (see for example QCA (2008)) rather than functional competence as was required for Asset Languages.

The voluntary recognition system was to be inclusive in the educational contexts, i.e. primary, secondary and adult, and range of languages catered for, with the ethos that language proficiency, however achieved, should be recognised. Specific reference was made to community language learners; learners of the language of the community that they belong to (CLT, 2005). Separate testing of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills was seen as necessary, particularly for non-Latin script or community languages where learners may progress more rapidly in listening and speaking than reading and writing (Little, 2006; Ogawa Douglas, 1992) due to the difficulty of reading and writing for non-Latin script languages and the profile of community language learners who tend to have stronger listening and speaking skills. A key challenge for Asset Languages is how these facets can work within a single framework. Due to these complexities and significant pressures of development, as North and Jones (2009) outline, an iterative cycle was foreseen with the first standards set seen as provisional. Findings from research such as the current study can then feed into this iterative review process.

This article uses a can-do survey to explore and compare secondary school learner self-assessments of reading proficiency in German, Japanese and Urdu. Although reading (and responding) is a core skill in the National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages (NC for MFL) in England (DfES & QCA, 1999), past research has highlighted the limited attention given to reading within foreign language classes (Macaro & Erler, 2008). For example, an Ofsted (2008, p. 15) evaluation of language learning found that students 'rarely read beyond the course book, a worksheet or for examination practice'. Furthermore Grenfell (1992) is critical of the attention paid to reading within course books while Dobson (in Macaro & Erler, 2008, p. 90) comments that reading experience is often 'limited to comprehending short texts which rarely extend beyond a few sentences'. A recent cross-European survey supports these findings with results revealing England as the lowest performing country in reading in both the first and second most widely taught foreign languages (French and German respectively) (European Commission, 2012). Thus reading remains an area in urgent need of further research.

The three languages were chosen for several reasons. First, they use different scripts and alphabets. In Japanese, a non-Latin script language, Chinese logographic characters, Kanji, are used together with two syllabic systems, hiragana and katakana with around 1500 kanji in common daily use (Akita & Hatano, 1999; Sasaki, 2004). Urdu is an alphabetic language with Persian (as opposed to Roman) letters and is written from right to left (Mumatz & Humphreys, 2001). Second, in England, the majority of learners of German and Japanese are either second or foreign language learners whereas Urdu is the most widespread community language (CLT, 2006). The following from McPake (2006, p. 4) best describes the Urdu learners in this study: 'children learn a community language after they have learned English' with children from families of Pakistani origin often learning to speak Panjabi at home before starting to learn Urdu the national language of Pakistan at a later age. The inclusion of Urdu was also seen as important here given that in a large cross GCSE school subject comparability study, Coe (2008), found that Urdu behaved psychometrically differently to other subjects. The trait constructed by Coe can be seen as a measure of general academic ability and Coe suggested that Urdu students have a special interest or ability in the subject distinct from the trait of general academic ability.

Issues of comparability within a functional framework, should they exist, are likely to be more prominent across these three languages and learning contexts and at lower levels of reading proficiency where further research is needed into the progression represented in functional frameworks, particularly given the limited focus on reading in foreign language classrooms in England.

## 2. Self-assessment

Self-assessment is based on the ability of learners to reflect on and accurately assess their knowledge and skills (Ellis, 2003; Little & Perclova, 2001). A key area for research has been on the validity and reliability of self-assessment. Here Ellis (2003, p. 303) argues that self-assessment can be both 'valid and reliable' while Oscarson (1997) and Ross (2006) claim that the majority of studies have produced favourable results. Examples of studies which have found a positive relationship between language proficiency tests and self-assessments include LeBlanc and Painchard (1985), Bachman and Palmer (1989), Hargan (1994), Ross (1998), Alderson (2005), Brantmeier and Vanderplank (2008), Alexandria (2009) and Litz (2009), while Brantmeier (2006, p. 19) notes that results across studies 'generally support the use of self-assessment as an indicator of second language abilities'. A positive relationship between self-assessment and test results has also been found in other subject areas, e.g., Shen (2002) and Shen and Pedulla (2000) in large scale cross-country comparability studies of mathematics and science.

Other studies have looked at how self-assessment can be made more reliable finding that learners are better at assessing items that are concrete or functional rather than abstract or general (Alderson, 2005; Bachman, 1990; Ross, 1998). Further to this, Ellis (2003, p. 302) suggests that the lack of correlation between self-assessments and proficiency tests found in some studies could be due to the use of generic self-assessment instruments.

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