

**Regional Co-operation in the Harmonisation of Language Testing**  
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There are several features that characterise Europe today. From among them unification, mobility and co-operation play a very special role and it is interesting to see how these are related to the assessment of competence in more than one language in the context of the European Language Portfolio based on one language exam system.

Co-operation and thus mobility are becoming more and more important in the areas of tourism, work and especially study and research. There are many people who choose to study or work abroad, there is one barrier, however, the lack of appropriate language knowledge. This is why all countries involved in the European unification and harmonisation process have to motivate language learning and the transparent certification of language competence. That is in the framework of the mutual recognition of certificates and diplomas language competence has to be certified in an internationally comparable way as well, this means that the language exams have to share some features and standards so that they are recognised across Europe and across languages. This requirement is difficult to meet, and several solutions have been provided so far. The present paper attempts to introduce one.

In the first part of the paper the history of the ECL (European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages) will be introduced.

The history of the ECL exam can be divided into two phases. In 1992 the ECL Consortium was founded by renowned European higher education institutions. Experts had come together in the early eighties with the aim of designing unified and comparable tests, that is to achieve harmonisation in accordance with the Council of Europe guidelines on international co-operation in language teaching and testing. The idea was to introduce a special kind of standardisation. On the basis of previously developed unified testing principles and standards a single system of test construction, test administration and test evaluation was set up in all the languages concerned.

In the following you find a brief description of the institutions involved in the first and second phases of the ECL process.

**The first phase of standardisation**  
(1983-1999)

Development of a standardised language exam system (ECL) for languages of the EU

EU grant ERASMUS 1988-89, LINGUA AKTION V A 1992,  
LINGUA AKTION III 1993-1996

Co-ordinator:

University of London Examinations and Assessment Council

Institutions involved in developing and then constructing ECL tests based on the set of unified standards and then conducting ECL exams in *English, German, Italian, Spanish, Greek* and *Hungarian*:

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki School of Modern Greek Language  
Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques de Sévres  
Fachverband Deutsch als Fremdsprache

Heinrich-Heine-Universität/IHK Düsseldorf  
Janus Pannonius Tudományegyetem Idegen Nyelvi Titkárság  
Scuola di Lingua e Cultura Italiana per Stranieri di Siena  
Società Dante Alighieri  
Universität Jena Wirtschaftswissenschaftliche Fakultät IWK  
Universidad de Granada Centro de Lenguas Modernas

### **The second phase (1999-)**

Extending the already existing ECL standards to all the official languages of the EU  
Co-ordinator:

University of Pécs Foreign Language Centre

Institutions participating in the process of extending the ECL exam standards to *Finnish, Swedish, Dutch, French, Danish, Portuguese* and *Polish*, in designing ECL exam preparatory curricula and courses, in setting up a national and international ECL preparatory and exam centre network.

Aarhus Universitet Institut for Nordisk Sprog og Litteratur  
Institut für Interkulturelle Kommunikation e.V. Berlin  
Göteborg Universitet  
Helia Helsinki Business Polytechnic  
Université Stendhal - Grenoble 3 CUEF  
Universidade de Coimbra  
University Pécs Foreign Language Centre  
The Institute of Polish for Foreigners

In the second phase of the ECL programme the idea was to extend the testing standards to other languages, especially to the less widely used and taught languages (LWULT) of the European Union as well as to the languages of the candidate countries. This endeavour is in compliance with one of the special priorities of the European Union.

In the third phase of the standardisation process the languages of the neighbouring countries will be included in the framework of regional co-operation, including the Alps-Adriatic Working Community.

After having presented the history of ECL I would like now to describe this system itself in more detail. It has four levels:

Level A	<i>tourist, "survival" level</i>
Level B	<i>employment level</i>
Level C	<i>higher education level</i>
Level D	<i>negotiation level</i>

This is in line with the Council of Europe *Common European Framework for the Teaching of Modern Languages*, we have simply added a fourth, pre-elementary level. The correspondence between the Council of Europe and the ECL levels is the following:

Levels of ECL Exams	Council of Europe Levels
ECL Level "D"	Mastery C2
	Operational Proficiency C1
ECL Level "C"	Vantage B2
	Threshold B1
ECL Level "B"	Waystage A2 <sup>2</sup>
ECL Level "A"	Breakthrough A1

The ECL exam takes learners' needs into consideration, it includes practical tasks from real life (both formal and informal) and it covers all four skills, allocating them all the same importance.

Listening comprehension	25 points
Reading comprehension	25 points
Written communication	25 points
Oral communication	25 points
<i>Maximum total:</i>	<i>100 points</i>
<i>Minimum pass level:</i>	<i>60 points</i>
<i>Pass level per skill</i>	<i>15 points</i>

#### 1. SKILLS ASSESSED AND POINTS ALLOCATED

LEVELS	A	B	C	D
<b>Reading comprehension</b>				
<b>Time (mins)</b>	30	30	40	45
<b>Number of texts</b>	2	2	2	2
<b>Number of words</b>	350-400	500-600	800-1000	1000-1300
<b>Written communication</b>				
<b>Time (mins)</b>	45	50	75	90
<b>Number of tasks</b>	2	2	2	2

<b>Number of words</b>	150 (70-80)	250 (120-130)	400 (200-200)	600 (300-300)
<b>Listening comprehension</b>				
<b>Time (mins)</b>	25	25-30	30-35	35-40
<b>Number of words</b>	350-400	500-600	800-1000	1200-1500

## 2. ECL TEST FORMAT

The main features of the test are the following:

- **Comparability:** the exams, test materials, and certificates are built on uniform principles, so the types of tasks and the evaluation criteria are the same across languages.
- **Authenticity:** all texts and materials are produced by the institutions of the country of origin of the language.
- **Reliability:** each specialist member of the Consortium is responsible for test construction and marking in their own language. To ensure maximum reliability all items are pre-tested, test constructors and markers are trained before each exam session. Specialists monitor the standards of question setting, marking and the awarding of certificates to ensure equivalence between all levels of achievement across the languages.
- **Validity:** the ECL exam tests the oral and written ability to use the language of practical, professional and personal topics.

The ECL exam is national and international respectively: national as the language specific items are prepared by the national members and international as the tests are harmonised and comparable. The ECL is also open to all target groups, from students to adults, it is non-age, non-culture, non-gender, non-country and non-profession specific. It also reflects the action-centred approach of language learning, teaching and testing advocated by the Council of Europe, as well as the communicative approach to language teaching and testing as it measures the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence of the learner. All the topics given in the European Framework Recommendations of the Council of Europe are included among the exam topics. There is also a standardised modular preparatory course system to ensure further harmonisation as well as a set of sample tests.

Who do we recommend the ECL tests for? For students who want an international language certificate that they can use in the target language country and in any other country as well. It is especially useful for students who are learning and know several languages and who need or want exams in their languages that are comparable. This idea also ties in very well with the concept of the European Language Portfolio of the Council of Europe. With the ECL exam it is easier to keep track of the language experience of the individual as a result of the comparability factor. The ECL wants to contribute to the idea of a language passport with its unified principles, with its concepts of language teaching and learning, assessment and certification.

This ambition has been highly appreciated by the EU and it has supported the project both morally and financially. Another sign of appreciation is the fact that the ECL language exam in English, German and Hungarian has been officially recognised by the Hungarian Language Exam Accreditation Board.

As a conclusion – and in the framework of regional co-operation – I would like to present some recommendations on regional co-operation in language testing that are worth consideration by the institutions of higher education of the region:

- recognise ECL examinations as the official certification of language competence in their own institutions
- inspire the lecturers and students of the mobility programmes to choose ECL examinations to prove their language competence
- popularise the internationally recognised and financed examination system in their own countries
- take active part in the examinations on a professional and commercial basis and set up a national exam system
- language departments should contact the Foreign Language Centre
- Contact: <http://inyt.pte.hu> \* [ecl@inyt.pte.hu](mailto:ecl@inyt.pte.hu)

### **Sources**

Modern Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. A Common European Framework. Strasbourg. 1996.  
[www.europa.eu.int](http://www.europa.eu.int)  
[www.coe.fr](http://www.coe.fr)