## A LEVEL-BASED APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPING PRE-SERVICE PRIMARY TEACHERS' LEARNING AND STRATEGIC COMPETENCE

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#### **Summary**

This article investigates the implementation and challenges of the level-based approach within the Ukrainian higher education system, specifically concerning the formation of English-language learning and strategic competence of pre-service primary school teachers. Against the backdrop of Ukraine's ongoing educational reforms and its integration into the global academic landscape, the study highlights the critical need to align national foreign language education standards with European requirements, as exemplified by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). While the CEFR provides a robust framework for defining and assessing language proficiency levels, a detailed analysis reveals inconsistencies in its application within Ukrainian universities, particularly regarding the allocation of guided classroom hours and the variability of student entry levels. The research emphasizes that a significant proportion of incoming students do not meet the expected B1+ proficiency level for bachelor's programs, posing a substantial challenge for institutions tasked with developing communicative and professional competence within limited timeframes. The study critically examines the current curriculum for primary education specialists, noting discrepancies in course titles, placement within programs, and overall hours dedicated to foreign language instruction. It advocates for a more structured and extended foreign language curriculum, proposing distinct courses for general and professional communication. The article also underscores the advantages of the level-based approach, including clear learning objectives, the use of authentic materials, and the potential for international certification. Ultimately, this work provides a foundational analysis for establishing and correlating specific levels of foreign language learning and strategic competence in future primary school teachers with recognized international proficiency standards.

**Key words:** foreign language education, teacher training, CEFR levels, communicative competence, pedagogical English, curriculum reform, Ukraine, primary education.

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### 1. Introduction

The profound and multifaceted transformation currently underway within Ukraine's higher education system is an objective response to contemporary global demands. This imperative is driven by the nation's steadfast commitment to integrating its educational landscape into the international sphere, fostering competitiveness within an increasingly globalized society, and fundamentally reorienting the entire pedagogical process toward the holistic and harmonious development of the individual. Such ambitious goals necessitate a deep and systematic modernization, specifically the alignment of national educational standards with established European benchmarks. Within this broader context, the present study addresses a critical lacuna

in the preparation of future primary school teachers: the effective integration of a level-based approach to intercultural communication for the comprehensive formation of their English-language learning and strategic competence (Konotop, 2020, 2025).

The concept of a "level-based approach" is well-established in international scholarly discourse and regulatory frameworks, notably CEFR. Its active implementation in contemporary Ukrainian higher education institutions underscores a shift towards student-centered learning, emphasizing independent activity and the cultivation of personal attributes. However, a critical review of existing literature and pedagogical practices reveals a significant challenge: the absence of unified, quantitatively and qualitatively consistent descriptors for assessing foreign language proficiency specifically tailored for future primary school teachers. Current assessment practices predominantly rely on generalized CEFR descriptors, often failing to account for the unique professional communicative needs of this cohort. This discrepancy highlights a fundamental disconnect between aspirational international standards and the practical realities of national pedagogical training.

The primary objective of this research is to critically analyze the existing frameworks for foreign language proficiency within the Ukrainian higher education system and to propose a refined, level-based model for the development of English-language learning and strategic competence of pre-service primary school teachers. This includes delineating specific proficiency levels for both general English and English for professional pedagogical communication, and correlating these with the stages of bachelor's degree training.

To achieve this overarching goal, the following **research objectives** have been established: to conduct a comparative analysis of international (CEFR, CUP) and national guidelines regarding the required guided classroom hours for achieving specific foreign language proficiency levels (B1, B2); to investigate the current state of foreign language education within Ukrainian higher education programs for pre-service primary school teachers, identifying discrepancies in curriculum design, course nomenclature, and time allocation; to articulate detailed descriptors for B1+ and B2 professional pedagogical English proficiency, integrating insights from CEFR and national scholarly contributions; to propose a structured framework for the progression of English language proficiency across the bachelor's training period, acknowledging varied entry levels and the absence of mandatory English proficiency for admission to relevant specialties; to evaluate the efficacy of standardized international tests (e.g., PET, FCE) as diagnostic and summative assessment tools for foreign language competence in this specific educational context.

The **methodology** employed in this research is primarily analytical and comparative. It involves a systematic review of normative documents, educational professional programs, and specialized academic literature concerning foreign language education and teacher training in both Ukrainian and international contexts. Comparative analysis will be utilized to contrast pedagogical approaches, curriculum structures, and proficiency benchmarks. The logic of presentation will move from a broad overview of the global and national educational context to a detailed examination of existing frameworks, culminating in specific proposals for enhancing the level-based approach in the target domain. This systematic inquiry aims to provide robust scientific solutions for optimizing the formation of essential English-language competencies, thereby contributing significantly to the modernization of pre-service school teacher education in Ukraine.

### 2. The Level-Based Approach in Intercultural Communication

Ukraine is undergoing a significant transformation of its higher education system, driven by objective contemporary demands. The integration of Ukrainian education into the global sphere, the imperative to establish its competitiveness within modern global society, and the reorientation of the entire educational process towards the comprehensive and harmonious development of individuals – all necessitate a profound modernization and the alignment of national standards with European requirements.

The term "level-based approach" is widely used in scholarly literature and normative documents (N. F. Borysko, O. B. Bigych, O. P. Bykonya, I. P. Zadorozhna, L. Ya. Zvenya, S. Yu. Nikolayeva, O. O. Parshykova, O. S. Synekop, V. V. Chernysh et al.) and is actively being implemented in the practice of contemporary Ukrainian higher education institutions. This implementation emphasizes the role of independent learning activities, stimulates the development of students' personal characteristics and abilities, and, in turn, requires instructors to objectively assess student learning achievements (Konotop, 2010, 2015). A detailed review of the scientific literature and relevant documents reveals numerous descriptions of the level-based approach to foreign language proficiency. However, as V. V. Chernysh aptly notes, these descriptions lack uniformity in both the quantitative and qualitative descriptions of descriptors and their scales (Chernysh, 2015: 74). It is important to note that, in line with the specific focus of our research - identifying and describing foreign language proficiency descriptors for pre-service primary school teachers – such studies are entirely absent. When assessing learning achievements, instructors currently rely on the general descriptors of the CEFR. Therefore, this section will analyze both general and professional (foreign language professional pedagogical communication) language proficiency levels and endeavor to correlate them with the years of training for pre-service primary school teachers in higher education institutions. We define foreign language proficiency level as a specifically designated level of communicative foreign language proficiency characterized by precisely defined linguistic, speech, sociocultural, and strategic behavioral traits of an individual (Konotop, 2025).

The development of the level-based approach in academic research is linked to the definition of foreign language proficiency levels, a process initiated in the 1960s and 1970s by Council of Europe experts. This multi-year research culminated in the development of the CEFR / CEF – the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, one of the principal European systems for defining foreign language proficiency levels used within the European Union. This document systematizes approaches to foreign language teaching and standardizes the assessment of foreign language proficiency levels, and has been translated into 38 languages worldwide. The CEFR system defines and elaborates on foreign language proficiency levels. CEFR experts (Zahalnoievropeiski Rekomendatsii, 2003: 44–46; CEFR, 2018: 34) proposed and described three broad proficiency levels: Basic, Independent, and Proficient: Level A: Basic User (A1 – Breakthrough or "Discovery," A2 – Waystage or "Survival"); Level B: Independent User (B1 – Threshold, B2 – Vantage); Level C: Proficient User (C1 – Effective Operational Proficiency, C2 – Mastery); Levels A1 and A2 are categorized as Basic User, levels B1 and B2 as Independent User, and levels C1 and C2 as Proficient User.

CEFR has established a robust system of language proficiency levels, presenting a clear hierarchy, a standardized network of definitions, and comprehensive methodological recommendations. The scales proposed within the CEFR are relevant for describing the achievement levels of any language user, regardless of age, and can be applied in both primary and professional education settings. They are cohesive and sequential, allowing for consistent approaches (Zadorozhna, 2011: 50). For each level, the CEFR meticulously outlines the knowledge and skills a student should possess across all language activities. The descriptors for each of the six CEFR levels are straightforward and convenient, providing a qualitative, albeit approximate, means of assessing actual foreign language proficiency. These levels, ranging from basic to

near-absolute mastery, are integral to the development of European language curricula, text-books, manuals, reference books, dictionaries, and tests.

In 2009, Council of Europe experts further detailed the CEFR by introducing additional sub-levels: a "+" marker was appended to each existing level to denote an enhanced or stronger corresponding proficiency. The strength of this approach lies in its ability to create practical, localized levels that cater to specific needs while remaining harmonized with the overarching hierarchical system. Contemporary researchers continually strive to identify intermediate levels; for instance, O. O. Parshikova's research specifically identified and described such levels for primary school students (*Parshikova*, 2009: 94–109).

N. F. Borysko identifies several advantages of utilizing these scales in foreign language teaching practice: linearity of presentation: This allows for tracking a language user's progress both vertically (advancement through levels) and horizontally (expansion of communicative context); flexibility of the scale: This enables the identification and specification of additional or intermediate levels; independence from specific educational environments: The scales can be applied across diverse educational contexts, various types of educational institutions, and for users of different ages; user-friendliness: The "I can" statements inherent in the descriptors motivate language learners towards further study (*Borysko*, 2005: 10).

As I. P. Zadorozhna points out, implementing the European language proficiency scale in foreign language education provides several opportunities: standardizing learning objectives, ensuring flexibility and variability in instruction by focusing on needs, unifying assessment of results, and ensuring transparency in documenting student achievements (Zadorozhna, 2011: 51).

Experts from the Cambridge Syndicate have experimentally determined the approximate number of classroom hours under instructor guidance required to achieve specific CEFR levels, starting from an initial beginner level. To progress from A1 (Basic User) to A2 (Waystage), a student typically requires 180–200 hours, with one hour equating to 45 minutes. Reaching B1 (Threshold) from a starting point at Level B (Independent User) requires 350–400 hours, while advancing to B2 (Vantage) necessitates 500–600 hours. For C1 (Proficient User), approximately 700–800 hours are needed, and achieving C2 (Mastery) typically demands 1000–1200 hours (Cambridge.com).

## 3. Comparing Guided Classroom Hours for B1 and B2 English Proficiency

Let us compare the number of guided classroom hours allocated to Ukrainian students for progressing to B1 and B2 proficiency levels (see Table 1). Cambridge University Press (CUP, 2018) provides two distinct estimates for the hours required to advance to the next level. The first estimate suggests the number of hours for highly motivated adult learners with extensive access to learning materials, while the second pertains to younger learners with more limited access to resources and less consistent motivation (CEFR, 2020).

Table 1
Required Number of Classroom Hours to Achieve Levels B1, B1+, B2, and B2+
According to Program (2005), CEFR (2018), and CUP (2018)

Level	Programm (2005)	CEFR (2018)	CUP 1 (2018)	CUP 2 (2018)
B1+	not defined	not defined	not defined	not defined
B2	200	150-200	180–260	220–270
B2+	not defined	not defined	not defined	not defined

Approximately 200 classroom hours are generally needed to advance to the next proficiency level. However, the precise number of hours is contingent upon several factors, including: prior foreign language learning experience, intensity of instruction, age, and the frequency and format of extracurricular study. Specifically, as the comparison above demonstrates, a transition from B1 to B2 proficiency requires approximately 200–270 hours of guided classroom instruction.

Let us now correlate the B1, B1+, B2, and B2+ levels with certifications from IELTS, TOEFL, and Cambridge ESOL, and present the number of instructor-led classroom hours required to achieve each specific level from a zero starting point (see Table 2).

Table 2
Number of Hours to Achieve Levels B1, B1+, B2, and B2+ According to Test Systems
and Their Correlation with Examinations/Scores

		TOEFL		IELTS		ESOL	
Level	Level	Hours	TOEFL CBT	Hours	IELTS	Hours	ESOL Cambridge
B2	Upper-Interme- diate	540+	173–210	540+	5,0-6,0	540+	FCE
B1+	Intermediate	420+	133-170	420+	4-4,5	420+	PET
B1	Pre-Intermediate	300+	97–130	300+	3,0	300+	KET

Internationally, the level-based approach manifests in diverse curricula and syllabi. A curriculum encompasses a comprehensive description of an existing system, considering all influencing factors: from the justification for its development and organizational measures for implementation, to the system of analysis and evaluation of planned outcomes. It essentially serves as a conceptual model for a foreign language learning system within a specific historical period of societal development.

International practice indicates that foreign language is a compulsory discipline in European higher education institutions, typically comprising 240–270 hours. To achieve specific foreign language proficiency levels, the number of guided classroom hours allocated to practical foreign language training for future primary school teachers in Ukrainian higher education institutions must be substantially increased. This conclusion is drawn from the analysis of educational professional programs, which will be detailed below. It is also crucial to consider that students enter higher education institutions not only with varying levels of foreign language proficiency but also having studied different languages in school, such as French or German.

# 4. Comparing Guided Classroom Hours for B1 and B2 English Proficiency in Ukraine

Let's now examine the implementation of the level-based approach within Ukrainian higher education institutions. The academic subject "Foreign Language" is among the compulsory disciplines for bachelor's degree programs across all fields of study in higher education. Our analysis of 15 educational professional programs for the training of future primary school teachers at the first (bachelor's) level revealed that while foreign language is present in all programs, significant discrepancies exist across several points:

1. **Placement of foreign language within the curriculum:** In most programs, it is placed within the general training cycle for bachelor's degrees, but some programs include it in the professional training cycle.

- 2. Varied course titles: Examples include "Foreign Language," "Practice of Oral and Written Communication," "Business Foreign Language," "Foreign Language for Professional Communication," and "Foreign Language (for Professional Communication)," among others.
- 3. **Absence of general foreign language courses:** Some educational professional programs entirely omit the "Foreign Language" course, with foreign language study commencing directly with professionally oriented content.
- 4. **Varying number of semesters:** The duration of foreign language study ranges from two to eight semesters.
- 5. Diverse allocation of total hours, credits, and ratios of independent to classroom work: The time dedicated to foreign language learning differs significantly.

A common finding during the analysis of "Foreign Language" as an academic subject was that it is typically taught for 1–2 semesters, with an examination serving as the final form of assessment. All of the above points indicate an undervaluation of foreign language instruction during the training of future primary school teachers. We believe that foreign language should be taught for no fewer than two semesters and should include at least two courses: "Foreign Language" and "Foreign Language (for Professional Communication)." Furthermore, it would be desirable to organize elective courses such as "Business Foreign Language," etc.

On one hand, an insufficient level of foreign language communicative competence minimizes the possibility of introducing a professionally oriented foreign language course in the first year of higher education. However, considering that students in non-linguistic specialties typically begin studying their core subjects and acquiring primary professional skills only in their second or third years, the impact of implementing such courses in the first year would unfortunately be limited. Therefore, in our opinion, it seems most appropriate to develop foreign language communicative competence in students during their first year, followed by foreign language professional competence in subsequent stages.

Observations of the learning process in non-linguistic faculties of higher education institutions have revealed several factors that complicate foreign language learning: students possess varying levels of foreign language knowledge from their school curricula; a limited number of guided classroom hours are allocated in the curriculum for foreign language instruction (once or twice a week); the short duration of foreign language study (from one semester to 1–2 years); Learning groups have high student numbers (over 20 students); compared to core disciplines in non-linguistic higher education institutions, foreign language is often perceived as a "secondary" academic subject, leading to a decrease in motivation.

Within the scope of our research, specifically the training of future primary school teachers, we must also account for the diverse foreign language proficiency levels of first-year students. It should be noted that foreign language is not a mandatory subject for admission to the 013 Primary Education specialty at the first (bachelor's) level, which does not necessitate a high level of English proficiency from applicants. Our analysis also provided a basis for correlating language proficiency levels with years of study in higher education institutions (see Table 3).

Let's now attempt to correlate the levels of general foreign language proficiency and professional foreign language proficiency (specifically, the language of foreign language professional pedagogical communication) with the years of study for future primary school teachers in higher education institutions. This will consider the approximate correlations developed by S. Yu. Nikolaieva (Nikolaieva, 2010: 53–88) and V. V. Chernysh (Chernysh, 2017: 76–80) (see Table 4).

Table 3
Structure of Foreign Language Education in Ukraine for Future Primary School
Teachers, Considering CEFR (2018, 2020)

Level	foreign language education for pre-service primary school teachers		
C2+			
C2	self-directed foreign language learning		
C2-			
C1+			
C1			
C1-	foreign language education at the Master's level		
B2+			
B2			
B2-	foreign language education at the Bachelor's level		
B1+			

Table 4
Approximate Correlation of General and Professional Foreign Language Proficiency
Levels with Stages of Study in Higher Education at the First (Bachelor's) Level

_	Course	Level		
Stages		General foreign language proficiency level	Level of professionally oriented foreign language proficiency	
Beginner	1	B1+ Threshold	B1+ Threshold professional	
Intermediate	2–3	B2-	B2-	
Advanced	4	B2 Vantage	B2 Vantage professional	

The primary goal of the "Foreign Language" academic discipline in non-linguistic faculties should be the further development of students' language proficiency and the formation of their foreign language communicative competence. It's crucial to acknowledge that a significant number of students do not possess the required foreign language proficiency upon entry, which obliges higher education institutions to develop these essential competencies across all language activities within a limited timeframe. The 2005 curriculum states that bachelor's graduates should achieve a B2 level of language proficiency, while master's graduates should reach B2+ to C1 (Bakaieva, 2005: 2–3).

According to the CEFR, first-year students are expected to enter with either a B1 or B2 level, depending on their prior schooling. Under such conditions, it's challenging to ensure effective continuity given the variability of school education. The expected entry level for higher education applicants should ideally be no lower than B1. It's worth noting that external independent evaluation (ZNO / NMT) currently serves as a mandatory link between secondary and higher education, assessing graduates' language proficiency. However, for admission to specialty 013 Primary Education, a ZNO certificate in a foreign language is not typically required, except in some institutions where students pursue an additional specialization in "Foreign Language."

Let's now consider the B1 and B2 levels as described in the CEFR descriptors (CEFR, 2001, 2018, 2020), incorporating their professional component (Nikolaieva, 2010: 53–88; Chernysh, 2017: 76–80). These professional aspects must be factored into the development of foreign language learning and strategic competence in future primary school teachers. The "-" mark indicates a lower and weaker corresponding level, while "+" signifies a stronger one:

- B1+ (Threshold) implies that a student can understand the main points of clear, standard speech on familiar topics frequently encountered in work, study, leisure, etc. They can handle most situations encountered while traveling in a country where the language is spoken and can produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. They can describe experiences, events, hopes, dreams, and ambitions, and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
- B1+ (Threshold Professional) indicates that a student can participate in formal and informal foreign language professional pedagogical communication, adhering to the basic norms and rules of verbal and non-verbal behavior in the target language country.
- B2 (Vantage) denotes that a student can understand the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of specialization. They can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. They can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue, giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
- **B2** (Vantage Professional) means a student can participate in formal and informal direct/mediated foreign language professional pedagogical communication with foreign colleagues, both native and non-native speakers, across a broad range of professional contexts (Zahalnoievropeiski Rekomendatsii, 2003: 24).

Considering the requirements of the current 2005 curriculum and correlating them with international examinations, it is advisable to use PET (Preliminary English Test) for assessing the incoming foreign language communicative competence of first-year students and FCE (First Certificate in English) for the outgoing level. We can visualize the development of foreign language proficiency for future primary school teachers by level (Fig. 1).

Within the context of the level-based approach, it's crucial to address testing as a means of determining students' actual foreign language proficiency. While the expected entry level for students entering non-linguistic higher education institutions is B1+, practical experience shows that the real level is often significantly lower. Several tests exist for assessing B1 and B2 levels. For instance, the Preliminary English Test (PET) is designed to confirm the B1 level and comprises reading and writing, listening, and speaking components. For the B2 level, the First Certificate in English (FCE), the third examination in the Cambridge English Qualification series, is recommended. This exam includes sections on reading and use of English (grammar and vocabulary), writing, listening, and speaking.

In our view, adopting a level-based approach in higher education offers several substantial advantages:

- 1. Clear definition of learning objectives: It provides precise end goals for each foreign language proficiency level, ensuring continuity in learning.
- 2. Use of authentic materials and tests: It facilitates the use of genuine teaching and learning resources and assessments designed for each specific level.
- 3. **International certification:** It allows students to validate their foreign language proficiency with internationally recognized certificates from the target language country.

### 5. Foundations and Challenges of the Level-Based Approach

The level-based approach is founded on the diagnosis of foreign language proficiency. We define this as a specifically designated level of communicative foreign language

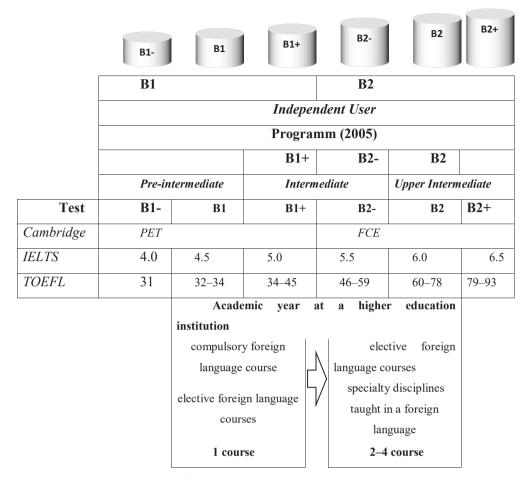


Fig. 1. Diagram of Foreign Language Development by Levels for Future Primary School Teachers

proficiency, characterized by precisely defined linguistic, speech, sociocultural, and strategic behavioral traits of an individual. Each level possesses its own objectives and tasks, along with a set of educational and communicative competencies for each aspect of language activity.

According to regulatory documents governing foreign language instruction for pre-service primary school teachers at the first (bachelor's) level, the language proficiency of applicants upon admission should be no lower than B1+, and upon graduation, it should reach B2. However, a significant number of students do not possess the required foreign language proficiency upon entry. This compels universities to develop the necessary competencies across all language activities within a limited timeframe. In our study, we must also account for the varying foreign language proficiency levels among students. It's important to note that a foreign language is not a mandatory subject for admission to the 013 Primary Education specialty, which means applicants are not required to demonstrate a high level of English knowledge.

#### 6. Conclusions

This study has undertaken a comprehensive examination of the level-based approach as it pertains to the development of English-language learning and strategic competence of pre-service primary school teachers within the context of Ukrainian higher education. Our analysis underscores the critical need for robust integration of international standards, particularly CEFR, to ensure that graduates are adequately equipped for intercultural communication in an increasingly globalized educational landscape. The research identified several key findings: discrepancy in Proficiency Levels: A notable gap exists between the expected B1+ entry level for students entering bachelor's programs and their actual foreign language proficiency. This necessitates a significant compensatory effort from higher education institutions within often limited instructional timeframes; curricular Inconsistencies: Current educational professional programs for primary school teachers exhibit considerable variability in their foreign language components. This includes diverse course titles, inconsistent placement within curricula (general vs. professional training cycles), and wide discrepancies in the allocation of contact hours and independent study; insufficient Focus on Professional Competence: While general foreign language skills are addressed, there is often an inadequate emphasis on the specific professional pedagogical communication skills crucial for pre-service primary school teachers. The early introduction of professionally oriented language content is hampered by students' foundational proficiency levels, yet delaying it limits its impact when students begin their core professional studies; advantages of a Standardized Approach: The adoption of a harmonized level-based approach, underpinned by clear objectives and internationally recognized assessments (e.g., PET, FCE), offers substantial benefits for curriculum design, material selection, and the validation of student achievements.

This study opens several promising avenues for future research. Firstly, there is a need for empirical studies to quantitatively assess the actual foreign language proficiency levels of pre-service school teacher students across various Ukrainian universities, providing granular data to inform policy and curriculum adjustments. Secondly, developmental research is essential to design and pilot innovative teaching methodologies and authentic materials specifically tailored to foster foreign language learning and strategic competence in this professional context. This could involve exploring task-based learning, content and language integrated learning for pedagogical subjects, and the use of digital tools.

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