

Cultivating Cognitive Skills for C1 level Proficiency: A Holistic Approach

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Abstract: Achieving proficiency in a foreign language transcends the mere acquisition of extensive vocabulary or the mastery of complex grammatical structures. For students aspiring to attain C1 level certification before transitioning from high school to university, developing advanced cognitive skills is paramount. By integrating cognitive skill enhancement into pedagogical strategies, educators can foster greater language maturity and complexity of thought in students. This study highlights crucial cognitive skills necessary for achieving C1 level proficiency, including critical thinking, problem-solving, abstract thinking, inferential reasoning, and adaptability in language use. It also explores practical strategies and examples of activities and exercises designed to strengthen these cognitive skills, aiming to prepare students more effectively for the challenges of advanced language exams and ensure their readiness for academic and professional environments.

Keywords: C1 level proficiency; cognitive skills; language education; holistic approach

1 Introduction

To successfully pass a C1 level English exam, reflecting the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), an individual must demonstrate a high level of proficiency in English that extends beyond vocabulary and grammar. This proficiency involves advanced cognitive skills and a sophisticated approach to language use. According to the CEFR, C1 level learners should be able to understand a wide range of demanding texts and recognize implicit meanings, express themselves fluently and spontaneously, and use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes [2].

However, achieving such proficiency necessitates more than rote memorization or repetitive practice. It demands the cultivation of cognitive skills that enable learners to process, analyze, and synthesize complex information while adapting language use to various contexts. This paper examines the cognitive skills critical to attaining

C1 level proficiency and outlines practical strategies for integrating these skills into language education.

2 Differences Between B2 and C1 Levels According to CEFR Criteria

Understanding the transition from B2 to C1 levels in the CEFR framework requires a thorough examination of both the linguistic competencies and cognitive skills expected at each stage. The B2 level, often described as the upper-intermediate stage, equips learners with the ability to communicate with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. However, C1 proficiency demands a significant leap, requiring learners to achieve a higher level of sophistication, precision, and adaptability in their language use.

One of the primary distinctions between B2 and C1 levels lies in the complexity of language structures and vocabulary usage. At the B2 level, learners can understand the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of specialization. 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 [2]. However, their discourse may still exhibit occasional lapses in accuracy and fluency, and their ability to handle nuanced language and idiomatic expressions remains limited. In contrast, C1 learners are expected to comprehend a wider range of demanding, longer texts and recognize implicit meanings. Their expression becomes more fluent and spontaneous, allowing them to use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes. They can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors, and cohesive devices.

The cognitive competencies required at the C1 level also surpass those at B2. While B2 learners can engage in discussions and provide reasoned arguments, their ability to analyze, synthesize, and critically evaluate information is less developed. C1 learners, on the other hand, demonstrate advanced critical thinking skills, enabling them to dissect complex arguments, identify underlying assumptions, and construct nuanced responses. This cognitive leap is crucial for success in academic and professional settings, where sophisticated language use and deep analytical abilities are often required.

For instance, in reading comprehension tasks, B2 learners might grasp the general meaning and key points of a complex text, but they may struggle with identifying subtleties or implicit information. C1 learners, however, can interpret nuanced language, detect irony or bias, and understand the author's intent beyond the explicit

content. This depth of comprehension reflects their enhanced inferential reasoning abilities, which are essential for engaging with advanced texts.

In writing, B2 learners can produce coherent and structured texts but may rely heavily on formulaic language and struggle with maintaining stylistic consistency. Their arguments may lack depth, and they might find it challenging to present multiple perspectives or counterarguments effectively. C1 learners, conversely, exhibit greater flexibility in their writing, using a wide range of vocabulary and complex sentence structures. They can develop well-rounded arguments, incorporate diverse viewpoints, and employ sophisticated rhetorical strategies to persuade or inform their audience.

Speaking skills also evolve significantly from B2 to C1. B2 learners can participate in conversations on familiar topics and express their opinions, but they might hesitate or search for words when discussing unfamiliar or abstract subjects. Their ability to adapt their language based on context and audience is limited. C1 speakers, in contrast, demonstrate a higher degree of fluency and spontaneity. They can discuss complex topics with ease, use idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms appropriately, and adjust their register depending on the situation.

The cognitive development from B2 to C1 also encompasses enhanced metacognitive skills. C1 learners are expected by CEFR requirements to be more adept at self-monitoring and self-correcting their language use. They can identify their weaknesses, seek appropriate resources to address them, and employ strategies to improve their language proficiency. This level of self-awareness and strategic learning is less pronounced at the B2 level, where learners may still rely heavily on external feedback.

Moreover, the problem-solving abilities of C1 learners are more advanced. While B2 learners can handle everyday situations and solve routine problems using the target language, C1 learners can navigate complex scenarios that require critical thinking and creative solutions. They can manage hypothetical situations, debate abstract concepts, and engage in persuasive discourse, showcasing their cognitive flexibility and adaptability.

In terms of listening comprehension, B2 learners can understand the main ideas of extended speech and lectures if the language is relatively standard. They might struggle with idiomatic expressions, cultural references, or fast-paced conversations. C1 listeners, however, can follow extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signaled explicitly. They can comprehend various accents, colloquial language, and subtle cues, reflecting their advanced listening skills.

In summary, the progression from B2 to C1 involves not only linguistic enhancement but also significant cognitive development. C1 learners exhibit superior critical thinking, inferential reasoning, problem-solving, and metacognitive skills, enabling them to use the language with greater sophistication

and adaptability. This transition is crucial for learners aiming to excel in academic, professional, and social contexts where high-level language proficiency is essential.

3 The Role of Cognitive Skills in Achieving C1 level Proficiency

Attaining C1 level proficiency involves a deep integration of cognitive skills within language use. Cummins states, “As students progress through the grades, they are increasingly required to manipulate language in cognitively demanding and context-reduced situations that differ significantly from everyday conversational interactions” [3]. Critical thinking, for instance, is essential as it allows learners to analyze texts, synthesize diverse information, and evaluate arguments effectively. Students who develop strong critical thinking skills can navigate complex academic language tasks more effectively. In practical terms, this skill manifests when students engage with argumentative essays, where they must construct coherent arguments supported by evidence and address counterarguments persuasively.

Problem-solving is another pivotal cognitive skill in language learning, as a language exam “frequently elicits opinions and reasonings in order to assess abilities to formulate ideas and opinions with precision” [1]. Problem-solving equips students to tackle nuanced language tasks and navigate hypothetical scenarios commonly encountered in C1 level exams. Successful C1 candidates are expected to demonstrate the ability to manage complex language tasks by employing problem-solving strategies. For example, during role-playing activities that simulate real-life situations like negotiations, staff meetings, and interviews, students must adapt their language use to solve problems and achieve specific communication goals.

Tsvetkova notes that “teachers should focus less on general approaches to English language teaching and more on meeting the challenges that they have identified” [7], among which the acquisition of abstract thinking plays a crucial role in mastering C1 level proficiency. This skill enables learners to discuss philosophical topics or hypothetical scenarios effectively, enhancing their ability to engage in sophisticated conversations and write reflective essays.

Inferential reasoning, the ability to draw conclusions based on implicit information, is indispensable for understanding complex texts. Schindler points out that “informal statistical inference and informal inferential reasoning (IIR) are increasingly gaining significance in statistics education research”, [6] as well. Students with strong inferential reasoning skills can better understand underlying meanings in texts and conversations. This skill becomes evident when students analyze literary works or news articles, inferring the author’s intentions and the subtleties of the message.

Perspective-taking, or the capacity to understand and appreciate different viewpoints, enriches students' communicative competence. Engaging in debates or discussions on controversial topics requires learners to argue from perspectives they may not personally hold, fostering empathy and broadening their understanding of diverse cultural and social contexts.

Adaptability in language use is another critical skill, enabling students to adjust their language according to context, audience, and purpose. Successful C1 candidates demonstrate flexibility in their language use, switching between formal and informal registers as needed. This adaptability is crucial in exams where candidates must write both formal reports and informal letters or participate in structured conversations and spontaneous monologues.

Self-reflection and metacognition are essential for language learners to assess their progress and identify areas for improvement. Metacognitive skills enable students to assess their language proficiency and adopt effective learning strategies. Encouraging students to maintain learning journals where they reflect on their language development can significantly enhance their self-awareness and learning efficacy.

Effective communication strategies, including organizing thoughts coherently and expressing complex ideas clearly, are fundamental to achieving C1 proficiency. Public speaking exercises, such as presentations or storytelling, help students develop these skills, enabling them to maintain clear and persuasive communication even when encountering vocabulary gaps.

Active listening and reading comprehension, involving the understanding of subtleties and nuances in language, tone, and style, are also crucial. Listening to podcasts or watching films in English, followed by discussions on themes, tone, and style, can enhance these skills.

In the following Cambridge Advanced Reading exercise, not only the candidates' linguistic proficiency is assessed but also a wide range of cognitive skills, particularly inferential reasoning and abstract thinking. The reading exercise challenges candidates to process, interpret, and analyze four reviews about a TV documentary series on large companies. The complexity of this task lies in the subtleties embedded within the reviews, requiring examinees to go beyond literal comprehension to make inferences, synthesize information, and identify nuanced perspectives. The questions in the task are as follows:

“Which reviewer has a different opinion from the others on the choice of companies to focus on in the series?

Which reviewer shares reviewer B's opinion of the likelihood of viewers losing interest in the series after a while?

Which reviewer takes a different view from the others on the impression given in the series of what it is like to be at the top of a large organization?

Which reviewer has a similar view to reviewer C on the questions asked in the interviews in the series?" [4].

In this C1 level exercise, inferential reasoning is indispensable for several reasons. Understanding Implicit Opinions and Biases is one, as the reviewers' opinions are not always directly stated. For instance, Reviewer A mentions that the interviewees used excessive jargon, potentially alienating viewers. While this is explicit, the critique about the questioning not being "probing enough" requires inferential reasoning to deduce that Reviewer A believes the documentary lacked depth in its exploration of management practices.

Drawing Parallels and Distinctions Across Reviews is another reason since one of the questions asks candidates to identify which reviewer has a different opinion regarding the choice of companies featured. This necessitates not just a surface-level reading but an ability to infer the subtext in each review. Reviewer C, for example, highlights that the companies chosen were atypical and selected for their entertainment value, implying a deviation from the norm. In contrast, Reviewer D asserts that the companies were "carefully chosen to be representative" [4]. Understanding this contrast requires an inferential leap, as the direct comparison is not provided.

Several reviewers mention the accessibility of the series to general viewers. Reviewer B discusses how insider jargon might alienate non-expert audiences, leading them to switch channels, while Reviewer D notes that the interviews were "not really accessible to the lay person" [4] but rewarding for persistent viewers. Recognizing the subtle agreement between these two viewpoints demands decoding nuanced evaluations, particularly as their phrasing differs.

Reviewer C makes an intriguing comment suggesting that executives seemed to enjoy their roles while delegating difficult responsibilities, hinting at a critique of corporate leadership culture. This idea is implied rather than explicitly discussed, requiring examinees to infer the underlying assumption about leadership in large corporations.

The task also demands that examinees not only understand each review in isolation but also compare and contrast the perspectives. Abstract thinking allows candidates to conceptualize the overarching themes—such as the portrayal of corporate complexity, leadership dynamics, and viewer engagement—beyond the literal content of each review.

The reviews often critique abstract notions, such as the nature of modern corporate leadership or the impact of management theories on business operations. For example, Reviewer B touches on "the impact of modern management theories," [4]

while Reviewer A discusses the complexity of running large organizations. Several reviews comment on the series' accessibility and appeal to general audiences. Evaluating these comments necessitates abstract thinking to consider factors influencing viewer engagement, such as the use of jargon, narrative style, and interview techniques. It is not enough to note that reviewers found the interviews complex; candidates must abstractly evaluate why that complexity affects audience reception.

Apart from the skills mentioned, examinees must also critically evaluate the validity and biases in each review. For instance, Reviewer C's suggestion that executives avoid responsibility through delegation could be scrutinized for potential bias or exaggeration. Understanding the different reviewer perspectives, especially when they conflict, requires the ability to adopt multiple viewpoints. Small linguistic cues often guide correct answers. Terms like "bewildering" (Reviewer B) and "not really accessible" (Reviewer D) suggest similar critiques about viewer comprehension but require careful reading to connect.

These cognitive skills empower candidates to approach the reading task with the depth and nuance required at the C1 level, reflecting advanced linguistic proficiency as well as sophisticated cognitive engagement.

4 Integrating Cognitive Skill Development into Language Education

Incorporating cognitive skill development into language education requires carefully designed activities that challenge students to apply these skills in meaningful contexts. Debate sessions on diverse topics, from current events to ethical dilemmas, compel students to research, construct, and articulate arguments convincingly, enhancing critical thinking and perspective-taking. Problem-based learning (PBL) projects encourage students to tackle real-world issues, promoting problem-solving and critical analysis. For instance, students might explore environmental challenges, research potential solutions, and present their findings in English, thus integrating language use with cognitive skill application.

Creative writing assignments, such as speculative fiction or opinion essays, foster abstract thinking and creativity. By encouraging students to experiment with different narrative styles and perspectives, these assignments help develop adaptability and critical thinking. Analyzing texts and media, including literary works, news articles, and films, enhances inferential reasoning and comprehension skills. Teachers can guide students in examining the author's intentions, underlying themes, and rhetorical strategies, promoting deeper engagement with the material.

Case studies provide another effective method for developing cognitive skills. Analyzing real-world scenarios, identifying problems, and proposing solutions

require students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations. For example, a case study on a company's ethical dilemma might prompt students to evaluate the situation from multiple perspectives and present well-reasoned arguments for potential resolutions.

Simulation games, where students manage virtual projects or organize events, promote strategic thinking and problem-solving. These activities challenge students to apply abstract concepts in practical contexts, enhancing their adaptability and critical thinking skills. Research projects further develop cognitive abilities by requiring students to gather and analyze information, draw conclusions, and present their findings coherently.

Conclusion

Endeavours to focus on teaching cognitive skills are essentials for achieving C1 level proficiency in language learning. By integrating activities that develop critical thinking, problem-solving, abstract thinking, and other cognitive abilities into language education, teachers can better prepare students for the challenges of advanced language exams and future academic and professional environments. A holistic approach that combines language instruction with cognitive skill development not only enhances exam performance but also enables a deeper engagement with the language.

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