The National Examination of English in Lithuania: Searching for Evidence of CEFR Criterial Achievement Levels

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Abstract. Alignment of language tests with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is a complex process. One of many steps in this process involves the analysis and benchmarking of learner performances characteristic of one or another achievement level. It is the analysis of grammatical features of learner essays written during the national English examination in Lithuania that is at the focus of this article. The study aims to investigate to what extent a list of grammatical criterial features (GCFs), proposed by the English Profile Programme (EPP) at the University of Cambridge (Hawkins and Filipović, 2012), is applicable to Lithuanian learners. Bearing in mind the fact that the national examination of English in Lithuania is oriented towards levels B1 and B2, the purpose is to contribute to the empirical validation of the test by providing linguistic evidence from the essays of successful candidates. As the analysis shows, the corpus of examination essays used in this study contains many A2 structures, half of B1 and about one third of B2 structures proposed by the EPP team. The article discusses a number of issues related to the criteriality of individual GCFs and the applicability of a general list of features to specific learner groups.

Key words: *CEFR levels, language assessment, grammatical criterial features (GCFs), Lithuanian learners of English, English Profile (EP).*

Introduction

Learner corpus research provides much needed empirical data for the description of learners' competence and language proficiency. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001), has become highly influential in language teaching, learning and assessment. The CEFR continues to receive both criticism and praise but, above all, has been gaining wide recognition and is increasingly used in educational and professional contexts. While CEFR level descriptors are deliberately formulated in general statements to allow for a broader application to a variety of contexts, they provide an extensive research programme aimed at the localisation and adaptation of the common descriptors to specific uses. It is this process of turning common into specific that is the focus of this article, which shows how learner corpus research links common CEFR descriptors with authentic learner language.

Language testing and assessment is one of the areas where the CEFR is used most extensively. A number of projects are being implemented across Europe to align national tests of foreign languages with the six proficiency levels proposed in this document. Lithuania is not an exception— the national tests of foreign languages are supposed to be testing at levels B1 and B2, which presupposes that successful candidates can be considered to have attained those levels. In the case of receptive skills (listening and reading), the examination score is the only evidence of level attainment and its reliability is largely subject to the quality of test items which are developed to measure one or another skill at a particular proficiency level. In contrast, the testing of productive skills (speaking and writing) is essentially different because learner performance provides evidence of what a learner can or cannot do in a language. Hence, the rater's subjective judgment of content, structure and linguistic (lexical and grammatical) range determines a candidate's success in the test as it results in scores for the individual criteria, linguistic range among them. Undoubtedly, a corpus of examination scripts may become an invaluable source of empirical data for language testers as it illustrates characteristic features of learner language at different proficiency levels and thus could be used to increase reliability of test rating.

Previous Research

Linguistic features of learner language are usually understood as consisting of lexical and grammatical elements (Council of Europe, 2001, pp.110–111), both of which are incorporated in any writing assessment scale even if the descriptors may be worded differently. While lexical elements are described in terms of word frequency, single-word or multi-word items, their degree of semantic transparency and fixedness, grammatical elements are most often referred to as simple or complex. The interpretation of simplicity or complexity, however, is very broad; so far there seems to be no general agreement on the conceptualization of grammatical complexity or range for the purposes of language testing and assessment.

An apparently simple way forward might be to analyse, for example, the mean lengths of syntactic units (sentence, T-unit, clause, etc.), which tend to become longer as proficiency increases (e.g. Ortega, 2003). In a recent study, Jiang (2013) analysed T-units in Chinese learner writing and found that error-free T-units reliably discriminate between learners of varying proficiency. What remains unexplained is the grammatical sophistication of learner language because two T-units might contain grammatical constructions of varying difficulty. The issue of grammatical complexity, as proposed by Rimmer (2006), could be partly resolved by consulting corpus material, because the

frequency of individual structures in a corpus of native-speaker language seems to correlate with their complexity. Obviously, the next step in the formulation of grammatical complexity following Rimmer's suggestion would be to examine not only corpora of authentic language use but also language produced by learners who are known to have achieved a certain level of proficiency.

A popular approach to the study of grammatical range in learner language involves error analysis (Abe, 2007; Darus and Subramaniam, 2009; Thewissen, 2013). While this approach allows researchers to highlight problem areas in the process of language acquisition, judgments of learners' proficiency levels in the context of language testing and assessment could also be based on the positive linguistic features of learner language rather than on error counts.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the first attempt to use a learner corpus for the specification of the CEFR's proficiency levels was undertaken by the Cambridge English Profile Programme, initiated by the Cambridge ESOL group of Cambridge Assessment, which is directly involved in the development and administration of a number of tests of English as a foreign language (EFL). This pioneering project, aimed at relating CEFR descriptors to learner corpus evidence among other goals, seeks "to produce Reference Level Descriptions for English linked to the general principles and approaches of CEFR" (UCLES/ CUP, 2011, p. 2) and "to add grammatical and lexical details of English to CEFR's functional characterisation of the different levels" (Hawkins and Filipović, 2012, p.5). One of the outcomes of this research programme is a list of criterial features defined as "certain linguistic properties that are characteristic and indicative of L2 proficiency at each level" (Hawkins and Buttery, 2010, p.2). The EPP not only provides a list of typical errors for the six levels of proficiency, but, more importantly, proposes a set of criterial features describing the grammatical, lexical and functional competence of EFL learners at a particular CEFR level. Following the principal approach of the CEFR, the EPP identifies generalized features of EFL learners without taking into account their first language and derives its data from the *Cambridge Learner Corpus* (45 million words) representing 138 first languages. While such an approach is in line with the CEFR goals, as it echoes its common levels descriptors and provides lexical and grammatical specification for each of the six levels, the next stage of specification must undoubtedly be related to the learner's mother tongue (cf. Salamoura and Saville, 2010, p. 123). It is the applicability of a general list of criterial features to a specific learner group that is at the centre of the present article.

The study presented here deals with the grammatical complexity of learner language produced by Lithuanian EFL learners who successfully passed the national examination of English. The English Grammar Profile, which enumerates GCFs characteristic features of each CEFR proficiency level (UCLES/ CUP, 2011; Hawkins and Filipović, 2012), is used as a reference tool for grammatical criterial features. Owing to the fact that the essays under analysis are examination scripts from the highest-scoring papers, our hypothesis is that candidates will demonstrate those structures which pertain to the proficiency levels of the test from which they are taken, namely B1 and B2 (ŠMM, 2013). More generally, the study sets out to investigate to what extent a general list of grammatical features is applicable to one specific L1 group, namely Lithuanian EFL learners.

Data and Methods

The data for the investigation of the GCFs of Lithuanian learners comes from a new corpus of learner writing which is being currently compiled at the National Examination Centre (NEC) of Lithuania, the institution responsible for examinations taken by pupils upon completion of their secondary education, foreign language examinations among them. A sample of examination essays from the NEC corpus was used in this study. It consists of 433 essays of English written on two topics: "Studying abroad: advantages and disadvantages" and "The importance of volunteering for young people". The total number of words in the sample is 89, 232; the average essay length is 206 words. The sample represents only the strongest candidates whose total score on the examination test is between 61 and 100 (maximum) points.

Since the corpus is still in the stage of compilation and not POS-tagged or annotated, data retrieval involved both semi-automatic and manual text-processing methods. *WordSmith Tools* (v. 5, Scott, 2008) was used to produce frequency lists and concordances while a number of structures and sentence patterns had to be searched manually. The English Profile list of grammatical criterial features was used as the reference tool and the sample of essays was investigated for all the features listed there: twelve structures for A2 (there are no structures listed for A1), eighteen structures for B1, ten structures for B2, five structures for C1, and three structures for C2 (UCLES/ CUP, 2011, pp.16–24, see also Hawkins and Filipović, 2012, pp.147–151). Throughout the paper, the terms *(grammatical) criterial features* (GCFs) are used interchangeably with *(grammatical) structures*, following the EP manual (UCLES/ CUP, 2011).

Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis show that out of 49 GCFs included in the English Grammatical Profile fourteen have not been found at all whereas thirteen occur infrequently (less than 20 times in 433 essays). The broadest range of features established in the NEC corpus belong to level A2, while B-level features are not so numerous; C-level features, with one exception, are practically not attested at all. Bearing in mind the fact that the analysed sample consists of essays written by those candidates who had high final scores and who successfully passed the examination targeting levels B1 and B2, the findings are rather unexpected.

The results are discussed in the following four sections, with each reporting the findings for levels A2, B1, B2 and C-levels. All frequencies of respective features are given in Tables 1–4 and are based on the sample of 433 examination essays.

Level A2 Features

The distribution of A2 level features is presented in Table 1 below[1]. Seven features out of twelve are very frequent in the corpus, and the other five appear fewer than 50 times. The frequent features refer to clause structures (A2.1–4) and prototypical modal meanings (A2.10 and A2.12), while others deal with particular patterns involving a specific grammatical element.

The absolute frequencies in the sample of 433 essays show that over half of these features appear quite often in the examination essays and, presumably, cause little difficulty to the learners. There are five features, however, whose frequency is considerably lower.

Table 1. Frequencies of Level A2 Features.

Feature	Description[2]	Absolute frequency
A2.1	Simple sentences without object: *You can get there by train.*	203
A2.2	Clauses with a direct object: *I met a lot of interesting people.*	195
A2.3	Clauses with a direct and indirect object: *I can give you my guitar.*	95
A2.4	Verb + subordinate clause with/ without *that*: *I knew that you have a new house. I think the zoo is an interesting place.*	282
A2.5	Verb + infinitive: *I want to buy a coat. I would like to sell a book.*	192
A2.6	Direct WH-questions: *What are going to wear?*	50
A2.7	Pronoun + infinitive: *You can bring something to eat. There's nothing to do.*	15
A2.8	Noun + descriptive phrase introduced by past participle: *There are beautiful paintings painted by famous Iranian painters.*	36
A2.9	Double embedded genitive with (*of...* (*of...*)): *I like the colours of the back of the mobile phone.*	11
A2.10	MAY, CAN, MIGHT in the Possibility (epistemic) sense: *Then we may go sightseeing. The paint might make our T-shirts dirty.*	May 116
		Can 655
		Might 123
A2.11	MUST in the Obligation (deontic) sense: *We must be there at 7 o'clock in the morning.*	33
A2.12	SHOULD in the Advice (deontic) sense: *You should wear old clothes because we will get dirty.*	222

One of the less frequent features is A2.7 'pronoun + infinitive', for example:

(1) *After classes many pupils have nothing to do* <1essay1073>[3].

While this might be seen as a relatively easy structure which does not involve irregular morphological inflection, the use of the indefinite pronouns in English has some restrictions and is usually given special attention in the classroom: *anything* is used in interrogative and negative statements, *something* in the affirmative, etc. In Lithuanian, indefinite pronouns do not have such restrictions. For example, the use of *nothing* excludes any other negation in the English clause while in Lithuanian more than one element of a statement may be negated, and the English sentence *We have nothing to eat* corresponds to the following in Lithuanian:

(2) *Neturime   nieko   valgyti.*
Not have-PRS.1PL   nothing-GEN.SG   eat-INF
'[We] do not have anything to eat.'

One negation in English therefore corresponds to two negations in Lithuanian. Lithuanian EFL learners, taking a high-stakes examination, might be deliberately avoiding a structure which involves variability and has no one-to-one correspondence in their L1.

Similarly, the scarce use of the double embedded genitive with *of* (feature A2.9) could be interpreted as a case of L1 interference because the translational equivalent of the structure in Lithuanian is a sequence of nouns in the Genitive case, which is considered to be stylistically heavy and thus inappropriate: the EP manual example *the colours of the back of the mobile phone* (UCLES/ CUP, 2011, p. 17) translates into Lithuanian as follows:

(3) *Mobiliojo   telefono   nugarėlės   spalvos*
Mobile-GEN.SG telephone- GEN.SG back-GEN.SG colour-NOM.PL
'The colours of the back of the mobile phone.'

Lithuanian learners seem to be avoiding three Genitives in a row which, as they have learned in their L1, is not a good stylistic choice. The same avoidance strategy could be observed in the use of the other two features with *of* phrases (cf. the frequency of features B1.15 and C1.4).

Another instance of the corpus-specific underuse of an A2-level feature is related to direct WH-questions (A2.6), which were used in 50 essays. Presumably, the low number of occurrences can be accounted for by the teaching tradition in Lithuania. Many teachers of English, when teaching their students to distinguish registers, warn them against the use of direct questions in written English, because direct questions are interpreted by more conservative examiners as inappropriate for a semi-formal essay. Our findings seem to suggest that test takers follow their teachers' advice, as this particular feature is quite scarce. In contrast, indirect questions (cf. features B1.8 and B1.9) are much more frequent. Obviously, the distribution of individual GCFs in our corpus can be accounted for by the examination setting and its local context. This tendency was further confirmed by the analysis of B-level features.

Level B1 Features

B1 is described in the EP by eighteen GCFs. More than half of them (B1.1–B1.5, B1.7–B1.9, B1.11, B1.15) are

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[1] The sequential numbers, descriptions and examples of GCFs in Tables 1–4 are taken from UCLES/CUP (2011, pp. 16–24).
[2] All the descriptions and illustrative examples are given as they appear in UCLES/CUP (2011).
[3] References to all examples in the NEC corpus are enclosed in pointed brackets where the first figure, either 1 or 2, stands for one of the two

highest-scoring bands in the corpus; 'essay' (rather than 'letter') indicates genre, which is followed by the number of essay in the corpus.

defined in UCLES/ CEU (2011) in terms of parts-of-speech and general patterns (phrases, clauses). Some refer to very specific clauses or narrowly defined patterns (B1.6 and B1.15, respectively) or to specific words (B1.10, B1.12–B1.14, B1.16–B1.18). As seen in Table 2, the most narrowly defined features are meagerly represented in the NEC corpus: they were either not found at all or their frequency of occurrence is very low. Many part-of-speech and pattern-type features are more frequent; four of them are found in the frequency band 100+.

Table 2. Frequencies of Level B1 Features.

Feature	Description	Absolute frequency
B1.1	Verb + object + infinitive: *I helped her (to) bake the cake.*	216
B1.2	Verb + object + Verb ending in -*ing*: *Maria saw him taking a taxi.*	17
B1.3	Noun + descriptive phrase introduced by present participle: *I put an advertisement in the newspaper asking if someone had it, but no one answered me.*	45
B1.4	*It* + Verb + subordinate clause with/ without *that*: *It's true (that) they cannot come. It is a pity (that) they cannot come.*	63
B1.5	Verb + Prepositional Phrase + subordinate clause with or without *that*: *He said to me (that) he would like to come back soon.*	0
B1.6	Relative clauses with *whose*: *...this famous painter whose pictures I like so much.*	0
B1.7	*WH*-word + *NP* + V*erb* clauses used as subject or object: *What I absolutely dislike is go shopping. What I saw was amazing.*	53
B1.8	Indirect *WH*-questions: *I don't know how I could have done it. Guess where it is.*	112
B1.9	Indirect *WH*-questions with infinitive: *I don't know what to do. He explained how to do it.*	122
B1.10	Complex auxiliaries WOULD RATHER and HAD BETTER: *You had better tell them.*	3
B1.11	Adverbial subordinate clauses with -*ing* that follow the clause to which they are attached: *He was sitting there, drinking coffee and writing something.*	246
B1.12	*seem, supposed* + infinitive: *Monika seems to be good and intelligent. I was supposed to go to the English class at the same time I have a rehearsal.*	10
B1.13	*expect, like, want* + object + infinitive: *I expected it to be more difficult. I want you to say hi to everybody.*	3
B1.14	*easy* + infinitive: *The train station is easy to find. The problem you have is not very easy to solve.*	0
B1.15	Double embedded genitive with (of…(-'s)): *the beginning of the professor's book; I am a big fan of the world's most famous British secret service agent.*	
B1.16	MAY in the Permission (deontic) sense: *May I borrow your bicycle for this weekend?*	6
B1.17	MUST in the Necessity (epistemic) sense: *This movie must be great. He is on holiday and must be really happy.*	15
B1.18	SHOULD in the Probability (epistemic) sense: *I have invited all my friends, so we should be 28 people.*	0

Let us examine more closely some of the most frequent and least frequent features. Our findings show that what is extensively represented in the corpus and, consequently, actively used by Lithuanian learners, could be ascribed to transferrable structures, which are easily calqued from Lithuanian. For example, the frequency of the B1.1 structure seems to be easily explained by its proximity to an equivalent structure in Lithuanian, e.g. Lith. *Aš paprašiau jo atvažiuoti iš ryto* translates verbatim into English as 'I asked him to come in the morning'. The other abundantly used features are indirect questions (B1.8 and B1.9), and their frequency confirms, albeit indirectly, the observation mentioned above that Lithuanian students are taught to avoid direct questions in written English and encouraged to give preference to indirect questions.

A specific case for Lithuanian learners of English is represented by the participle -*ing* clause structures, which appear in three criterial features (B1.3, B1.11 and B2.1). Unlike EFL learners from other L1 backgrounds, who often underuse and/ or misuse such clauses (cf. Granger, 1997; Springer, 2012), Lithuanian learners show a significant overuse of participle clauses (Grigaliūnienė and Juknevičienė, 2012). Moreover, -*ing* clauses are amply represented not only in their writing but also their speech. This is not very surprising, considering the fact that 49.3% of verb forms in the morphologically annotated corpus of contemporary Lithuanian are participial forms (Rimkutė, 2006). While in translation to English they may be rendered in a variety of grammatical forms, the -*ing* participle is an easy choice as it involves regular morphological marking. Our data shows that Lithuanians have little difficulty in using the -*ing* participle in both modifying and adverbial clauses, even though they might sometimes produce less successful sentences. Moreover, subtle semantic nuances of the verb in the participle form may be not fully understood by the learners who opt for a post-modifying clause where a full relative clause would be a better choice, for example:

(4) *I remember a heart-warming sight of <u>a group of teenagers cleaning a street</u> with happy looks on their faces.* <1essay1009>

Example (4) would sound more natural if the noun *teenagers* had been modified by a full relative clause (*who clean streets*) as *clean* is a dynamic rather than stative verb (see Biber et al., 1999, pp.631–632), yet the participle clause is a verbatim rendering from Lithuanian (*grupė paauglių, valančių gatvę*) which is clearly a strategy the author chose to express the idea in English.

Another peculiarity of Lithuanian EFL learner language is related to the use of adverbial subordinate clauses with *-ing* which either follow (feature B1.11) or precede (feature B2.1) the verb in the main clause to which they are attached. Such clauses are quite frequent in our sample which suggests that they are relatively easy for Lithuanian learners to use. The two GCFs (B1.11 and B2.1) differ in terms of clause positioning, where pre-position is attributed to level B2. While the post-position of the adverbial clause is the unmarked choice in all registers (Biber et al., 1999, p.831), the initial position has a special discourse function as it sets a frame of activity and shows the chronological sequence of events. Hence, it is indeed an indication of higher linguistic proficiency and justifies the distinction between B1.11 and B2.1 in the EP list of features. Our data also shows that subordinate adverbial clauses with *-ing* in the post-position are almost twice as frequent as clauses preceding the main clause (246 vs. 126 instances, see Table 3). Interestingly, the pre-positional adverbial clauses become more prominent in the written English of advanced Lithuanian learners (senior university undergraduates), where nearly 70% of all adverbial clauses are placed before the main clause (Grigaliūnienė and Juknevičienė, 2012).

Another peculiarity of *-ing* clauses in the NEC corpus is related to their specific discourse-organizing function to introduce or conclude a paragraph, for example:

(5) *Taking everything into account, I am strongly opposed to the idea of studying abroad.* <2essay2164>

(6) *Taking everything into consideration, studies abroad have its benefits and drawbacks.* <2essay2165>

(7) *Considering all the facts that I have mentioned, it should be said that studying abroad is the best choice to take.* <1essay2249>

(8) *Having this in mind it looks normal that teenagers choose to leave their country for better and cheaper education.* <1essay2025>

This type of usage involves both set English expressions (5 and 6) and less typical instances of *-ing* clauses used as summative statements in the essays (7 and 8). So features with the participle *-ing* can be interpreted as positive L1 transfer—the analysed sample may be lacking a number of higher-level structures, but *-ing* clauses are clearly over-represented in comparison to other features.

Quite a number of B1-level features, however, have not been found at all in our sample. One of them is a fairly general feature (B1.5) defined as 'verb + Prepositional Phrase + subordinate clause with or without *that*' (UCLES/ CUP, 2011, p. 18). Its absence in the NEC corpus seems to be due to L1 transfer. In synthetic (inflecting) languages like Lithuanian, prepositions are much less frequent than in analytical languages like English. In the above structure, the prepositional phrase expresses the indirect object, which in Lithuanian is prototypically rendered by the Dative case. Therefore, example (9) can be understood as a direct translation from Lithuanian, where the missing preposition *to* demonstrates that the student poorly discriminates between direct and indirect objects, the first

roughly corresponding to the Lithuanian Accusative case and the second to the Dative case:

(9) (…) *the fact that they were volunteering in any organisation for a long time will prove the employer that they are very altruistic and reliable.* <1essay 1060>

Moreover, Lithuanian learners are also uncertain about the preposition: *to the employer* vs. *for the employer*, which in both cases correspond to the Lithuanian Dative case. This is another reason for confusion and, ultimately, the decision not to use any preposition or make do without the indirect object at all. In general, the results show that learners avoid patterns with a variable slot, in this case, the preposition, which can lead to errors. Similarly, feature B2.4 ('Verb + object + *that* clause') is also rare because the learners do not discriminate between different verb complementation patterns and see the object slot as variable and optional.

Another set of unattested B1-level structures involves GCFs which are defined by concrete lexical exponents, for example, feature B1.6 'relative clauses with *whose*'. The acquisition of this relativizer causes some confusion for EFL learners because, due to its affinity with *who*, it is primarily associated with human noun heads, e.g. *people whose benefits were reduced* (BNC), whereas its use with non-human heads remains quite limited even at more advanced levels, which is evident from its frequency in the Lithuanian student writing. In the LICLE corpus (Grigaliūnienė and Juknevičienė, 2012), the normalized frequency of *whose* per 100,000 words is 10, which is rather low compared to its normalized frequencies in other comparable ICLE subcorpora (Granger et al., 2009), for example, 18 in Finnish, 17 in German, 22 in Russian or 23 in Spanish. It is thus hardly surprising that this feature is not attested in the writing of secondary-school pupils.

The absence of feature B1.14, which is also defined by referring to a single word ('tough movement with the adjective *easy*', UCLES/ CUP, 2011, p. 20), can be explained by the fact that this structure is indeed unusual for Lithuanian learners due to its foreign wording that has no close translational equivalent in Lithuanian. Moreover, there is a competing structure that conveys a similar meaning and which is much closer to Lithuanian, namely, B2.2 ('*It* + Verb + infinitive', e.g. *it is easy to learn a new language* <1essay2141>). To test the hypothesis that B2.2 is an easier structure for Lithuanian learners than B1.14, we ran a simple test asking first-year undergraduates of the English philology programme in Vilnius University to translate a few sentences from Lithuanian: the absolute majority used *it is easy to* rather than 'NP *is easy to*' structure. A similar tendency to avoid tough movement structures was reported in Callies (2008) who found that this feature is significantly underused by German learners of English in comparison to native speakers even though German is typologically rather close to English.

Structures that are very scarcely attested in the NEC corpus (from 1 to 20 occurrences), similarly to those which have not been found at all, also mostly include those that are defined in reference to very specific patterns, concrete

words or their senses. Only one of seven structures is defined as a more general pattern: B1.2 'Verb + Object + Verb ending in -*ing*' and it was mostly found in sentences with *see* and *hear*, e.g.:

(10) *In recent years you can often* <u>*see students going*</u> *abroad to study*. <2essay 2059>

See and *hear* being used as the main verb in this structure is to be expected whereas the overall low frequency seems to be pointing to learners' uncertainty or to their inability to control the structure. Verb complementation is given much attention in teaching, and learners are taught lists of verbs taking an infinitive with *to* or a bare infinitive, or an -*ing* participle. Yet examination stress discourages them from risk taking and, as a result, they choose a full clause to avoid a potential error. This is exactly the picture we see in the case of the complementation of *see: see + object + -ing* appears in eleven essays whereas *see + finite clause (how, that)* in nearly twice as many (eighteen). Once again, we have a feature that involves a degree of variability and thus is a source of confusion for test takers. A similar explanation might be given for all features involving specific verb complementation patterns that appear infrequently (e.g. B1.13, B2.7).

The other structures rarely attested in the corpus are those defined in reference to single lexical items, such as complex auxiliaries *would rather* and *had better* (B1.10), *seem, supposed* (B1.12), *expect, like, want* (B1.13), the modal *may* in the permission (deontic) sense (B1.16), the modal *must* in the necessity (epistemic) sense (B1.17), or as a very specific pattern—'double embedded genitive with (of... (-'s)' (B1.15). Of the two auxiliaries in the B.10 structure, only *would rather* was found in three essays; *had better* was not attested at all. Similarly, in structure B1.13, of the three verbs, *expect, like* and *want*, only the last was found in three essays, with the other two not attested at all, for example:

(11) *The majority of those people are parents, who* <u>*want their children to be*</u> *good students*. <1essay1115>

The use of modal verbs in the NEC corpus seems to be confined to their prototypical senses, especially *may, can* and *might* in the possibility sense or *should* in the advice sense, all of which are lower-level features (A2.10, A2.11 and A2.12). More refined senses found at B1 and B2 levels, especially those which are rather peripheral (e.g. B1.18 *should* in the Probability sense), are seldom or never attempted by the learners. One explanation for this might be related to Lithuanian teaching practice. As a rule, modal verbs are hardly ever presented as multi-faceted means to express the author's stance but rather taught as lexical items having one-to-one correspondences in Lithuanian and marking prototypical modality. Variations of modal meanings or modals with perfect infinitives are usually addressed in grammar exercises and, apparently, not taught as a means of expressing stance in the context of essay writing. Learners are encouraged instead to use a handful of explicit stance markers, e.g. *in my opinion* (cf. 130 occurrences in the NEC corpus), *I think* (170 occurrences), etc. Most of these phrases are based on simple vocabulary and seldom involve modal verbs.

Level B2 Features

There are ten B2 level GCFs identified in the EP manual. As seen in Table 3, six out of ten B2 structures are rarely or never used by Lithuanian learners. The following discussion will deal first with frequent features and then proceed to less frequently attested structures.

Table 3. Frequencies of Level B2 Features.

Feature	Description	Absolute frequency
B2.1	Adverbial subordinate clauses with -*ing* that precede the clause to which they are attached: *Talking about spare time, I think we could go to the museum.*	126
B2.2	*It* + Verb + infinite: *It would be helpful to work in your group.*	170
B2.3	*WH*-word + *VP* clauses used as subject and object: *What interests me is politics.*	25
B2.4	Verb + object + subordinate clause with or without *that*: *I told him I loved his songs.*	5
B2.5	Verb + object + adjective: *Just go and paint the houses yellow and blue.*	82
B2.6	Verbs *appear, cease, fail, happen, prove, turn out* and adjectives *certain, likely, sure, unlikely* + infinitive: *The evening totally failed to live up to my expectations.*	18
B2.7	*imagine, prefer* + object + infinitive: *I would prefer my accommodation to be in log cabins. I had never imagined myself to have visited Alaska.*	0
B2.8	*expected, known, obliged, thought* (in Passive voice) + infinitive: *Your theatre is known to present excellent performances.*	0
B2.9	*difficult, good, hard* + infinitive: *The grammar and vocabulary are a bit hard to learn.*	5
B2.10	Double embedded genitive with ((of...) -'s): *After that I went to a friend of mine's house where I spent one week.*	0

The least problematic feature seems to be B2.2 referring to complex clauses containing one main clause beginning with *it* and a verb, followed by a subordinate complement clause with an infinitive (cf. UCLES/ CUP, 2011, p. 21), for example:

(12) *To my mind,* <u>*it is better to learn*</u> *in the country where you were born than somewhere else.* <1essay2121>

(13) *But* <u>*it is crucial to have in mind*</u> *that a life in a foreign country can turn out a lot more difficult than expected.* <1essay2247>

Most of these clauses are impersonal sentences with the 'dummy'-subject *it* and, as argued in the previous section in reference to B1-level features, they compete with structure B1.14 (cf. B1.14 *the train station is easy to find* vs. B2.2 *it is easy to find the train station*). Lithuanian learners acquire structure B2.2 quite early and, presumably, are not encouraged to learn structure B1.14 later on. It should also be noted that feature B2.2 is defined in the EP manual in more general terms and hence is bound to generate a larger

number of manifestations, whereas the narrowly defined feature B1.14 is confined to structures containing the word *easy*, which decreases the probability of its occurrence.

The other relatively frequent features, B2.1 and B2.5, are not really problematic for Lithuanian learners. The first of them, B2.1, as argued in the previous section, is quite easy for Lithuanian learners due to the fact that it has a translation equivalent in Lithuanian. Another fairly frequent structure (B2.5) is concerned with secondary predications. In this case, the direct object of the verb also contracts a secondary relation with the following predicate, e.g. *he painted the car red* (UCLES/ CUP, 2011, p. 21). Interestingly, the most frequent main verb in such sentences in the NEC corpus is *make* (75 out of 82 instances). The other three verbs used in the construction are *keep, get* and *find*, for example:

(14) *(…) volunteering makes people more environmentally friendly.* <2essay1088>

(15) *(…) young people, who want to make a difference and are not afraid to get their hands dirty.* <1essay1047>

(16) *Do they find volunteering important? If so, then why?* <1essay1076>

The least frequent structures, as already mentioned, are mostly those that are very narrowly defined and hence naturally yield fewer instances. This is especially relevant for structures that have not generated a single occurrence, such as B2.7, B2.8 and B2.10. The first two are concerned with specific lexical exponents, such as *imagine* or *prefer* + object + infinitive (B2.7) or *expected, known, obliged, thought* (in the Passive Voice) + infinitive (B2.8). These are again raising structures and, as evidence from LICLE shows, they are not acquired until much later: structure B2.7 does not appear in LICLE at all whereas structure B2.8 is only used in 14 essays out of 329, and is clearly a rare feature of advanced student essays. The last feature (B2.10) is very specific: double embedded genitive with ((*of…*) -'*s*), e.g. *the king of England's war* (UCLES/ CUP, 2011, p. 22). Our argument on the specificity of the last feature is indirectly supported by the evidence in the British National Corpus (BNC), where the search pattern $[N_1]$ of $[N_2]$'s $[N_3]$ generates only 20 occurrences, and not all of them are embedded. The number of the second noun used in the plural $[N_1]$ of $[N_2]$' $[N_3]$ is much higher— slightly more than 300 occurrences. Considering the size of the corpus, these are still rather low numbers for the BNC, and it is difficult to see how they might distinguish the language produced by non-native users.

The other low-frequency structure (B2.4) is fairly general and at first sight looks entirely unproblematic: verb + object + subordinate clause with or without *that*. Structurally, it is similar to B1.5, where the object is a prepositional phrase, or indirect object. As already mentioned, structure B1.5 is not attested in the sample, whereas structure B2.4 was found in only five essays. Such results could be interpreted in reference to L1 transfer. Lithuanian is an inflecting language and prepositional phrases are seldom chosen by learners in positions corresponding to case forms in Lithuanian. Another point relates to the transitivity and valency of English verbs where they differ from Lithua-

nian. For example, English *tell,* in addition to a subject, obligatorily takes two more arguments: direct and indirect object. In Lithuanian, however, the verb *pasakyti* 'tell' requires only a direct object whereas the indirect object is optional. Therefore, Lithuanian learners tend to produce sentences like (17) rather than (18):

(17) *I strongly believe that volunteering is very important not only for adults but for young people as well and I can tell why.* <1essay1007>

(18) *I was asked to write a composition for this magazine. They told me that I can choose by myself, about what I want to write (…)* <2essay1118>

Defined in terms of concrete lexical exponents, features B2.6 and B2.9 seem to account for the low frequency of both structures. While the first of the two occurs 18 times, the second is very rare (7 occurrences). Feature B2.9 is realized by two adjectives in our sample: *hard* (six out of seven cases) and *good* (one case). Although it is difficult to understand why an identical structure with the adjective *easy* is of a lower difficulty level (B1.14), our data shows that the pattern adjective + infinitive represented in features B1.14 with *easy* and B2.9 with *difficult*, *good* and *hard* is rather difficult for Lithuanian learners.

The low frequency of B2.6 type structures could be related to certain preferences of Lithuanian EFL learners. This structure has a lexical verb (*appear, cease, fail, happen, prove, turn* out) functioning as a copular verb, which Lithuanian learners find quite difficult to cope with. Instead, they prefer the prototypical link verb *to be*; the idea is indirectly supported by the data from LICLE where *cease*, *fail*, *prove* and *turn out* are very rare—each of them occurs up to ten times in 329 essays written by senior undergraduates, which makes it too early to expect such verbs in the writing of secondary school pupils.

Overall, the majority of B2 level structures are moderately frequent, rare or very rare. These low figures are partly accounted for by the specificity of the GCFs and L1 transfer. The search for C-level criterial features has yielded even less evidence, but this was perhaps to be expected given the level of the learners in our sample.

Level C Features

C-level features are described by only eight structures in the EP manual: C1 level is characterised by five structures and C2 by three (Table 4). All of them are defined in quite specific terms, mostly by referring to a specific word, for example, the verb *chance* in C1.1, the verbs *believe, find, suppose* and *take* in C1.2, or *declare, presume, remember* in C2.1, *presumed* (in the Passive Voice) in C2.2 and *tough* in C2.3.

The meagre findings from the NEC corpus provide no basis for any discussion. The only structure that was identified in three cases in the data was C1.2. It is defined in reference to four lexical verbs which are used in the main clause and followed by a noun phrase and a subordinate clause with an infinitival verb.

Of the four verbs in the structure, three were identified in the NEC corpus, *suppose*, *believe* and *find*, cf.:

(4) *I <u>suppose volunteering to be</u> extremely important and needed for every young person.* <1essay 1117>

(5) *I <u>believe volunteering to be</u> beneficial for the youth as it implies humanistic values, allows to acquire vocational skills as well as helps to make new connections.* <1essay1029>

(6) *(…) many young people <u>find volunteering to be</u> very important (...)* <1essay1047>

Table 4. Frequencies of C-levels Features.

Feature	Description	Absolute frequency
C1.1	The verb *chance* + infinitive: *I chanced to know about your competition from an international magazine.*	0
C1.2	*believe, find, suppose, take* + object + infinitive: *I find this to be more interesting than the walking route to Lake Hawksmere.*	3
C1.3	*assumed, discovered, felt, found, proved* (in Passive voice) + infinitive: *The children stories were felt to be the best idea for kids.*	0
C1.4	Double embedded genitive with *((-'s) -'s)*: *after spending the first day of their marriage in the bride's family's house*	0
C1.5	Modal MIGHT in the Permission (deontic) sense: *Might I tell you what we discuss?*	0
C2.1	*declare, presume, remember* + object + infinitive: *They declare some products to be the hits of the season.*	0
C2.2	The verb *presumed* (in Passive voice) + infinitive: *Not only meetings with people are presumed to give new experiences.*	0
C2.3	*tough* + infinitive: *What she knew would be really tough to live with was the reason of his death.*	0

The other C level structures are not attested which, presumably, indicates that the structures characterizing this proficiency level have not been attained.

Conclusion

Overall, the study has provided a comprehensive, and unprecedented, picture of grammatical range in the written language of Lithuanian EFL learners. Undoubtedly, the English Profile offers a solid base against which the grammatical complexity of learner language can be investigated. Our findings, however, point out a number of tendencies in the distribution of GCFs in the writing of EFL Lithuanian learners. The tendencies seem to be accountable for in terms of several different factors, either singly or in combination.

Firstly, features which lend themselves to verbatim renderings from Lithuanian are represented in high frequencies: A2.1, A2.2, A2.3, A2.4, A2.5; B1.2, B1.8, B1.9. B1.11 and B2.2. These are mostly features at the clause level. Features that are less frequent involve complementation patterns and variable or optional slots which learn-

ers, obviously, find difficult to cope with. Moreover, these features have no direct correspondences in Lithuanian (e.g. A2.7; B1.2, B1.12, B1.13). It is also possible to identify a group of features that are specifically addressed in teaching due to their typological specificity and the absence of correspondences in Lithuanian. Our study shows that such structures (A2.9; B1.6, B1.10; B2.7, B2.8, B2.10; all C features) are rarely if at all attempted by Lithuanian learners during the examination.

The findings of the study suggest that Lithuanian learners make do with a restricted repertoire of grammatical structures which cause little difficulty under examination constraints. This is a fact that both EFL teachers and administrators of the national examinations should take into account. One of the ways to encourage the use of more complex structures would be to develop a clear statement of criterion for each of the levels tested in the examination so that both teachers and learners would have a clear picture of linguistic range and complexity tested in the examination. More importantly, assessment procedures should also be revised. The candidates need to know that an attempt to use a structure typical of a higher level will be assessed as a positive feature and not merely penalized if it is used erroneously. It would increase the candidates' motivation to learn such structures and to use them during the examination.

Secondly, the lists of features given as characteristic of language proficiency levels in UCLES/ CUP (2011) are defined in terms of different degree of generality. Some of them, which we refer to as broadly defined features, represent very general patterns, e.g. A2.1–A2.4, B1.4–B1.9 and B1.11, B2.1–B2.5. Most broadly defined features are much more numerously represented in the NEC corpus than narrowly defined features. The latter often employ in their definitions several specific lexical exponents, e.g. *expect, like, want* in B1.13, *imagine, prefer* in B2.7, *difficult, good, hard* in B2.9. Some definitions are limited to a single lexical exponent, such as *easy* in B1.14, *chance* in C1.1, *presumed* in C2.2, *tough* in C2.3 or very specific senses of words, e.g. the probability sense of *should* in B1.18. Overall, the more specific the definition of the feature is, the less likely that it will appear in the corpus of learner language, irrespective of the level of proficiency. The level of generality vs. specificity, undoubtedly, should be taken into account when applying the EP list of GCFs for language testing and assessment or any other EFL teaching context.

Finally, as noted by Milanovic and Weir (2010), the CEFR was meant to be common and general because its adaptation to a specific educational context will largely depend on local conditions. In a similar way, a general English profile of an EFL learner, although a very useful starting point for the analysis of proficiency, is not to be expected to serve all. This study shows that L1 influence cannot be disregarded. The list of GCFs developed by specialists at the University of Cambridge, which is a good tool to start describing proficiency levels, should be tested on EFL learners from different linguistic backgrounds and perhaps specified to capture individual L1 or L1 groups.

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Rita Juknevičienė, Inesa Šeškauskienė

Anglų kalbos valstybinis brandos egzaminas Lietuvoje: ieškant kriterinių kalbos pasiekimo lygių požymių pagal BEKM

Santrauka

Norint susieti *Bendruosiuose Europos kalbų mokymo, mokymosi ir vertinimo metmenyse* (BEKM) gana bendrais bruožais apibrėžtus kalbos mokėjimo lygius su konkrečia užduotimi, įskaitant valstybinio brandos egzamino užduotis, nepakanka remtis bendrais samprotavimais apie tuos lygius. Norint patikimai susieti užduotį su BEKM lygiais, labai svarbu turėti tinkamą instrumentą. Tokį instrumentą anglų kaip svetimajai kalbai sukūrė Kembridžo universiteto mokslininkai, remdamiesi įvairių gimtųjų kalbų besimokančiųjų tekstynu. Jie parengė anglų kaip svetimosios kalbos gramatinių kriterinių požymių (struktūrų) sąrašą, plačiau žinomą kaip *English Profile* (EP). Mokslininkų teigimu (žr. Hawkins and Filipović, 2012), tas sąrašas padeda patikimiau nustatyti negimtakalbio vartotojo kalbos lygį.

Šiame straipsnyje pristatomi tyrimo, kuriuo buvo mėginta taikyti EP Lietuvos moksleivių anglų kalbai tirti, rezultatai. Tyrimui pasirinkta šiuo metu Nacionaliniame egzaminų centre kaupiamo anglų kalbos valstybinio brandos egzamino rašto darbų tekstyno (NEC tekstyno) dalis – 433 geriausiai įvertinti kandidatų darbai – rašiniai iš dviejų temų. Pasitelkus programinę įrangą ir rankiniu būdu šiame tekstyne nustatytos visiems lygiams (A2, B1 ir B2, C1 ir C2) būdingos struktūros. Atlikus tyrimą paaiškėjo, kad egzamino kandidatų darbuose vyrauja A2 lygio struktūros, vartojama apie pusė B1 ir tik maždaug trečdalis B2 lygiui būdingų struktūrų. C lygio struktūrų, išskyrus vieną, beveik nerasta.

Straipsnyje pateikiamos galimos tokių neįprastų rezultatų (ypač B1 ir B2 lygio) priežastys, kritiškai vertinami kai kurie EP požymiai bei svarstoma apie galimybes integruoti EP ar kitą patikimą instrumentą į mokymo procesą. Siekiant padidinti tyrimo patikimumą, manoma, kad jį vertėtų išplėsti ir tirti ne tik gramatines struktūras, bet ir leksinę raišką.

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