

A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of promising practices

1 OVERVIEW

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Country: United Kingdom

Institution: Eurocentres

Type of context: Programme/school level;

Educational sector: Adult (private sector)

Main focus of your project: Learning/Self-Assessment

SUMMARY

Name: Integrating mediation and online interaction into a CEFR-based curriculum

Abstract:

The Eurocentres Foundation bases its curriculum of learning aims and outcomes for language courses on the CEFR illustrative scales. This is achieved through a process of selective interpretation to provide a shortlist of cyclically addressed learning aims at each CEFR level, relevant to the learning context and target group, and dealing with communicative competences and language resources specific to the target language. These learning aims are used to negotiate the syllabus with learners on an ongoing basis, through weekly reviews and formative self-evaluation with an online portfolio mechanism in the web platform 'my.Eurocentres'. The recent addition in the CEFR Companion Volume of new illustrative scales in the areas of mediation, online interaction and plurilingual / pluricultural competences facilitated an English Language curriculum planning project to update the core learning aims for each level, and also develop specialised modules from Level B1 upwards dealing with an over-arching concept of '21st century communication skills'.

Stage: Planning

Theme: Curriculum

CEFR aspects used: Levels, descriptors, mediation, defined assessment criteria

Main features of this example:

- Integration of new illustrative descriptors (mediation, online interaction, pluricultural competences) into a CEFR-based programme
- Development based on situation & needs analysis (focus groups)
- Well-planned, locally-situated development by groups of teachers

Quality principles demonstrated: Relevance, Validity, Transparency, Coherence, Inclusiveness, Sustainability



2 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background

Eurocentres is a group of schools teaching languages where they are spoken. There are 5 schools in the UK, where this project took place. A curriculum based on 'can do' descriptors has been in place since 1992. Since 2000, all language course programmes are specified by levels which refer to the CEFR, and learning objectives are related to the illustrative descriptors of CEFR levels. There is a statement of the institution's educational philosophy and written descriptions of its learning programmes, including course objectives and content, appear in every classroom.

The project sought to respond to the changing needs of international learners enrolled in English programmes at Eurocentres intensive language schools in the UK, through a comprehensive update to curriculum and conceptual framework of progress and assessment. The following key findings gathered from customer surveys, focus groups and satisfaction questionnaires were taken into account in planning the focus of the update:

- an overwhelming majority of learners studying English Language at Eurocentres in the UK do so for reasons of career advancement and employability, either as a part of their higher education, or prior to entering the job market.
- a significant proportion of this student body have studied English language at school for several years, and are at Level B1 or above. These learners generally wish to take their language studies beyond 'the study of language' and develop practical communication skills for real-life contexts in education and the workplace.
- the need to develop communication skills for employability does not translate into significant enrolments on Business English programmes, which remain a niche product
- tertiary educators and employers have adopted the term '21st century skills' to indicate the cluster of skills now needed for employability on the international stage
- These include 'soft skills' for collaboration and communication such as adaptability, presenting, critical thinking, teamwork, using virtual workspaces, research skills, synthesising information, data interpretation, and inter-cultural literacy.
- There is a significant cross over between these conceptions of '21st century skills' and the competences described in new illustrative scales in the CEFR Companion Volume for mediation, online interaction and pluricultural competences.

Stated aims: Project rationale and goals

The project therefore set out the following overarching goals:

1. To update the core programme for general language studies to include the dimension of mediation in learning aims, outcomes and productive skills assessment
2. To design schemes of work for specialised additional modules focusing exclusively on '21st century communication skills', aimed at learners at level B1 and above.
3. To prepare the ground for rollout of these changes in 2018 with self-directed project based peer training and classroom experimentation carried out by teaching teams in Eurocentres UK schools

Lead project team goals:

1. Using as inspiration the CEFR descriptors for Mediation, develop draft course aims and an overview of syllabus content for a specialised module focused on coaching international communication strategies for employability. This should be differentiated by focusing on developing the higher-level communication-management techniques detailed in the CEFR Mediation descriptors, going beyond the standard situational / functional components of a typical Business English course.
2. Develop a criterion-referenced model of task-based assessment, focusing on key mediation skills over and above the usual communicative / linguistic parameters of assessment. This will be for use in a formally assessed specialised module and in-company language training situations.

3. Produce an overview for a specialised 4-week course module of 5 hour a week with specified aims, a list of core materials, illustrative weekly plans for each of the 4 weeks, and mapping of aims to core documents to support a flexible planning approach.
4. Draft an illustrative scheme for a blended-learning set of resources and course sequence, as a road map for future development of in-company course offers in teaching contexts overseas.
5. Provide an illustration schedule and description of how teacher development should be handled in both intensive and extensive contexts, to ensure relevant course offers meet their unique aims in the classroom / online.

Stages & Steps: Timeline

(i) Design of conceptual framework, July-September 2016

This stage was led by the Head of Academic Development in consultation with both academic staff and sales facing staff to develop a conceptual scheme that would provide an easy reference point for all stakeholders. This conceptual framework included the following key concepts:

- the development and assessment of spoken and written skills should encompass production, interaction and mediation in a criterion-referenced scheme.
- this should include written interaction as a dimension addressed through online collaborative tasks
- assessment criteria should be produced for these three areas at each level of the Eurocentres scale, to inform task based assessment of proficiency.

(ii) Selection and refining of illustrative descriptors, October-December 2016

The project team proceeded to colour code interesting descriptors by scale, drawn from the new illustrative scales in Microsoft Excel and collate them by level / area for distillation into a shortlist of learning aims at each level for the core programme and for the specialised 21st century communication skills module.

The core programme at each level was updated first, identifying themes in the collated descriptors at each level for mediating communication, texts and concepts. These themes informed a process of condensing the relevant descriptors by deleting perceived redundancy and combining phraseology.

In parallel, existing communicative assessment criteria were updated for production and interaction, with the addition of mediation criteria for both speaking and writing that were distilled from the same set of collated descriptors.

The project team then referenced a broader collation of descriptors including online interaction and pluricultural competence to perform the same process for the specialised 21st century communications skills module. This distilled two main themes of English Online and Global Citizenship.

(iii) Focus group review, Q1 2017

The new learning aims and assessment criteria for each level were documented and presented to teacher focus groups in each of the 5 UK schools. Orientation exercises involved blind

categorisation of learning aims and assessment descriptors into the areas of production, interaction and mediation. Conceptual overlap perceived between some interaction and mediation descriptors were discussed and evaluated, informing adjustments.

(iv) Exploratory piloting , Q1 – Q2 2017

Teachers in each focus group were asked to form mini-groups that would investigate an application of the new learning aims to a classroom context / topic area relevant to them and to their learners. These included the following areas of investigation selected by the teachers themselves:

London Central School

- Group 1. Teaching mediation strategies for Spoken Mediation
- Group 2. Online Interaction using students' phones
- Group 3. The lexical approach for Online Interaction (including tone, style, register)

Brighton school:

- Group 1. Online Interaction: 'Encouraging autonomous online interaction: using modern internet language/acronyms in chat groups e.g. Whatsapp'
- Group 2. Mediation in a group: 'Language for mediation in problem-solving tasks for B1/B2 level students'
- Group 3. Mediating information/ideas: 'Paraphrasing and passing on information from a range of spoken and written sources for B1+ level students'

Bournemouth school:

- Group 1. Spoken mediation: class presentations as extended projects
- Group 2. Exploiting the use of authentic media for Spoken/Written mediation

Cambridge School:

- Group 1: Mediation - using film to improve mediation skills
- Group 2: Online Interaction – conversational and opinionative threads
- Group 3: Mediation skills in exam classes

London Eltham School:

- Group 1: Written and Spoken mediation in online interaction using the 'my.Eurocentres' Resource Page.

Feedback from these groups was elicited in peer-presentation format, with a project team representative in attendance. All groups reported positive impact on student engagement and classroom interaction through the piloting of these themes.

(v) Operational piloting of new communicative assessment criteria, Q2 - Q3 2017

A pool of teachers were identified to use the new assessment criteria in task based communicative spoken and written assessment of their classes. They were then interviewed by the project team on their reactions to the new criteria

(vi) Operational piloting of 21st Century Communication Skills Schemes of Work, Q3 – Q4 2017

All 5 schools switched to the schemes of work for 21st century communication skills as a feature of afternoon general language modules, to flexibly incorporate new syllabus content into the weekly plan in consultation with the learners in those classes. The Head of Academic Development (project manager) conducted further focus groups in each school to gather feedback on the new syllabus material.

Feedback was generally positive, with caveats that lower B1 students were less able to handle the 'critical thinking' aspects of the new syllabus and still preferred a more functional approach.

(vii) Operational rollout of new course aims (2018)

This stage will involve the updating of course aims on the blended learning platform my.Eurocentres, so that they are referenced at every touch point of the course for needs analysis and course planning, through an online portfolio-based tutorial system and online weekly course planner referencing the course aims.

People/roles:

- **Project manager:** The Head of Academic Development, Tim Goodier
- **Project team:** a core group of two senior teachers was recruited to lead the curriculum update, by means of internal advertisement requiring submission of a statement of interest. These project roles were managed through flexible secondment to Eurocentres' Academic Development department. The team were issued a project brief with clearly defined goals:
- **Wider teaching group for piloting:** focus groups were held in each of the 5 UK schools to introduce the underlying concepts for the project, in particular mediation competences, and to invite teachers to form groups that would investigate a particular area of their teaching practice to present to their peers in relation to these concepts.

Other resources needed:

Proprietary Eurocentres blended learning platform 'my.Eurocentres' for learner access of new course aims

Quality Assurance procedures employed:

- In course feedback collated for qualitative and quantitative analysis in Survey Monkey
- Annual reflective session in each school with teaching team to feed back on successes of new updates and provide further recommendations
- Peer observation of teachers engaging with new teaching ideas
- Evaluative lesson observation by senior academic teaching staff

3 RESULTS

What was achieved:

- There is coherent reference to the CEFR, both in planning and implementation of course programmes in such a way as to have a real influence on setting clear learning objectives as well as on teaching and learning.
- There is a shared culture of continual improvement and development of teaching, evidenced by action research and/or other reflective teaching practices.
- The Eurocentres general language curriculum for learning aims was updated to include operationalised aims for mediation and online interaction at each CEFR level, ready for roll out through the my.Eurocentres learning platform in 2018
- Concepts underpinning the new learning aims were explored in classroom practice by teachers across the 5 UK schools, and best practice shared in peer presentations and visiting training sessions between schools
- A new set of assessment criteria was developed for spoken and written task-based assessment, to provide coherence with the inclusion of the mediation dimension in course learning aims.
- A new intensive afternoon module scheme of work was developed and piloted in 5 UK schools to

address mediation, online interaction and pluricultural competences, under the working title of '21st century communication skills'.

Impact:

This whole initiative created a 'buzz' across the UK schools and a conceptual impetus for teacher development among a highly experienced teaching staff. This had tangible positive impact for higher-level learners who were challenged in a more focused way to develop their group interaction skills in mediating communication, and information processing skills in mediating texts and concepts. The focus on online interaction competences in the afternoon programme also drove classroom level innovations to foster opportunities for online interaction in blended learning activities – these innovations also led to further inter-school training and sharing of best practice.

Further impact has yet to be measured when the core learning aims updates are rolled out in 2018 for learner self-evaluation and weekly planning on the my.Eurocentres platform.

4 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

Do:

Gather updated information on student learning needs first before reviewing the CEFR illustrative scales – this will focus your approach
Distil a workable shortlist of 10 – 20 new learning aims at each level, through filtering and combining descriptors where appropriate
Build into your project plan regular touch points of reflection through consultation of teaching practitioners, to keep things relevant
Be prepared to simplify piloted curriculum material and approach if teachers are finding it unworkable
Highlight to teachers how new descriptors shine a light on areas they may already address to an extent in their practice, but with a new emphasis

Don't:

Rush into trialling new descriptors – you need to prepare the ground with teacher focus groups to consider the underlying concepts and select appropriate descriptors
Use assessor formulated can-do descriptors as learning aims for use with learners in class – consider learner oriented versions in every case
Hand a complete syllabus ready made on a plate to teachers – involve them in exploring ways of developing classroom tasks and activities to address the new learning aims
Throw out existing syllabus material – iterative development is more likely to take hold and build on existing syllabus strengths
Have a rigid conception of how updated learning aims will be addressed – allow room for creativity and flexibility of approach for better ownership