

A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of practices

1 OVERVIEW

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Country: Finland

Institution: Finnish National Agency for Education

Type of context: National

Educational sector: Primary and secondary, including upper secondary

Main focus: Objectives: Curriculum reform through scale of descriptors

SUMMARY

Name: National curriculum language proficiency scale

Abstract:

Finnish Curriculum reform called “The Evolving Language Proficiency Scale.”

New national curriculum with integrated skills (moving beyond the old ‘four skills’): interaction skills, interpretation skills, text production skills.

Stage: Planning

Theme: Curriculum

CEFR aspects used: Levels, Descriptors, Action-oriented approach, Assessment with defined criteria, Plurilingualism

Main features of this example:

- A paradigm shift in language teaching and learning in Finland to meet 21st century needs. People to learn languages in order to interact.
- Iterative development with rounds of consultation/feedback from different stakeholders - including the public
- Assessment according to criteria linked to the Finnish application of CEFR
- Final stages of feedback included data for calibration of the descriptors: informants arranged individual descriptors into different categories and levels.

Quality principles particularly demonstrated: Relevance, Validity, Coherence, Sustainability



2 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background: There has been a Finnish application of the CEFR levels / descriptors for Basic Education + Upper Secondary School since 2003, including descriptors for listening comprehension, reading, speaking, and writing. The CEFR has been embedded in the core curricula since 2003. Now, instead of the traditional four skills, the new 2014 curriculum uses 3 main categories: interaction skills, interpretation skills, text production skills. The term ‘text’ includes all forms of linguistic representations.

The curriculum is organised around a Finnish scale of proficiency with descriptors for different levels. The 2003 Finnish scale is extended and updated in the 2014 project.

Stated aims: The aim was to refresh Version 1 of the core curricula to meet the general thinking and guidelines of the Finnish Curriculum Reform of 2014 (for Basic Education, which of course had an impact on the Upper Secondary School “update” - two different administrative processes). The reform aimed to exploit CEFR descriptors more closely in order to provide positive, action-oriented objectives. In a nutshell, it aimed to achieve a paradigm shift in language teaching and learning in Finland to meet 21st century needs.

The idea was to provide students with descriptor scales they can use to get an overall understanding of WHY we learn languages – *to interact!*

Steps/stages:

1. Discussions on needs with different interest groups and expert groups
2. Developing the new scales
 - drafts
 - feedback from different expert groups
 - revision of drafts, feedback, revision
3. Embedded in the core curricula (regulation), named The Evolving Language Proficiency Scale

Procedures used:

Draft 1: experts (mainly Finnish National Agency for Education – EDUFI- staff) studying carefully Version 1 (from 2003) indicating strengths / weaknesses + overall aims of the reform (e.g. no negative phrases in descriptors, which the 2003 version included, quite the contrary to the CEFR).

Preliminary discussion on categories according to new needs and emphases of the core curricula. Looked at the possibility of devising a common scale for second language + foreign languages (did not happen)

All CEFR scales carefully studied with the aim to make use of the “original” scales and wordings as far as possible

- Development of first draft
- Feedback from expert groups working on the Core Curriculum. First versions commented by a 20-30 person working group for the core curriculum reform for languages. The group consisted of language teachers and language / assessment researchers well acquainted with the thinking behind language proficiency levels (CEFR).
 - a special event arranged for the group to organize the individual descriptors according to skill/level. The problematic descriptors were identified.
- Revision into Version 2: the scales were reformulated accordingly (mainly in EDUFI)
- Feedback from expert groups, individual experts and teachers.
- Revision
- Feedback from teachers, revision, feedback from teachers / teacher training students, revision. Feedback including arranging individual descriptors in different categories/levels without context, (Helsinki University/ teacher training college; Turku University / teacher training college; a major further education event for language teachers organized by SUKOL (Language teachers’ union in Finland)). Over 200 teachers or teacher trainees or researchers were involved in the process.

After each occasion, the descriptors were slightly modified according to feedback. Most difficulties

had to do with the descriptors for *Interaction skills (Interacting in different situations and Cultural appropriateness for communication)*, which, especially in the first stages of the process, were easily mixed up with one another. However, we made the decision to hold on to the descriptors as separate skills for educational and washback effect purposes.

- the core curricula in all were open for **public comment** twice during the reformation; only a few commented on the scales as such. Overall feedback was positive.

People/roles: Expert team, feedback from other groups of experts, from teachers and teacher training students. Comments from over 200 people

Quality Assurance procedures employed:

No explicit quality assurance (QA) procedures employed. The calibration process was a light procedure, which is not documented in detail.

Timeline:

6/2012: The government decree on the distribution of lesson hours in basic education given.

2013: Expert groups working on the core curriculum; The first public commenting rounds in spring 2013

By 12/2013: First versions of the finalized scales circulated

Spring 2014: Finalization of the scales

12/2014: Regulation given on the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014

8/2016: The new curricula step into force (teaching begins)

Spring 2019: first round of Basic Education Final Assessments (at the end of grade 9) to be executed under new curricula

3 RESULTS

What was achieved: A new national curriculum with integrated skills.

(The 2014 levels are supposed to be the same as the 2003 ones, even if the emphases and wordings are different, but there is no scientific evidence to support this belief.)

The purpose of the core curriculum is to provide a common ground for the local curricula and thus promote equality and equity in education and the rights of the pupils within the whole country. The national core curriculum contains the guidelines for the provision of education as well as the objectives and key contents of instruction. The core curriculum also addresses development of the school culture and cooperation, implementation of education, instruction and guidance, support for learning, pupil welfare as well as assessment of learning. To support the work of the education providers, the core curriculum also contains references to the legislation that underpins the norms laid down as well as guidelines for preparing the local curricula.

Impact: The purpose for the whole undertaking was to foster a paradigm shift in language teaching tradition, so it is too early to judge impact.

The change is reflected in the Matriculation exam (ISCED 3) when developing tests, but sadly not in the certificates issued to students. This is due to legislation: (a) the tests are not criterion-referenced, (b) only certain types of grades / awards acknowledged (numerical assessment 4 – 10 in schools; 7 levels of awards for Matriculation – Improbatur -- Laudatur). This is a major hindrance in practice. The current regulation does not allow for the use of the CEFR/Finnish descriptors or CEFR levels in the actual certificates (work is needed on practices to overcome this shortcoming).

In addition, in Elementary Education, for each subject, there are two transition phases, at the end of Year 6x and Year 9. At these points there are national assessment criteria given for “good performance”, i.e. a

numerical grade/mark '8'. In languages, for interaction skills, text interpretation skills and text production skills, grade/mark '8' is defined in terms of the level of proficiency and the descriptors of the CEFR/Finnish scale. The levels and descriptors are tools for teachers to assess their pupils.

Finally, the feedback received from different interest groups has mainly been positive and encouraging to date, but this has not really been studied in retrospective. The feedback we received has been closely linked with the whole reform, which has mainly been applauded. But it is early days.

Resources on this theme: The core curricula for basic education or general upper secondary education:
<https://www.ellibs.com/fi/books/publisher/0/opetushallitus>

4 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

Advice on this theme; things to remember: Pay attention to the discussions and decisions made by the mother tongue and literature core curriculum providers.

Be aware that such communicative categories will overlap, especially for interaction skills; be prepared for criticism on this (especially in relation to testing)

Be ready to answer teachers' questions about how to report on different skills

Consider media literacy and the use of ICT early in the process. The lack of coverage was realized only too late and there was no little time to do anything about it.

Lessons learnt/Issues to watch out for:

It was a huge undertaking moving away from the traditional 4-subskill division, and it took a lot of time to process our thinking and needs and see the light, so to speak, what the gist of the reformation was with respect to the 2003 version of the proficiency scale. We didn't take a big enough step back at the beginning. As a result, media skills + literacy, the use of ICT, are not really present even if we tried to move away from the somewhat outdated thinking underlying the 2003 version. This we realized only too late and had no time to do anything about it except for publishing materials to support a shared understanding of concepts used in the core curriculum.