

A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of practices

1 OVERVIEW

Project leader(s) contact:

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Country: Ireland

Institution: Maynooth University

Type of context: National

Educational sector: Primary and secondary, tertiary

Main focus: Test, Curriculum, Resource, Training

SUMMARY

Name: Tests for a national language – TEG project – ALTE Q mark

Abstract:

This document describes a suite of standardised proficiency tests in Irish, Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge (TEG), which are broadly aligned with CEFR levels A1–C1. Comprehensive syllabuses, sample teaching materials, and samples exams for each level are provided on the TEG website, www.teg.ie, along with additional notes and resources to guide learners and teachers in their use. The exams were awarded the ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) Q-mark in 2015, confirmation that they have passed a rigorous audit and meet all 17 of ALTE's quality standards.

Stage: Planning, Implementation, Evaluation

Theme: Assessment, Curriculum development

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

Main features of this example:

- Research-based scientific approach
- Various aspects of quality assurance, including psychometric testing, rater training, rater reliability and monitoring
- Expert advice and input (including ALTE membership and audit)

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



2 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background:

The Irish language is taught as a compulsory subject at primary and secondary level education in Ireland, and is formally assessed as part of state exams at the ages of approximately 15 and 18. Before 2005, however, Irish-language courses and learners outside of the formal compulsory education system were commonly described using general terms such as ‘beginner’, ‘intermediate’ and ‘advanced’, with no clear definition or consensus on what those levels implied. There were no standardised tests available outside of this formal education system, in order to assist adult learners in assessing their own proficiency or progress, or to offer employers a means of assessing employees’ proficiency levels.

Stated aims:

- To create a series of Irish-language syllabuses at A1-C1 levels of the CEFR, in order to specify learning targets in Irish for those levels.
- To create a series of accompanying tests for adult learners of Irish that would be:
 - neutral and independent, not linked to any particular course
 - recognised internationally
 - as scientific as possible and based on research and best practice in language testing
 - based on a communicative approach

Steps/stages:

- Securing funding
- Test specifications
- Development of the syllabuses
- Development of the exams
- Observer status within ALTE
- Piloting of exams
- Full ALTE membership/consulting fellow members
- Designing the sample teaching materials
- Developing a teacher training course (The Diploma in Teaching Irish to Adults).
- Auditing, evaluating and reviewing the above.

Timeline:

2003 – 2005:	Funding secured. Development of A1 and A2 syllabuses and exams.
2005:	Membership of ALTE with observer status Piloting and administration of A1 and A2 exams.
2006:	Full membership of ALTE B1 syllabuses and exams developed. Exams piloted and administered.
2007:	B2 syllabuses and exams developed. Exams piloted and administered.
2009:	A1 and A2 exams audited by ALTE.
2011:	C1 exam developed and piloted
2012:	C1 exam administered.
2014:	Auditing of A1-C1 levels by ALTE
2015:	ALTE Q-mark awarded for exams at A1-C1 levels
2016-2020:	Learner corpus research to further develop grammatical proficiency descriptors for B1-C1 levels.
2017:	Recruitment of a full-time Development Officer

People/roles:

- The introduction, development and continued success of TEG would not have been possible without the support of funding bodies, state agencies and ministries
- Institutional support of the university is essential from the perspective of academic recognition and financial sustainability. It also ensures the availability of adequate staffing structures.
- The Centre Director leads the project within the university while a full-time Director of TEG is responsible for the development of tests and overseeing logistical matters.
- Membership of ALTE provides a continuous source of expertise and experience, in addition to test analysis, monitoring and auditing.
- A full-time administrator to liaise with teachers, learners, candidates, examiners and centres.
- A full-time development officer was first employed in 2017 to promote and raise awareness of TEG exams nationally and internationally.
- Irish-language teachers with experience in materials development were engaged on short-term contracts to create teaching resources based on the specifications.
- The Centre technician provides technical support in a number of areas, including the application process, compilation of statistics, preparation of results for psychometric analysis, etc.
- Oral examiners are recruited on a part-time basis and trained for each session/level, each year.
- Test candidates include the following groups of people:
 - Adult learners, of all ages, both Irish and international, who may be motivated by a wide range of personal factors and interests.
 - Secondary school students (aged 15-16) taking an optional 'transition year' programme between the junior and senior cycles of second level education. As there is no formal curriculum provided by the state for transition year Irish, a number of schools choose to use the TEG syllabuses and teaching materials, and to submit students for either partial or full certification at a chosen CEFR level at the end of the academic year.
 - University students, many of whom are motivated to take the exams in order to support their applications to postgraduate study or employment.
 - Civil servants/ state employees, in positions where Irish is necessary or beneficial for career progression.
 - Others requiring evidence of their language proficiency for professions such as teaching or translation.

Quality Assurance procedures employed:

Various procedures are in place to ensure the quality of the exams.

- Pre-testing is carried out for each level
- Oral examiners complete rater training each year, at each level.
- All oral exams are recorded and monitored to ensure rater reliability.
- Psychometric analysis is carried out externally on the reading and listening tests, to ensure validity and reliability.
- There is an appeals procedure in place to deal with any queries about exam results.
- The Centre joined The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) in 2005, initially with observer status. We became full members in 2006, once we had begun administering the exams. Since then, we have attended ALTE conferences twice a year where possible. The director of the Centre serves on the Executive Committee and we hosted an ALTE conference in Maynooth in 2009.
- When the ALTE auditing system was introduced in 2009, TEG A1 and A2 exams were audited. Levels A1-C1 were audited again in 2014 and we were awarded the ALTE Q-mark for excellence in 2015. The Director of TEG has now trained as an auditor for ALTE. The CEFR is central to ALTE's quality assurance procedures.

Publications that have been used or produced related to this example:

Gallagher, A. & Ní Mhaonaigh, S. 2009. 'Washback effect of tests in Irish for adult learners', in Barker, F. & Khalifa, H., Cambridge ESOL: Research Notes, Issue 35. Available at:
<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/23154-research-notes-35.pdf>

Ihde, T., Ní Neachtain, M., Blyn-LaDrew, R. & Gillen, J. 2008. *Colloquial Irish*. New York: Routledge.

Ní Ghallachair, A. 2008. Teaching and learning Irish today, in Nic Phóidín, C., & Ó Cearnaigh, S., *A New View of the Irish language*, Dublin: Cois Life, 191-201.

Ní Ghallachair, A. 2009. 'Ciúnas, bóthar, cailín, bainne': ag filleadh ar an Ghaeilge', in Ó Catháin, Brian (ed.), *Léachtaí Cholm Cille XXXIX*, Maynooth: An Sagart, 220-233.

3 RESULTS

What was achieved:

A suite of standardised proficiency tests and certification in Irish, broadly aligned with CEFR levels A1-C1. The exams have been awarded the ALTE Q-mark, confirmation that they have passed a rigorous audit and meet all 17 of ALTE's quality standards. Comprehensive syllabuses, sample teaching materials, and samples exams for each level are also provided on the TEG website, www.teg.ie, along with additional notes and resources to guide learners and teachers in their use. TEG exams have been taken by almost 5,000 candidates, at 10 national test centres, as well as a number of international centres, including those in Paris, New York, Ottawa and Sydney.

Impact:

- The existence of the TEG exams has done more than any other single project to raise awareness of the CEFR across all levels of education in Ireland as well as in the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of the Gaeltacht, all Irish universities and teacher training colleges.
- It has encouraged reflection within Irish-language education on the concept of language proficiency, and has raised general awareness of the CEFR and principles of best practice in language teaching and assessment. Although TEG is an independent testing system, it has had a significant impact on Irish teaching within the formal state education system in Ireland. It is used by many schools during the optional transition year between the junior and senior cycles of secondary education. It has also influenced the development of a CEFR-based syllabus for Irish at third-level, which has been implemented in a number of universities around the country.
- Perhaps the most significant impact is the adoption of TEG exams as a means of satisfying entry requirements to certain teaching training colleges and university courses, or as part of promotion schemes within state organisations. The Teaching Council of Ireland, the body responsible for the governance of professional standards among the teaching profession in Ireland, has recently introduced a language proficiency stipulation based on the CEFR for second level teachers of all languages, and many prospective teachers use TEG in order to satisfy this requirement. While this can be seen as a positive impact in many ways, it has also posed some challenges for TEG and raised the stakes of the exams at certain levels.
- Another positive impact that was unexpected or unintended is the number of non-native Irish learning the language around Europe, some with a view to using it in their work within the European Union.

Resources on this theme

www.teg.ie

4 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

Advice on this theme; things to remember:

- It is important to take a research-based, scientific approach, and to seek expert advice, where necessary.
- If possible, gain the support of those in power (e.g. government, the Department of Education, university authorities, etc.).
- It may be important to raise awareness and clarify misunderstandings about what you're trying to do.

- In testing, make provisions for partial certification in one or some language skills, to provide for partial competencies.
- Seek feedback from teachers and from exam candidates.
- It is important to make the syllabuses themselves freely available online, in order to enable autonomous learning and informal group teaching.
- The development of sample teaching materials, that are also freely available online, was an important factor in illustrating to learners and teachers how the learning outcomes and principles of the syllabuses could be translated into practical classroom tasks.
- Much support is required on the part of organisations, teachers and learners.
- It will take time!

Advice on this theme; pitfalls to avoid:

- There are still some who do not fully understand communicative, learner-centred language teaching and are reluctant to adopt a new approach.
- There has also been some misunderstanding among learners and teachers about what each level actually entails, e.g. some assume that a native speaker should be C1 or C2 level, where this is not necessarily the case, particularly when we are dealing with a minority language.
- There has also been some misunderstanding about the purpose of the sample teaching materials. These materials are intended to illustrate the way the learning outcomes in the syllabuses can be translated into practical classroom activities and tasks, encouraging communication, language awareness and other principles of the CEFR. It was our intention that teachers would adapt the materials to the specific needs of their learners rather than follow them page by page like a textbook. Not all teachers appear to use them in this way, however.

Lessons learnt/Issues to watch out for:

- Since most progression levels involving adult learners are typically structured around a two-hour-week, year-long course, it is sometimes difficult to persuade learners that it is not possible to progress from one CEFR level to the next in one year.
- The absence of national regulation to oversee the use of the CEFR can lead to inconsistencies in the interpretation of the levels on the part of different organisations, thus undermining one of the founding principles of the CEFR, i.e. comparability. This has proved to be a challenge in the development of the TEG system.