

A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of promising practices

1 OVERVIEW

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Country: Austria

Institution: Austrian Ministry of Education / University of Innsbruck

Type of context: National

Educational sector: Upper Secondary

Main focus: Examination reform

SUMMARY

Name: Standardized Secondary school-leaving exam (Matura)

Abstract: Development of new national school-leaving examination to reflect a CEFR-based curriculum introduced in 2004, following EALTA guidelines and the procedures of the Manual for relating examinations to the CEFR

Stage: Evaluation

Theme: Assessment

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

Main features of this example:

- Round table of stakeholders to design the reform (national agency, two universities, inspectors, head teachers)
- Test development linked closely to the CEFR
- Thorough test development process, including test specifications
- Strict linking to the CEFR using the Council of Europe's Manual for this purpose
- Collaboration with external experts
- Collaboration with teachers and teacher educators

Quality principles particularly demonstrated: Validity, Transparency



2 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background: The need to create a school-leaving exam compatible with the national curriculum, in which the CEFR has been implemented. The 2004 curriculum laws adopted the CEFR with its focus on communicative competence and action-oriented principles and stipulated minimal exit level standards in terms of CEFR levels and descriptors (First foreign language: B2; second and third foreign languages: B1).

Stated aims:

- Introduce standardised CEFR-based school leaving exams for four foreign languages (English, French, Italian, Spanish)
- Broaden assessment from written production to also include the listening and reading skills and a language in use component
- Develop home-grown expertise in exam development and administration based on international expertise and internationally accepted standards of best practice

Steps/stages: After a small-scale pilot organised by the University of Innsbruck with English teachers at a grammar school, the exam reform started off in 2007 as a small project and has ultimately led to the legal implementation of a reformed, national standardized examination for the foreign languages.

- Initially the project was a voluntary initiative called “Schulversuch” (trial project). Secondary Schools could opt for having the professionally developed exam rather than the conventional one, the latter being normally designed by the individual class teacher. Obviously, it was those schools who participated where teachers were well trained or in favour of reform. Then, legal changes obliged schools to include a listening and reading component employing standardized test methods in the Matura exam produced by the class teacher; this led to a steadily increasing voluntary take-up of the standardized Matura.
- Starting with a team of 15 selected general secondary school teachers from all nine Austrian provinces for English and French, teams of practising language teachers were trained as item writers over the course of three years, with the involvement of an international consultant and an international trainer.
- First live administration of listening and reading tests for English and French took place with 56 pilot schools in five of Austria’s nine provinces in May 2008. This was broadened in 2009-10 (a) to include two new languages Spanish and Italian, and (b) for English and French – where listening and reading tests had already been provided – to the assessment of writing and of ‘language in use’ (like in Cambridge exams).
- Recruitment of students as project team members led to MA theses conducted in the area of assessment and test development.
- In 2013, responsibility for the production of the Matura moved from one institution to the other, namely from the University of Innsbruck to BIFIE (*Bundesinstitut für Bildungsforschung, Innovation und Entwicklung des österreichischen Schulwesens*). This also meant a move from a development stage to an actual production stage, with a fixed need of x number of tasks per year. Efficiency was then a priority, without the liberty to try out different things as at the earlier stages. As of 2017, the BIFIE unit responsible for the Matura has been incorporated into the Federal Ministry of Education.

Timeline: started small scale in 2007 and has grown continuously, for example with more and more teachers becoming involved; first nationwide compulsory administration across all school types in 2016.

People/roles: Collaboration between the academic and political levels; active participation by external as well as internal experts; international experts as consultants, international trainers, teachers and teacher educators were active in the development process and in dissemination. The training and employment of practicing language teachers as item writers was crucial for the wide acceptance of the project.

Quality Assurance procedures employed: Use of the EALTA Guidelines for Good Practice and also the CEFR Manual for relating examinations to the CEFR; a cyclical approach with successive validation undertaken.

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

Spöttl, C. Kremmel, B. & Holzknrecht, F. (2016). Evaluating the achievements and challenges in reforming a national language exam: The reform team's perspective. *Papers in Language Testing and Assessment Vol. 5*, Issue 1. 2016

http://www.altaanz.org/uploads/5/9/0/8/5908292/1_spottl_et_al.pdf

Spöttl, C., Eberharter, K., Holzknrecht, F., Kremmel, B., & Zehentner, M. (forthcoming). Delivering reform in a high stakes context: from content-based assessment to communicative and competence-based assessment. In Sigott, G. (Ed.): *Language Testing in Austria: Taking Stock*. Peter Lang.

Weiler, T. & Frötscher, D. (forthcoming). Ensuring sustainability and managing quality in producing the SRDP in the foreign languages. In Sigott, G. (Ed.): *Language Testing in Austria: Taking Stock*. Peter Lang.

For further publications see <https://www.uibk.ac.at/fakultaeten/soe/ltrgi/publications/>.

3 RESULTS

What was achieved:

- Professionally developed and standardized school-leaving exam for the foreign languages English, French, Italian and Spanish.
- CEFR-based analytic rating scales with criteria from the CEFR for the rating of written performances in order to break with the Austrian tradition of just penalizing for errors.
- Benchmarked performances for all task types and accompanying justifications for each of the criteria.
- Three teams of double raters were trained for writing.
- Although there are still no standardized speaking tasks across Austria for the oral part of the school-leaving exam, the project was successful in providing teachers with sample tasks, sample interlocutor frames, analytic and holistic rating scales, rating forms and some benchmarked performances.
- Widely-based political support for the project, which has since meant that subjects like Mathematics, German as L1, and the sciences have followed suit in defining core competences and levels of achievement, similar to the CEFR, with standardised testing to follow.

Impact: (see linked article: http://www.altaanz.org/uploads/5/9/0/8/5908292/1_spottl_et_al.pdf)

- Implemented across all school types (general: 15,000 students; vocational: 22,000 students).
- Positive washback on classroom practices.
- Success of the pilot project also strengthened the BIFIE (national agency) as an institution.

Resources on this theme:

EALTA Guidelines for Good Practice

Manual for relating examinations to the CEFR

4 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

Advice on this theme; things to remember:

- Start small, pilot and trial projects.
- Try to trigger a lot of interest and get teachers to voluntarily participate in the project.
- Annual "Schulversuche" every year with more and more schools participating.
- Collect and analyze data about how the live exam actually worked out and feed that back into development.
- Use multipliers who are trained in several sessions by those responsible for the reform.
- Provide information on the background of the reform and the underlying principles of the reform to promote knowledge about the exam, awareness of the issues and testing culture.
- Make stakeholders part of the project, e.g. as standard setters.

Advice on this theme; pitfalls to avoid: based on Spöttl et al (2016). Evaluating the achievements and

challenges in reforming a national language exam: The reform team's perspective. *Papers in Language Testing and Assessment Vol. 5, Issue 1.*

- Document the processes, issues, challenges and threats carefully throughout the project. Although the documentation of the technical aspects of assessment reform is generally acknowledged as best practice, the documentation of the social and political dimensions of such projects is often a neglected area.
- Keep your finger on the political pulse and keep in touch with the key players in the educational system. Test development and test research can never be detached from politics and financial resources.
- Ensure sufficient and sustainable resources for training to increase (and maintain) language assessment literacy. The work involved shouldn't be underestimated in terms of human capital and deadlines and so on.
- Be prepared for compromise. Initial plans of the ideal exam reform are unlikely to be fully implemented for financial or political reasons or both. Be prepared to negotiate and accommodate, as it may be better to make short-term compromises on some elements than to have no exam reform at all.
- Establish a clear division in areas of competence when working across institutions and anchor this contractually for the duration of the project.
- Danger of teaching to the test: the teachers are very concerned about whether their students are going to pass the Matura and whether they have been preparing them well for the Matura, but a lot of them focus on the test methods rather than the reading behaviours you need for this exam, how the CEFR describes reading at level B2, for example.
- Don't forget the PR: The underlying aims and the professional work behind the project are not really known to the greater public, but the complaints from teachers or from teacher unions are because they talk to the press.
- Consider involving stakeholders in roll-out events. Preparing information events jointly on new developments that affect teaching and classroom assessment is one way of assuring a deeper understanding of the issues involved.
- Be aware of hidden agendas. Openness to or fear of change can play a crucial role in the agendas of the different stakeholders. Individuals may have very different motives for their involvement in the project. Reactions by politicians were largely predictable, but the strong opposition from teacher unions was less expected. Opposition was fuelled by a belief that teachers themselves would be assessed by the new reforms. Journalists also tend to select their own angle from the data gathered in an interview, often based on factors outside the interview topics, an incomplete understanding of the issues at stake, or the fact that journalists reported only on those issues they (thought they) understood.
- Engage professional help in handling the media. Information is power and untimely release of information can adversely affect public perceptions of a reform.

Lessons learnt/Issues to watch out for:

It is not really clear whether the project has led to more familiarity of teachers with the use of the CEFR or with putting it into practice and also the understanding of the CEFR of what language is and how language is used. We don't know whether this is different now in the teaching community. Some teachers are very familiar with the CEFR obviously, because they are item writers, standard setters, multipliers, double raters, or teacher trainers, but we don't know what the average teacher does, how they work with the CEFR and what understanding they have. Generally speaking we have the impression that teachers are more familiar with the CEFR than they were before the reform, also because the CEFR is getting more attention in pre- and in-service teacher education, but there is to date no specific research to back this up.

Another political challenge was the dependence on other subjects in terms of political decisions. The authorities, with their lack of understanding of language testing, lumped all subjects together when it came to decisions about, for instance, test administration. The lack of a standardized speaking part in the exam is one example for this. In addition, when the reform started, the great majority of teachers did not see the need for central marking, as they felt that they were trained professionals who could and should do the job. Teacher unions and school inspectors shared this view – so central marking was abandoned.