

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325130811>

Preliminary Collaborative Steps in Establishing CEFR Sign Language Levels.

Chapter · January 2012

CITATIONS

2

READS

56

3 authors, including:



Beppie Van den Bogaerde
University of Amsterdam

84 PUBLICATIONS 283 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Joni Oyserman
Leiden University

11 PUBLICATIONS 11 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Narratives in Dutch DSH [View project](#)



Hi all. Great topic ! I am going to give a talk on sign acq methodology, and w love to read it. Thanks, Beppie [View project](#)

Preliminary Collaborative Steps in Establishing CEFR Sign Language Levels

Laura Sadlier†¹

Trinity College Dublin

Beppie van den Bogaerde²

Utrecht University of Applied Sciences

Joni Oyserman³

University of Amsterdam

This chapter explores the role of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the context of teaching, learning, and more specifically, assessing signed languages. An exploration of various approaches used in selected universities across Europe provides perspectives on how the CEFR lends itself to adaptation. CEFR will be an important tool in shaping the future quality and comparability of higher education in the field of Deaf Studies and Interpreter Training both within each university and from an international perspective. Specific issues under discussion here are (i) the CEFR in relation to signed languages, (ii) the assessment of signed language skills as guided by the CEFR and (iii) future collaboration from an international perspective.

Key words: Common European Framework of Reference, signed languages, assessment, collaboration, stakeholder involvement.

¹This chapter is published posthumously by Laura Sadlier, who unexpectedly passed away before the publication of this volume.

² beppie.vandenbogaerde@hu.nl

³ j.oyserman@uva.nl

1. Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides a basis from which languages can be learned, taught and assessed (Council of Europe, 2001). However, placing this in the context of teaching and assessing signed languages (SL's) creates a need to adapt traditional spoken language skills or competencies. Such adaptation is necessary as SL's are visuo-spatial in nature and auditory-based competencies are therefore irrelevant. This chapter will explore issues that arise when teaching and testing SL's in relation to the CEFR and the additional benefits and challenges that occur when collaborating between a) test stakeholders such as test developers, test raters and test takers within each of the universities and b) collaboration across universities.

Prior to exploring the main issues, it is imperative to provide some background to the topics under discussion. This includes (i) a description of SL's and issues of language recognition and standardisation (ii) CEFR competencies that are relevant to SL's and (iii) necessary adaptations to the CEFR in relation to SL's. Firstly, signed languages use space, body, shoulders, head and non-manual markers and though SL's are constitutionally recognised in some countries, standardization is nonetheless difficult (but see Schermer, 2003). Secondly, competencies can be divided into three general sections (a) comprehension, (b) production and (c) interaction, whereas written competencies are unnecessary. Thirdly, fundamental adaptations to the CEFR relate to comprehension, signed production and interaction and pre-recorded signing. We will describe and discuss different

adaptations made for the signed languages taught in higher education in Ireland and the Netherlands, viz. Irish Sign Language (ISL) and Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT).

Having grounded this exploration in its appropriate context, we will then outline the arena where such teaching and assessment is set. The universities mainly involved in this collaborative process are Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) (Ireland), Hogeschool Utrecht University of Applied Sciences (HU) and University of Amsterdam (UvA).

Just as the CEFR is adapted to suit the nature of SL's, so too are the methods of teaching skills relevant to SL's. Assessments of such skills are equally challenging. The assessments and testing procedures necessary to establish the level of sign language learners are complicated by the fact, that many SL's have not been fully described yet. We will examine this by focusing on A1 and A2 competencies and assessment procedures, although, given that SL's are far less standardized than spoken languages, some of this work is in its infancy.

Lastly, this chapter will outline the importance of collaboration in assessment. It will serve to outline the benefits of stakeholder involvement both at an intra-university level, i.e. between test developers, test raters and test takers, and also at an inter-university level, i.e. between institutes across Europe. A micro and macro collaborative approach to assessment aids reliability from process to product, proving collaboration to be a key factor in the testing and assessment of signed languages and the challenges that this presents.

2. Background on Signed Languages

Signed languages are recognised as manual languages (Stokoe, 1960) and express meaning in the visuo-spatial modality.

ISL is recognised as the indigenous language of Deaf people in Ireland and research shows it to be a linguistically complex language that is separate to and not based on a manual representation of English (O’Baioill & Matthews, 2000). This provides evidence of the complex nature of ISL and therefore imposes complexity on its assessment. Much work and resources are needed to aid the teaching and learning of ISL (see below Sign of Ireland Corpus). Equally, the constitutional recognition of ISL or lack thereof, poses additional challenges for any university in relation to resources, funding and career prospects for graduates.

The same is true for NGT. The language has been described to a certain extent (Schermer 1990, see also Baker, van den Bogaerde, Pfau & Schermer, 2008), there is a (online) dictionary (Schermer & Koolhof, 2009) and a large web-based⁴ corpus of filmed NGT samples has been created which can be used as input for material development.

3. Signed Languages and the CEFR

The use of the CEFR in relation to signed languages involves taking the auditory-verbal focus and reformulating this to suit the visual-gestural nature of SL’s. Leeson and Byrne-Dunne (2009) outline that just as spoken languages can be described in generic terms, so too can signed languages so that each country across

⁴ See http://www.ru.nl/sign-lang/projects/corpus_ngt/

Europe can make appropriate language specific adaptations.

Taking receptive and productive skills as an example, it becomes clear that in the context of SL's, writing skills and orthography can be eliminated and reconstructed as pre-recorded signing skills with a focus on production of a rehearsed topic. Leeson and Byrne-Dunne (2009) propose that the area of 'Understanding' can be divided into (i) real life receptive language skills and (ii) receptive signed language exercises. To illustrate the point the reader is guided to the table below, from Leeson and Byrne-Dunne (2009, p. 4), using A1 and A2 as an example for (ii). One can see the necessary variations made to the CEFR when dealing with a visuo-spatial mode of language.

Table 1. Common Reference for Signed Languages: Global Scale. Self-Assessment Grid: (pre) recorded language.

	A1	A2
Receptive Signed Language Exercises	I can understand familiar names, signs and very simple sentences, for example in recorded videos or DVDs.	I can understand very short, simple recordings. I can find specific, predictable information in recordings, such as advertisements and videos and can understand short simple messages.
Pre-Recorded Signing, Producing a Signed Language Recording	I can compose a brief recording in order to send a simple message, for example to my family.	I can produce a very simple personal message, for example thanking someone for something.

The above illustrates some adaptations for signed languages, and, in turn, raises the question of using authentic materials in a visual learning environment. Unlike for spoken languages there is little real life material available for signed languages. Much time is needed to source and collate authentic material. Examples are the Signs of Ireland Corpus and the Corpus NGT: these projects aimed to collate, for the first time, electronic corpora of ISL and NGT.

3.1 Perspectives from Ireland and the Netherlands

Within the Republic of Ireland, there is no standardized approach to the teaching of ISL and as Leeson and Lynch (2009) outline this plays a role in the need for the Bachelor in Deaf Studies first year students in CDS to receive intensive training in ISL. This training is mapped to the Common European Framework as it provides a range of generic language descriptors from zero mastery to near native-like competency (Council of Europe, 2001). This is the rationale upon which the CEFR is used in the teaching, learning and assessment of signed languages.

In the CDS a full cohort of students from year one to four has not yet been realised and therefore the curriculum is in its infancy. However, the curriculum is clearly shaped by the CEFR as the emphasis is on mapping learning and assessment across a continuum (see Chapter 8 in Council of Europe, 2001). The Signs of Ireland Corpus mentioned previously are used as a learning tool for students, allowing for reflection and revision of language in use and aids the implementation of naturalistic learning as advocated by the CEFR. However, since the degree programme accepted its first

cohort in 2009, the use of the CEFR within the curriculum has to date been taught to A1, A2 and B1 level. In all teaching, emphasis is placed on relevance and involvement for learners.

In the Netherlands, a standard curriculum for the teaching of NGT is being developed. Based on COE (2001) and Leeson's (2008) first concept and adaptations of the CEFR for ISL, Terpstra (2009) developed a draft version for NGT, which was later elaborated with co-workers of HU and UvA. The target learners in the Netherlands are teachers and employees in the field of special education and students of sign linguistics, student-teachers and student-interpreters of NGT. In the Netherlands the collaborators, with support from the VLLT⁵ and SLO⁶, are momentarily developing pilot-modules for the first four language levels, A1 – B2. Since the research on CEFR for NGT has only just started, only a first cohort of students is being educated with the new didactics (as per September 2010) and language levels. Level A2 was achieved in November 2010 by all first year students, and level B1 is being taught. A first analysis of the results is yet to be done, but observations by the NGT teachers of HU, as well as by the interpreting trainers, indicate increased skills in comprehension and interaction of these students compared to students who were taught in the old method. UvA is planning to start with the new teaching curriculum in September 2012.

⁵ VLLT: Vereniging Leraren Levende Talen, Society for Teachers of Modern Languages, section Sign Language of the Netherlands.

⁶ SLO: Nationaal Expertisecentrum Leerplanontwikkeling, National Expertise Centre for Curriculum Development

3.2 Test Design

Test design comprises of many issues including test constraints (limitations of resources); test purpose (what is to be tested); test content (what is included in the test), test method (interaction between test taker and test materials), validity (ensuring defensibility and fairness of tests), and rating and measurement (judgment relating to score or level of attainment). The CEFR provides guidelines for assessment ranging from holistic/analytic to peer and self assessment (Council of Europe 2001, pp. 189-193). The use of peer and self-assessment fosters the notion of reflection and awareness for learners.

4. Testing, assessment and collaboration with stakeholders

This section will explore the assessment procedures at micro level, looking within each of the Universities at the system of testing in operation. Across Europe there are strict assessments criteria that aid harmonisation of assessment and qualifications and all courses are linked to the Bologna Process. The Dublin descriptors provide clear criteria of expected competencies across all levels of certification from undergraduate to Doctorate level (Joint Quality Initiative, 2004). In addition to this, there are quality assurances at national level in each country. In Ireland, the courses run by CDS are mapped to a National Framework of Qualifications, where the Bachelor in Deaf Studies that offers professional training in the area of Deaf Studies, Interpreter Training and ISL Teaching, is mapped at Level 8 as it is recognised as an honours degree.

In the Netherlands all universities are assessed by the NVAO (Netherlands and Flemish Accreditation Organisation), which guarantees that all programs are in concurrence with the Dublin Descriptors. The HU provides teacher and interpreter training in professional bachelor (four years) and master programs (two years, part time). The UvA offers a three year Bachelor of Arts' degree in General Linguistics, specialisation Sign Linguistics and a one year Master of Arts' degree.

4.1 Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College Dublin

CDS was established in 2001 and is a constituent part of the School of Linguistics Speech and Communication Sciences in Trinity College Dublin, though there were ad hoc ISL training opportunities available since 1992.

At an institutional level, there are many strict criteria that guide assessment across Trinity College Dublin and all Irish higher level institutions. Within the School of Linguistics Speech and Communication Sciences, collaboration occurs between other language teaching faculty and CDS in that there are similar approaches to teaching and assessing all L2 learners.

Within CDS both teaching and assessment of ISL at A1 level focuses on authentic use of language. Receptive tests at A1 level are focused on topics of personal relevance to students and rating is determined by a common scale relevant to the expected level of the group and tests are conducted by the ISL teaching staff. External review also takes place to add to the validity of the process (see Appendix I).

4.2 Utrecht University of Applied Sciences (HU)

The Institute for Sign, Language & Deaf Studies of the Faculty of Education of Hogeschool Utrecht University

of Applied Sciences piloted a diploma curriculum for teacher and interpreters of NGT in 1997, which was granted permanency in 1998.

Research and national developments supported the idea to improve the level of NGT teaching and to devise a theoretically based NGT curriculum, which was supported by the educational field. In 2009, collaborative research was started between HU and Kentalis⁷, UvA and VLLT to adapt and apply the CEFR descriptors to NGT. Through a collaboration agreement between HU and NTID at the Rochester Institute of Technology (USA), it was investigated, whether the Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI) was useful to assess HU's NGT students' proficiency (Newell, Caccamise, Boardman & Holcomb, 1983).

4.3 University of Amsterdam

In 2002 the UvA came to an agreement with HU to use their NGT courses and course materials. When HU decided to start research in the application of the CEFR language levels to NGT, teachers of the UvA joined the research team. At the UvA an electronic test for comprehension in NGT via Blackboard (Oyserman, 2009) is being developed for levels A1, A2, B1 and B2. Besides using the established tests and language assessments of the HU, UvA is developing language tests of its own, also because their assessment cycle differs from that of HU. (see Appendix III).

4.4 A1 and A2 assessment to date

Of those entering study in CDS, ISL skills typically range from Zero to Basic user and therefore the learning

⁷ Royal Kentalis see www.kentalis.nl

of ISL is pitched at A1 and A2 levels respectively across each semester. Much focus is given to receptive skills and the curriculum follows the themes as laid out in the CEFR. The ISL assessments are structured to match the can-do statements of the specific level required of the students and are rated on a scale of 0 - 5. Emphasis is placed on receptive and productive skills appropriate to A1 and A2 levels. For example, students complete an interactive test whereby a live interlocutor interacts with the students on familiar topics (such as personal identification). Students are rated by an additional rater (ISL teacher) and the tests are rated live. Tests are also recorded to aid validity and allow for rechecking of test performances. This is also in line with the system of external examiner validation, which is an integral component of the TCD examination system. Student feedback is also used to adapt and alter test settings and future test development as testees are recognised as holding an important role in the design of assessments (Shohamy, 2001; see also Sadlier, 2009).

In the Netherlands at HU the development of NGT language tests is now at the stage that exams and assessments have been made for levels A1 and A2 (see Appendix II). Assessment and testing takes place four times a year (formative and summative testing). Tests are devised along the same lines as described for ISL. The can-do statements for each level define the theme and topic/subject in NGT and the comprehension and production levels. Since the focus of levels A1 and A2 is on comprehension we devised comprehension tests for the first two levels in the NGT curriculum. The tests are being evaluated at the point of writing, in order to discuss the results of the students, and establish validity and reliability.

5. Collaborative work across Europe

The three institutes discussed here, CDS, HU and UvA are eager to start international collaboration. Each of the Universities has similar remits as outlined above, which aid the level to which resources can be compared and experiences shared. However, as this work is in its infancy in each of the Universities much work is needed before conclusions can be drawn on the implementation and design of CEFR based curricula and assessment.

As more and more European countries seem on the verge to implement adaptations of CEFR to their national sign language, collaboration was sought between many research and teaching institutes. Haug and Keller (2011) are organising an ESF preparation meeting on these issues in September 2011 in Zürich, Switzerland, which will hopefully be the start of more international cooperation and exchange of expertise in the teaching and assessment of signed languages.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined principle challenges associated with the implementation of the CEFR in relation to signed languages. There is an obvious move away from auditory and writing based skills towards live and recorded receptive and productive skills that coincide with the visuo-spatial nature of signed languages. The challenges associated with teaching and assessment of CEFR related curricula are far reaching and require greater volumes of digital resources and human resources in terms of rating and recording of test materials. Collaboration is an important element of assessment both at intra- and inter-university level. At inter-university levels, all Universities discussed above

ensure collaboration among teaching staff, raters, external reviewers and test takers in a bid to achieve valid assessment methods for all stakeholders. Collaboration between universities across Europe will also become a vital component of shaping the future of this complex area and steps have been made to begin such a process. Further research is needed once the process of collaboration brings to light areas for comparison and co-operation in the implementation of the CEFR for signed languages across universities in Europe.

References

- Baker, A., Bogaerde, B. van den, Pfau, R., & Schermer, T. (2008). *Gebarentaalwetenschap. Een inleiding* [Sign Linguistics. An introduction]. Deventer: Van Tricht uitgeverij.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Joint Quality Initiative (2004). http://www.jointquality.org/ge_descriptors.html. Retrieved 21st March 2011.
- Haug, T., & Keller, J. (2011). *Development of Theoretical and Practical Guidelines for the Adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to Sign Languages*. ESF workshop, 16-18 September 2011, Zürich Switzerland.
- Leeson, L. (2008). *Note on the adjustments required for the inclusion of Irish Sign Language into the Common European Reference Framework for Language*. Dublin: Trinity College.

- Leeson, L., & Byrne-Dunne, D. (2009). *Applying the Common European Reference Framework to the Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Signed Languages (No. 3.1)(UK/08/LLP-LdV/TOI/163_141)* Dublin: Trinity College Dublin.
- Leeson, L. & Lynch, T. (2009). Three Leaps of Faith and Four Giant Steps: Developing Interpreter Training in Ireland. In J. Napier (Ed.) *Signed Language Interpreter Education and Training: A World Survey* (pp. 35-56). Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Newell, W., Caccamise, F., Boardman, K., & Holcomb, B.R. (1983). *Adaptation of the Language Proficiency Interview (LPI) for assessing sign communicative competence*. *Sign Language Studies*, 41, 311-352.
- Oyserman, J. (2009). *Gebarentaal in ICT onderwijs*. [Sign language in ICT education] Talon 4 project, Paper presented at the Faculty of the Humanities, University of Amsterdam, December 2009.
- O'Baoill, D., & P. Matthews, (2000). The Structure of Irish Sign Language. *The Irish Deaf Community*, vol. 2. Dublin: ITE.
- Sadlier, L. (2009). Pandora's Box: Lifting the Lid on Issues of Testing: A Case Study of Sign Language Interpreters in Training in Ireland. *The Sign Language Translator and Interpreter (SLTI)*, 3(2), 177-201.
- Schermer, T. (1990). *In search of a language. Influences from spoken language on Sign Language of the Netherlands*. Delft: Eburon.
- Schermer, G.M. (2003). From variant to standard: An overview of the standardization process of the lexicon of Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN) over two

- decades. *Sign Language Studies, Special Issue on dictionaries and lexicography, part 2*. 3(4), 469-486.
- Schermer, T. & Koolhof, C. (Eds). (2009). *Basiswoordenboek Nederlandse Gebarentaal*. [Basic Dictionary Sign Language of the Netherlands. Utrecht/Antwerp: Van Dale Uitgevers.
- Shohamy, E. (2001). *The Power of Tests: A Critical Perspective on the Uses of Language Tests*. London. Pearson.
- Stokoe, W.C. (2005). Sign Language Structure. An outline of the visual communication systems of the American deaf. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 10(1), , 1-37.
- Terpstra, A. (2009). *Vaardigheidsniveaus Nederlandse Gebarentaal*. [CEFR languages levels for Sign Language of the Netherlands, NGT]. Kentalis Centre for Expertise, Groningen: manuscript.

Appendix I CDS

ISL 1 Assessment (A1 CEFR Level)

Productive Skills	Language Portfolio	40%
Receptive Skills	Language Test	60%

Portfolio	Themes (CEFR)	Questions/Contents
Part 1 - 10%	Personal Identification	Introducing Yourself
Part 2 – 10%	Home/House Environment	Layout/Design – Location of rooms in house (student’s own home)
Part 3 –	Education	Personal Experience –

10%		1 st day in CDS student to produce their experience, no more than 2 minutes.
Part 4 – 10%	Weather	Snow, no more than 2 minutes.

Language Contents Test (Two parts)

Gloss 40%	Education – approx 2 minutes clip.	Narrator – must be the student’s teacher
Gloss 20%	Weather – approx 1 minute clip	Narrator – must be the student’s teacher

Appendix II HU
Examples of NGT test (A1).

Since this is the very first NGT test the students have to take, the instruction is in written Dutch. The written instructions are shown in the box:

Specific information about the exam, a combination of interaction, production and comprehension; this test consists of three parts:
1) Provide answers to questions (interaction): you answer a couple of (filmed) questions in NGT. These questions you can see on the screen. You tape your answers. If you haven’t understood the

question you should make this clear in NGT (e.g. 'I did not understand the question'). After you have seen the question, you have a limited period of time to answer. On the screen will be shown how much time you have left.

2) Production: assignments in which you show the shape of thing and you show your facial expression. You film yourself for these assignments. Here too there is a limited time slot to formulate your signed answer, the time bar will show you how much time you have left.

3) Comprehension: assignment which comprises several film fragments. On a special form you indicate, for example, whether the film fragment is the same as the picture on the form or different. The film fragments are shown twice; in between 'writing time' is provided.

The exam takes an hour. During the exam the 'input tape' will be offered from the central desk. It is therefore not possible to pause the input tape or to rewind and review film fragments.



Figure 1 description of a person

Example for 2) Production:

The instruction is signed as follows: Later you will see here (points to left) a drawing of a person (see Figure 1). Describe in NGT what the person looks like and his/her clothes.

Example for 3) Comprehension:

The students are shown a film, where one or two sentences are shown simple NGT. Besides the signer a picture is shown, and the students have to indicate whether the picture is the same or different from the signed utterance(s) by ticking the below drawings of NGT SAME or NGT DIFFERENT (see Figure 2a and 2b), or by ticking the box for RIGHT or NOT-RIGHT (see Figure 2c and 2d) after a yes/no question.

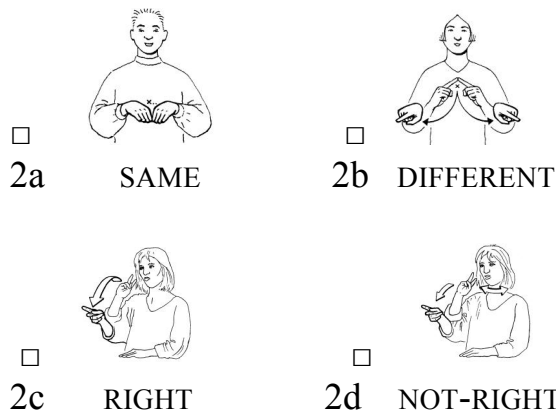


Figure 2 Example of HU comprehension test

The following text is signed: 'Today it is April 9th. Please circle the correct date below.' (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 Calendar

Appendix III UvA

Example of Comprehension NGT assessment: Matching (A1 CEFR Level)

The students are shown seven short films. One film with instructions: Find the sign for a town (i.e. SCHEVENINGEN) and match it with the fingerspelled word S-C-H-E-V-E-N-I-N-G-E-N. Three films show signs, three other films the fingerspelled words (see Figure 4).

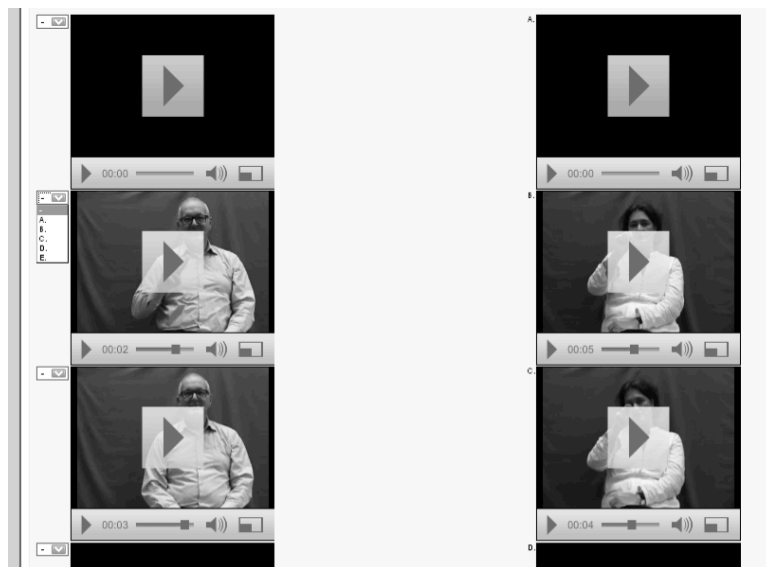


Figure 4 Screenshot Blackboard