

**Edited by**  
**Kaarina Mäkinen**  
**Pauli Kaikkonen**  
**Viljo Kohonen**

*FUTURE PERSPECTIVES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE  
EDUCATION*

**Oulun yliopiston kasvatustieteiden tiedekunnan  
tutkimuksia 101/2004**

# Using the Common European Framework: Some Finnish experiences

**Sauli Takala\* & Felianka Kaftandjieva\*\***

*\*University of Jyväskylä, Oulu, Finland, Center for Applied Language Studies (emer.)*

*\*\*University of Sofia*

## **I. Introduction and some historical background**

The Council of Europe (CoE) celebrates soon the fiftieth anniversary of its activities in the area of culture (in a broad sense). While Finland became a full member rather late, she took an active part in the programme under the Convention for Cultural Cooperation (CDCC, set up in 1962). One of the most successful and influential actions is surely the work carried out to develop and enhance modern language teaching. The Council also played an important role in setting up AILA (International Association of Applied Linguistics) in the early 1960s.

The Project Director of all major CoE language projects, John L. M. Trim has on several occasions described the basic philosophy of the CoE in language education. The following summarizes his views:

The Council of Europe, with its limited resources, has concentrated on the co-ordination of voluntary co-operation among member governments acting in a framework of common values and freely agreed common objectives, which develop out of the practice of interaction, relying on the willingness of governments to invest in programmes in which international participation serves their enlightened self-interest.

The successive Projects of the Council of Europe in the field of modern languages have been planned and designed consistently to identify the kinds of language proficiency needed by European citizens to interact and co-operate most effectively, and to describe these kinds of proficiency as accurately and usefully as possible.

The activity of the CoE for promoting language education in member countries has involved projects and organising a very large amount of conferences and workshops in cooperation with the member countries. The first Intergovernmental Symposium under the CDCC was organised by France in 1961 to launch its pioneering work in *Le Français Fondamental* and the associated audio-visual course *Voix et Images de la France*. Following this, the Second Conference of European Ministers of Education meeting in Hamburg agreed on a programme for the long-term reform of language teaching and asked the Council of Europe to organise it.

The work of the Council of Europe in modern languages has been realised as a series of medium-term projects, with objectives set by the CDCC. Related to these projects there have been major conferences in Strasbourg to evaluate the work done and to recommend new action. These conferences have given coherence and continuity and a mandate to the series of medium-term projects:

1962—1971: a period of a large amount of meetings, which promoted awareness of the new approaches and findings of applied linguistics, of audio-visual tools in teaching languages, and which helped to establish mechanisms of regular international cooperation. Eg., two conferences in 1966, in Ostia and Ankara, outlined modern objectives for languages, which were widely quoted and applied throughout Europe. They played an important role in the construction of the first comprehensive school curriculum (1970).

1971—1977: Expert group, to create a global conceptual framework for the development of language learning systems and the inter-institutional cooperation in the area of adult education. This led, among other things, to the publication of the very influential "Threshold" documents for specifying objectives of language teaching. These soon established themselves as classical works of language didactics and were reflected in the subsequent Finnish curricula as well.

1977—1981: Project 4, to consolidate and develop the conceptual framework, to extend its coverage to other languages and to other levels of education, and to test its applicability in a series of pilot experiments in a range of educational settings.

1982—1988: Project 12, "Learning and teaching languages for communication", to promote the application of the new approaches (communicative principles and objectives) in classrooms. This was a period of a very intensive programme of 37 workshops. Further studies were carried out on needs analysis, objectives specification, teaching methodology and evaluation, as well as on vocationally oriented language learning (VOLL).

By this time, the basic principles of learner-centredness, life-relatedness, the primacy of the identification of learner needs, the explicit statement of objectives, authenticity of materials, learning by doing, testing as a feedback process had been widely adopted in language education in Europe.

1989—1995 (1997): “Language Learning for European Citizenship” launched in January 1989: “New Style” workshops (A+B/follow-up) were set up, more closely focused and that they should form part of a coherent strategy rather than being seen as single events.

In 1971, the Rüşchlikon Symposium on languages in adult education initiated the process of systematic development work. The second Rüşchlikon Conference in November 1991 meant a kind of re-launching of the project “Language Learning for European Citizenship” at half-way. It was originally to focus on questions of assessment and certification, transparency and coherence of criteria and assessment of communication skills. This meeting, which was attended by representatives of the new member countries, also produced a recommendation with a far broader scope than assessment and certification (without belittling their great importance for tomorrow's Europe): a European Framework of Reference for language teaching and learning should be developed, and a study be made of the feasibility of a European Portfolio of language skills for future European citizens.

Current major projects undertaken by the Council of Europe in the area of language teaching, learning and assessment are related to

- The Common European Framework of Reference for Language: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEF)
- The European Language Portfolio (ELP)
- Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEF.

The Manual will be briefly discussed below (Section 4).

## **2. Finnish experience in using CEF in language education**

### **2.1 Curriculum development**

In the intensive reform of modern language curricula in Finland since the late 1960s, the Council of Europe's work has been utilized consistently. This was first shown in the comprehensive school curriculum (1970) and the new curriculum for the upper secondary school (1971). The “four skills” and cultural and attitudinal goals were adopted largely on the basis of CoE's Ostia and Ankara conference recommendations. The approach that led to the Threshold document was applied first in the mid 1970s and the key functional-notional features have ever since been a consistent part of the curricula. The notions of learner autonomy, self-assessment and reflection were incorporated in the 1980s. The ideas implemented in the Portfolio have also been influential. The continuities and new developments in the Council of Europe's work are thus clearly reflected in Finnish language curricula.

The CEF has also been used in developing the examination frameworks for DIALANG, YKI and AMKKIA (see 2.2).

## 2.2 Linking examinations to CEF levels

The CEF is the fundamental reference tool in the Portfolio and Manual projects. It has been also the starting point in four Finnish projects in the area of language testing and assessment. These will be presented in a table for and briefly described.

There have been four projects in Finland where standard setting procedures were applied in order to link test results to CEF scales of language proficiency. These projects were carried out at the Center for Applied Language Studies by Dr. Felianka Kaftandjieva in cooperation with Professor Norman Verhelst from CITO and Professor Sauli Takala from the Center. In chronological order the projects were:

- EU-funded DIALANG project, Phase 1 coordinated in 1997—2000 by the Center; this is a internet-based diagnostic assessment system.
- AMKKIA project, 2000—2001, to develop an assessment system for three main branches at non-university tertiary level polytechnics; the project produced an CD-based item bank from which items can be used as anchor items with known CEF-values.
- YKI project (Finnish National Foreign Language Certificates for adults), 2001—2002: CEF-related item bank is available for English and under preparation for Finnish and Swedish.
- Matriculation Examination Board advanced level English test, 2002: a study prepared and reported at the Helsinki Conference. This project differed from the three others that it did not apply IRT methodology.

A summary of main characteristics of the four projects is given in the following table:

Project Features	DIALANG	AMKKIA	YKI	Matriculation examination
Languages	Finnish	English Swedish	English	English
Skills	Reading Listening Vocabulary Grammar Indirect Writing	Reading Listening Vocabulary Grammar Writing Speaking	Reading Listening Vocabulary & Grammar Writing Speaking	Reading Listening Vocabulary & Grammar Writing
Items	Multiple choice Open-ended (short answer)	Multiple choice Open-ended (short answer) Performance assessment (Speaking and Writing)	Multiple choice Open-ended (short answer) Performance assessment (Speaking and Writing)	Multiple choice Open-ended (short answer) Performance assessment (Writing)
Scoring scheme	Dichotomous scoring	Polytomous scoring	Polytomous scoring	Polytomous scoring
Score reporting	Profile of CEF-related levels	Profile of CEF-related levels	Profile of CEF-related levels	Norm-referenced single grade
Test analysis	IRT approach	IRT approach	IRT approach	CTT approach
Standard-setting procedure	Item mastery method <sup>(a)</sup>	Item mastery method	Item mastery method	Modified Angoff method <sup>(b)</sup>
Number of judges	7	10 (English) 12 (Swedish)	10	14

Project Features	DIALANG	AMKKIA	YKI	Matriculation examination
Judgement task	Item specific Yes/no decision 5 level-specific ratings per item <sup>(c)</sup>	Item specific Yes/no decision 5 level-specific ratings per item <sup>(c)</sup>	Item specific one rating per item (on CEF scale) <sup>(d)</sup>	Item specific one rating per item (on CEF scale) <sup>(d)</sup>
Inter-judge consistency	Analyzed	analyzed	analyzed	analyzed
Intra-judge consistency	Analyzed	analyzed	analyzed <sup>(d)</sup>	analyzed <sup>(d)</sup>
Cut-off score establishment	Minimizing the loss function <sup>(a)</sup>	Minimizing the loss function <sup>(a)</sup>	Minimizing the loss function <sup>(a)</sup>	Compound cumulative strategy <sup>(b)</sup>
Cut-off score adjustment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scale validation	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

- a) Item mastery method (Kaftandjieva & Verhelst, 1999; Verhelst & Kaftandjieva, 1999; Reckase, 2000) was developed for the DIALANG project and was applied during its first phase. The method can be classified as a test-centered continuum method where the cut-off points are set to minimize the preliminarily defined loss function that combines two sources of information: item parameter estimations, based on the IRT modelling, and experts' judgements about the relation between item mastery and the level of proficiency.
- b) Modified Angoff method (Kaftandjieva & Takala, 2002) was developed and applied in the Matriculation examination, as well as in the Finnish National Certificates for Swedish and Finnish, where due to the small number of examinees IRT is not applicable yet. The method also can be classified as a test-centered continuum method and the judgment task is the same as in the Item mastery method. The compound cumulative strategy for cut-off score establishment also combines two sources of information – empirical item difficulty (in percent correct) and expert's judgments about the level of proficiency to which a certain item belongs.
- c) This task requires judges to decide for every item whether (yes or no) an examinee on level X will be able to answer the item correctly. The task requires every item to be judged 5 times (once for every level – A2, B1, B2, C1, C2).
- d) This modification requires judges to rate the items only once, assigning to each one the level to which an examinee has to belong to be able to answer the item correctly. The advantage of this modification is that it reduces the complexity and the time required for the procedure to a large extent. Its shortcoming, however, is that it restricts the possibility to monitor the intra-judge consistency of rating.

In view of the work done, the results of the above-mentioned examinations can present a strong claim of being related to the CEF levels.

### **3. Use of the CEF in constructing the new comprehensive and upper secondary school curricula**

In the construction of the new school-adapted proficiency scales, the starting point was the CEF scales. The descriptors developed in the Finnish portfolio project were also consulted as well as the Canadian benchmarks. These provided a useful complement to the CEF scales.

The scales underwent several revisions during the curriculum construction when 15–20 representatives of all languages from both the comprehensive and upper secondary school commented them. The wordings were also tried out in some ten training seminars across the country (with 30–50 participants in each of them). The feedback was used in the cycle of revisions. Finally, a small-scale empirical validation was also carried out with 16 experienced teachers sorting descriptors. The data were analysed and the results indicated good agreement with the original scale values. A few descriptors were further revised on the basis of the results (for a report, see Hildén & Takala, 2003).

The levels and their labels are presented in the table below. Some deviation from the CEF was considered useful for the school context. Especially, it was considered important to be able to characterize and report progress at the lowest level at sufficient detail so as not to demotivate learners by indicating that they show very slow progression.

Level	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
A1.1	First stage of elementary proficiency			
A1.2	Developing elementary proficiency			
A1.3	Functional elementary proficiency			
A2.1	First stage of basic proficiency			
A2.2	Developing basic proficiency			
B1.1	Functional basic proficiency			
B1.2	Fluent basic proficiency			
B2.1	First stage of independent proficiency			
B2.2	Functional independent proficiency			
C1.1	First stage of skilled proficiency			

Since the marking, however, is to be done using the traditional scale 4—10 (fail-excellent), there is a need to find a way of relating it to the proficiency scales. Using the target levels set in the new curricula for the end of grade 6, the end of grade 9 and the end of the upper secondary school, a conversion table was sketched, which makes it possible to do this, and – as an added advantage of the use of scales, marks in different grades are more comparable than in the traditional marking system. It should be stressed that the conversion table has been constructed by one of the authors (Takala) and has no official status.

A sketch of a conversion table showing how marking in the comprehensive school and upper secondary school could be made comparable using the adapted CEF-scales:

Mark	Grade: Comprehensive School							Upper secondary		
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3
4	<<<A1.1	<<A.1.1	<A.1.1	A1.1	< A1.2	< A1.3-	<A1.3	<A2.2	<A2.2+	<< B.1.1
5	<<A1.1	<A1.1	A1.1-	A1.1+	A1.2-	A1.3-	A1.3	A2.2-	B1.1-	<B1.1
6	<A1.1	A1.1-	A1.1	A1.2-	A1.2	A1.3	A2.1-	A2.2	B1.1	B1.2
7	A1.1+	A1.1	A1.1+	A1.2	A1.3	A2.1-	A2.2	B1.1-	B1.1+	B2.1-
8	A.1.1	A1.1+	A1.2	A1.2+/ A1.3	A1.3+	A2.2	A2.2+/ B1.1	B1.1+	B2.1+	B2.2
9	A1.1+	A1.2	A1.3	A1.3+	A2.1	A2.2+	B1.1+	B2.1-	B2.2	B2.2+
10	A1.2-	A1.3	A1.3+	A2.1	A2.2	B1.1	B1.2-	B2.2-	B2.2+	C1+

The marking can be illustrated as follows, using mark 8 as an example. The corresponding CEF-level is indicated within brackets: Grade 3—8 (A.1.1), Grade 4—8 (A.1.1+), Grade 5—8 (A1.2), Grade 6—8 (A1.2+/A.1.3), Grade 7—8 (A1.3+), Grade 8—8 (A2.2), Grade 9—8 (A2.2+/B1.1); Upper secondary: Grade 1—8 (B1.1+), Grade 2—8 (B2.1+), Grade 3—8 (B2.2).

The following sketch of a conversion table shows how the marking of receptive and productive skills in the comprehensive school and upper secondary school could be made comparable using the adapted CEF-scales:

Mark	Comprehensive School				Upper Secondary School			
	LC	SP	RC	WR	LC	SP	RC	WR
4	<A1.3	<A1.2	<A2.1	<A1.2	<B1.1	<B1.1	<B1.1	<B1.1
5	A1.3	A2.1	A2.1	A1.3	B1.1	B1.1	B1.1	B1.1
6	A2.1	A2.1+	A2.2	A2.1	B1.2	B1.2	B1.2	B1.2
7	A2.2-	A2.2-	B1.1-	A2.2-	B2.1-	B2.1-	B2.1-	B2.1-
8	A2.2	A2.2	B1.1	A2.2	B2.1	B2.1	B2.1	B2.1
9	B1.1	B1.1+	B1.1+	B1.1	B2.2	B2.2	B2.2	B2.2
10	B1.2	B1.2	B1.2	B1.2	C1.1	C1.1	C1.1	C1.1

The results of the study on linking the advanced English Matriculation Examination are reported in an unpublished paper (Takala & Kaftanjieva, 2002; available by contacting [sjtakala@hotmail.com](mailto:sjtakala@hotmail.com)). The study showed that the majority of the students were at level B2, but the range was from <B1 (fail/improbatur) to C1+ (excellent/laudatur).

#### 4. Linking examinations to the CEF

There has been a growing interest in Europe (and indeed increasingly elsewhere) to link examinations to the CEF. The Finnish authorities, in cooperation with the Council of Europe, arranged an invitational expert seminar in Helsinki in the summer of 2002 to explore the issues involved (see Report: DG IV/EDU/LANG (2002) 15). The report recommended collaborative endeavour building on current work in member states:

- To describe the examination coverage, administration and analysis procedures;
- To align results reported from the examination to the CEF common reference levels;
- To provide supporting evidence that reports on the procedures followed to do so.

The report led to the setting up of an Authoring Group to prepare a manual that would set out a recommended procedure to carry out the linking. The first draft was ready in the summer of 2003 and printed in September.

The Manual recommends a four-part procedure:

**Familiarisation:** to ensure that participants in the linking project have an in-depth knowledge of the CEF

*Outcome:* Claim that persons engaged in relating exams to CEF know and understand the nature of scales of language proficiency

**Specification:** aims, CEF audit of coverage

Objectives, coverage, sections, weighting, text & item types, marking criteria, reporting

*Outcome:* a claim on the basis of content and coverage, in a standardised report

**Standardisation:** understanding CEF levels



Training with calibrated examples, benchmarking local examples for standardisation training

*Outcome:* reinforcement of claim on the basis of documented examples and procedures

**Validation:** Collection and analysis of data

Internal (test characteristics) External (relation to calibrated tests and descriptors)

*Outcome:* Confirmation of the claim on the basis of detailed reporting on data analysis

A detailed description of the recommended procedure is to be found in the preliminary pilot version of the Manual (DGIV/EDU/LANG(2003) 5). A shorter account will appear in the journal *Language Testing* (North et al., 2004).

## 5. A Possible Future Scenario

If the procedures of the Manual are acceptable and if there is an interest in increased transparency of examinations and tests, it is possible that in the foreseeable future:

- Examinations (and certificates) interested in the linkage may be related to the CEF. The linking needs to be validated by an independent review system.
- There may be a European chart showing the comparability of different examinations (ie, the validated link between examination grades & CEF levels)
- There may be co-operative training provided in the required linking procedures using the Manual.
- There may be European benchmarks for testing receptive and productive skills to assist in the linking.
- There may be a training package and training for teachers who may be required or may wish to relate their own marking to CEF-anchored scales
- Training of this kind of marking may become a regular part of teacher education.

In conclusion, our experience in Finland testifies to the great benefits of systematic international co-operation planned and coordinated by the Council of Europe. The CEF, the Portfolio and the new Manual are all tools which can be used in improving language learning, teaching and assessment and in doing so make the language education systems more comparable and transparent. This is, without doubt, a goal worth pursuing in the rapidly changing multicultural and multilingual Europe.

## References

- Hildén, R. & Takala, S. 2003. Kielten uusien opetussuunnitelmien taitotasokuvausasteikon validoinnista. Ainedidaktinen symposium 7.2. 2003. Opettaja, asiantuntijuus ja yhteiskunta. Turun yliopiston kasvatustieteiden tiedekunnan julkaisuja B72. Turun opettajankoulutuslaitos, 420—429.
- Kaftandjieva, F. & Takala, S. 2002. *Relating the Finnish Matriculation Examination English Test Results to the CEF Scale*. Paper, presented at Helsinki Seminar, June 31— July 2, 2002.
- Kaftandjieva, F., Verhelst, N. & Takala, S. 1999. *DIALANG: A Manual for Standard setting procedure*. (Unpublished).
- Kaftandjieva, F. & Verhelst, N. 2000. *A new standard setting method for multiple cut-off scores*. Paper presented at LTRC 2000, Vancouver.

- Kaftandjieva, F. & Takala, S. 2002 Relating the Finnish Matriculation Examination English Test Results to the CEF Scales. Paper presented at the Helsinki Seminar, June 31— July 2, 2002.
- North, B., Figueras, N., Takala, S., Verhelst, N. & Van Avermaet, P. 2004. Relating Examinations to the Common European Framework: A Manual (to appear in Language Testing)
- Reckase, M. D. 2000. A Survey and Evaluation of Recently Developed Procedures for Setting Standards on Educational Tests. In *Student performance Standards on the National Assessment of Educational progress: Affirmations and Improvement*. Ed. By M. L. Bourquey & Sh. Byrd, Washington: NAEP, 41—70.
- Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framaework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEF). Manual. Preliminary Pilot Version. Strasbourg: Language Policies Division. September 2003 (DGIV/EDU/LANG(2203) 5)
- Verhelst, N. D., and Kaftandjieva, F. 1999. *A rational method to determine cutoff scores (Research Report 99—07)*. Enschede, The Netherlands: University of Twente, Faculty of Educational Science and Technology, Department of Educational Measurement and Data Analysis.