Putting the CEFR to Good Use: Activities and Outcomes in Finland

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1. Introduction

I will present a selective account of the activities on and with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in Finland. This will also reflect my own perspective, drawing on long contact and association with the Council of Europe´s modern language project.[21] This gave me a good opportunity to help mediate the CoE initiatives to the development of language education in Finland as I was a regular member of several subsequent curriculum development teams in modern languages. Finland tended to be among the "early adopters" of the many CoE contributions to the updating of language teaching and learning (Takala 2006). The curriculum of the new comprehensive-type basic school in 1970 reflected the recommendations of the Ostia and Ankara conferences in 1966, which featured the "four skills" , becoming acquainted with the target language culture and developing a positive attitude to its speakers. In the mid-1970s the functional-notional approach embodied in the Threshold level was adapted to school use. Subsequent curricula strengthened the role of learner autonomy and responsibility, self-assessment and reflection and cross-cultural competence.

Why did Finnish language educators and decision makers have such a favourable attitude to the approaches and tools developed under the umbrella of the CoE modern language project? There is no research information on this but I will present some personal views. Perhaps the most important reason is the fact the CoE developed a coherent and far-sighted general policy for its work in promoting broad-based European cooperation in developing new initiatives in language education. It was able to draw on top experts from a variety of countries ensuring that

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[21] My first brush with the CoE was in 1968 when I attended its seminar on language testing/assessment in Skepparholmen, Sweden. In 1976 I attended the symposium in Holte, Denmark, whose theme was modern languages in primary education. A more active role occurred at "a meeting of experts on the extension of the threshold to school education" in Strasbourg in 1976. In the 1990´s, I was a member of the advisory group related to the development of the CEFR and in the 2000s a member of the working group developing the manual for relating examinations to the CEFR.

DIALANG faced many daunting challenges: how to write test specifications, self-assessment statements, feedback statements and relate all this to the CEFR (see Alderson 2005). Of course, relating the outcomes to the CEFR was a huge challenge (Kaftandjieva, Verhelst & Takala 1999) and it became a "hot" topic after the CEFR had been published in 2001. It needs to be pointed out that standard setting required a new approach: from the usual task of setting one cut-score (failing/passing the standard), as many as five cut-scores were needed. This was done using as a starting point the "modified Angoff" method.[23]

The results of a validation study (Kaftandjieva & Takala 2002), which was designed and conducted as a part of a pilot study of a standard-setting procedure specifically designed for the purposes of DIALANG, provided strong support for the validity of the CoE scales for listening, reading and writing. These findings not only confirmed that the DIALANG assessment system was based on solid ground but they also had a broader impact, supporting the view that any further development of the CEFR could be undertaken on a sound basis.

3.2. Scale development
While the CEFR scales have become the benchmark in Europe and beyond, there were many scales developed and used before the CEFR. Indeed, Brian North (1995) reports in his PhD thesis that almost 30 scales (and about 1000 descriptors) were used in the Swiss project that led to the CEFR scales.

In Finland, the need for a national certificates system (YKI) was discussed in the early 1990s and introduced by an Act in the mid-1990s. A number of reasons were presented for the system, including the opportunity for adults to have a reliable assessment of their language proficiency irrespective of how they had acquired the skills and the possibility of using the data for

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[23] Actually three different modifications of the modified two-choice Angoff method as well as three different modifications of the contrasting group-method were applied to the standard setting procedure. Multiple matrix sampling with incomplete equal-sized linked design was used to pilot the items. Item response theory was applied to item calibration. The One Parameter Logistic Model (OPLM) was chosen, because it combines the desirable statistical characteristics of the Rasch model with the attractive features of the two-parameter logistic model. Moreover, the OPLM computer program allows application of incomplete test design, which at that time was not possible with most of the other computer programs that applied the IRT approach to test development and analysis. The adaptive test construction design was based on the two-stage multilevel adaptive testing approach. The role of the routing test (pre-estimation) is played by the Vocabulary Size Placement Test and the self-assessment tools. The second-stage language test has three overlapping levels of difficulty.

assessing the overall national language proficiency level and for developing language education. The development of the system drew heavily on the Waystage, Treshold and Vantage specifications and adapted the 9-point scale of the English Speaking Union.[24] As the CoE 6-point scale entered the scene and gained growing attention and acceptance, a project was set up to calibrate the original scale to a new 6-point scale. This required considerable conceptual and empirical work and the new scale was successfully validated against the CEFR scale (Kaftandjieva & Takala, 2003).

Another large-scale project (2000-2001) was carried out to develop a system for harmonizing high-stakes assessment of compulsory language requirements in polytechnics (tertiary level). Scales were developed on the basis of the CoE 6-point scales but adapting them to make them more relevant for a LSP context. Their validation procedure was largely similar to the earlier work developed by Dr. Kaftandjieva. This and the building of an item bank (a new feature) is reported in an unpublished manuscript (Kaftandjieva 2001).

A third project is presented to show a different context of scale development. The current syllabuses for the basic school and the upper secondary school (2004 and 2003, respectively) continued the long-established orientation of communicative language teaching and cross-cultural communication but introduced as a new element target levels for grades 6, 9 and 12 using school-adapted CoE scales. The most important deviation is the introduction of three sub-levels at A1: A1.1, A1.2 and A1.3. There are two main reasons for this: qualitatively clear progress is the most rapid at the beginning stage and more fine-grain levels are needed for reporting progress. It is surely very demotivating if a pupil feels that he/she is making progress but is reported to be at level A1 for a long period of study. Another adaptation is that there is more attention given to constraints than in the CEFR where the descriptors are predominantly couched in positive terms without indicating any constraints. It was felt that the spelling out of constraints was useful for the purposes of assessment and grading. Teachers have tended to agree that this is a useful addition. The scales were subjected to a small-scale validation (Hildén & Takala, 2007).

3.3. Assessment of learning outcomes in the school system

In the above, language proficiency was assessed in the DIALANG and AMKKIA projects. The "clients" of these were not "representative" of the ordinary school population. There have been a

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[24] It is likely that the experience in developing and administering a language examination in several languages, drawing on the CoE tools was one of the main reasons why the Center for Applied Language Studies was encouraged to submit a proposal that led to the launching of DIALANG.

few studies where nationally representative studies have explored what level is achieved in language studies in the Finnish school system.

The first of these was a study of the level of achievement in English in the Matriculation Examination after 10 years of English (about 850 lessons, some 625 "clock" hours). The study (Kaftandjieva & Takala, 2002) was presented at a CoE seminar in Helsinki in the summer of 2002, which launched the process leading to the CoE Manual for relating examinations to the CEFR. Using basically the approach used by the authors in earlier studies it was established that about 60% of students had reached level B2, about 15% C1, 1-2% level C2 and about 15% level B1, which was the pass level. Figure 1 illustrates the levels reached in different languages with a 10-year course of study as against a 3-5 course study (started at the age of 13-14 or 15-16), and a 6-year course for Swedish (a compulsory language for Finnish-speaking students).

Distribution of Levels (%) in the Matric Exam (19yrs)
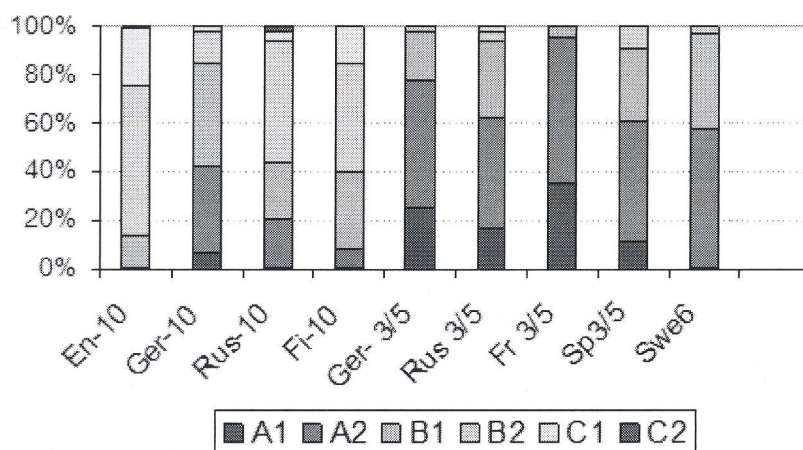
10: 10 years of study; 3/5: 3-5 years of study; 6 - 6 years of study

Fig 1. Distribution of levels reached in the Finnish school system.

A few observations are worth pointing out. The level reached in English is much higher than in the other "long" languages (the same number of lessons). The good level of achievement in Russian and Finnish can be explained by the relatively large number of students who are strongly bilingual. This illustrates the fact that, especially for English, a substantial part of the level of achievement is explained by out-of-school use of English ("informal learning"). There is, in fact, a saying in Finnish that "English sticks to your clothes" – it is ubiquitous. It is sometimes

also called "the third national language", with Finnish/Swedish being "the other national language", respectively. The figure shows further that the level attained in the shorter courses is considerably lower than in the long courses. It also shows that learning oucomes in Swedish are quite low, mainly due to problems of motivation. It is also worth noting that the linkage of English and Swedish is more reliable than in the case of the other languages, which are presented here as tentative linkages.

There have been three national assessments with representative samples of basic school 9th graders. Fig. 2 shows the levels reached at the end of basic school after seven years of English (some 600 lessons, 450 "clock hours"). The results are reported by Tuokko (PhD thesis 2007).

Level in English (%): grade 9 (15-16 years; 7 years of English, Tuokko, 2007)
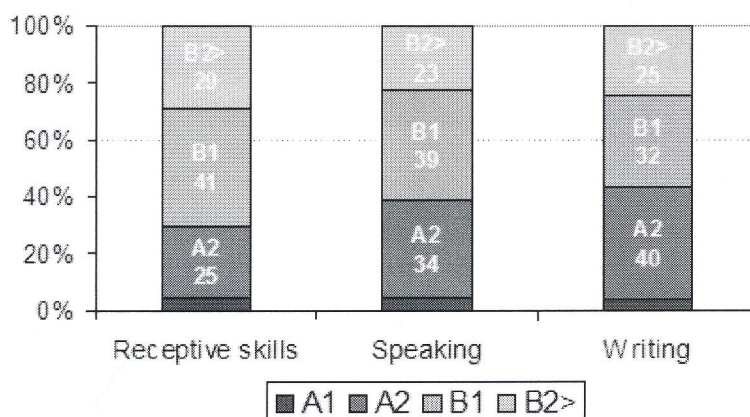
Fig. 2 Distribution of levels in English at the end of basic school
All four skills were assessed, but for the purpose of standard setting the receptive skills (listening and reading) were merged to reach a satisfactory level of reliability (as the relatively short tests did not possess a sufficient level of reliability). As the figure shows, the most common level reached was B1 (it was B2 at the end of the upper secondary school; cf. above).

The level reached in Swedish (Finnish-speaking students) and Finnish (Swedish-speaking pupils) was lower. The level in Swedish (three years of study) was about A1.3 - A2.1 (Tuokko 2008). The level in Finnish was obviously higher (seven years of study) – A2.2 on the average but clearly lower than in the case of English (Toropainen 2010). For those students who studied

according to a more mother-tongue resembling syllabus (more or less bilingual students) the level was (obviously) higher – B1.2 on the average. An outcome which is worrisome in a school system which is strongly built on the premise of educational equality is the fact that the general level of attainment in Finnish was considerably lower in the coastal area in the mid-west than in the more bilingual-influenced southern coastal area.

4. Conclusion and discussion

Overall, it is probably fair to say that the rather extensive work on and with the CEFR in Finland has been a positive and rewarding experience and that it has been quite successful. On the other hand, the implementation of the CEFR applications in schools and classrooms (eg. in assessment/grading/examinations) has been slow and not very systematic.

One of the conclusions reached during the work with and on the CEFR is that there is qualitatively fast progess in the lower stages of language proficiency. After this it takes increasingly more time (exposure, use) to reach subsequent levels. This is illustrated tentatively in Fig. 3 (Level 1=A1, 2=A2 etc). The time scale represents hours.
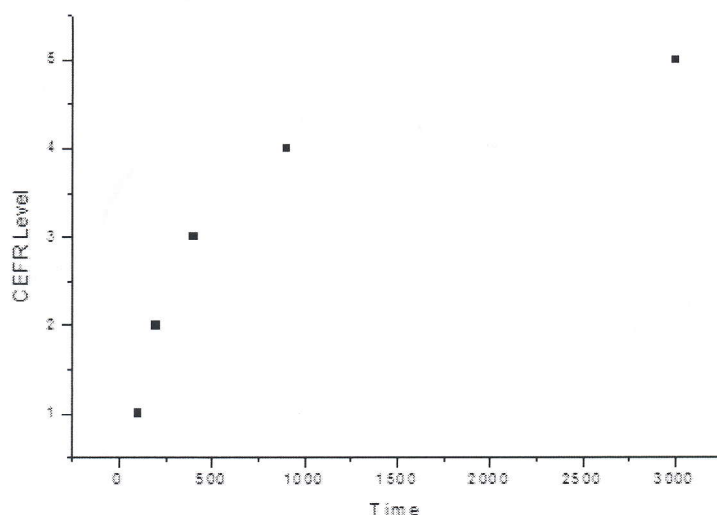
Another conclusion is that reporting learning outcomes in terms of the CEFR levels (which is a form of criterion-referencing) makes it possible to report progress over time and to compare levels attained in different courses/languages much better than is possible in the still dominant norm-referenced grading practice in Finland.

A third conclusion is that the benefits of using the CEFR do not come cheap. A lot of effort has to be devoted to planning, execution, data analysis and interpretation. After an intensive period of development work there are now several tools that can be consulted and used, but even so the need for competence building and learning-by-doing should not be underestimated. On the other hand, reliance on external "experts" should not be overstated. Competence can be built up by making a commitment to a relatively long period of development work. A lot can be learned by studying how the CEFR has been used in other contexts.

Finally, I wish to express my personal perception of how the CEFR is viewed in Finland. It has been seen as a valuable tool in all national development of language education and also been found useful in international contacts and cooperation. It is seen as a reference tool, descriptive rather than prescriptive, both inviting and requiring thoughtful application by the users. While it is comprehensive it does not cover everything. Also, while it is the most useful tool developed in the recent past, it needs to be elaborated through international cooperation. In sum, both the CEFR and the ELP are good examples of international cooperation undertaken voluntarily and serving enlightened national self-interests. Contrary to some voiced criticism, it is not seen in Finland as an agenda for trying to enforce consensus or to exercise power. All of my forty years of involvement in the various CoE language project activities suggest that the ethos of the activities is built on sharing, consultation and cooperation.

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Sauli Takala obtained his PhD in 1984 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign focusing on vocabulary learning in EFL. He took an active part over 40 years in the national research and development work on language education in Finland and participated in Nordic cooperation in this area, which was very lively in the 1970s and 1980s. He coordinated the IEA International Study of Writing in the 1980s and helped to plan and coordinate the EU DIALANG project in the late 1990s. He has had a long association with the Council of Europe modern language project and is currently consultant for its European Centre for Modern Languages. He is a founding member of EALTA and served as its second president.