

A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of practices

1 OVERVIEW

Project leader(s) contact:

Ailín Ní Chonchúir (Project Manager), Professor Máirín Nic Eoin, Professor Emerita
Fiontar agus Scoil na Gaeilge, Dublin City University

Dr John Walsh, Senior Lecturer in Irish,

School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

Aoife Ní Ghloinn, (Implementation)

Department of Modern Irish and Centre for Irish Language Research, Teaching and Testing,
Maynooth University, Ireland

Country: Ireland

Institution: Maynooth University

Type of context: National/national language

Educational sector: Tertiary

Main focus: Curriculum, Resource, Assessment

SUMMARY

Name: Curriculum for a national language – undergraduate level

Abstract:

This document describes the development and implementation of a CEFR-based syllabus for Irish at undergraduate level. This account focuses on two distinct phases of the project:

Phase 1: The development of the syllabus and sample teaching materials as part of a collaborative, inter-institutional project (*An Mheitheal um Theagasc na Gaeilge*), led by St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra (now Dublin City University) and the National University of Ireland, Galway, and involving a number of partner institutions.

Phase 2: The adaptation and implementation of the syllabus and accompanying resources in one of the partner institutions, Maynooth University.

Stage: Planning, Implementation, Evaluation

Theme: Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Assessment

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

Main features of this example:

Phase 1: Inter-institutional syllabus development

- Well-planned, thorough curriculum development process, with needs analysis, inter-institutional collaboration, financial support from a state organisation, *Foras na Gaeilge*, and expert advice and input

Phase 2: Adaptation and implementation of the syllabus in Maynooth University

- Sufficient time and resources allocated: e.g. the University recruited two full-time team members to adapt and implement the programme.
- Course handbook and resources developed to make it easy for teachers and students to use CEFR.
- Training workshops to guide teachers in delivering the course. Teachers may avail of additional training through a Diploma in Teaching Irish to Adults, also offered by Maynooth University, which is based on CEFR principles.
- Feedback sought from students and teachers each year to allow for ongoing evaluation and review of the programme.
- Ongoing review of assessment practices in order to ensure coherent CEFR-based alignment of curriculum, teaching and assessment.

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



2 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background:

This project arose from a recognition that significant growth in the number of students studying Irish at tertiary level and increasing diversity in their prospective career paths had resulted in a change in the backgrounds and learning needs of those students. Concerns were voiced about students' language proficiency levels both at entry to university and on completion of their studies, and questions were raised about the possible consequences for the teaching profession and other sectors employing Irish language graduates. There was a perceived need for the modernisation and standardisation of Irish language programmes across institutions around the country, and the CEFR was seen as a useful framework on which to base a new syllabus.

Description:

The syllabus specifies learning outcomes based on level B2 of the CEFR, which were adapted in order to meet the learning needs of university students of Irish. The syllabus was also informed by other principles of best practice outlined in the CEFR document, including a communicative approach, student-centred learning, an integrated approach to the teaching of language skills, task-based learning, self-reflection, the promotion of language awareness and the use of a learner portfolio.

Stated aims:

1. To clarify the learning targets of the undergraduate programme in Irish, in particular the learning targets related to the language itself, as opposed to literature and other elements of the B.A. Irish programme.
2. To provide this specification in a way that would be comparable to other language programmes, both nationally and internationally.
3. To modernise the teaching approach, with a focus on communicative, task-based learning, self-reflection, language awareness, autonomous learning, cultural awareness and other principles of best practice in modern language teaching.
4. To achieve a higher level of language proficiency, autonomy and language awareness among Irish-language graduates, many of whom will go on to teach Irish at primary and secondary levels in the future, or to work in other areas of the Irish-language sector, such as the media and translation.

Steps/stages:

1. Planning:

- A conference on the Teaching of Irish at Third Level was held in Saint Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, in February 2008. This conference highlighted the challenges faced in teaching Irish at undergraduate level and the need for a collaborative effort, based on international research and best practice, in order to tackle these issues.
- A collaborative inter-institutional working group, *An Mheitheal Um Theagasc na Gaeilge ar an Tríú Leibhéal*, emerged from this conference.
- In April, 2008, funding was secured from a state organisation, *Foras na Gaeilge*, for the development of a CEFR-based syllabus and teaching materials for the undergraduate programme in Irish.
- A full-time project manager was appointed in November of that year.
- A research assistant was employed to conduct a detailed needs analysis of students across four institutions, and a report of the findings was presented to the project manager.

2. Development of syllabus:

- The syllabus and sample teaching materials were developed from 2008 – 2011. This work was led by the project manager, with input from a committee of experts from the various institutions involved.

3. Adaptation and implementation in Maynooth University

- Implementation in various institutions around the country began in 2009. Maynooth University began implementing the syllabus as part of the first-year undergraduate programme in 2010.

- In 2011, two full-time staff members were recruited to implement, develop and teach the programme in Maynooth. They conducted further analyses of the needs of the students in that institution (through questionnaires and a learner corpus analysis) and developed and adapted the teaching materials and continuous assessment practices accordingly.
- Course handbooks were developed for each of the three undergraduate year-groups to support students and teachers in the implementation of the syllabus. These handbooks include checklists of can-do statements based on the learning outcomes and competences specified in the syllabus. Students are encouraged to engage with these checklists as part of self-assessment tasks and teachers are encouraged to draw students' attention to these learning targets and to use them to facilitate the monitoring of their own progress throughout each year.
- Tests and exams are slowly changing to better reflect these learning outcomes, but the implementation of changes in this area of the course has been more challenging, due to pre-existing and well-established approaches to assessment, as well as the constraints of working within the broader university context.

4. Teacher training and professional development in Maynooth University

- Regular training workshops and standardisation meetings were introduced in order to guide teachers in the delivery of the programme and related assessment. The levels and basic principles of the CEFR (e.g. student-centred learning, a communicative approach, integration of skills, task-based learning, self-reflection, language awareness, etc.) were discussed as part of these workshops.
- Additionally, many of the teachers have availed of further training through a Diploma in Teaching Irish to Adults, also offered by Maynooth University, which is based on CEFR principles.

5. Review of assessment practices in Maynooth University

- A review of assessment practices began in 2015 and is ongoing. This review began with the recording of the oral exams for the first time in 2015. A small-scale research project was conducted to analyse these recordings, in order to assess the reliability and validity of both the exams themselves and of the rating process. Expert language testers were consulted during this process.
- Recommendations were made based on this analysis, new oral exam specifications were drawn up and a workshop was held for department staff to discuss the new approach and raise awareness of principles of best practice in assessing speaking.
- Written exams were also analysed and recommendations made in order to link them more closely to the learning outcomes of the new syllabus and to increase their reliability, validity and positive washback effect. A number of these recommendations were implemented in the academic year, 2016-17.
- Studies were also conducted in both 2016 and 2017 to compare student attainment at the end of the undergraduate programme to their achievement on an independent, standardised CEFR-based test for Irish, *Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge*, in order to investigate the alignment of the exams with the CEFR.

Timeline:

2008: Conference leading to collaborative inter-institutional working group. Funding secured, with full-time project manager appointed in November.

2008-11: Needs analysis research carried out. Syllabus and sample teaching materials developed.

2009: Implementation began in various institutions around the country, including Maynooth University.

2011: Two full-time staff recruited to implement, develop and teach the programme in Maynooth University.

2015: A review of assessment practices began in Maynooth University and is ongoing.

2015: Conference to report on and assess the implementation of the syllabus in various universities around the country.

2016: Research began in Maynooth University to compare student attainment at the end of the undergraduate programme to their achievement on an independent, standardised CEFR-based test for Irish, *Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge* (TEG), in order to investigate the alignment of the final exams with the CEFR.

People/roles:**Phase 1: Planning and syllabus development**

This was carried out by an inter-institutional collaborative working group, *An Mheitheal um Theagasc na Gaeilge*. This group consisted of three parts: i) a steering committee who led the process; ii) a syllabus working group, made up of experts on various aspects of teaching, learning and assessment; and iii) a support network of representatives from each of the partner institutions, who served as a link between the project and those institutions. The support of the state organisation, *Foras na Gaeilge*, was crucial in providing funding to employ a project manager. The leadership of senior members of staff, particularly in the two lead institutions, was also an important factor that contributed to the success of the project.

Phase 2: Implementation in Maynooth University

Two full-time senior tutors were recruited in 2011 to implement, develop and teach the programme in Maynooth. They developed and adapted the teaching materials, course handbooks, teacher training workshops and continuous assessment practices over the following years. As the programme was being implemented in Maynooth, regular staff meetings were held to discuss the implementation, and feedback was sought from students and tutors. Again, the support and advocacy of senior members of staff in the institution was essential in ensuring the successful implementation of various changes related to the new syllabus.

Quality assurance procedures employed in Maynooth University:*Continuous standardisation and validation*

- Regular training sessions and rater moderation meetings were and continue to be held for tutors, to ensure the reliability of continuous assessment.
- Oral exams have been standardised and a process of rater moderation and monitoring has also been introduced, facilitated by the recordings of the exams.

Ongoing validation

- Further research is also been carried out to investigate the benchmarking of student achievement in final undergraduate Irish exams to the CEFR.

It should be mentioned that the university also has its own procedures for quality control, mainly in relation to exams and assessment. Quality reviews of all courses are conducted every five years, and we have an exams' board and a system of external examiners who oversee assessment practices within each academic department. There is also an appeals procedure in place in the university to deal with any queries about exam results. However, none of these procedures is specific to language education and external examiners may or may not have knowledge of the CEFR, or specific expertise in the areas of language teaching and testing.

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

- An Mheitheal um Theagasc na Gaeilge ar an Tríú Leibhéal. 2009. *Siollabas Nua don Chéad Bhliain Ollscoile*. Available at: www.teagascnaGaeilge.ie
- Ní Fhrighil, Ríona & Nic Eoin, Máirín (eds). 2009. *Ó Theagasc Teanga go Sealbhú Teanga: Múineadh agus Foghlaim na Gaeilge ar an Tríú Leibhéal* (Cois Life, Dublin).
- Nic Eoin, Máirín (2016). 'Re-Imagining Academic and Professional Irish Language Programmes in Initial Teacher Education: Implications of a New Third Level Irish Language Syllabus', *Teanga* 24. Available at: : http://www.iraal.ie/uploads/1/3/5/8/13582401/teanga.24_nic_eoin.pdf
- Walsh, John and Nic Eoin, Máirín (2010). 'Siollabas nua Gaeilge don chéad bhliain ollscoile'. *Teagasc na Gaeilge*, 9, 13-24.
- Walsh, John & Nic Eoin, Máirín. 2009. 'Cúlra an Tionscadail: Bunú na Meithle um Theagasc na Gaeilge ar an Tríú Leibhéal', in *Siollabas Nua don Chéad Bhliain Ollscoile*. Available at: www.teagascnaGaeilge.ie
- Walsh, John, 2012. 'An Chanóin, an Caighdeán agus an Curaclam (2)'. *Léachtaí Cholm Cille XLII*. Maynooth: An Sagart, 74-98.

3 RESULTS

What was achieved:

A common CEFR-based syllabus and sample teaching materials for Irish at university level, made available through the project website, www.teagascnagaeilge.ie. Clearer learning outcomes for the undergraduate programme, as well as increased emphasis on communication, task-based learning, learner autonomy and language awareness.

Impact:

- The project has raised awareness and understanding of the CEFR and of principles of best practice in language teaching and assessment among teachers and students of Irish at third level.
- The project has also raised awareness of applied linguistics, in general, as an academic field and has possibly raised the status of language teaching and testing specialists within Irish university departments. This can be seen most clearly through the creation of two new permanent full-time positions for 'Senior Tutors of Irish' within the Department of Modern Irish in Maynooth University, where a significant percentage of language teaching was previously done by part-time staff and post-graduate students.
- As we are working in a context where a traditional grammar-translation approach to language teaching was dominant in many institutions until the introduction of this syllabus, some advocates of that style of language teaching may have been sceptical that a communicative approach would prioritise communication at the expense of grammar. The implementation of change, particularly in relation to assessment practices, has happened very gradually as a result. A lot more work has still to be done, particularly regarding assessment, before the true impact of the project can be evaluated.

Resources on this theme

www.teagascnagaeilge.ie

4 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

Advice on this theme; things to remember:

- Where implementation of the CEFR in a particular educational context represents a significant change or shift in approach, this change needs to be managed carefully. The need for change should be justified by careful needs analysis and relevant research. It may be important to raise awareness and clarify misunderstandings about what you're trying to do.
- It is important to take an inclusive, collaborative approach and to involve all stake-holders, both in the planning and implementation stages of the project. It is worth considering collaboration on an inter-departmental or inter-institutional level as well as within the department or institution. Gather feedback regularly from students, teachers and other stakeholders, and adapt the approach accordingly.
- If possible, gain the support of those in positions of power (e.g. government, the Department of Education, university authorities, etc.). Well-placed advocates (i.e. senior members of staff) may be essential to champion the benefits of implementing the CEFR and the need for change.
- It is important to take a research-based approach, with expert advice and input, where possible. It is essential to provide adequate training and professional development opportunities for staff members involved.
- It will take time! You may need to find a balance between being ambitious and practical.

Advice on this theme; pitfalls to avoid:

Don't try to change too much too quickly. It may be a process of trial and error, trying new approaches, evaluating their success and adapting accordingly.