

Testing less widely-spoken languages in a multilingual context

**Learning, teaching, assessment: how should
national education systems respond to the
challenge of the CEFR?**

**David Little
Trinity College Dublin**

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Introduction

What is the challenge of the CEFR?

- The CEFR's action-oriented, "can do" approach to the definition of L2 proficiency offers to bring curriculum, pedagogy and assessment into closer interaction with one another than has usually been the case
- Each "can do" descriptor can be used to
 - Specify a curriculum goal
 - Select/develop learning activities and materials
 - Frame the elaboration of assessment criteria
- In this way the CEFR challenges us to rethink each dimension – curriculum, pedagogy, assessment – in terms of the other two
- This should have implications for
 - The selection and definition of curriculum goals
 - The development of teaching methods
 - The selection and elaboration of assessment instruments

The response so far: curriculum

- An early international consensus:
 - A1 and A2 = primary and lower secondary
 - B1 and B2 = upper secondary
 - C1 and C2 = higher education
- Examples
 - Analysis of the (implied) communicative goals of the Irish L2 curricula yielded A1/A2 checklists for lower secondary (Junior Certificate) and B1/B2 checklists for upper secondary (Leaving Certificate) – cf. ELP 2001.10
 - France specifies B2 at school leaving for first foreign language and B1 for second foreign language
 - The UK's subject benchmark statement for primary degrees in languages (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2007, pp.15–16) specifies C1 for “threshold standard” and C2 for “typical standard”

The response so far: pedagogy

- The European Language Portfolio as a means of promoting
 - reflective learning/learner autonomy/lifelong language learning
 - plurilingualism
 - intercultural awareness
- 101 accredited versions of the ELP have been developed in 32 Council of Europe member states and by 5 INGOs (November 2009)
- In a few cases (individual schools and universities in various countries) the ELP has provided the basis for significant pedagogical innovation based on reflection driven by self-assessment
- In most cases it has been treated by teachers and learners as an unwelcome add-on, though increasing numbers of textbooks contain elements that reflect the influence of the ELP (e.g. checklists, self-assessment, the idea of a dossier)

The response so far: assessment

- The Council of Europe has developed and piloted the *Manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR* (Council of Europe 2009)
- There is no evidence that in European school systems the CEFR's action-oriented approach **as such** has had an impact on either the design of assessment instruments or the approach to rating
- Learning outcomes may now be expressed in terms of the CEFR levels, but the exams remain the same:
 - Priority still tends to be given to reading and writing
 - The testing of oral skills is often very sketchy
- There is typically a serious mismatch between the communication skills school leavers are claimed to possess and the skills they can actually deploy spontaneously, confidently and to good effect

The remainder of this presentation

- How educational systems might respond more adequately to the challenge of the CEFR
 - Curriculum
 - Pedagogy
 - Assessment
- Conclusion: it can be done
 - Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for ESL in Irish primary schools

**Responding to the challenge of the
CEFR: curriculum**

Read and reflect on the descriptors

- **A1:** *I can introduce somebody and use basic greeting and leave-taking expressions*
- **A2:** *I can make simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks*
- **B1:** *I can start, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest*
- **B2:** *I can initiate, maintain and end discourse naturally with effective turn-taking*
- **C1:** *I can use the language fluently, accurately and effectively on a wide range of general, professional or academic topics*
- **C2:** *I can take part effortlessly in all conversations and discussions with native speakers*

The learning implied by CEFR levels

- A1 and A2 descriptors mostly refer to discrete tasks
 - “*Basic greeting and leave-taking expressions*” can be mastered in a few lessons
 - “*Simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks*” might provide the focus for several terms’ learning
- From B1 upwards descriptors refer to increasingly general and complex communicative activity:
 - “*I can start, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest*” (B1) requires an extended period of learning in which the target language is the medium of classroom interaction
 - “*I can take part effortlessly in all conversations and discussions with native speakers*” (C2) is not a skill that can be imparted by a teacher in a classroom: it requires sustained use of the target language in communication with native speakers in a variety of academic and/or professional contexts

Defining learning outcomes

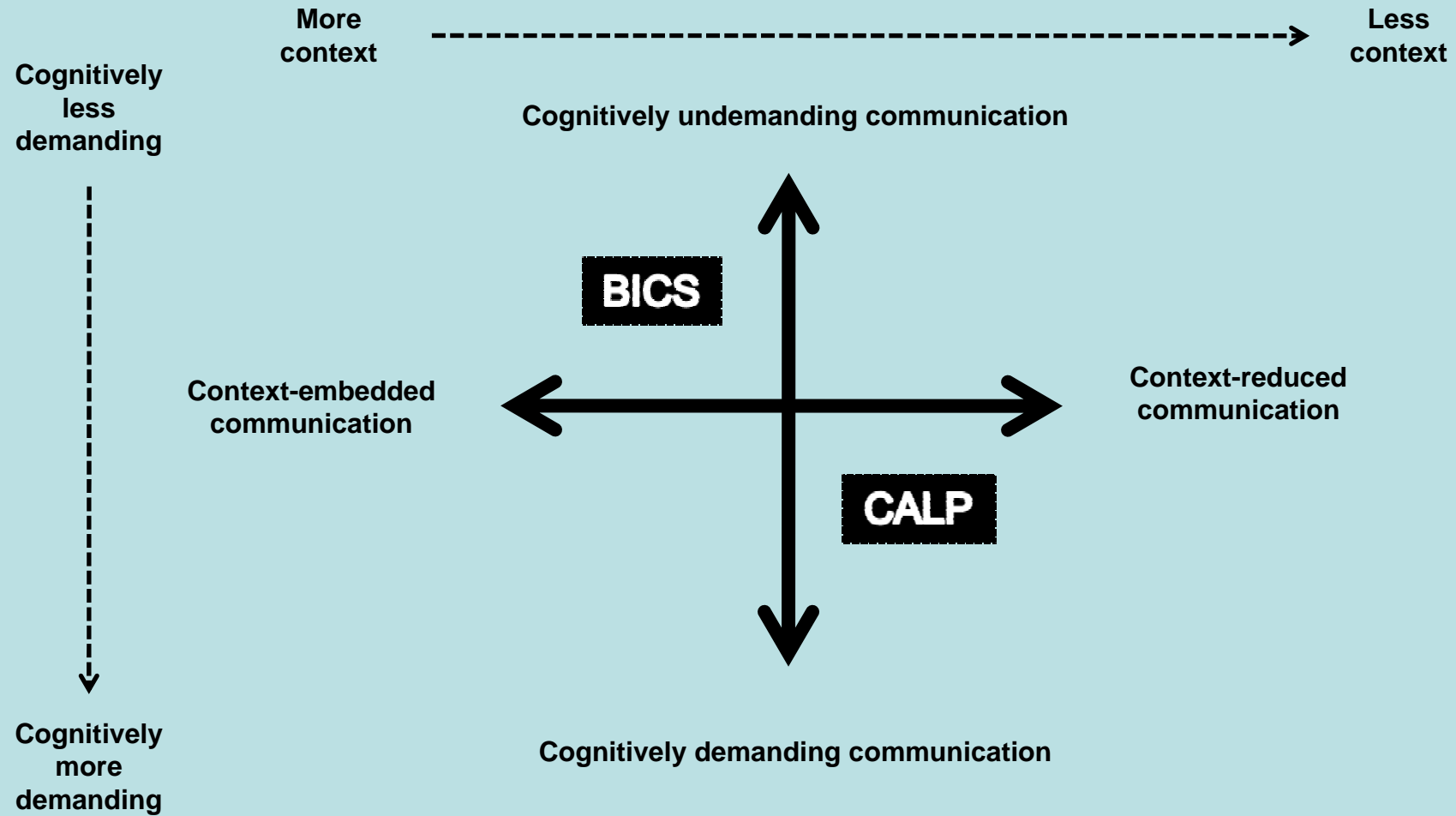
- Educational authorities should face reality:
 - In the majority of L2 classrooms in European school systems the target language is **not** the preferred medium of teaching and learning
 - There is in any case insufficient teaching/learning time to achieve the proficiency levels most curricula aim for
 - Consider the Canadian experience: core vs immersion French
- Specify achievable goals:
 - A2 in SPOKEN INTERACTION, SPOKEN PRODUCTION and WRITING is a perfectly respectable school-leaving outcome ***if is achieved as a fully internalized and spontaneously deployable repertoire***
 - A2 is the level at which “the majority of descriptors stating social functions are to be found” together with “descriptors on getting out and about” (Council of Europe 2001, pp.33–34)
 - If the typical Irish school leaver had an A2 productive proficiency in Irish and one continental European language ...

Can more advanced levels be achieved?

- Yes, but only under certain conditions:
 - If we are seriously intent on promoting higher levels of proficiency we must develop different kinds of curricula and adopt different approaches to teaching and learning (especially to using the target language as the medium of classroom interaction)
 - CLIL (content and language integrated learning), in which the target language is the medium through which the content of a non-language subject is learnt, offers the best hope of bringing school leavers to B2: *“I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view”* (B2 WRITING)
 - It should be fundamental to CLIL curricula that they emphasize the importance of developing learners’ metacognitive capacities ***in the target language*** (this is a clear implication of B2 descriptors)
 - In other words, L2 teaching at this level should focus increasingly on the development of learners’ Cognitive/Academic Language Processing abilities (e.g., Cummins 1984)

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BICS and CALP (Cummins 1984)



Define curriculum goals in “can do” terms

- Don't simply claim that the curriculum corresponds to one or another CEFR level: such claims are typically vacuous
- Use “can do” descriptors to specify learning outcomes in terms of the CEFR's five communicative activities – LISTENING, READING, SPOKEN INTERACTION, SPOKEN PRODUCTION, WRITING
- If the curriculum embraces more than one CEFR level, use the levels to indicate progression in learning
- However much detail the “official” version of the curriculum contains, construct it in such a way that a briefer, teacher/learner-friendly version can easily be derived from it
- A curriculum that specifies learning outcomes in “can do” terms emphasizes its communicative orientation

**Responding to the challenge of the
CEFR: pedagogy (the ELP)**

What is the ELP?

A personal document that has three obligatory components:

- **language passport** – summarizes the owner's linguistic identity and language learning and intercultural experience; records the owner's (teacher-supported) self-assessment using the levels of the CEFR (self-assessment grid)
- **language biography** – provides a reflective accompaniment to the ongoing processes of learning and using second languages and engaging with the cultures associated with them; scaled "I can" checklists are used to plan and review learning
- **dossier** – used to collect evidence of L2 proficiency and intercultural experience

and two functions:

- **pedagogical**, supporting a reflective approach to language learning and the development of learner autonomy (CALP)
- **reporting**, providing evidence of L2 proficiency and intercultural experience

Use the ELP to mediate curriculum goals

- A widely reported reason why teachers reject the ELP as an unnecessary extra: its relevance to the curriculum is unclear
- Counteract this by developing a version of the ELP that is explicitly rooted in the curriculum
 - Checklists of “I can” descriptors should be derived directly from the “can do” descriptors of the curriculum
 - Language biography pages should reflect specific emphases of the curriculum
- Present the ELP as a multilingual document
- Provide the “I can” checklists in each of the curriculum languages to encourage language learning through language use
- Present the checklists in such a way that they can be used to plan and monitor as well as assess learning
- Encourage self-assessment and peer assessment as one of the foundations of reflective learning

The ELP and self-assessment

- From the beginning of the ELP pilot projects (1998–2000) self-assessment has been one of the ELP's most challenging features
- A general concern:
 - Learners do not have the knowledge necessary to assess themselves
- This concern
 - may be influenced by the fact that L2 exams (and language teachers) have traditionally judged learning outcomes according to standards of linguistic correctness
 - misses the point that in the ELP self-assessment is referenced to behavioural criteria: even very small children know what they can do

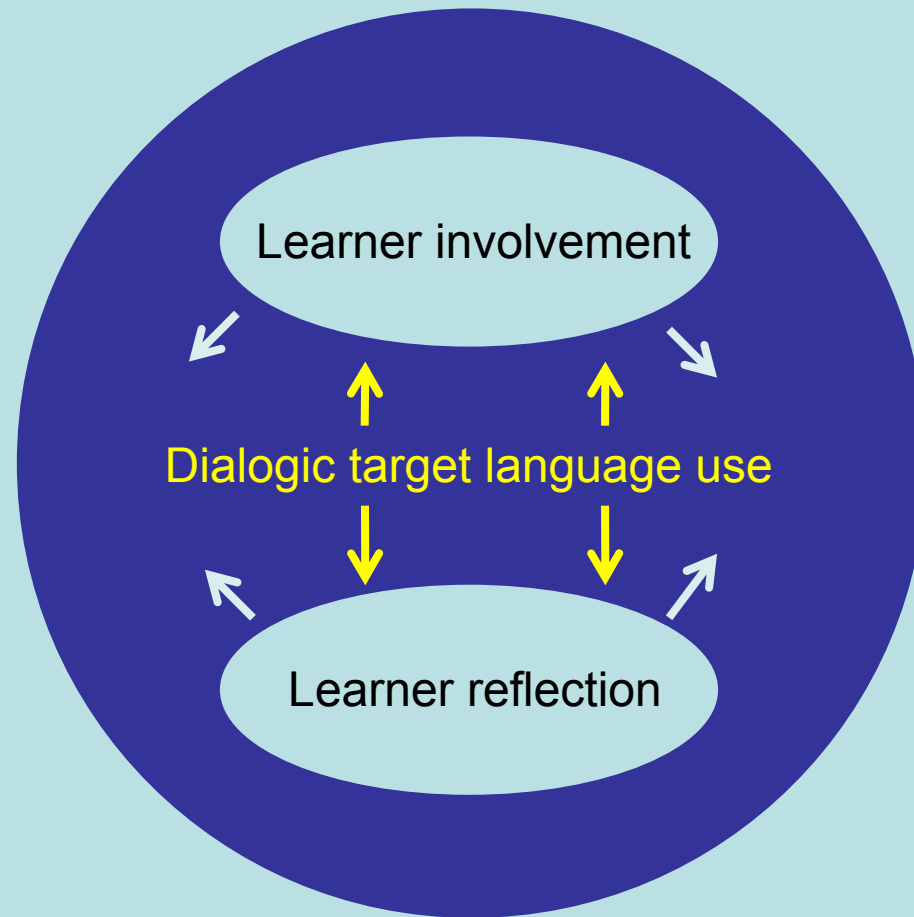
The ELP and self-assessment

- Three specific concerns:
 - Learners do not know how to assess themselves
 - There is a danger that they may overestimate their proficiency
 - They may be tempted to cheat by including in their ELPs material that is not their own
- Responses to these concerns:
 - Self-assessment is a skill that must be taught
 - Self-assessment should always be supported by evidence
 - When the ELP is central to teaching and learning there is no reason why self-assessment should not be accurate, reliable and honest
- For further discussion of the ELP and self-assessment, see Little 2009

Assessment for learning

- Arguments in favour of assessment for learning imply forms of classroom discourse that are exploratory (“dialogic”) as well as presentational (e.g. James & Pedder 2006)
- For proponents of “dialogic learning” exploratory talk is the means by which learners come to understand and internalize learning content (e.g. Barnes 1976, Mercer 1995, Alexander 2006)
- L2 teaching that is shaped by this theoretical perspective uses the target language as the principal medium of teaching and learning (e.g. Dam 1995, Little 2007)
- Exploratory talk in the target language necessarily includes the metacognitive and metalinguistic dimensions of language use (CALP)
- This is the essence of a pedagogy that seeks to develop language learner autonomy

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**Responding to the challenge of the
CEFR: assessment**

The problem

- Public examinations are all too often the tail that wags the dog
- The nearer learners get to the exam, the more strongly teachers are tempted to focus their efforts on practising exam performance and spotting questions
- Traditionally L2 curricula have operated without a very clear idea of a target communicative repertoire but have wanted to promote “advanced” learning
- This has often led to an attenuation of learning (and by extension, assessment): by the time they get to the school-leaving exam, learners are required to perform a small selection of (say) B2 tasks without having been able to develop the internalized proficiency needed in order to perform such tasks spontaneously and fluently

Towards a solution

- Look for ways of making it unproductive to “teach to the exam”
- Develop item banks for tests of listening and reading and draw on them randomly (perhaps using different versions of tests in different parts of the country)
- Develop a thematically wide-ranging battery of productive tasks and (again) draw on them randomly
- Release rating grids and scoring schemes to schools
 - In this way self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment could be informed and supported by the instruments of formal, external assessment
- Devise ways of taking ELP-based self-assessment seriously
 - Provide learners with an assessment portfolio that includes their self-assessment and supporting evidence alongside exam certificates

**Conclusion:
it can be done**

The context

- From the mid 1990s Ireland experienced an unprecedented wave of immigration which brought a sudden and rapid growth in that part of the school-going population whose home language was neither Irish nor English
- DES policy: two years of English language support per pupil
- From 1999–2008 the DES funded Integrate Ireland Language and Training, a not-for-profit campus company of Trinity College Dublin, to support the teaching of ESL in primary and post-primary schools by developing curricula, teaching/learning materials and in-service training for teachers
- This work was based on research and development undertaken in the Centre for Language and Communication Studies (CLCS), Trinity College Dublin, especially with regard to language learner autonomy

How we developed the curriculum

- An age-appropriate and context-specific version of B1 was identified as the appropriate exit level
- We observed a number of Irish primary classrooms and drew up a checklist of typical modes of classroom communication
- We familiarized ourselves with the multi-volume primary curriculum and with the help of teacher focus groups identified 13 recurrent themes
- We wrote 13 “units of work” at three levels in the form of “can do” statements for listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing
- We added scales of underlying linguistic competence: grammar, vocabulary, phonology, orthography
- The result: *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* (IILT, 2003)

From curriculum to pedagogy

- The ELP adopted as the key teaching/learning tool (IILT 2004)
 - Given the limited nature of ESL support, it is essential to develop pupils' metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness and skills (CALP)
 - The ELP was a way of capturing each pupil's ESL development in such a way that it can easily be reported and demonstrated to class teacher, school principal, parents, school inspectors
- 13 "I can" checklists (one for each "unit of work") mediate the curriculum to learners and foster the development of reflective learning habits
 - What are we learning?
 - Why are we learning it?
 - How are we learning?
 - How successful is our learning?
 - What are we going to learn next? (Dam 1995)

From pedagogy to assessment

Schools felt a need for tests

- To measure the English language proficiency (if any) of newly arrived pupils
- To provide a formal check on the record of learning captured by the ELP
- To enable teachers to report on pupils' developing linguistic competence and to identify aspects that may need special attention
- To measure learning achievement at the end of the first and second years of language support
- If necessary, to support a case for granting some pupils more than two years of language support

From pedagogy to assessment

- Tests developed and piloted in 2004 and 2005; revised in 2006; made available to schools in 2008
- Assessment tasks and themes based on the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks: closely integrated with the ELP and with day-to-day classroom activities
- Judgements made via the tests are closely related to judgements made by learners and their teachers on the basis of the self-assessment function of the ELP
- In this way testing supports self-assessment and pedagogy (for a detailed argument, see Little 2005)

A success story

- From the first, teachers accepted the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks as a practical map of the ground their ESL pupils had to cover
- They also welcomed the ELP as a pedagogical tool that promotes learner reflection and as a means of tracking learner progress
- The tests were accepted as an obvious closing of the circle
- In 2006 and again in 2007 we sold 5,000 copies of the ELP and 2,500 copies of a related workbook for infant classes
- This implies that more than 80% of ESL pupils were being taught using the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and the ELP
- If you want to see just what was achieved between 2000 and 2008, look at ***Up and Away***, our handbook for primary ESL teachers, available from the NCCA website (www.ncca.ie → Publications → Inclusion → English as an Additional Language → IILT materials)