

Language teaching at UCL SSEES and the Common European Framework of Reference

Project report

1 Introduction	1
2 The CEFR	1
3 Languages at SSEES and the CEFR	2
4 Project Methodology	3
5 Findings	5
6 Conclusions	6
7 Acknowledgements	7
Appendix: Scales of attainment levels	8

1 Introduction

This is a report on a project undertaken to investigate how the teaching and testing of East European and Slavonic languages at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) maps onto the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), with particular reference to taught postgraduate language courses. The project was funded by the Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies (CEELBAS) – www.ceelbas.ac.uk.

The objectives of the project were to:

- increase awareness of the extent to which current language teaching and assessment at SSEES relate to the CEFR levels
- engender a better understanding of how the framework might be used to enhance comparability of standards in the teaching of a wide range of East European languages, at SSEES, other UK universities and partner institutions abroad
- provide teachers with an opportunity to re-assess their own teaching in the light of the CEFR
- identify further steps which could be taken in the overall process of embracing the CEFR philosophy.

The project was undertaken by Marta Jenkala (Project Leader) and Christopher Moseley. The initial phase was overseen by Aniela Grundy.

2 The CEFR

The CEFR, developed by the Council of Europe with the key involvement of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), is becoming increasingly important in language teaching and testing in the UK, Europe and throughout the world. The framework provides a common reference point for the description of language courses, the definition of language proficiency levels and the interpretation of language qualifications.

Many providers of language teaching and testing now relate standards in their institutions to the CEFR, and increasing numbers of students entering UK universities have language qualifications or competences which can be related to the CEFR. Similarly, a growing number of companies and other organisations which employ staff with language skills express their requirements in terms of the CEFR.

A number of UK universities, which form part of the chain linking language teaching and language use, have begun to explore the relationship between the CEFR and their own language teaching and assessment. Given the key rôle of language training in the CEELBAS programmes, it is important for the Centre's partner universities to move towards embracing the CEFR philosophy, and the project is intended to give an initial impetus to consideration of this issue.

The complete text of the CEFR document can be accessed at:
http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp.

3 Languages at SSEES and the CEFR

The CEFR is of relevance to SSEES in relation to both taught postgraduate and undergraduate courses, particularly in its potential usefulness in assuring continuity of levels in language teaching, and in managing expectations as to achievement. Using the CEFR scales as a tool to measure both prior knowledge of a language and attainment could lead to a better understanding of teaching outcomes, on the part of all those involved in the process. It could also ensure a measure of consistency, not only within SSEES, but between SSEES and other institutions who participate in the teaching of SSEES students (for example, on summer courses or longer periods of study abroad).

SSEES offers students a choice of 11 Slavonic and East European languages as components of Masters degrees and 9 languages as course units contributing to undergraduate degrees. Teaching of most of the languages is delivered by the Department of East European Languages and Culture (EELC); Russian language teaching is delivered by the Department of Russian. Serbian/Croatian are taught as one course; at BA level Slovak is taught together with Czech with the course title "Czech with Slovak".

For Masters degrees all EELC languages may be taken as a New Language (an *ab initio* course), and five of the languages are available at Intermediate level (open to those who have completed New Language, or can demonstrate an equivalent competence). In addition to the above two levels, the Russian Department offers a course at Advanced level. All Masters language courses attract 40 credits.

SSEES currently offers three types of Masters degree for which a language component is obligatory or may be taken as an option:

- the one-year MA degree (various tracks) in which students may opt to take the MA New Language course (in Bulgarian, Czech, Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian/Croatian or Ukrainian)
- the two-year MRes in East European Studies in which New Language is obligatory in the first year and Intermediate in the second year of study

- the two-year Erasmus Mundus International Masters in Economy, State and Society (IMESS), in the first year of which students are obliged to take the MA New Language course in one of six languages (Czech, Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian, Polish or Russian), with the second year being spent studying abroad in one of the respective partner universities.

Given the structure of, particularly, the IMESS degree, a mechanism is needed to ensure that both teachers and students (in particular international students embarking on taught courses) have the same expectations relating to achievement and outcomes of courses, both at SSEES and at partner universities, to ensure smooth transition from one level and/or educational system to another. The CEFR has the potential to act as such a mechanism.

Whilst the main aim of the project was to address the potential of the CEFR with regard to Masters language courses, the opportunity was also used to gather data relating to the teaching of BA language courses.

The EELC Department delivers undergraduate language courses across three years of study: Level 1, normally taken in the first year of study; Level 2, normally taken in the second year of study, although students who can prove language competence equivalent to Level 1 may take Level 2 in their first year; Level 3, normally taken in the final year of study, after the year spent abroad (where relevant). Whilst Level 1 is an integrated course teaching both receptive and productive skills, Levels 2 and 3 are divided into half-course units, with 2A and 3A focusing on comprehension and 2B and 3B on production of language.

Undergraduate language course units in the Russian Department are organised so as to cater not only for *ab initio* students, but also for those who already have an “A” level or equivalent qualification in the language. It is, therefore, difficult to draw comparisons between the EELC and Russian undergraduate language programmes, and the latter were not included in the data-gathering.

Details of EELC language courses:
<http://www.ssees.ucl.ac.uk/languages/courses.htm>

Details of Russian language courses:
<http://www.ssees.ucl.ac.uk/russmadg.htm>, <http://www.ssees.ucl.ac.uk/russbadg.htm>.

4 Project Methodology

Information on how the teaching and testing of Slavonic and East European languages at SSEES map onto the CEFR was gathered by means of a series of structured face-to-face interviews with SSEES language teachers, in which the interviewer completed a questionnaire on the basis of the information provided by the respondents.

In the main part of the interview the respondents were asked to indicate, for each of the language courses they teach, approximately how many hours of teaching are typically required for the students to reach certain levels of attainment with respect to five areas of competence:

- listening comprehension
- oral production
- reading comprehension

- written production
- grammatical accuracy.

The scales of attainment levels, onto which the respondents were asked to map the progress made on their courses, were taken from the CEFR document mentioned above. Specifically, the scales used for the above five areas of competence are those on pages 66, 58, 69, 61 and 114 respectively, and are presented in the appendix to this report. It was felt that these scales best fitted the expected outcomes of the various courses as stated in the course descriptions.

The levels of attainment covered by each scale range from a very basic level to a level reached by proficient language users. For each course, however, only a subset of the levels in each scale is relevant, and the relative importance of each area of competence varies between courses.

The respondents were provided with the scales in a briefing document in advance of the interviews to give them an opportunity to consider their responses. A key feature of the methodology was the way in which the scales were presented. Given that some of the respondents were acquainted with the scales through their work for other institutions which use the CEFR, it was decided to present only the statements describing the levels of attainment, without their corresponding labels (A1/A2/B1 etc.) For ease of reference the statements were, instead, numbered sequentially. The intention was to encourage respondents to focus on the actual statements, rather than recall any preconceptions of the levels represented by the labels.

As well as being asked to state approximately how many hours of teaching are typically required, in their experience, for students to reach different levels of attainment, the respondents were also able to provide comments expanding on or qualifying their judgements. In particular, in cases where the level typically reached at the end of a course does not map precisely onto one of the CEFR levels, the respondents were asked to indicate how much progress is typically made towards reaching the next CEFR level.

In addition to the main part of the interview, concerned with attainment levels, a number of additional questions were asked:

- introductory questions – exploring respondents' familiarity with and use of the CEFR framework
- concluding questions – requesting views on the potential benefits of applying the CEFR philosophy to language teaching and assessment at SSEES.

The project team was keen to encourage frank expression of views, and to avoid any impression, on the part of respondents, that their teaching was in any way being assessed or evaluated. For this reason the participants were assured that, in any dissemination of the project results, no association would be made between views expressed and the persons expressing the views.

The questionnaire was tested in a number of pilot interviews. After discussion and revision the final version was used to conduct 13 interviews.

5 Findings

Given below is a summary of the responses to the questionnaire gathered during the interviews.

Introductory questions

Prior awareness of the CEFR was high. Most respondents were familiar with the CEFR scales and had some knowledge of their application at other academic or governmental institutions, even if they themselves had not been involved in this. A number had referred to the scales when teaching or developing materials at SSEES, or when teaching, conducting assessments or developing materials for institutions outside SSEES.

Where the CEFR had been applied previously, it was found to be substantially relevant in respondents' own teaching and/or assessment, but less so in standardising across institutions.

Some interviewees were also aware of the application of the CEFR in the countries where their languages are spoken (and, therefore, where SSEES students go to continue their language study).

Questions concerning attainment

The table below summarises the average levels attained at the end of each MA course, New Language (NL) and Intermediate (INT) (see Appendix for statements corresponding to these levels):

	Listening	Oral	Reading	Writing	Grammar
MA NL	A2	A2	B1	A2	B1
MA INT	B2	B2	C1	B2	B2

The differences in attainment between the various competence areas are explained by the differing emphasis placed on these in the courses. The MA New Language course primarily aims to equip students with study-related reading skills, as well as basic everyday communicative skills. Writing skills are taught as an aid to study, but are not formally assessed at this level. At MA Intermediate level students are actively taught writing skills, and their communicative competence is also enhanced. The main emphasis, however, continues to be on reading.

The table below summarises the average levels attained at the end of each BA course (see Appendix for statements corresponding to these levels):

	Listening	Oral	Reading	Writing	Grammar
BA Level 1	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1
BA Level 2	B2	B2	B2	B2	B2
BA Level 3	C1	C1	C1	C1	C1

Respondents' judgements on the levels attained in various courses, when expressed as averages in the above tables, reflect both progression between each year of study and the appropriate emphasis on different competence areas in different courses. There were, however, some differences in attainment between individual languages.

Respondents frequently mentioned the difficulty in quantifying attainment on a course as a whole, as, in any one group, there are usually differences between students' language competence (owing to prior knowledge of other Slavonic languages, linguistic ability, spending a year abroad, etc); additionally, having small numbers of students in most language learning groups (with the exception of Russian) made it difficult to generalise. Frequently, the year abroad accounted for significant leaps between levels.

Many of the respondents found it difficult to apply the statements defining CEFR attainment levels. The point was frequently made that the statements, as presented, did not fully match the outcomes expected from SSEES courses. In some courses (both MA levels and BA Level 1), knowledge of vocabulary was difficult to map onto the statements, as the use of dictionaries was allowed in some classwork and in written examinations. Also mentioned was the view that, particularly for higher-level courses, the scales did not fully cater for the skills needed to read literary texts.

Concluding questions

Opinions were divided on the usefulness of using the CEFR scales, as presented in the questionnaire, for teaching at SSEES. A majority of respondents (2:1) would be willing to use the scales. Those who were in favour tended to qualify their support by suggesting that the scales should be used flexibly. Others argued that implementing the CEFR would make it easier to explain to students, particularly on *ab initio* courses, what level they could expect to achieve, and particularly to answer questions such as "Is this like A-level?" Those who were against implementation considered that the scales used in the project were generally inappropriate. Fears were also expressed that, were the CEFR framework to be introduced, this would add to the bureaucracy of teaching and assessment, and would encourage "managers to substitute scaling for thinking".

By a ratio of 2:1 it was considered that application of the CEFR could lead to benefits. However, the reservation was expressed that implementing the CEFR philosophy would not succeed in reducing subjectivity in the assessment of attainment, particularly in relation to disparate (mainly small) student groups. In this regard the point was made that courses in different languages were too varied (whilst syllabus content is broadly comparable, the order in which items are taught varies according to the complexities of each language), making comparisons and standardisation difficult.

6 Conclusions

Whilst most language teachers are aware of the CEFR and use it in various situations outside SSEES, a number did not consider that adopting the CEFR philosophy, or, specifically, its scales (as they were presented in the project), would materially enhance their teaching or assessment. On the other hand, given the need for a clear understanding of expectations and outcomes by all those delivering language teaching to SSEES students, whether at SSEES or in partner countries, applying at least some aspects of the CEFR could be of potential benefit.

From the above findings the following may be concluded:

- before any implementation of the CEFR could be contemplated, wider in-depth consultation would need to take place so that the arguments for and against can be analysed;
- consideration would need to be given to whether any implementation would be for use in all language teaching and assessment, or only for situations where consistency between SSEES and other institutions was an issue;
- the scales should be customised so that they reflect SSEES requirements more closely (the CEFR document envisages and encourages this);
- discussion would also need to take place as to how the maximum benefit could be derived from the CEFR: whether to measure the typical overall attainment of courses or the attainment of individual students; in the latter case, measures for courses could be obtained by aggregating measures for students;
- if the CEFR was embraced for use in all SSEES language courses, consideration should be given to issuing graduates, in addition to their degree certificates, with a certificate of language attainment relating to the CEFR;
- any implementation of the CEFR should not emphasise the framework to the detriment of experienced and informed judgement;
- any implementation should not materially add to time spent by teachers on administration.

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Appendix: Scales of attainment levels

Listening comprehension

A1	Can follow speech which is very slow and carefully articulated, with long pauses for him/her to assimilate meaning.
A2	Can understand phrases and expressions related to areas of most immediate priority (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment) provided speech is clearly and slowly articulated.
	Can understand enough to be able to meet needs of a concrete type provided speech is clearly and slowly articulated.
B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure etc., including short narratives.
	Can understand straightforward factual information about common everyday or job related topics, identifying both general messages and specific details, provided speech is clearly articulated in a generally familiar accent.
B2	Can understand the main ideas of propositionally and linguistically complex speech on both concrete and abstract topics delivered in a standard dialect, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation.
	Can follow extended speech and complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar, and the direction of the talk is sign-posted by explicit markers.
	Can understand standard spoken language, live or broadcast, on both familiar and unfamiliar topics normally encountered in personal, social, academic or vocational life. Only extreme background noise, inadequate discourse structure and/or idiomatic usage influences the ability to understand.
C1	Can understand enough to follow extended speech on abstract and complex topics beyond his/her own field, though he/she may need to confirm occasional details, especially if the accent is unfamiliar. Can recognise a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms, appreciating register shifts. Can follow extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly.
C2	Has no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, delivered at fast native speed.

Oral production

A1	Can produce simple mainly isolated phrases about people and places.
A2	Can give a simple description or presentation of people, living or working conditions, daily routines, likes/dislikes, etc. as a short series of simple phrases and sentences linked into a list.
B1	Can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within his/her field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points.
B2	Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field of interest, expanding and supporting ideas with subsidiary points and relevant examples.
	Can give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail.
C1	Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on complex subjects, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.
C2	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing well-structured speech with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.

Reading comprehension

A1	Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words and basic phrases and rereading as required.
A2	Can understand short, simple texts containing the highest frequency vocabulary, including a proportion of shared international vocabulary items.
	Can understand short, simple texts on familiar matters of a concrete type which consist of high frequency everyday or job-related language.
B1	Can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his/her field and interest with a satisfactory level of comprehension.
B2	Can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low frequency idioms.
C1	Can understand in detail lengthy, complex texts, whether or not they relate to his/her own area of speciality, provided he/she can reread difficult sections.
C2	Can understand and interpret critically virtually all forms of the written language including abstract, structurally complex, or highly colloquial literary and non-literary writings. Can understand a wide range of long and complex texts, appreciating subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning.

Written production

A1	Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences.
A2	Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like 'and', 'but' and 'because'.
B1	Can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within his field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.
B2	Can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources.
C1	Can write clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.
C2	Can write clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.

Grammatical accuracy

A1	Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire.
A2	Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes – for example tends to mix up tenses and forget to mark agreement; nevertheless, it is usually clear what he/she is trying to say.
B1	Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used 'routines' and patterns associated with more predictable situations.
	Communicates with reasonable accuracy in familiar contexts; generally good control though with noticeable mother tongue influence. Errors occur, but it is clear what he/she is trying to express.
B2	Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make mistakes which lead to misunderstanding.
	Good grammatical control; occasional 'slips' or non-systematic errors and minor flaws in sentence structure may still occur, but they are rare and can often be corrected in retrospect.
C1	Consistently maintains a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare and difficult to spot.
C2	Maintains consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in forward planning, in monitoring others' reactions).