Language Assessment in Ireland at Senior Cycle

A comparative document analysis of assessment instruments across languages examined at senior cycle using the Common European Framework of Reference for languages and Anderson and Krathwohl’s taxonomy.

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The Irish Education System

Post-Primary education entails:

Junior Cycle or Lower Secondary (3 year programme: age 12-15)

Senior Cycle or Upper Secondary (2-3 year programme: age 16-18)
The Washback Effect

“The impact that a test has on the teaching and learning done in preparation for it, which can be positive or negative” (Green, 2013, p. 40).

FRENCH
How I got a H1

Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission

LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

FRENCH

Tuesday, 13 June – Afternoon, 2.00 – 5.00
High stakes examinations
The good, the bad, the ugly

- **The good**: formal examinations provide data on the skills acquired by students in schooling, which can be used for accountability or comparative purposes, highlighting educational concerns or influencing curricular or pedagogical reform (Haertel, 1999).

- Sound test design means “teachers and learners behave in ways that are considered desirable” Green (2013, p. 45).

- **The bad**: students adopt short-term strategies; memorising large chunks of material instead of engaging with concepts and ideas on a deeper level.

- **The ugly**: teachers may neglect parts of the syllabus and “teach to the exam.”
Calls for reform
Senior cycle reform developments “long overdue”

– Intense scrutiny of Leaving Certificate examinations by the Irish media:


Review of Senior Cycle Languages
Recommendations from Phase 1

- *The Review of Languages in Post-Primary Education: Report of the First Phase of the Review* (NCCA, 2005) calls for analysis of the current assessment model in phase two of the review to consider how the negative effects of washback could be minimised.

- A more balanced and varied form of assessment measuring a wider skill-set, which recognises the integral role of the CEFR and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) in achieving this.

- “...learner autonomy, skill development, plurilingualism and improved access to and transferability of learning in the broad context of lifelong learning” (NCCA, 2005, p. 61).
Language Education Policy
Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026

- Launch of *Languages Connect: Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026 and Implementation Plan 2017-2022.*

- Key target: adoption of the CEFR in education and by employers by 2026 (DES, 2017, p. 12).

- All future language curriculum documents should be referenced to the CEFR.
Anderson & Krathwohl’s Taxonomy

Rationale for taxonomies

• Means of categorising intellectual skills (cognitive processes) and knowledge.

• A taxonomy of classified learning outcomes, facilitating exchange of ideas on testing procedures and test items.

• Recognised worldwide as a reference point for test and curriculum design.

• Bloom’s and revised taxonomies have been used to categorise skills tested in the Leaving Certificate but not for languages (Madaus & MacNamara, 1970; Burns and Devitt, forthcoming)

• Students awarded marks primarily for knowledge recall and absence of higher-order intellectual skills promoted by the examinations (Burns and Devitt, forthcoming).
Bloom’s revised taxonomy

Bloom’s taxonomy, 1956

Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001
The CEFR

- “Internationally accepted scale” that can be used to compare different language examinations to each other (NCCA, 2015, p. 14).
- Means of standardising language examinations against a set of recognised set of criteria levels on within a European framework.
Research Questions

1. What *intellectual skills* and *knowledge domains* do the French and Italian leaving certificate examinations assess (as per Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) and to what extent are they comparable?

2. How do the *higher level* and *ordinary level* examinations compare in terms of the *knowledge domains* and *intellectual skills* measured as per Anderson and Krathwohl’s taxonomy?

3. To what extent can the current leaving certificate French and Italian examinations be *aligned to the CEFR levels* and which *proficiency level(s)* do they reflect?

4. What are the *implications* and *imperatives* for assessment practice in relation to the CEFR?
Methodology

Step 1: Familiarisation with the CEFR and Anderson and Krathwohl’s taxonomy

- Three-day workshop organised by RELANG;
- The Dutch CEF project online training module;
- Sample vignettes (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).
# Analysis of reading texts

## Dutch CEFR Grid Reading (texts)

### Characteristics of Input Text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Text source</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Taken from CEFR Table 5 page CEFR)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Authenticity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input text appears to be: [please select ▼ ]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Discourse type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Source: DIALANG Assessment Specifications)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discourse types</strong></td>
<td><strong>Examples (discourse types)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly Descriptive</td>
<td>impressionistic descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. sports commentaries, physical appearance, layout of room, house, landscape, places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>technical descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. presentation of a product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly Narrative</td>
<td>stories, jokes, anecdotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. news reports, features, documentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly Expository</td>
<td>definitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. programme listings on the radio, timetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>elaborations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. an oral account of the plot of a book, summarising minutes of a meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. describing a book, an article etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly Instructive</td>
<td>personal instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. announcements, ads, propaganda, routine, commands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly Argumentative</td>
<td>comments, pros and cons of an issue, opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by any individual in any situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>formal argumentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. formal debate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Domain

| (Source: CEFR page 45) |
| NE: in many situations, more than one domain may be involved |
| 5. Topic |
| (Source = CEFR page 85) |
| 6. Nature of Content |
| 7. Text Length in words |
| 8. Vocabulary |
| 9. Grammar |

### View CEFR scales:

| View CEFR scales: |
| please select ▼ |

| 10. Text likely to be comprehensible by learner at CEFR level |
| please select ▼ |
# Analysis of reading items

**Dutch CEFR Grid Reading (items)**

## Characteristics of Item:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>14. Item type</th>
<th>Selected response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(from DIALANG Assessment Specifications)</td>
<td>1. Multiple choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Banked multiple choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. True False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Multiple matching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Sequencing / ordering jumbled text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Citing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Short answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Cloze (every nth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Gap filling (one word)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. C-Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Summary completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Information transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Sentential response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Justify by citing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. Essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16. Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17. Report in own words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18. Justify in own words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19. Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please specify:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 15. Operations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recognise</th>
<th>Main idea/gist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make inferences</td>
<td>Speaker's/Writer's attitude/mood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicative Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text Structure/Connections between parts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| from explicit information | from implicit information |

### View CEFR scales:

- Please select

### Item Level estimated:

- Please select

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*Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin*
The Knowledge Dimension
Major types & subtypes of knowledge (adapted from Anderson et al. 2001, p. 29).

- **Factual**
  - Knowledge of terminology
  - Knowledge of specific details

- **Conceptual**
  - Knowledge of classifications & categories
  - Knowledge of principles & generalisations
  - Knowledge of theories, models & structures

- **Procedural**
  - Knowledge of subject-specific skills & algorithms
  - Knowledge of subject-specific techniques & methods
  - Knowledge of criteria for determining when to use appropriate procedures

- **Metacognitive**
  - Strategic Knowledge
    - Knowledge about cognitive tasks including contextual & conditional knowledge
  - Self-knowledge
# The Cognitive Process Dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Process Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Create</td>
<td>Put elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganise elements into a new pattern or structure.</td>
<td>6.1 Generating, 6.2 Planning, 6.3 Producing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Make judgements based on criteria and standards.</td>
<td>5.1 Checking, 5.2 Critiquing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Analyse</td>
<td>Break material into constituent parts and determine how each part relates to each other as a whole.</td>
<td>4.1 Differentiating, 4.2 Organising, 4.3 Attributing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>Carry out or use a procedure in a given situation.</td>
<td>3.1 Executing, 3.2 Implementing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>Construct meaning from instructional messages (e.g. oral, written and graphic etc.).</td>
<td>1.1 Interpreting, 1.2 Exemplifying, 1.3 Classifying, 1.4 Summarising, 1.5 Inferring, 1.6 Comparing, 1.7 Explaining.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Remember</td>
<td>Retrieve relevant knowledge from long-term memory.</td>
<td>1.1 Recognise, 1.2 Recall.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methodology

Step 2: Corpus construction

Selection and analysis of marking schemes, Chief Examiner reports and examination papers.
Methodology

Step 3: Selection of CEFR illustrative scales for visual reception (reading) activities and Dutch CEF grids for reading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OVERALL READING COMPREHENSION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illustrative scales for visual reception (reading) activities: Overall Reading Comprehension (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 69).
Examination structure

- Reading comprehension: Higher Level (30%); Ordinary Level (40%)
- Content relevant to age group with a fixed number of questions.
Findings
Intellectual Skills, Knowledge and CEFR levels
Summary of Findings

Intellectual Skills & Knowledge and CEFR levels assessed

- Most items measure ability to understand factual knowledge for both languages and levels, not simply recalling or “rote-learning”.
- Small number of items assess students’ ability to use higher-order skills: analyse conceptual knowledge, analyse factual knowledge and evaluate factual knowledge.
- Some questions on Higher Level French paper assess ability to make judgements on a statement given with reference to details in the text (evaluate factual knowledge).
- Students not given the opportunity to make judgements or engage in a deeper analysis of the text in the Higher Level Italian paper.
- Higher Level French & Italian: B1/B1+/B2 level
- Ordinary Level Italian: A2/A2+
- Ordinary Level French: A2+/B1 (even B2!)
Understand Factual Knowledge

Intellectual Skills & Knowledge at Higher Level

- **Understand**: construct meaning
- **Factual knowledge**: knowledge of specific details of a text
- **Section A Question 1 (a) Higher Level Italian 2016**: 

  * Prima sezione
  1. (a) *Spiegate con le vostre parole*, qual è l’obiettivo del progetto *Table Babel*.
      
      - 
      - 

- **Section 1 Reading Comprehension 1 Question 1 (i) Higher Level French 2016**:

  1. (i) *Relevez une expression qui explique pourquoi Jonathan aime beaucoup Londres.* (Section 1)
Analyse Conceptual Knowledge
Intellectual Skills & Knowledge at Higher Level

- **Analyse**: Break material into constituent parts and determine how each part relates to each other as a whole.

- **Conceptual knowledge**: knowledge of how smaller elements form larger components and their relationship between each other.

- Section 1 Reading Comprehension 1 Question 2 (ii) Higher Level French 2016:

  (ii) Trouvez dans la deuxième section un verbe au futur simple.

- Section A Question 3 (a) Higher Level Italian 2016:

  Terza sezione
  3. (a) Trovate il verbo al congiuntivo presente.
Analyse Factual Knowledge (Italian)
Intellectual Skills & Knowledge at Higher Level

– Section B Unseen Literary Passage Higher Level Italian 2016:

5. Answer the following question in English.
Looking at the passage as a whole, outline what we learn about Aurora (one point), Giovanni (one point) and how they differ from one another (two points).

– Ability to analyse the text and organise and outline main points about characters based on the statement given and distinguish differences between them.
Evaluate Factual Knowledge (French)

Intellectual Skills & Knowledge at Higher Level

- *Evaluate*: make judgements based on criteria or standards.

- Section 1 Reading Comprehension 2 Question 6, French Higher Level 2016:

  6. *Dealraíonn sé gur duine an-phaichilleach i Mia, nach ndéanann cinnti tobanna. An aontaíonn tú leis sin? Déan tagaírt don téacs chun tacú le do fhreagra. (Dhá pointe, thart ar 50 focal san iomlán.)*

  *Mia appears to be a very cautious person, who does not make impulsive decisions. Do you agree? Refer to the text in support of your answer. (Two points, about 50 words in total.)*

- Ability to make a judgement on the statement presented and give own opinion (two points). This constitutes “judging” or “critiquing”, which subsumes the category “evaluate”. Thus, *evaluate factual knowledge*. 
Ordinary Level French & Italian
Intellectual Skills & Knowledge at Ordinary Level

- Differentiation at Higher and Ordinary Level: content, text length and language.
- Most items assessed students’ ability to understand factual knowledge at Ordinary Level for both languages.
- Candidates answer all questions in English (Italian paper).
- Question 3 & 4 Ordinary Level French mirror Higher Level French. Final item assesses ability to evaluate factual knowledge.
- Section 1 Question 3 Part 8 Ordinary Level French 2016:

8. “Camille’s family have always been helpful to her.” Do you agree?

Answer in English, giving TWO points and referring to the text.
CEFR at Higher Level
B1/B1+/B2 learner level

- Text length: 500-600 words.
- Content: themes within students’ area of personal interest (celebrities, social media, learning languages, relationships).
- Most questions require correctly manipulated responses or direct quotation or both in the Target Language (as per Marking Schemes).
- Accessible to B1 language learners:

| B1 | Can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his/her field and interest with a satisfactory level of comprehension. |
| B1 | Can identify the main conclusions in clearly signalled argumentative texts. Can recognise the line of argument in the treatment of the issue presented, though not necessarily in detail. Can recognise significant points in straightforward newspaper articles on familiar subjects. |
| B1 | Can collate short pieces of information from several sources and summarise them for somebody else. Can paraphrase short written passages in a simple fashion, using the original text wording and ordering. |
CEFR at Higher Level

B1/B1+/B2 learner level

- Final question on each section accessible to a B2 learner (CEFR illustrative scales: Reading for Information & Argument, Council of Europe, 2001, p. 69).

- Students required to interpret a viewpoint based on information in the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can obtain information, ideas and opinions from highly specialised sources within his/her field. Can understand specialised articles outside his/her field, provided he/she can use a dictionary occasionally to confirm his/her interpretation of terminology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can understand articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular stances or viewpoints.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CEFR at Ordinary Level

A2/A2+/B1 learner level

- Shorter text length (200-300 words) and simpler language addressing concrete themes. Most questions accessible to A2/A2+ learner level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A2</th>
<th>Can understand short, simple texts on familiar matters of a concrete type which consist of high frequency everyday or job-related language.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Can understand short, simple texts containing the highest frequency vocabulary, including a proportion of shared international vocabulary items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Can pick out and reproduce key words and phrases or short sentences from a short text within the learner’s limited competence and experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Can copy out short texts in printed or clearly handwritten format.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Can identify specific information in simpler written material he/she encounters such as letters, brochures and short newspaper articles describing events.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Ordinary Level French Questions 3 & 4, accessible to B1 learner level (CEFR illustrative scales: Processing Text, Council of Europe, 2001, p. 96):

| B1 | Can collate short pieces of information from several sources and summarise them for somebody else. Can paraphrase short written passages in a simple fashion, using the original text wording and ordering. |
Limitations
Limited scope of study

- **Stage 1** intended as a catalyst for larger scale research of language assessment at senior cycle.
- Limited scope; small-scale study (languages, small corpus, select exam components).
- Based on researcher’s interpretative analysis.
- The leaving certificate examination predates the publication of the CEFR. Claims of alignment to the CEFR are limited.
- However the current language syllabus is influenced by the Threshold levels, the same documents on which the CEFR is based (Shiels, 1978).
Future Research Developments

Plans for Stage 2 of research

- Student & teacher interviews on implications of the current senior cycle model of assessment for teaching and learning.
- Aligning the CEFR with Anderson and Krathwohl’s taxonomy.
- Analysis of listening comprehensions, written and oral sections of examination papers.
- Larger corpus, larger scale.
- Student-generated data (written answers and oral answers).
- Ethical considerations!
Thank You
Merci
Grazie
Go raibh maith agaibh