

A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of promising practices

1. OVERVIEW

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Current position: EAL program specialist & academic advisor, College of Education

Country: Canada (Saskatchewan)

Institution: Former: Ministry of Education, Saskatchewan
Current: University of Saskatchewan

Type of context: Provincial level: compulsory education

Educational sector: Primary, Lower Secondary, Upper Secondary (= High School)

Main focus of your project: Implementing province-wide EAL assessment and data-gathering processes; improving EAL instructional practices by building an understanding of stages of language progress.

SUMMARY

Name: English for integration – EAL Framework

Abstract: This project involved the adoption of the CEFR (as CFR) to provide a coherent framework for English as an Additional Language (EAL) in Saskatchewan, with alignment to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher education, and clear guidelines about learner readiness for inclusion in large-scale assessments and examinations.

Stage: Planning; Evaluation

Theme: Curriculum; Assessment

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

Main features of this example:

- Systematic, province-wide introduction of CEFR in one area to solve a specific issue
- Involvement of classroom teachers, administrators, and professional staff
- Sustained, realistic development over a number of years

Quality principles demonstrated: Relevance, Transparency, Coherence, Inclusiveness, Sustainability



2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background:

The CEFR was first introduced in Canada through The Canadian Languages Portfolio Project: a national initiative linked to the Action Plan for Official Languages. The initiative was coordinated by CASLT (Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers). Ministry-led workshops took place in February and September of 2006 to introduce the CEFR and the Canadian Languages Portfolio Project to language teachers in Saskatchewan schools. In addition, CEFR-based Language Portfolios were developed in 2006-07 for a Ukrainian-English Bilingual School in Saskatoon and piloted during the 2008-09 school year. At that time, there were 220 students, 12 teachers and 2 administrators involved in this project. There was great interest among staff, students and particularly parents, because of the user-friendly language of the 'can-do' statements. Teachers used CEFR-based portfolios for two years in bilingual classrooms, but the project lost momentum largely due to administrative changes at the school and ministry.

During the 2008-2009 school year, EAL (English as an Additional Language) numbers grew in Saskatchewan at an unprecedented rate due to increased immigration to the province. Prior to this time, EAL learners were less than one per cent of all students. Support for EAL was not seen as a priority: school-based approaches to supporting EAL learners were varied and uncoordinated. There was no reliable, valid data on the number of EAL learners across the province and very few EAL specialists were adequately prepared to work in K-12 school settings. Training programs at the two universities in Saskatchewan focused primarily on certification for Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESL). The TESL programs prepared instructors to work with non-English speaking adults requiring specific levels of English for work or career goals. TESL programs relied on use of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) as a language reference framework. The program components of TESL were not focused on mainstream classroom teachers and the task of helping EAL students *learn English* and *learn in English* to reach curriculum goals at various grade levels. The CLB was also not an appropriate language scale for elementary and high school learners as descriptors were based on life and work scenarios beyond the school years.

The EAL Credit Course project described below was a first step in adoption of a common reference scale for the province. The project allowed ministry personnel to bring EAL educators together to build professional knowledge about EAL and create a collaborative team spirit across the province for future EAL initiatives.

Stated aims:

The goal of the project was to introduce a systematic approach to EAL throughout the province with an alignment to subject area curricula, instruction, assessment, and teacher education. The educational contexts include monitoring and charting the progress of all EAL learners integrated in mainstream classrooms. EAL learners include newcomers from other countries, local students requiring English (e.g., German-speaking Hutterite colony students, students who speak indigenous languages) and students in French immersion and Francophone schools requiring English.

Steps/stages:

1. 2009-10: EAL High School Credit Course for beginners

Ten school division representatives with differing EAL populations (north, south, urban rural, Hutterite, First Nations, Francophone) worked with three ministry consultants and a writer, Noreen Jeffrey, for ten working sessions during the year. The writer's task was to assemble course components for a high school EAL credit course, using feedback from the working group. The working group was tasked with using observable and measurable descriptors to:

a) Identify the language **starting points** for the course;

- b) Describe the **benchmarks/stages** of English language progress until students are no longer EAL learners (the stage at which students reach proficiency similar to their peers); and,
- c) Determine **course outcomes** (what students *will know and be able to do in English*) after completing the course.

The working group was reluctant to adopt the CEFR but came to the realization that a common reference framework was essential for a coordinated effort to support EAL needs across the province. Initially, some working group members suggested creating our own provincial language scale. They attempted to make a chart of their own and the chart closely resembled the CEFR. Through this process, the working group found that they could not pursue this idea: their end product would not have validity and reliability. Ministry personnel then shared information about the various scales being used across the province. The working group was overwhelmed by the list: Alberta ministry benchmarks, CLB (Canadian Language Benchmarks), Manitoba EAL Curriculum, Ontario ministry language benchmarks, WIDA (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment) scale, ACTFL (American Council for Teachers of Foreign Languages) scale and a scale designed internally by one school division. Through this exploratory process, the ministry and working group reached the **first big EAL milestone**: school division **consensus that a common scale** would create a unified provincial understanding of language progression, instructional needs, and assessment processes with EAL learners in mainstream classrooms.

2. Adoption of the CEFR as the CFR

The **second big milestone** was the ministry's move to accept the CFR (renamed, with the word *European* removed from CEFR) as a reference scale for a) identifying English language skills and monitoring the language progress of all EAL learners in Grades 1-12 in provincial schools. Using the CFR, the province was able to create a process for baseline assessment of each newcomer's EAL profile upon arrival to a Saskatchewan school. After placement into an age and grade appropriate classroom with their peers, teachers sought the support of EAL specialists for adjustments with lesson plans and adaptations for classroom learning so that EAL students could learn English, learn in English and move toward achievement of curriculum outcomes.

The province of Saskatchewan has a diverse population. For this reason, each of the province's 28 school divisions develops its own policies and procedures to support the needs of the EAL student population. Some divisions have many refugee learners, others have a large local population of EAL learners, and still others have a student population from many different countries. The objective (and non-culture specific) nature of the CFR allows for unity within this diversity. Adoption of the CFR as a reference tool allowed the ministry to create a level playing field for all students, regardless of location, first language, or culture.

Given the growing knowledge base about CFR levels, the ministry was able to make recommendations and provide guidelines to school divisions about appropriate EAL entry points for provincial credit courses. School divisions did not question the need for students to be at B1.2 on the CFR scale. At this point, EAL students have a level of proficiency similar to their English-speaking peers. They are adequately prepared to comprehend text-dense readings in subjects such as English Language Arts and Social Studies.

As school divisions began developing their own internal documents about EAL learners, they also consulted with the ministry to ensure that their decisions were based on best practices and research. Together with school divisions, the Ministry created webinars to enable professional sharing of 'best practices' for EAL and housed these materials on a Blackboard site accessible to all educators and administrators.

3. 2012-13 – *Guide to Use of the CFR with EAL Learners* – adding school-based examples to descriptors

In fall 2012, the Ministry of Education prepared a draft guide for use of the CFR with EAL learners. This was the **third big milestone**. The goal was to add school-based examples to the descriptors and can-do statements, so that the descriptors became more meaningful to the classroom context. EAL consultants and classroom teachers wanted examples of subject-specific tasks to illustrate progress in English. Through a web-based search, ministry consultants found that many excellent school-based CEFR descriptors were available from education sites in Ireland. What a terrific source of support this turned out to be!

When the draft document was ready, two workshops were held to introduce the CFR guide to school divisions in spring of 2013. More than 75 EAL teachers and specialists attended. The final version of the guide was prepared in English and French, and made available through the provincial *Publications Centre* in September 2013.

4. 2011-12: EAL Initial Assessment Toolkit

The primary aim for preparation of this toolkit was the implementation of a standardized process for assessing each newcomer student's language abilities after arrival in a Saskatchewan school. A secondary aim was the provision of support for on-going assessment. Both initial assessment and ongoing assessment processes required student involvement and some self-assessment.

To create the toolkit, five school divisions worked collaboratively with the ministry to prepare a binder that contained language and math assessment tools (oral and written basic language skills, short readings, comprehension exercises, math items). These tools were items that had been selected by the school divisions over an extended period of time for assessment of EAL learners arriving to Saskatchewan. All the school division assessments were then correlated to CFR levels so that any students assessed using the toolkit had an identified level on the CFR scale (A1.1, A1.2, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1 and B1.2). Students at or beyond B1.2 were near the language ability of their classroom peers and were not identified as EAL learners. This was a decision made by the ministry based on various research studies, information located on the CEFR website, and advice from Dr David Little, Trinity College Dublin*. The assessment toolkit made possible the first ever provincial EAL data collection in September 30, 2012. This type of data collection for EAL was only possible after adoption of the CFR scale. Preparation and use of this toolkit was **our fourth milestone**.

**Dr. David Little has provided guidance and support via email correspondence with N. Prokopchuk, following a CEFR training workshop in Edmonton (2008). A meeting with Dr. Little, N. Prokopchuk, and Saskatoon Public School Consultants took place at Trinity College in Dublin in March, 2013.*

5. In-service training

To implement the CFR and ensure a thorough understanding of the levels, the ministry gathered representatives from every school division and conducted training sessions using a train-the-trainer model. Two workshops took place during the 2011-12 year to introduce the toolkit to all school divisions. Two EAL educators or specialists from each school division were invited to attend these workshops (28 school divisions x 2 participants). The intent was to have these participants become the EAL 'assessors' within the school divisions, who would then be tasked with sharing their assessment knowledge with other EAL educators. School divisions had to take follow-up action *to train their teachers*, with funding and resources provided by the ministry. Implementation of this training model was **our fifth milestone**.

This plan was successful for five years; the toolkit now requires some revision and a new round of training workshops. The development of an EAL Initial Assessment Toolkit was an invaluable step in sharing CFR information across the province.

6. Assessment Grids/Rubrics

Teachers were very pleased with the *Guide for Use of the CFR with EAL Learners* (as described in #3), but they wanted additional clarity about skill development, specifically for reading and writing. The emerging question was "What does writing and reading at each level look like?" Again, the Saskatoon Public School Division collaborated with the Ministry to prepare CFR-based writing and reading rubrics documents. Classroom teachers gathered writing samples representing a range of writing abilities along the CFR. Teachers also worked to create detailed descriptors of reading abilities at each level. The completed documents provided yet another layer of support for assessing skill development at each level of English language learning up to B1.2 and beyond. These documents represent a **sixth milestone**.

7. Other exploitations of the CFR/CEFR

- a) **Protection vis-à-vis standardized assessments:** We have used the CFR to guide decisions about when to include EAL learners in standardized assessment procedures. Our province is currently using the Fountas & Pinnell assessment system and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to determine reading levels of our students. The ministry has issued the following recommendation: EAL learners should not be included in these standardized assessments until they are **at least at level A2.2**, but our preference is B1.1.
- b) **Protection vis-à-vis school leaving exams:** The CFR has played an integral role in creating an equitable approach to grade 12 departmental examinations for EAL learners. A policy was created, stating that students must be assessed as Level B1.2 to be able to write departmental examinations.
- c) **Student data:** The CFR has enabled collection and storage of EAL data within the provincial student data system. On September 30, 2012, an *inaugural* provincial EAL data collection took place, resulting in a comprehensive snapshot of the number and location of EAL students in Saskatchewan. School divisions entered each EAL learner's student number, name, grade, school, and CFR level into to the Student Data System, or SDS. The SDS is a secure ministry site that houses student registration data for all students in Saskatchewan schools. In the first year of data collection for EAL, the ministry learned that there were 9,676 EAL learners in our province at varying stages of the CFR between A1.1 and B1.2. EAL data collection since 2012 has taken place on the same date each year. The process ensures consistency when preparing comparative studies about cumulative growth and language progress. After four years of data-gathering, the ministry has robust information about provincial EAL demographics, emerging trends or issues with language progress at various levels of the CFR scale, and EAL profiles of each school division in Saskatchewan. In September 2016, SDS data indicated that there were 13, 831 learners receiving EAL support in Grades 1-12. To be clear, the purpose for EAL data gathering is to inform and support learning within school divisions prior to level B1.2. When students move beyond B1.2, they are no longer considered EAL learners and are no longer part of the EAL data collection.
- d) **Heritage Languages:** Heritage language teachers in Saskatchewan provide language instruction to students outside of school hours. In 2007-8, the ministry introduced the CEFR to those teachers. The ministry language consultant (N. Prokopchuk) was invited to deliver workshops on the CFR at the Annual Conference of SOHL, the Saskatchewan Organization for Heritage Languages in 2009 and again in 2012. Given the success of the CFR for EAL learners, it made sense to propose use of the CFR for heritage language students. In 2014, following a valuable trip to Dublin to consult with Irish Ministry representatives and CEFR specialist David Little, the ministry moved forward to formalize use of the CFR for heritage languages. A project to create self-assessment tools for heritage language students began that year. SOHL contracted a writer to complete the project. The writer collaborated with the N. Prokopchuk to complete the project, which resulted in development of CFR-based heritage language assessment forms for student assessment. The project was completed in 2014 and implemented by SOHL's heritage language schools in 2015. Heritage language teachers received training for use of the self-assessment tools during three SOHL workshops. Electronic versions of the CFR-based assessment forms are available on the SOHL website here: <http://heritagelanguages.sk.ca/> (Click on 'Resources' from the top menu).

Timeline:

From introduction to implementation of the CFR, the process has taken over five years, from 2009 to 2015/6. The implementation is now complete, but use of the CFR within the ministry and across school divisions continues in Saskatchewan.

People/roles:

EAL credit course:

- ten school division representatives providing a cross-section of differing EAL populations (north, south, urban rural, Hutterite, First Nations, Francophone)
- three ministry consultants (Nadia Prokopchuk and 2 others)
- a writer, Noreen Jeffrey, to assemble course components for a high school EAL credit course (identified as a locally-developed course with collaboration from school divisions)

CFR Guide:

- a writer, Noreen Jeffrey
- senior program manager, Nadia Prokopchuk
- an external consultant/CEFR expert, David Little, to review and offer comments.

Assessment toolkit:

- five school division representatives
- senior program manager, Nadia Prokopchuk
- an external consultant/CEFR expert, David Little

Heritage languages:

- a writer, Loraine Thompson
- consultation with Irish Ministry officials plus David Little
- senior program manager, Nadia Prokopchuk, to review the project and ensure that ministry CFR guidelines were reflected in her work.

Other resources linked to the CFR:

Since 2013, the ministry has provided project funding in the amount of 10,000 dollars to school divisions that are willing to develop an innovative project linked to EAL assessment. There are three main requirements. School divisions must: 1) share their project across the province in a professional learning webinar 2) submit their project resources for posting on the Ministry's Blackboard page, and 3) ensure that the project incorporates CFR levels and curriculum outcomes. Between 2013 and 2016, the ministry funded over 30 innovative projects.

Quality Assurance procedures employed:

Data collection – once the toolkit was available - to survey the situation on the ground.
External CEFR expert as consultant.

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

3. RESULTS

What was achieved:

1. Province-wide understanding of language levels of EAL learners: Every classroom teacher knows about the CFR/CEFR levels and the impact these levels have on the selection of instructional strategies and assessment processes.
2. School-division ownership of EAL assessment and support: The projects have allowed school divisions to develop internal processes for EAL assessment based on CFR levels. The ministry-funded projects have enabled school divisions to build a network of support and contacts. The ministry is not seen as being 'in charge' of EAL; school divisions have taken responsibility by embracing the CFR as a unifying framework that is equitable, accessible, and user-friendly for educators.
3. Support for indigenous learners: CFR-based assessment projects have had a positive effect on indigenous learners. Some school divisions have adapted descriptors to meet the needs of learners with indigenous language backgrounds so that they reflect the linguistic and cultural needs of this target population.
4. Prudent use of international resources to make improvements to CFR descriptors: By examining Ireland's classroom-based, CEFR-based material, Saskatchewan's CFR document was more clearly aligned to the curriculum. Descriptors (marked by checkmarks) were added for subject-based language progress. The Saskatoon Public School Division examined Ireland's descriptors in connection with their EAL assessment projects. Another school division, Prairie Spirit, used Ireland's example of an electronic CFR-based assessment tool to create their own online assessment process to report student progress.

5. Proof of language proficiency for citizenship: Another significant advantage of the CFR involves student applications for Canadian citizenship (18-22 years of age). After a year-long struggle to have Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) recognize that students in Saskatchewan schools 18-22 years of age are assessed using CEFR levels to indicate English language proficiency (B1), in a parallel manner to the use of DELF to identify proficiency in French. We were successful in our effort and Saskatchewan's scale is on the IRCC site here:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/application/application-forms-guides/guide-0002-application-canadian-citizenship-under-subsection-5-1-adults-18-years-older.html>
(scroll down to Language Requirement #15)

Impact:

Before the introduction of the CEFR, the provincial Ministry of Education did not have enough data to help school divisions. As a ministry, we could not make informed decisions about support to school divisions, because we did not know how many EAL students we had, what their levels were, and what kind of challenges school divisions faced. We began to collect clear, reliable, and equitable data across the province using a consistent process for gathering information. By using the same tool and scale, we have been successful in tracking EAL numbers, locations, and provincial growth for the past 5 years. In 2016, 9.2% of students in Saskatchewan (166,000 in Grades 1-12) were receiving EAL support. This number grew from 6.2% in 2012.

Our universities in Saskatoon and Regina also grew in the realization that teacher training in the area of EAL required more specialized courses focused on school-aged learners, CFR use, and K-12 curricular needs, rather than the typical focus on adult ESL needs. An agreement between the Ministry and the College of Education at the U of S allowed Nadia Prokopchuk to work with the college to create a Post-Degree Certificate in EAL Education (PDCEAL). This program, which began in September 2016, is:

- Delivered online (10 courses) to ensure accessibility and flexibility for all teachers;
- Designed for teachers with a Bachelor of Education degree and at least one year of teaching experience;
- Recognized by the province as a post-graduate certificate that is eligible for a salary increase.

The new courses designed for this certificate program focus, to a significant degree, on best practices for monitoring and assessing English language progress. This, in turn, results in a comprehensive overview of the CEFR as an international language reference tool. Details about the PDCEAL are available here:

<https://admissions.usask.ca/english-as-an-additional-language.php#About>

Resources on this theme:

EAL Assessment Project Funding has resulted in many very interesting and innovative approaches to use of the CFR with EAL learners. For example, Saskatoon Public School Division prepared [EAL Writing Rubrics](#) and [EAL Reading Rubrics](#) based on language descriptors within the CFR. These documents are available on the ministry's web page (link given below). Prairie Spirit School Division created an [electronic assessment tool](#) for reporting EAL progress based on provincial CFR descriptors. Ireland's CEFR-based electronic assessment tools inspired this initiative.

Links to Resources:

Please see the government Publications Center for copies of the CFR Guide and all CFR-related support documents: <http://www.publications.gov.sk.ca/deplist.cfm?d=11&c=3604> (CFR Home Page) OR <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/education-and-learning/prek-12-education-early-learning-and-schools/learning-english-as-an-additional-language> . Click on "EAL Support Information and Documents".

Electronic versions of the CFR-based assessments for heritage languages are available on the SOHL website here: <http://heritagelanguages.sk.ca/> (See HL Student Self-Assessments tab)

4 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

- The CEFR meets the needs of every language group, every cultural context, and every scenario, for both in-school and out-of-school language learning needs. Why wouldn't we consider the CEFR for a pan-Canadian reference tool?
- It's important to have everyone 'on the same page' regarding the CEFR; there is more strength in promoting language learning if we have a common reference tool. We need to start with a clear understanding and agreement that a common framework can guide the stages of language learning in various languages.
- The process of implementing the CEFR cannot be too prescriptive as each province and location has its own benchmarks in place. However, the CEFR framework is solid. It is valid and reliable for many locations, cultures, and languages. We need to encourage people - perhaps through funding sources - to develop resources for the Canadian context and offer professional learning (e.g. webinars) to facilitate use of the framework.
- A cautionary note: One of the very first questions our ministry received from school divisions was whether there would be more funding for students at lower levels of the CEFR. We chose to keep the funding consistent at all levels to ensure that students would receive equal levels of support as they moved up the CFR scale.
- Ministry personnel emphasized to school divisions that every level of language learning was equally important. Students should not stop receiving targeted and sustained support at any level, particularly upper levels B1.1 and B1.2. There was a tendency among school divisions to stop providing support to B1 students because they appeared to 'function quite well in English'. Withdrawal of EAL support when it is needed most for academic language growth has proven to be detrimental for success in high school.