

A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of promising practices

1. OVERVIEW

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Country: Canada (Ottawa) **Institution:** Ottawa-Carleton District School Board

Type of context: Programme/school level

Educational sector: Primary, Lower Secondary, Upper Secondary

Main focus of your project:
Teaching Practices, Teacher Education: External exam

SUMMARY

Name: Reforming teaching practice through institutionalizing the DELF

Abstract:

Introduction of the DELF in the school leaving exam as a catalyst for CEFR implementation, reform of classroom teaching, increase in student motivation – and hence increase in enrolments in language classes.

Stage: Planning; Implementation; Evaluation

Theme: Curriculum; Teaching; Assessment; Teacher education

CEFR aspects targeted: Levels, Descriptors, Authentic tasks, Assessment with defined criteria

Main features of this example:

- Systematic, province-wide introduction of CEFR and DELF
- Training teachers as DELF examiners
- Turnaround to falling enrolments in language classes
- Sustained, realistic development over a number of years

Quality principles demonstrated: Relevance, Validity, Transparency, Sustainability



2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background:

Ottawa is the capital of Canada, on the border to the (French-speaking) province of Quebec. Canada is officially a bilingual country and many in the Ottawa school system are children of federal government employees or work in other sectors, where proficiency in both languages is an asset. When we did a review of current French as a Second Language (FSL) programmes (See Steps; see Timeline), one of the things to deal with at the secondary level across the province is that we were losing huge numbers of core French students after the mandatory grade 9, and also immersion students at higher grades. So our school district tried to find ways to motivate students to continue with French. This was one of the motivational factors behind the introduction of the CEFR and DELF.

Stated aims:

- To have a measure at the end of Grade 12
- Internal & external accountability for parents and employers
- To improve instructional practice

Steps/stages: (Please describe separately and number these steps/stages)

1. **Reviews of programmes** for French as a Second Language (2007-2009): (a) Core French (in the English program); (b) French Immersion. Recommendation to have some type of proficiency test at the end of grade 12 that would tell students, parents, employers what level the student had accomplished.
2. **Reviews of tests and scales** - and that is how we stumbled across the CEFR. Parallel to that, there was some work happening with the CEFR at the University of Ottawa and at the ministry, looking into how it could be used.
3. **Implementation of a CEFR-based curriculum** at the district level and at the same time it became a lead project at the provincial level. Every aspect of the CEFR fits exactly with the research we have done on best practices in teaching assignments and evaluation, it was seamless with the research, and meant it was aligned with work we were already doing.
4. **First round of DELF testing** in 2010. Our initial goal was to provide a proficiency test, but as we got more and more into the CEFR, all those other layers became extremely important to the district. When we began implementing the DELF, our first task was to have knowledgeable people. The first step was training DELF examiners. Goal: to get the evaluation up and running, but more importantly, to enhance the knowledge base of the CEFR as a whole. We strategically trained teachers from kindergarten to grade 12, and they meet regularly now, and they have started to talk about criteria in a much better way
5. **Training in the levels:** We test A2, B1, B2, with the vast majority at B2 level, quite a number at B1 and a small number at A2. Training in the levels is very important because: It gives our teaching staff a clear sense of what it means to have students functioning at a certain level, *and therefore* how they should be teaching, what the instructional practices are to make sure the students hit those levels, and thinking of how to build that into their evaluation practices. If you really try to move students through levels, you have to have that instruction happening right from the very beginning. So we started off with secondary and very quickly built to having elementary Core French & immersion teachers think of the concepts and become certified as correcteurs (DELF examiners). Also, there was a broadening understanding among students themselves of what it means to be at those different proficiency levels.
6. **Confidence building with descriptors:** The CEFR descriptors give positive statements, focusing on what students can do as opposed to what they cannot do; having students focusing on that as well was part of the plan. Our provincial goal was to have students build their self-confidence in being able to use the language, and can-do statements helped build that confidence; e.g: at this level, this is what I can do and I don't have to wait until I'm at the final level before I'm willing to open my mouth. It helps make more

concrete what levels of proficiency actually mean.

7. **Plurilingualism** is hugely congruent/aligned with what we want to do in our school district. We are in a particular context (national capital, *many* parents value bilingualism). When we did our review on FSL in 2007, there was huge support for the immersion program as well as Core French. So from 2016 we have the 50-50 program in junior and senior kindergarten (French & English) for all students. Then parents decide which program (English, Early French Immersion, Middle French Immersion, alternative). This is aligned to what we are trying to do here in terms of plurilingualism, the idea of equity. We want that during the first 2 years all children have the same opportunity for language instruction and after that, parents can choose which stream they want their children to go on to.

Timeline:

2007: Review of both French as a Second Language (FSL) programs (= Immersion; Core French) at the elementary level; in

2009: Review of FSL programs at the secondary level

2010: First round of DELF testing

2016: 50/50 English/French instruction in kindergarten

People/roles:

Other resources needed:

From a budget standpoint, it is a significant district investment. We have managed to continue to have this voluntary test taking financed by the Board with these justifications:

- It's been a huge buy-in from the parents and students
- And it's equity of access, because 80% of students are now taking the DELF; there is no cost to the student. FSL renewal funds can only be used in certain ways; we have been able to say that this is our commitment to staff training, to professional learning and to students, through the implementation of the DELF.

Quality Assurance procedures employed:

We built a research component into the implementation process from the very beginning: We did a research study in which we tracked for 4 years how many students were taking up the challenge of the DELF at each level, what levels were they the most proficient at. This was a huge piece of research with a questionnaire.

Now we have finished the piloting; we have gathered enough information.

We will continue to monitor the impact on enrolment in our French programs. We do some basic monitoring each year, looking at the results and seeing "Do we have more students going for the DELF at a higher level? What's the success rate?" We will also continue with some *general* monitoring, e.g., how many English language learners are in our EFI (Early French Immersion) vs MFI (Middle French Immersion) vs Core French program; how many children with special needs, etc.

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

3. RESULTS

What was achieved:

- The CEFR is common language in our district; most teachers are aware of it, particularly at the secondary level. Because of that, the students can self-identify in consultation with their teachers which level they want to take the DELF.
- We realized we needed more focus on instruction and evaluation of oral interactive communication; the DELF includes that category > impact in the classroom on instructional practice, because teachers and

students know this is a part in the DELF they have to prepare for.

The CEFR is not just a framework. It is very connected to instructional practice. We had little resistance from teachers as they began to see the positive impact on their students. It is a constant process to have teachers working on it, working with their colleagues and trying to get more consistent instructional practice that is congruous with the CEFR.

We are confident that we will continue the process of implementation, because we institutionalized the DELF assessment. That guarantees that we have to have qualified correcteurs to be able to administer the test. We have a budget to train the correcteurs to get them certified. They get a profound sense of what the levels are when participating in the administration of the DELF. That is an opportunity to step outside the classroom, get a look at proficiency from a very intense assessment standpoint, and then go back to the classroom having a deeper understanding of what it means for students to be functioning at each of those levels of proficiency.

DELF testing is changing the culture: it has helped teachers to give more importance to oral language development and assessment criteria. When we started putting students in for the DELF, a lot of teachers started asking themselves “what needs to happen in the classroom for this to happen?” Now teachers are quite good at assessing vocabulary range and control, whereas before there was less of these two elements in oral assessment.

What we thought was interesting when we started was that, very quickly, teachers who engaged in the process came on board with it. There was very little resistance as far as “is this good for kids?” The challenge was more to do with “I don’t know how to do this.” The teachers who do get on board do not go back. The teachers who have been long-standing teachers and have been able to transition to this, their teaching is just as tight, but done with a different focus – oriented to real world language use.

Students and parents’ responses have been extremely positive. We have made some adjustments based on students’ feedback in the questionnaire (as part of the research study). We asked both students who would and would not do the test and then analyzed why some did not want to do the test. Several said they were afraid of missing two days of school, so we looked for a way so that they could write the written part of the test as part of their classroom work, and tried to find a way to do the oral part with us going to them instead of them coming to us.

Implementation will never be finished, but looking at a continuum of implementation, we are well beyond awareness.

Impact:

In the first year, we had 60/70 students who volunteered to take the DELF over the two semesters; by the next year, it exploded up to 300/400. In 2016 we are at 1200/1400 kids per year who take it (about 80% of all students registered in grade 12 FSL courses volunteer to take the DELF). There is a big increase in Core French after grade 9 (when students can stop) and big increase in French Immersion too in the later grades.

Students continue with FSL because it is important to the students and their parents to have something in their hands when they walk out, and the DELF provides that. More importantly, the kind of instruction that we are seeing in classrooms engages students. They feel like they are getting somewhere and that it is worthwhile. Critical thinking and problem solving; they have a sense that their proficiency is progressing and they do things they want to do (e.g., authentic tasks).

The DELF is now institutionalized in Ottawa, because:

- we’ve never seen a dip in the number of students taking the DELF, and that’s an indication;
- all secondary schools participate;
- the number of students choosing to continue with French has not gone back down again.

Resources on this theme:

4 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

Do's

- If you want to have an impact, you need to have multiple entry points to the CEFR. With us, one was the DELF. The DELF is the catalyst, the vehicle of implementation of the CEFR, because once you get that up and happening, it trickles down to levels, instructional practices, etc. However, the second was professional learning for teachers, enhancing instructional practices in the classroom. A third way could be implementing a portfolio approach, where teachers assess students developing competencies based on the levels, *although not through* an official certification
- It is really helpful to have a systematic approach, and it has to fit in with what you are doing in the district as a whole. If you want a systematic approach and you want the work to be institutionalized, you have to think across all of the different employee groups (e.g.: teachers, principals, superintendents), how you are building capacity and buy-in at all those levels
- Therefore, every level of the organization has to be playing their role in it. It has to be a full-on press - it cannot be just the initiative of a small French department. It would never have the impact that it has had in our district if that had been the case:
 - My job as director was to work with the elected officials and present a plan on how to finance this.
 - Our superintendent of curriculum had to have a really tight plan for the instructional coaches to make sure that professional learning was happening throughout the district and that the administration of DELF was working.
 - Teachers have to be leaders, have to believe in it, and have to be supported by their principals (we had to bring principals in on the loop and have them on board)
- To help teachers improve their instructional practices one strategy is to use an instructional coach model for professional learning. One needs to create a network of teachers to get them on board.
- The *type* of instruction that takes place must be extremely well planned and with good resources; teachers think about how to structure their lessons, what resources they're going to use, how they're going to help students monitor their own learning, how they are going to be able to support students' learning, etc. It really takes a very talented educator.
- It is a good idea to link up with other people in order to make the change more sustainable. We have gone beyond our district, and we have taken on a role in helping with the implementation for other smaller school districts who would not have had the capacity to get this type of project up and running. First, we got it up and running in our region and then we helped other areas across the province develop other regional centres