

A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of practices

1 OVERVIEW

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Country: Greece **Institution:** University of Athens
Type of context: National
Educational sector: Primary and lower secondary
Main focus: Common curriculum that documents its reference level descriptors on the basis of precise linguistic elements making the levels explicit for individual languages.

SUMMARY

Name: An Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC)

Abstract:

Development of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC): This document presents a foreign languages curriculum project which is linked to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Teaching, Learning and Assessment* (CEFR), acknowledging its increasingly important role in Europe and beyond, as more and more school language curricula and language examination batteries are aligning their components to the illustrative descriptors included therein. These descriptors specify generic, functional criteria about how language competences are expected to develop across learning stages. The IFLC has officially been adopted as the national Foreign Language (henceforth FL) curriculum of state school education –from grade 3 primary to the last class of lower secondary school.¹

Stage: Planning, Evaluation

Theme: Curriculum (Teaching, learning and assessment)

CEFR aspects used: Levels, descriptors, assessment with defined criteria, plurilingualism, European Language Portfolio

Main features of this example:

- Provides systematic support for IFLC and CEFR use
- Thorough development processes, including large-scale piloting phase
- Systematic linking to the CEFR via alignment of the can-do statements (or illustrative descriptors)
- The IFLC functional can-do statements are backed up with linguistic data
- Coupled with the national multilingual examination suite, known as the KPG multilingual examination suite,² aligned with the CEFR.

Quality principles particularly demonstrated: Validity, Transparency, Coherence

¹ In the first two grades of primary school pupils are introduced to the first foreign language –which is English—through a special programme of English for Young Learners, known with its Greek acronym PEAP (<http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/peap/en>).

² Kratiko Pistopiitiko Glossomathias = ‘State Certificate in Language Proficiency’.



2 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background: The IFLC aims at the development of students' competences in languages other than the official school language. These competences can be tested and certified on the six-level language proficiency scale of the Council of Europe, by taking part in the KPG exams.³

The IFLC, developed by a group of experts commissioned (after a rigorous selection process) by the Institute of Educational Policy of the Ministry of Education, was officially adopted as the national FL curriculum in state primary and lower secondary schools in 2016, after a two-year pilot implementation phase and a revisions phase that followed. The ICFL involves all languages currently included in the school curriculum, and those that may additionally be included in the future. Its development has initiated a systematic effort to document its reference level descriptors (common for all languages and aligned to the Can-Do statements or illustrative descriptors provided by the CEFR) on the basis of precise linguistic elements making the levels explicit for individual languages.

Upon adoption of the new curriculum, changes were introduced in internal evaluation of learner output, including ways of alternative assessment by using the European Language Portfolio, learner and teacher diaries, journals and logs, inter-school and cross-class project work, interviews, debates and conferences. Moreover, new specifications for periodical progress and achievement tests were developed --and officially published (as presidential decree) in the Government Gazette. All testing and assessment modes aims at checking levelled skills in reading & listening comprehension and written production, as well as in cross language mediation. Oral performance is assessed in different ways and recommended that it be tested through oral interviews during regular class sessions.

IFLC testing specifications are modeled after those of the KPG⁴ exams. Sample (integrated level) test papers see <http://rcel2.enl.uoa.gr/files/xenesglossesedu/themata/index.html>.

The research supporting the ICFL is an ongoing project, the progress of which has depended on (irregular) State funding, involves a multilingual database, containing descriptions of elements of learners' levelled language competences (functional, grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic competences), acquired from various resources: Profile books, course-books in use in schools, and on the descriptors (i.e.the Can-Do statements) included in the specifications of the KPG exams.⁵

The IFLC database supports essential consistency checks and comparisons of linguistic descriptions across languages, and will ultimately be used for the development of lists of features that are criterial (distinctive) of

³ The KPG multilingual examination suite provides the opportunity to successful candidates to be certified for one of six CEFR levels of language proficiency. The exams, prepared by the two largest universities in Greece (Universities of Athens and Thessaloniki) and administered by the Greek Ministry of Education, uses the CEFR as a springboard for content specifications. For the time being, it covers six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Turkish. All six languages are tested on the basis of common detailed specifications that include the KPG descriptors which have been empirically trialled for years through the tasks in test papers for different levels. KPG languages are tested through common guidelines developed by the expert multilingual examination board for the test tasks of the following four test papers (test modules) measuring oral and written comprehension and production competences, as well as oral and written (cross language) mediation: Module 1: Reading comprehension and language awareness; Module 2: Writing and (from B1 to C2 level) written mediation; Module 3: Listening comprehension; Module 4: Speaking and oral mediation. Oral and written production of Modules 2 and 4, for all KPG languages, is evaluated and marked using common criteria and assessment grids. The KPG test tasks for all languages have been included in the new CEFR website of the Council of Europe as illustrative CEFR tasks: <http://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/institutions>. For detailed information about the KPG examination suite, how it is organised and operated, about the exam papers themselves (past papers), the extensive research and publications, and an e-school that teachers and students can use to help them prepare for the exams see: http://rcel2.enl.uoa.gr/kpg/en_index.htm.

⁵ During the pilot phase of in-school implementation the ICFL Can-Do statements served as the basis for calibration of the contents of foreign language course-books and for development of reference criteria for FL syllabuses.

key learning stages, specifying how language skills and awareness acquired at each level of proficiency differ from those of adjacent levels.

Designed as an essential methodological apparatus for the development of comparable descriptions of communicative performance across languages and levels of proficiency, it is programmed additionally to be linked with the “Language Learner Profile Project” (briefly described further on in this document), incorporating language data from the KPG corpora. The descriptions stored in the database are organized in terms of a representational framework and a set of metadata, common for all languages. As such, it supports links between elements of language competences and learning/assessment specifications across languages, aimed at substantially contributing to the development and assessment of plurilingual competence, as described in the CEFR. The continuation of the project which supports the ongoing development of the IFLC database depends on funding and availability of expertise at the RCeL, which is happy to collaborate with other organisations and research bodies.

Stated aims:

- 1) To develop an integrated curriculum common for all the languages taught in Greek school, adopting a generic approach to language learning and aiming towards plurilingual competence (as defined by the CEFR, 2001). With this new curriculum foreign language learning, teaching, and assessment the intention was to conform to the six-level CEFR scale and indeed it does. The IFLC sets clearly specified, explicit learning goals and associates the teaching and learning procedures with the objective assessment of language proficiency.
- 2) To link language learning at school with the KPG exams so that students who are prepared in or outside of school can sit for the exams, the pen-and-paper version of which are presently held twice a year (November and May). A multilingual computer adaptive testing system is underway for the KPG exams as well, especially for school students.

Steps/stages:

- 1) The IFLC was created by a team of experts commissioned by the Institute of Educational Policy and the initial version of the IFLC was piloted in 160 schools across the country. On the basis of the information collected, it was revised and completed in 2014. In 2012, a parallel project carried out at the RCeL was and still is providing data for its further development so that the IFLC specifies
 - levelled descriptors of language use in different situational contexts
 - linguistic accuracy and appropriacy descriptors associated with each level of competence.

The data is provided by the IFLC database, which is organized in terms of the 6-level scale of language proficiency and currently includes the following five language components:

- a) The Can-do statements that specify what the learner is expected to do using the language, at different levels;
- b) The language functions that the learner is expected to perform, at different levels;
- c) The grammar (grammatical patterns) that the learner is expected to produce and comprehend at different levels;
- d) The lexis (lexical units) that the learner is expected to produce and comprehend at different levels;
- e) The text types that the learner is expected to produce and comprehend, when communicating in the target language, at different levels.

The Linguistic information was selected from a variety of relevant resources to inform the ICFL database:

- descriptions of competences for each language from ‘Profile books’
- descriptions of language elements, extracted from foreign language course-books currently in use in Greek state (primary and secondary) schools
- descriptions from the KPG Task Typology

2) Through another project running in parallel at the RCeL, both the KPG exams and the ICFL stand to gain on an ongoing basis. This is “The Language Learner Profile Project”⁶ and its aim is to describe the linguistic profile of the Greek learner/user of foreign languages, adding details to the CEFR leveled descriptors of language proficiency across languages. Emphasizing the significance of learner data for describing language competences, the project team specifies proficiency scaling in terms of the use of target language properties exhibited by learners with coherent L1 characteristics and asks the following important questions:

- How are language competences of Greek learners scaled across levels?
- To what extent is the language use exhibited by Greek learners similar or different from that generally expected from learners across levels?
- Which are the commonalities or divergences between generally expected and observed developmental patterns of language use, designating the 'profile' of the Greek learner of languages, i.e. representing identifiable, measurable features or idiosyncrasies of the Greek learners' use of languages?

Bringing together different strands related to the study of languages (applied and theoretical linguistics, foreign language studies, computational linguistics), the team has been trying to carry out extensive empirical study of the use of three European languages (English, German and Spanish) made by Greek learners, in various communicative and discursive contexts –but of course the work on this project depends on funding. Drawing on corpus data collected on the basis of the KPG multilingual examination suite (i.e. the KPG English Corpus and similar corpora for German and Spanish) and using advanced natural language processing techniques for automated text analysis, the team has been developing and implementing a generic methodological framework (portable across languages), suitable for describing the contextual use of language in terms of features pertaining to distinct levels of linguistic analysis. This project will eventually deliver lists of lexical, semantic, grammatical/morpho-syntactic, and functional features that characterize Greek learners' language production, at different levels of proficiency. This project will inform, on an ongoing basis, the IFLC database and will support the development of novel teaching/testing materials.

The content of the IFLC:

Articulated as Can-do statements, the IFLC descriptors were systematically structured in terms of (a) communicative activities, (b) communicative language competences (linguistic, functional, pragmatic), (c) cognitive processes reified in learning tasks (e.g. information identification in text, information sorting, text summarization, etc.)

With an underlying view of language as a semiotic system (constituting resource for meaning making), the IFLC has moved beyond an understanding of the linguistic system as set of rules determining the well-formedness of sentences. Its descriptors or Can-do statements are formulated in functional terms, materially configured in different text types or ‘genres’. The notion of genre (i.e. text as a component of discourse, with characteristic generic features) is central in the view of language on which the IFLC rests.

Texts are linked to context, and specifically to:

- the purpose for which each has been produced
- the time and space constraints of the social situation to which each pertains
- the genre to which it belongs
- the knowledge, attitudes, and intentions of the participants in a given instance of communication the IFLC specifies the learning outcomes per level of proficiency which are straightforwardly mapped onto identifiable skills or competences that the user of language gradually develops and uses in order to communicate in various situations, with gradable degrees of success. In other words, the curriculum specifies the *what* of foreign language education –what is to be achieved by learners— rather than the *how*.

How these outcomes will be achieved, with what means, in what order and when are issues pertaining to syllabus design which is left to teachers to develop in accordance to their students’ needs and the constraints

⁶ <http://www.rcel.enl.uoa.gr/research/language-education-research/the-language-learner-profile-project.html>

of their teaching context. Thus, the curriculum views teachers as designers of the learning process, actively involved in the selection of learning experiences and the design of units of work which are appropriate to their class and school profile. It was to this end that the Teacher Handbook (see this document, p. 2) was produced, explaining the main principles of the curriculum and illustrating how teachers can design appropriate learning experiences for their students with reference to the learning outcomes specified in the IFLC.

Linked to the ICFL, the following changes have been introduced:

- Internal evaluation with new type of tests for primary and secondary schools assessing:
 - Reading comprehension and language awareness
 - Listening comprehension
 - Writing
 - Cross linguistic mediation
- External evaluation with national exams based on a multilingual foreign language testing suite leading to the state certificate for language proficiency. Note that it is not obligatory for students to sit for the exam.

Timeline: The ICFL was created by a team of experts commissioned by the Institute of Educational Policy from 2010-2012. The initial version of the IFLC was piloted for two years in 160 schools across the country and was revised and completed in 2013-2014. It took a year to go through the process of official adoption as the national curriculum and this process was completed in 2016.

People/roles: The IFLC was initially created by a team of 25 people, consisting of academics, researchers, foreign language teaching school advisors and foreign language teachers. Beyond the commissioned project, it was further developed because of the dedication of 10 members of the RCeL staff (applied linguists, general linguists and a computational linguist).

Quality Assurance procedures employed: The curriculum development team initially carried out a baseline evaluation of the current state of foreign language education in Greece which consisted, inter alia, a series of systematic studies concerning the needs and characteristics of the Greek FL user, the costs of State supported and private tuition FL learning in Greece, and content (quality) analysis of the current textbooks used in foreign language classes.

The use of the in 160 schools across the country (which were randomly selected) included a detailed plan for monitoring the use of the ICFL in schools and offering various types of support to teachers. In order to monitor its use, 10 Monitoring Consultants (five for primary schools and five for secondary pilot schools) were selected from the body of teacher trainers who were assigned with the responsibility of visiting at least three 'pilot schools', three times during the school year in order:

- a) to document, through structured interviews and a questionnaire given to the Headmaster and the school language teachers, the extent to which the ICFL was being used and how
- b) to offer in-house support and guidance on how best to use the curriculum.

Monitoring Consultants (MC) were asked to collect data pertaining to the implementation of the innovation on the basis of three school visits and to write a report at the end synthesizing the main outcomes of the monitoring process. The reports written by individual consultants were then sent to the coordinators who were responsible for drafting an overall report of the implementation process.

Up until now there is an absence of an organised system of monitoring and of measuring quality of education in the Greek educational system as a whole. It is now being developed but it will not have to do with quality indicators of subject specific curricula.

3 RESULTS

What was achieved: The adoption of the ICFL as the national FL curriculum in State primary and lower secondary schools, marked the beginning of a period in Greece whereby, for the first time ever, FL learning, teaching, assessment and testing is viewed and treated as an integrated whole with coherent structure and common, identifiable aims across the school curriculum. Moreover, the adoption of the ICFL meant that in the very rigid, centralized Greek educational system it was for the first time ever considered legitimate to decouple a subject curriculum from the organization of the wider school curriculum since the ICFL suggests (though it does not require) that students be grouped according to the level of their language proficiency and not according to the class / grade they are in. Therefore, it raised a new type awareness for FL teachers with regard to levelled language knowledge and skills. However, the realisation of this practice proved very difficult in this case, not only because of Greece's educational system, but also because it requires human resources which could not be supplied in a country that presently has to comply with extreme austerity measures.

Impact:

The impact that the ICFL team has been able to document, through its frequent communication with foreign language school advisors that work with teachers across the country is the following:

- The majority of foreign language teachers have begun thinking in terms of foreign language *education* in school (rather than ELT or FLT), and to collaborate to a certain degree on foreign language projects.
- On the whole foreign language teachers now understand the foreign language learning project in schools (where learners of the same age and class have different levels of proficiency, due to extra language learning outside the school) as a differentiated learning process and have been requesting that they are provided with the conditions to pursue this goal.
- Particularly motivated foreign language teachers understand in positive terms the opportunity that the ICFL offers them to design their own syllabuses and lessons, to select their own materials, and generally to have more autonomy than the educational system has allowed them up to now.
- The majority of the foreign language teachers understand that they need the State promised training and professional development courses to learn to design the teaching and learning by themselves but also to be given the conditions so as to achieve it.

On the whole, the ICFL has raised a new kind of awareness in foreign language teachers with regard to

- language learning leading to levelled proficiency
- what it means to have plurilingual competence
- cross linguistic mediation and the appropriate use of the L1 or other foreign languages students have in the classroom

Resources on this theme

- <http://www.rcel.enl.uoa.gr/research/language-education-research/the-integrated-foreign-languages-curriculum-iflc-linguistic-database.html>
- <http://www.rcel.enl.uoa.gr/research/language-education-research/the-language-learner-profile-project.html>
- <http://www.rcel.enl.uoa.gr/research/kpg-research.html>

1) **Academic publication**

Dendrinou, Bessie. & Gotsouilia, Voula. (2015). Setting standards for multilingual frameworks in foreign language education. In Bernard Spolsky, Ofra Inbar & Michal Tannenbaum (eds.) *Challenges for Language Education and Policy. Making Space for People*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015 (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/ymbfa3u95fh0qxo/IFLC.pdf?dl=0>)

2) **Teacher Handbook**

Dendrinou, Bessie & Karavas, Evdokia (2013). A publication (in Greek) entitled *Foreign language education to promote multilingual competences in Greece today: teaching approaches and practices*, which guides practicing teachers how to use the IFLC effectively as a resource, how to plan one's syllabus

and how to carry out differentiated learning for one's students who are in the same class but are not of the same language level, what other pedagogical practices to follow, how to use ICT in the classroom, testing on the basis of IFLC and alternative assessment. It contains many practical examples. The Handbook was published by the Research Centre for Language Teaching, Testing and Assessment (RCeL) of the University of Athens,⁷ and the Institute of Educational Policy of the Ministry of Education. It was made available in printed form to school advisors and it is available for teachers (electronically) free of charge.

3) **Report on FL education in Greece**

Dendrinou, B., Zouganeli, K. & Karavas, E. (2014). *Foreign language learning in Greek schools: European Survey on Language Competences* (published by the RCeL and the Institute of Educational Policy): http://www.rcel.enl.uoa.gr/fileadmin/rcel.enl.uoa.gr/uploads/images/ESLC_EN_WEB.pdf

4 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

Advice on this theme; things to remember:

The implementation of any new curriculum (but not only), and especially the ICFL requires organized monitoring processes throughout the period of its implementation, serious teacher support and in-service opportunities, teacher self- and other assessment, and the resources for differentiated instruction and for the use of differentiated printed and digital materials. Only some of these conditions were met in Greece because of the austerity measures imposed.

Advice on this theme; pitfalls to avoid:

Systematic implementation of a new curriculum (any curriculum) requires that teachers are on board, that they understand the rationale and what is required of them, that there is a team of professionals (preferably experts that they have high regard for) that guide and support them through the process. It is also important to have teachers communicating, supporting and explaining to each other what they are doing, sharing their work in communities of teaching and learning practice.⁸

Lessons learnt/Issues to watch out for:

Teacher support for implementation is essential and in order to have teacher support you also need a system of reward for good practices (which by the way is altogether missing from the Greek educational system, while recently teachers have experienced a 50% of salary decrease due to austerity measures, like most other highly trained professionals).

⁷ For information regarding the RCeL: <http://www.rcel.enl.uoa.gr/>.

⁸ As an example of a Greek FL teachers' community of practice see: <http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/togather/>