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CHAPTER 2.03.1. CEFLING: COMBINING SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND TESTING APPROACHES TO WRITING

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The official aims and practices of language education and assessment in Europe are fundamentally influenced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR). The best known aspect of the CEFR is the six-level scale of language proficiency. In Finland the “CEFR effect” is particularly strong, as the CEFR scales have been adapted for the National Core Curricula for schools, for adult education, and for the National Certificates language examination. Even the citizenship requirement of skills in one of the national languages (Finnish or Swedish) is based on the CEFR (B1).

The CEFR scale describes language proficiency with communicative and functional goals and descriptors. These are obviously not language-specific and thus give the learner or teacher no pointers for what structures and words might be useful for

reaching a given level. The CEFLING project addresses the question of how second language skills in a given language develop from one functional level to the next. It brings together two usually separate research fields: the study of second language acquisition and the study of language testing. It is a part of an informal European network called SLATE (Second Language Acquisition and Testing in Europe).

The focus area of the CEFLING project is the development of writing. Two languages are involved: Finnish as a second language (L1 varies) and English (L1 Finnish). The research questions of are the following:

What combinations of linguistic features characterise learners' performance at the proficiency levels defined in the CEFR and its Finnish adaptations?

To what extent do adult and young learners who engage in the same communicative tasks, at a given level, perform in the same way linguistically? To what extent are the adult-oriented CEFR levels and their Finnish adaptations for young learners equivalent?

To what extent are the pedagogical tasks found in the teaching materials in the Finnish comprehensive school comparable with the tasks defined in the CEFR and the new curriculum?

What are the linguistic and communicative features that teachers and the National Certificates raters pay attention to when assessing learners with the help of the Finnish adaptations of the CEFR scales? How do these features relate to the linguistic and communicative analysis of the same performances?

The data consists of writing samples from adults (National Certificates test performances) and young learners (grades 7–9, ages 12–16). The tasks for both sets of data were similar. For the development of the tasks, see Alanen et al. in this publication. The samples were assessed by trained raters using both the CEFR scale and the National Curricula scale. The National Curricula scale breaks down the CEFR levels into smaller steps, e.g. A1 into A1.1–A1.3. The samples with the minimum of 67 % inter-rater reliability (two ratings agree and one is at the most one level higher or lower) form the basic data. The basic data for Finnish consists of 671 samples from adults and 825 from young learners. For English there are 562 samples from young learners (adult data selection in process). The data has been coded in CHILDES format (Child Language Data Exchange System, <http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/>).

The data analysis for RQs 1 and 2 is currently (autumn 2009) being performed. Several senior researchers and doctoral students each follow the development of certain structural or lexical features across the functional, CEFR-based proficiency levels. For each feature, three dimensions are studied: frequency (per 1000 words), accuracy, and distribution. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. The theoretical starting points of the linguistic analysis vary somewhat but are primarily usage-based (construction grammar, conceptual semantics). Work on L2 English syntax focuses on the development of questions and negation. Vocabulary studies

focus on the frequency, range and depth of lexis in the learners' writing across proficiency levels as well as on the development of word derivation skills and the ability to use formulaic expressions such as collocations, prepositional phrases in English and verbal structures in Finnish, as well as metatextual phrases. The work for the RQs 3 and 4 is also proceeding, with the analyses of the task performance and the teacher and rater interviews.

At the moment the results are very tentative. However, it seems that the growth of the linguistic skills is not linear across the CEFR levels but there are bigger differences between some levels. Furthermore, the growth of the three dimensions is different: frequency and accuracy do not always grow similarly. An important finding is that practically any linguistic structure can be found at any level, even A1, but first with very limited distribution. This sheds new light on the SLA theories of the order of acquisition. The first results on the analyses of the rating data suggest that the two rating scales used in the study are quite comparable but that the qualitative findings from the interviews point out certain problems in usability of the scales and the specific descriptors of performance used in them.