

# **The CEFR and its Impact on a National Language Policy**

**Kari Sajavaara**

**Professor Emeritus**

**English, Applied Language Studies**

**Centre for Applied Language Studies**

**Jyväskylän yliopisto**

# Non-native languages in Finland

- Languages have always been a popular area of education in Finland
- All comprehensive-school pupils study two non-native languages (since 1972-77)
- Up to five languages are possible in the upper secondary school
- Languages compulsory in vocational education (from 1983)
- Universities have had compulsory language examinations since the 19th century
- Examinations in the mother tongue, the non-native national language, and one or two foreign languages in all HE degrees
- The National Foreign Language Certificate available since 1994 in nine languages

# National foreign language policy

- Finland has had a national foreign language policy since 1979
- The policy is based on the principle of societal multilingualism
- Target percentages were given in the policy for speakers of four major languages: English, German, French, Russian
- Swedish for Finnish speakers and Finnish for Swedish speakers are compulsory in the comprehensive school
- Swedish and Finnish were compulsory in the school-leaving examination until 2005

# A new national language policy needed

The world is no longer the same as it was in the 1970s

- globalisation, liberalisation, urbanisation
- importance of service industries (60% of Finns)
- Development towards knowledge society
  - Importance of professionals and skilled labour
  - High level of education
- Impact of technology and the media
- Need of tools for international communication
- Membership in the EU
  - employability, mobility
- New solutions needed for the teaching of national languages, Swedish for Finns in particular

**In modern developed societies societies, there are more and more types of academic employment and skilled labour whose essential requirement is a high level of language competence, in L1 and one or more L2s, inseparable from other aspects of professional competence.**

**Mother tongue skills and competences  
are the backbone of communicative  
abilities of professionals**

**They have to be developed concomitant  
with non-native languages**

# **A new national language policy needed**

- **The present development will lead to Finns knowing English only in addition to L1: all Finns study Swedish but most cannot use it**
- **English is not enough to cover the need of FL skills**
- **The percentage targets given in the national policy have not been reached**
- **Multilingualism is a good enough objective BUT**
- **A language user's total language resources should be the objective, ie. plurilingualism (L1 plus all other languages)**
- **The policy has not comprised any proper means of assessment and evaluation**

**The hidden ultimate target and norm of all language programmes has been 'perfect' native-like language competence**

**There have been no overall criteria of achievement**

**The tool to assess progress has been the rating of errors**

# The CEFR in Finland today

- **Comprehensive school:** Achievement in CEFR terms
- **Gymnasium:** Achievement in CEFR terms
- **Vocational education:** CEFR in rather general terms
- **Universities:** Languages for all - in progress
- **Polytechnics (some):** Optional speciality-oriented tests in CEFR terms
- **Adult lang education:** CEFR sporadically
- **Matriculation exam:** Under examination
- **National FL Certificate:** Based on CEFR

# Comprehensive school target levels in CEFR

Language	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
English A	B2.1	B2,1	B2.1	B2.1
Other lgs A	B1.1 – B1.2	B1.1	B1.2	B1.1 – B1.2
English B1	B1.2	B1.2	B1.2	B1.2
English B2	B1.1	B1.1	B1.1	B1.1
Other lgs B2	A2.2	A2.1 – A2.2	A2.2 – B1.1	A2.1 –A2.2
English B3	B1.1	A2.2	B1.1	B1.1
Other lgs B3	A2.1 – A2.2	A2.1	A2.1 – A2.2	A1.3 – A2.1

**A = 10-12 yrs    B1 = 8 years    B2 = 6 years    B3 = 3 years**

# Problems with the application of CEFR

- **CEFR evaluation is not congruent with school grading, which is more refined (grading from low 4 to high 10)**
- **It has been necessary to divide the levels in two**
- **Descriptors of CEFR levels are deceptive in their transparency and can only be used after extensive experimentation**
- **Validity of test items against CEFR can only be established through empirical work with experienced language teachers**
- **CEFR cannot be applied as such to professionally oriented language teaching and HE**

# Benefits from CEFR

- **Common denominator across languages, sectors of language education, and levels of language education**
- **Transparency of target level achievement for diplomas and certificates**
- **Establishment of transparent goals for adult language learners**
- **Potential starting point for development of criteria and levels in academic and vocational language education**
- **Tool for materials development**

# Impact of CEFR on language policy

- **Makes a coherent nation-wide language policy possible across languages (L1 included), educational sectors, and levels of language education**
- **Creates a certain congruence between end-level achievements**
- **Opens up channels to plausible lifelong language learning**
- **Improves transparency of certificates and diplomas**
- **Makes comparison of effectiveness of language education across national borders**

# Major goals for the New National Language Policy

- **Multilingualism through plurilingualism**
- **Increased cross-cultural and cross-language understanding**
- **Acknowledgement of the value of national languages**
- **Importance for equality of language competences**
- **Understanding of, and support for, personal goals of language learners however irrational**
- **Importance of language learning for learning to learn and for general pedagogical objectives**