



Self-Assessment Descriptors for Second Language

ŠORMOVÁ, Kateřina

Charles University, Czech Republic

Abstract

The poster presents pilot study in which an illustrative bank of self-assessment descriptors for Czech as a second language was evaluated. The project is related to Common European Framework for Language teaching and learning and was implemented by National Institute for Education in Prague. The descriptors define an ascending series of levels (from A1 to B2 level) and in four age categories (under 11 years, 11–15 years, 15–19 years and 19+ years) various aspects of language proficiency. In pilot study was evaluated the methodology to establish the difficulty level of descriptors and the ability level of learners. The subject of the study were 753 descriptors evaluated by 50 teachers and 640 students. They are analysed with questionnaires and controlled interviews. The analysis shows that many teachers are not sufficiently informed on second language acquisition. Another finding is the inexperience of many teachers with the language levels following the CEFR; they label words or grammatical elements as an inappropriate level, but their estimate is very often incorrect. The teachers mark sayings, proverbs and idioms as the most problematic. The students are often able to express the given meaning, but they are shy to speak in a foreign language.

Keywords: *second language, self-assessment, descriptor, pilot study;*

1. Self-assessment in language teaching

The traditional view was that language is only important in language lessons and the assessment was one way process pointed from teacher to the student. Today however, language is no longer seen as a goal in itself, but also as a tool through which students interact with friends and peers in schools or at work. Language is also a tool through which students learn content matters in subjects like science, literature, maths and history [1]. Self-assessment helps learners take ownership of their learning. Self-assessment descriptors can be used to encourage students to set goals and make them aware of what they need or want to learn. One of the effects of self-assessment is the encouragement in setting academic, professional and personal goals. Self-assessment can increase the interest and motivation level of students for the subjects leading to enhanced learning and better academic performance, helping them in development of critical skills for analysis of their own work. In case of school instruction, self-assessment should become an integral component of teaching, where it should be a part of further discussion and work in class [2]. It should be complemented by the assessment of the teacher or lecturer. Self-assessment helps students to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses and to regulate their further learning in an appropriate way. The evaluation of the teachers has a control importance for the student; it can also be motivational.

The self-assessment descriptors are descriptions of the specific skills, which correspond to the given level according to the CEFR. The descriptors form a uniform scale and are formulated clearly, concisely and positively (the goal is to name what the student knows how to do, not what he/she does not know how to do). One example of well-known self-assessment is European Language Portfolio (the part called evaluation portfolio). The ELP is defined as a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language – whether at school or outside school – can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences [3].

2. The specific nature of the acquisition of Czech as a second language

The self-assessment descriptors can be used not only for foreign language evaluation, but also for second language teaching. It is necessary to modify the content for second language learners. One example can be the Project of self-assessment descriptors for Czech as a second language.

From the perspective of linguistics, acquisition of the majority language seems to be the most important process, i.e. achievement of a certain linguistic competence allowing the individual successful realization in the foreign-language milieu. In this process, a certain specific form of bilingualism is achieved in a relatively short time, which is characterized by an imbalance of the knowledge of Czech in its function-style stratification: the spoken language has the primary position, the degree of acquisition of written Czech is negligible with almost half of the respondents and the vast majority speak of linguistic difficulties in official situations, especially in written speeches [4]. The

position of a second language is predominantly given by its importance in the life of a person; it is a language on which the user is existentially dependent. In children, it is the language of integration into school attendance; in adults it is the language that makes it possible to integrate into the majority society, so it is the languages that are necessary for working in a given society [5].

The level of the acquisition of Czech is usually very different within the individual language skills; the different needs of the students appear mainly in socio-cultural competence and the different psychological relations between the student and the language. It is particularly the issue of a forced language, the language which the student has not chosen freely based on his/her interest).

In instruction, it is at first mainly the instruction of compensation strategies and basic linguistic functions (greetings, thanking, a request...). In the first phase, instruction of speaking and listening predominates over instruction of reading and writing and the instruction of the basic lexis over the instruction of grammar.

3. Project

The creation of the descriptors for Czech as a second language is implemented by the National Institute for Education, a ten-member team of linguists and language lecturers were engaged in the project. The project's aim is support of Czech as a second language both in the area of the education of minors and also adult migrants. The conception of the self-assessment arises from the descriptors for foreign languages of the European Language Portfolio. The project lasted from June 2016 to November 2018. The creation of the descriptors was divided into four phases:

1. analysis of existing descriptors from the ELP and other foreign projects,
2. reformulation of existing descriptors and creation of new descriptors with respect to the second language,
3. piloting of the descriptors,
4. processing the results of the piloting and final formulation of the descriptors.

For the creation of new descriptors, four age categories and four levels of advancement were established: under 11 years and 11–15 years, levels A1, A2 and B1, 15–19 years and 19+, levels A1, A2, B1, B2.

4. Conception of the piloting study

A piloting of the descriptors took place from September to December 2017. The piloting had two phases – in the first phase a language diagnostic was conducted; in the second phase the descriptors in cooperation with the teachers were tested.

The aim of the piloting study was to verify whether the descriptors correspond to the given language level and whether the descriptors are comprehensible for the individual language levels and reflect the life reality of the target group. The questionnaires were broken down by age and language level.

5. Research design

The selection of the sample took place using a stratified sampling; pupils and teachers from primary, secondary, tertiary and language schools were included in the piloting. Pupils from the 3rd grade (inclusively), hence from age 9, with whom elementary literacy is already developed and who know how to read and write in the Latin alphabet, were included in the piloting.

A total of 35 schools and more than 50 teachers were involved in the piloting. The total number of pupils tested was greater than 640. According to our expectation, it was confirmed that the low language levels of A2 and A1 are also prevalent in the low age category (up to age 11). It is caused by two factors; the first is the short time of their stay in the Czech Republic, the second is the level of the cognitive abilities of children in the given age (a child at age 10 cannot read at level B2 even in their mother tongue, because they do not have a sufficient level of developed reading skills), but level A2 predominated also in another two age categories (15-19 years and 19+). We judge from that that in the case of adult respondents it is a category which Czech is most often learned institutionally; the higher categories apparently continue more commonly in private courses or the language is not learned systematically.

6. The results conclusion

The total number of the tested descriptors was 753. The most commentaries by the teachers (approximately 70 %) monitor the language level, especially on the lexical level. It shows that many teachers are not sufficiently informed on Czech as a second language, they evaluate the descriptors from the perspective of a foreign language.



The vocabulary of a second language is distinctly deeper and more specific than that of a foreign language, specialised phrases from many areas appear (health condition, communication with offices, communication with the school, social life). Some commentaries of the teachers suggest the use of synonymous phrases, thanks to which the formulations of the descriptors will be simpler and clear. Another finding is the inexperience of many teachers with the language levels following the CEFR; they label words or grammatical elements as an inappropriate level, but their estimate is very often incorrect. The teachers marked the descriptors which contain facts not related with the life experiences of their students (e.g. young students who are still studying do not have experience from a work environment). An interesting and repeated finding is the fact that students do not use dictionaries. Some examples are evaluated as misleading and recommended for reformulation. The teachers mark sayings, proverbs and idioms as the most problematic. An interesting comment is that students are often able to express the given meaning, but they are shy to speak in a foreign language. The teachers consistently state that there is usually a significant difference between the level reached in listening versus speaking, as well as reading versus writing [6].

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