Influence from afar: The CEFR and a New Zealand tertiary-level qualification

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Overview

* Background
* A national framework for NZ (and Australia)?
* The influence of the CEFR in NZ
* A new suite of English language qualifications (NZCEL)
  * Benchmarking, using the CEFR
  * Issues that have arisen
* Summing up
New Zealand (like Australia) recruits large numbers of international students for post-secondary studies.
Many of these students initially enrol in courses to improve their English language ability offered by a variety of providers:

- Language centres and Foundation Studies programmes at universities and polytechnics
- Private language schools
- Secondary schools at the senior level
Providers of these preparatory courses have a variety of assessment needs:

- Initial placement of students in classes
- Diagnosis of student strengths and weaknesses
- Advancement of students to a higher-level class
- Reporting of student achievement in the course
- Certification of proficiency in EAP
Studies commissioned by Education New Zealand (Read & Hirsh, 2005) and by the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (Elder & O’Loughlin, 2007)

* reviewed various ways of defining and assessing language proficiency levels; and
* surveyed ESOL professionals about the possibility of developing a national framework for assessing the English levels of international students.
## Pros and cons of a national framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROS</th>
<th>CONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A perceived need for more consistency in defining proficiency levels.</td>
<td>1. Commitment by providers to existing assessment tools and procedures.</td>
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<td>2. Portability of assessments and qualifications from one programme or provider to another.</td>
<td>2. The lack of a strong impetus to adopt a new, standardised approach.</td>
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<td>3. A basis for a more professional approach to assessment.</td>
<td>3. No obvious source of funding to develop and implement a new framework.</td>
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<td>4. A marketing tool for the national industry.</td>
<td>4. A lack of international currency.</td>
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Both studies recognised IELTS band scores as de facto definitions of proficiency levels.

Among existing frameworks already used in Australia, Elder & O’Loughlin (2007) found that the CEFR was the most favoured one, and they recommended its voluntary use by providers:

- to promote assessment literacy among teaching staff
- to map existing assessments to CEFR levels
- as a starting point for new curricula and assessments
The influence of the CEFR in NZ

- Until recently, the CEFR has had a low profile in New Zealand, except
  - In influencing a more communicative approach to the teaching of international languages in schools
  - Through alignment of Cambridge exams to the Framework.

- However, its perceived value as a framework for international benchmarking has played a significant part in the development of a new national qualification.
Till now, 79 non-university providers have offered a total of 274 ESOL qualifications at different levels.

Sample titles: Certificate in Beginner English; Certificate in Business English; Certificate in English (Specific Purposes); Certificate in English for Nursing; Certificate in English (Advanced); Certificate in Academic English (IELTS); Certificate in English for Academic Study.

Designed to meet the needs of
- international students
- adult migrants and refugees using the language for employment purposes and everyday communication.
A new set of qualifications

* From 2014 there is a standard suite of national qualifications, called NZ Certificates in English Language (NZCEL), which all providers will offer at five levels.

* Providers will have considerable freedom to design courses and assessments to meet the needs of their students within the NZCEL framework.
## NZ Certificates in English Language (NZCEL)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NZQF Level</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>CEFR level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>NZCEL (Foundation)</td>
<td>Low A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>NZCEL (Level 1)</td>
<td>High A1 – low A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>NZCEL (Level 2)</td>
<td>High A2 – low B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>NZCEL (General/Workplace/Academic)</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>NZCEL (General/Workplace/Academic)</td>
<td>B2</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>NZCEL (Professional/Academic)</td>
<td>C1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Originally developed in 1992; the current version dates from 2010.

A single, unified framework of all NZ qualifications, beginning at Year 11 of secondary school.

The goal is to compare qualifications on the basis of common learning outcomes, irrespective of how, when or where the learning was achieved.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Qualification Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Postgraduate diplomas and certificates; Bachelor degree with Honours</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Diplomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Certificates</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>) National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA),</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>) the senior secondary school qualification</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>)</td>
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</tbody>
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Why CEFR levels for the NZCEL?

- A request from stakeholders for international benchmarking of the qualifications.
- The lack of an alternative framework for defining proficiency levels.
- Availability of published course books written for a specific CEFR level.
- A certain congruity between the CEFR and the NZQF in terms of
  - having a focus on learning outcomes
  - not being linked to specific curricula or assessments
IELTS scores were not considered as the basis for defining the NZCEL levels because:

* IELTS band levels could not easily be related to the proposed NZCEL levels (based on the NZQF)
* more specifically, there was a perceived mismatch between the credit values assigned to the NZCELs and the typical time taken to advance from one IELTS band to the next.
* IELTS was seen as a commercial product which a government agency couldn’t appropriately endorse.
Initially descriptors from the CEFR, IELTS and the NZQF were compared by key members of the review panel.

Then, essentially there was a complex process of matching, and trying to reconcile, information from a variety of level specifications (“triangulating multiple data sources”)

The benchmarking process
## Resources for benchmarking NZCEL levels

<table>
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<tr>
<th>International</th>
<th>National</th>
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<tr>
<td>CEFR documents</td>
<td>NZQF levels, plus English language unit standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>IELTS band descriptors</td>
<td>Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) Learning Progressions</td>
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<td>British Council/EAQUALS Core Inventory for General English</td>
<td>Ministry of Education (MOE) English Language Learning Progressions</td>
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<td>ELT coursebooks and materials (explicitly “linked” to CEFR)</td>
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Graduates of [NZCEL 4] will have the English language skills to:

* understand main ideas and key supporting details of complex oral texts on familiar and sometimes unfamiliar topics
* read and understand complex texts with a large degree of independence on familiar and sometimes unfamiliar topics
* locate, organise and summarise important information in texts
* speak with fluency and spontaneity to communicate with some degree of elaboration in a range of familiar and unfamiliar contexts
* write coherent texts appropriate to audience and purpose, with few linguistic errors in a range of text types, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources.

Source: www.nzqa.govt.nz/nzqf/search/viewQualification.do?selectedItemKey=1883
This certificate builds on the New Zealand Certificate in English Language (General/Workplace/Academic) (Level 3) and can lead to:
* New Zealand Certificate in English Language (Professional/Academic) (Level 5) [Ref: 1884]
and facilitates meeting the language requirements for:
* most vocational and undergraduate programmes/courses and specialised fields of study requiring lower and/or New Zealand Qualifications Framework level 5, for entrance, depending on the focus of the programme leading to this qualification.
For international students, NZ universities typically require IELTS Band 6 for undergraduate admission.

According to NZQA, NZCEL 4 (Academic), which is at CEFR B2, is an appropriate qualification for undergraduate study, but the universities currently will not accept it as such.

However, they almost all accept Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE), which is at C1 level.
CEFR-IELTS equivalence chart

Source: www.ielts.org/researchers/common_european_framework.aspx
Consistency arrangements

* “To provide assurance that graduates of the same qualification are achieving the graduate profile outcomes to a comparable standard, all education organisations delivering programmes leading to NZCEL must engage in a consistency arrangement process. This will require providers to submit a portfolio of evidence to NZQA’s Tertiary Assessment and Moderation team that demonstrates achievement of qualification outcomes.
* The proposed Consistency Arrangements are currently being piloted.”

Another issue: student progression

- Funding agencies expect that students can complete each NZCEL within one semester of full-time study.
- This is an unrealistic expectation for many learners.
- Providers argued in particular that NZCEL Level 3 / CEFR B1 represents a particular challenge and learners should be allowed more time to complete it.
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The CEFR has been adopted as a basis for the international benchmarking of the new NZCEL qualification.

However, the process involved primarily the review and reconciling of level descriptors and learning outcomes from multiple sources, without any empirically based procedures for standard setting and validation of the kind found in the CEFR alignment manual.
The CEFR is just one basis among several for defining the NZCEL levels, and in practical terms its impact is not likely to be strong.

There are few indications that the broader principles of the CEFR will play a direct role in the delivery of the programme in individual schools and institutions.
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