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Extending CEFR descriptors for an analytic rating scale of academic writing at C1 to C2 – a stop-gap measure?

Abstract

Die Skalen des GERS sind bekanntlich nicht allumfassend, sondern weisen signifikante Lücken insbesondere auf C1 und C2 auf. Das Schließen mancher Lücken zu Lehr-, Lern- und Beurteilungszwecken wäre nützlich für Anglistik-Institute, die gewöhnlich B2+ als Eingangsniveau festsetzen. In einem einschlägigen Projekt entwickelten Expert*innen von vier österreichischen Universitäten analytische Beurteilungsskalen und Benchmark-Performanzen für wissenschaftliches Schreiben, Präsentationen und Interaktion auf C1 und C2 in einem theoriebasierten, intuitiven und datengestützten Prozess zwischen 2006 und 2010. Der vorliegende Beitrag umreißt (stellvertretend für alle anderen Kategorien) die Genese der Deskriptoren für Grammatik. Anschließend befasst er sich mit der Frage, wie jüngere Forschung zum GERS die Kompetenzbeschreibungen bereichern kann. Den Abschluss bildet eine Diskussion, inwiefern die in einem Mehrmethodenansatz zur Validierung der Skalen für die Sprechaktivitäten gewonnenen Erkenntnisse auf die Skala für Schreiben übertragbar sind.

It is well known that the CEFR scales are not exhaustive, with significant gaps particularly at the C levels. Filling in some of those gaps for teaching, learning and assessment purposes would be useful in departments of English where the entry level is set at B2+. One such project involved linguists and language teachers at four Austrian universities and resulted in analytic rating scales and benchmarked performances for academic writing, presentations and interactions from C1 to C2, developed in a theory-based, intuitive and data-informed approach over a series of workshops from 2006 to 2010. This paper first traces the evolution of grammar (illustrative of the other dimensions) from anchor descriptors in the CEFR to the extended versions formulated for C2. It then explores how the dimension could benefit from more recent research relating to the CEFR. It remains to be seen whether insights gained in the extensive multi-method validation procedure for the speaking scales could also be applied to writing.

1. Introduction

Foreign-language teaching in Austria is currently undergoing a long overdue process of standardization, with curricula and school-leaving exams now aligned with the CEFR (BMB 2004; BMB n.d.), although teaching and assessment practices at tertiary level are still lagging behind. One attempt to counteract this involved a series of workshops (2006–2010) attended by linguists and language teachers from English departments at the universities of Graz, Klagenfurt, Salzburg and Vienna, the aim being to professionalize assessment practices for exit-level examinations in their BA programmes. Analytic rating scales were developed and benchmarked performances identified for academic writing, presentations and interactions from C1 to C2 in a theory-based, intuitive and data-informed approach. This paper briefly describes the process and some of the products of this project. In Section 2, the dimension of grammar has been selected to illustrate how the team worked with the CEFR (CoE 2001) and student scripts (LTC 2009) to develop the analytic scales and some suggestions are made as to how the writing scale could be enhanced by more recent research on the C levels. Section 3 then refers to validation issues which were not tackled for writing but which were thoroughly covered for the speaking scales, the question being to what extent the methodology and findings of the latter may be applied to the former.

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