The CEFR has been adopted throughout Europe; Finland has pioneered its use by adapting it for the National Core Curricula for schools and for the National Certificates language examination.

We will examine the use of the CEFR in relation to learners of different ages and discuss the feasibility of the scale in second language learning:

How is the same CEFR scale suited to examining and assessing the skills of both young and adult second language learners?

To what extent is the CEFR scale applicable to second language, when the language is learned in a target language environment?

The study is part of the CEFLING project, which investigates the linguistic basis of the CEFR. The data (1116 texts) consist of two pseudo-longitudinal corpora: texts written by adult and young learners of F2. The adults’ data (A1-C2) comes from the National Certificate of Language Proficiency tests. The young learners’ data (A1-B2) comes from pupils aged 13-16.

Our paper is based on quantitative and qualitative CEFLING project studies concerning the use of key constructions of Finnish at levels A1-C2. These analyses also consider the situational nature of second language learning, and the impact of learning environments and resources, which seem to differ crucially between youngsters and adults.

The results indicate that the proficiency of young students develops differently from learners beginning their studies in adulthood: a number of structures and expressions typically considered more advanced or idiomatic appear relatively early in the young learners’ language.

The CEFR scale does not satisfactorily consider the aspect of language learning as a situated practice. Despite acknowledging the communicative function of language, it reflects the normative and rule-based view of language. That said, the results of this paper have already had an impact on the application of the CEFR in the new National Core Curricula for schools.

Keywords: assessment, CEFR, age effect, young and adult learners.