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Going national, standardised and live in Austria: challenges and tensions

In 2004 Austria introduced a CEFR based curriculum for foreign languages paving the way for a departure from the traditional knowledge-based teacher-oriented leaving exam to a competence based one with the scope for becoming standardised. Schools were encouraged to pilot this new form and in May 2007 the Ministry of Education agreed to provide funding for the development of English reading, English listening and French listening tests which would be available for schools on a voluntary basis.

In May-June 2008, 56 schools administered the first centrally developed listening tasks in English and French, and reading tasks in English. Further allocations of funding in early 2008 supported the development of French reading, and Italian, Spanish and Russian listening tasks, and in 2009 work began on the development of writing tasks across the languages.

By November 2008, 1200 groups across Austria had applied for centrally developed tasks for their 2009 leaving exam. The speed and the scope of these changes has unsettled, surprised and excited the many different stakeholders from class teachers and parents to the school inspectorate and unions.

This paper will report briefly on the background, challenges and tensions surrounding the introduction of these centrally available tests. Insights into working with the various teams of item writers and standard setters will be shared and the paper will conclude with recommendations for future multi-language test development projects.