

# THE CEFR RENEWED: INSPIRING THE FUTURE OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: A COMMON FRAMEWORK

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR: Council of Europe, 2001) is more than a book. It is part of a continuing commitment by the Council of Europe to language education that started in the 1960s and whose current incarnation is the *CEFR Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2018), being published in its definitive form in several languages this year, including Italian. The CEFR is published by the Council of Europe. It is useful to make a clear distinction between the Council of Europe and the European Union, whose governing body made up of the premiers of the EU's member states is called, rather confusingly, the European Council. The Council of Europe has 47 member states and was founded in 1949, well before the forerunner to the European Union, following Churchill's initiative to develop a European identity, in order to prevent a recurrence of the events which had caused the Second World War. The main focus of the Council of Europe has from the beginning been human rights and it is the home of the European Court of Human Rights. The main practical concerns of the Council of Europe are the protection of language rights and the protection of minorities, encouraging the integration of migrants and the promotion of inclusive, quality education for all, including education for democratic citizenship. Indeed, the CEFR itself sprang from a project on education for European citizenship, and the Council of Europe has recently published a framework of competences for democratic culture (Barrett, 2016).

The CEFR promotes a multi-dimensional, situated view of *competence in action*, for which reason it contains an array of sets of illustrative descriptors for different communicative situations and genre. For convenience, these descriptors are presented in 'scales,' with descriptors assigned to a series of succeeding levels. There were approximately 50 scales in the 2001 version and there are around 80 in the current update provided by the *Companion Volume*. The CEFR also promotes an *action-oriented approach* to language learning (Bourgignon, 2006, 2010; Piccardo, 2014; Piccardo & North, 2019; Puren, 2009) with the concept that learners mobilize and develop their language competences and strategies through action as *social agents* in tasks. Agency (Bandura, 1989, 2001), a far more active concept than autonomy, is central to the CEFR model. The CEFR recognises that people do not learn effectively unless they can personally engage with and shape what is being learnt, relating it to their needs and interests. The third main aspect promoted by the CEFR is the idea of plurilingual profiles and repertoires. One of the points most misunderstood about the CEFR is the focus on the levels. One has to remember that, in any group of users/learners, nobody is A2 (or C1) for exactly the same reasons. Everyone has a profile of strengths – within and across languages – partly dependent on their particular abilities (e.g. being a good reader) and partly due to the various experiences they

have had in their life trajectory. Different types of learners also have different types of needs. Thus the notion of profiles is very relevant for defining the needs of particular groups (e.g. adult immigrants; primary schoolchildren; CLIL students), as well as for the description of a person's abilities, within and across languages. Graphic profiles of both types are shown in the *Companion Volume* (2018: 37-39; 2020: 38-40).

The significance of the CEFR for curriculum and assessment has been recognized by many authors both within and beyond Europe and in addition several surveys of the adoption of the CEFR in different countries are available (Broek & Ende, 2013; Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Foley, 2019; Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford & Clement, 2011; Takala, 2013). In a state-of-the-art article on the language curriculum, for example, Graves (2008) writes: «One of the most important curriculum publications in the last decade is the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference ...*» (2008: 148), whilst Richards adds that «[p]erhaps the most widespread example of backward design using standards [working backwards from goals defined with 'can do' descriptors] in current use is the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)...*» (Richards, 2013: 26). Porto (2012) explains the success of the CEFR with the fact that it enables educational policy makers to marry the instrumental, socioeconomic motivations for language education that governments have in mind with broader educational objectives that she describes as: «Progressive Education, the main tenets of which are education for active citizenship, for social justice and for the protection of local languages, celebrating the students' interests and participation» (Porto, 2012: 135).

If we turn now to the aims of the CEFR, there are two principal ones. The first aim is to provide common reference points in the form of the CEFR levels and illustrative descriptors in order to:

- promote and facilitate co-operation among educational institutions in different countries;
- provide a sound basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications;
- assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts. (Council of Europe, 2001: 6)

The aim here is to encourage inter-sector and international communication and networking and to promote transparency and coherence in curricula for learners. The process of creating a clear link between planning, teaching and assessment in an institution that the CEFR with its descriptors encourages is technically called *constructive alignment* (Biggs, 2003). Encouraging this is perhaps the main significance of the CEFR for national and institutional curricula. The second aim is to stimulate reflection and reform in pedagogy. The CEFR is basically a compendium which sets out a range of options and asks users to consider a range of aspects which are relevant to language learning and then to reflect on current practice, asking themselves whether this practice makes sense or might be improved. For this reason the book contains at the end of each section what are called *reflection boxes* in which users are asked to consider various points which have just been introduced. The 2007 Language Policy Forum held in Strasbourg to take stock of the implementation of the CEFR left no doubt that the second aim, the reform aim, is more important to member states (Council of Europe, 2007). This point is reinforced in the *Companion Volume*: «The provision of common reference points is subsidiary to the CEFR's main aim of facilitating quality in language education and promoting a Europe of open-minded plurilingual citizens» (Council of Europe, 2018: 26; 2020: 28). In this respect, it is very important to understand that the CEFR is a heuristic. It is there as an aid to reflection. It is not intended to provide an answer to everybody's problems. It is a

reference work not a standard that should be picked up and applied. The authors make this very clear right at the beginning of the work in the foreword ('Notes to the user') in which they say: «We have NOT set out to tell practitioners what to do or how to do it. We are raising questions not answering them. It is not the function of the CEFR to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they should employ» (Council of Europe, 2001: ii). Nevertheless, despite the fact that in general the CEFR is often perceived as having a greater effect on assessment than on teaching and learning (e.g. Martinyuk & Nojons, 2007), Rüschoff concludes that:

This action and language use oriented framework helped shift the focus of attention from a second/foreign language classroom intent on training linguistic control of a target language towards language learning contexts aimed at fostering real-world relevant communicative and interactive proficiency together with related strategic competences. It also helped shift the focus from language classrooms concerned with the traditional four skills towards learning and teaching contexts and settings committed to competence-orientation. (Rüschoff, forthcoming)

## 2. THE ROAD TO THE CEFR

Let us now consider the development of the CEFR, before turning to the direction in which it is now going. The CEFR did not suddenly appear from nowhere in 2001. It is in fact a direct successor to the work of the Council of Europe during the 1970s that aimed towards the development of a unit-credit scheme for adult language learners in Europe (Trim, 1978). Such a development had been recommended by an intergovernmental symposium held at Rüslikon, near Zurich, in 1971. The unit-credit scheme itself never came to fruition, since it was rejected by France and Germany at the subsequent symposium at Ludwigshafen in 1977; one had to wait until a second Rüslikon symposium, held in 1991 in a period of European optimism, for the go-ahead to develop the framework that became the CEFR.

Nevertheless, a number of studies and projects that were part of the unit-credit initiative had a substantial impact on the form that the CEFR would later take. The most significant of these were the following: the concept of needs analysis as a combination of an analysis of real life communicative needs for a type of learner, combined with ongoing refinement of the needs of a particular class by the teacher (Richterich & Chancerel, 1980); the definition of course 'content' from a *user* standpoint, in a notional-functional approach, rather than by listing grammar and vocabulary (*The Threshold Level*: van Ek, 1975; van Ek & Trim, 2001); the concept of learner autonomy, in the sense of the definition of objectives, development of learning strategies etc. (Holec, 1981); experimentation with self-assessment with '*I can ...*' descriptors (Oscarson, 1979, 1984), which suggested that whilst learners were not very good at estimating their grammatical accuracy, with this functional self-assessment, their assessments could be just as accurate as their teachers' (1984); and the idea of a '*can do*' defined set of common levels (Wilkins, 1978). Wilkins proposed seven levels that incorporated *The Threshold Level*, and the point halfway towards it, *Waystage*, which had also been defined in detail. His top level was called 'ambilingual proficiency', the sort of sophistication one associates with interpreters and translators. The Framework Working Party later took his first six levels.

The idea to have another go at a European framework was an initiative of the Swiss government, hence the symposium being in Switzerland. In the run up to the Rüslikon

symposium, van Ek and Trim had updated the *Waystage* specification (that became the basis for A2) and *Threshold Level* (that became the basis of B1) and added a third to the series, called *Vantage Level* (that became the basis for B2). The symposium actually had two main themes: the Framework and the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP) (Council of Europe, 1992). The idea of a set of European common reference levels was originally part of the presentation of the Portfolio, but the representatives of the member states decided it should form the backbone of the Framework, and that the Portfolio should be developed after the Framework, with self-assessment versions of the same descriptors.

The Framework Working Party, set up in 1993, then adopted the first six of Wilkins (1977) levels for the CEFR, considering that the seventh, ‘ambilingual proficiency’, was not relevant to formal education. Trim himself missed the symposium, due to a heart bypass operation and recovery from it, but then became Chair of the CEFR Authoring Group, a subgroup of the Framework Working Party, as he had led the 1970s project. The other members of the Authoring Group were initially Daniel Coste and Brian North<sup>1</sup>, both working in Switzerland at the time, who did background studies on categories and levels (North, 1993a, 1994) and on plurilingualism (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 1997) respectively. A Swiss National Science Foundation project then developed the descriptors for the CEFR and the ELP (North, 1995, 1997, 2000; North & Schneider, 1998; Schneider & North, 2000) in parallel to the discussions on the Authoring Group between 1993 and 1996, on the basis of a methodology proposed by North (1993b).

The interaction in the Authoring Group was very fruitful and the CEFR introduced a number of new pedagogic concepts, discussed below, which were to have a considerable impact over the next twenty years. There is sometimes a misconception that the CEFR is pedagogically neutral, or just reflects the mainstream communicative approach. This misunderstanding is caused by the requirement that the CEFR had to be “comprehensive”, in the sense that it had to be possible for all language professionals to find in it the approach that they adopted, since the CEFR was «presenting all options in an explicit and transparent way and avoiding advocacy or dogmatism» (Council of Europe, 2001: 142). In other words, it was designed as a compendium – but as one that acted as a springboard to stimulate reflection on current practice, on other options outlined, and so on possible reform.

### 3. THE CEFR 2001

The CEFR, in fact, makes no secret of the fact that the Council of Europe itself is in no way pedagogically neutral, stating on the same page: «For many years the Council of Europe has promoted an approach based on the communicative needs of learners and the use of materials and methods that will enable learners to satisfy these needs and which are appropriate to their characteristics as learners» (2001: 142), and, right at the beginning: «An open, ‘neutral’ framework of reference does not of course imply an absence of policy» (2001: 18). And that policy is stated very clearly to be plurilingual, needs-based, action-oriented education.

A lot of concepts are presented in the CEFR that were new to the vast majority of the field in 2001. Of these, some were inherited from the 1970s project, as outlined above.

<sup>1</sup> Joe Sheils, the member of the Council of Europe secretariat coordinating the group and working party, was later persuaded to write Chapter 7 on Tasks, since he had recently done a study of communicative activities in the language classroom.

These were: the definition of learner needs from a user standpoint; a ‘*can do*’ proficiency rather than deficiency approach to defining learners’ abilities and reference levels, with ‘*can do*’ (CEFR) and ‘*I can*’ (ELP) descriptors; together with self-assessment and learner autonomy, as operationalised in the ELP that accompanied the CEFR. These, already slightly familiar, concepts were very successful after the appearance of the CEFR, and we still see their influence in course books. When people refer to the impact of the CEFR (e.g. Faez, Majhanovich, Taylor, Smith & Crowley, 2011; Figueras, 2012; Martinyuk & Nojons, 2007; North, 2010), it is usually to the implementation of these concepts to which they are referring.

Other new concepts introduced in the CEFR, however, were very innovative at the time. These include the notions of the user/learner as a social agent; the adoption of an integrated approach to language activity, moving from four skills (= reception and production) to four modes of communication, through the addition of interaction and mediation; a positive approach to communication strategies (seen up till then as purely compensatory); the action-orientated approach, and plurilingualism. These notions are all, not surprisingly, interrelated, as is better explained in the *Companion Volume*, to which we turn next.

Unfortunately, the only one that was conceptualised in any detail in the CEFR itself was plurilingualism, which, as mentioned, had been the subject of a preliminary study. Even this got off to a slow start, with John Trim lamenting in 2007 at the Language Policy Forum that « [m]ost users of the CEFR have applied it only to a single language, but its descriptive apparatus for communicative action and competences together with the ‘*can do*’ descriptors of levels of competence, are a good basis for a plurilingual approach to language across the curriculum, **which awaits development**» (Trim, 2007: 49, my emphasis). Although there was a continuing academic dialogue, particularly in French (e.g. Coste, 2010; Mochet *et al.*, 2005; Moore & Castellotti, 2008; Zarate, Lévy & Kramersch, 2008), the plurilingual turn seems to have started some five years later (e.g. Candelier *et al.*, 2011; Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014; Piccardo & Capron Puozzo, 2015; Taylor & Snoddon, 2013).

The other new concepts fared even worse. Even today, very few people seem to have noticed the significance of the move on from the (very artificial) four skills, which by 2001 had been criticised for around 20 years (e.g. Alderson & Urquhart, 1984; Breen & Candlin, 1980; Brumfit, 1984; Stern, 1983). The action-oriented approach and related social agent provoked discussion and movement in the Francophone literature (e.g. Bourgignon, 2006, 2010; Lions-Olivieri & Liria, 2009; Puren, 2009) but, with the exception of van Lier (2007), the action-oriented approach was, erroneously, assumed in Anglophone literature to be synonymous with the task-based approach, and the concept of agency ignored altogether. Mediation, largely because of its very brief description in the CEFR 2001 and the lack of descriptors, was interpreted as an individual activity in those countries that adopted it (Germany and Greece, then Switzerland), seen as a communicative equivalent of the traditional translation and *précis* (see Kolb, 2016).

This is not to say that the CEFR was not a success. People disagree about its precise impact, but there is no doubt that the ‘*can do*’ philosophy has affected curricula in almost every European country and the materials for most languages taught in at least Europe. However, the most surprising aspect is that the CEFR, and the toolkit of resources around it, are not used more systematically in teacher training. In the survey of member states that was part of the 2017-2018 consultation procedure on the updated and extended descriptors, only 50% of those 20 states that replied stated that the CEFR was used in initial teacher education.

Outside Europe, with the main exception of Canada, the CEFR is overwhelmingly associated with the teaching of English (see, for example, Byram & Parmenter, 2012) and with the English language teaching and testing industries that push international tests and textbooks. Any associated teacher education is generally very limited training in a British style of English-only communicative language teaching that has changed little since the late 1980s (e.g. Aziz & Uri, 2018; Foley, 2019; Ngo, 2017; Savski, 2019, 2020). All of the authors just mentioned, who work in South East Asia in countries in the process of adopting the CEFR to improve the efficiency of their English teaching, state that teachers' attitudes towards the ideas in the CEFR are fundamentally positive. What teachers would like is training in the concepts in the CEFR, plus support to improve their own language proficiency.

#### 4. THE CEFR UPDATED: *THE COMPANION VOLUME*

While the text of the CEFR was lengthy and at times difficult for practitioners to understand, hopefully the article-length text in the *Companion Volume* that summarises the *Key aspects of the CEFR for teaching and learning*, plus the rationales added to explain the thinking behind each descriptor scale, will prove to be more accessible to trainers and trainees in teacher education, both inside and outside Europe. Many writers (e.g. Foley, 2019; Rüschoff, forthcoming) are in fact already referring to the *Companion Volume* as the new CEFR. This is firstly because it explains better the origin and purpose of the CEFR, the CEFR descriptive scheme, the rationale for the different descriptor scales, and the way descriptors are intended to be used, and secondly because it substantially further develops those aspects that were mentioned but not fully explained twenty years ago. In particular the *Companion Volume* elaborates: the vision of the user/learner as a social agent; the action-orientated approach; mediation; and plurilingualism.

The main reason this was possible is that our profession has not stood still in those twenty years. Piccardo (this volume), North and Piccardo (2016) and Piccardo and North (2019) explain the way in which the inter-related concepts of mediation and agency have developed in relation to education in general and language education in particular. Language learning, like any learning, is increasingly seen as a complex, situated process of emergence in response to the perception of affordances in the immediate social and material environment (Larsen-Freeman, 2011, 2017; van Lier, 2004, 2010). Sociocultural / socio-constructivist theories of learning see concepts first emerging in social interaction and then, in a second step, being internalised. The process is mediated, either by the learner exercising their agency to mediate for themselves or through the mediation of another person, who may be a facilitator and source of knowledge (parent, teacher etc.), and also a peer, with whom the learner is thinking things through. That is the basis of collaborative learning. Language learning is unique in this respect since the process of mediating itself almost inevitably involves languaging (Cowley & Gahrn-Andersen, 2018; Swain, 2006), articulating thoughts either to oneself or with the others, and further elaborating those thoughts, so that language becomes both the process and the product, the means and the end.

This collaborative, social and situated process cannot happen if the beginning and end of mediation is seen as summarising a text, even across languages. But if a small group is working on an action-oriented task/project in which they research (or are given) different inputs, which they need to explain to each other, jigsaw-style, in order to move forward and reach their goal or produce their artefact (poster, video, blog, pamphlet, etc. ...), then

that summary has a purpose. If they are being creative, they will want to use all their resources, access information in the languages they know, and possibly use different languages during the collaborative discussion. Or, alternatively, the source materials they are provided may be in different language(s)/genre(s) to the target language(s)/genres of the artefact to be produced. Links between action-oriented tasks and plurilingual behaviour are natural. Even with a very simple mediation activity, as in the descriptor *Can relay (in Language B) specific information given in straightforward informational texts (such as leaflets, brochure entries, notices and letters or emails) (in Language A)*, there is a lot of scope for flexibility. In descriptors like this, «Language A and Language B may be two different languages, two varieties of the same language, two registers of the same variety, [two modalities of the same language or variety]<sup>2</sup>, or any combination of the above. However, they may also be identical» (Council of Europe, 2018: 107; 2020: 92).

This is a different view of language education to that put forward in 2001. The process described above is not what is commonly understood as task-based language teaching (TBLT: Nunan, 2004; van den Branden, 2006; Willis & Willis, 2007), though van den Branden's (2006, 2016) vision goes in this direction. It is a philosophy of language education that can apply to the learning of additional/foreign languages, but also to CLIL and to the learning of the language of schooling. It is a view of language education as plurilingual education, because, actually, all the other languages are always present in the classroom, so why pretend they are not? The fact that the descriptors for mediation extends the applicability of the CEFR clearly beyond the foreign language classroom to a languages across the curriculum approach was very much approved by both institutions and individuals in the 2016-2017 consultation process that preceded the first online publication<sup>3</sup>.

## 5. LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

It is difficult enough to assess the past without trying to guess the future. However, the *Companion Volume* does have the potential to initiate change, as the CEFR did 20 years ago. Like the CEFR at that time, the *Companion Volume* is an aspirational document intended to inspire, not a recipe to implement off-the-peg. The aim is to broaden the scope of language education, get finally beyond syllabuses based just on dull topics and grammatical progression and promote plurilingual and intercultural education. By the time this volume goes to press, the definitive English and French versions of this CEFR update will be online, with nine other languages, including Italian, German and Spanish, on the way. Also during the course of this year, a volume of around 20 case studies of using the descriptors will be published. In addition, a descriptor search tool is planned for the near future. This tool will enable users to choose language(s), level(s), and categories to download descriptors to an editable file.

What the *Companion Volume* has already achieved is to inspire new interest in the CEFR project. Altogether, 189 institutes and over 1,500 individuals became involved in developing and validating the descriptors, which created quite a network. Conceptually,

<sup>2</sup> The section in brackets, referring to sign languages, is not present in the 2018 version.

<sup>3</sup> In the consultation survey, respondents were asked: «Although the CEFR scales were developed with a view to second/foreign language learning and use, many of the mediation descriptors seem to apply to other learning contexts and might be included in a set of descriptors for use of language in mainstream subject teaching ('Language of Schooling'). Do you see this as a positive development?» The answers from the 500 individual respondents were 93% positive; institutions answered 91% positive.

the *Companion Volume* puts the emphasis in the CEFR back on learning and teaching, as in its title (“... learning, teaching, assessment”); clarifies key aspects of the CEFR, re-emphasizing needs analysis and needs profiles; moves beyond the four skills; conceptualizes mediation and presents the action-oriented approach clearly; removes the ghost of the ‘native-speaker’ and puts plurilingualism on the map for curriculum development with the provision of concrete descriptors suitable for different levels.

Hopefully all this will lead to more notice being taken of the implications of the CEFR vision for teaching, with a shift in emphasis from the levels and descriptors, through the action-oriented approach to the development of competences, and in particular plurilingual and pluricultural competences. This may facilitate a re-evaluation of the place of different languages in a holistic, plurilingual, inclusive vision of languages across the curriculum that values the role of heritage languages. It may build links between the teaching of the first and second additional languages, and the language of schooling, and in general give an impulse to the development of pedagogies for plurilingual and intercultural education. Last but not least, in such a broadening of the scope of language education, there are significant links and synergies between this new CEFR approach and two other projects, namely the Council of Europe’s *Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*<sup>4</sup> on the one hand, and the European Commission’s ‘comprehensive approach’<sup>5</sup> to language education on the other.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/competences-for-democratic-culture>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9229-2018-ADD-2/EN/pdf>.



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