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LANGUAGE LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSING WITH THE CEFR AND ELP PLURILINGUALISM AND COMMUNICATION IN EUROPE

***Abstract:** The paper briefly presents the CEFR (the Common European Framework of Reference) and ELP (the European Language Portfolio) and the way in which language teaching, learning and assessment can benefit from the provisions of these two documents). It highlights the importance of the language proficiency levels and of the “can-do” descriptors and correlates them with the tasks performed by learners, teachers and test builders.*

The paper describes one of the many programmes that have been created drawing on the provisions of the CEFR – the English Profile Project – and the benefits it may offer to those involved mainly in language teaching.

***Key words:** plurilingualism, competences and skills, levels of competence, common standard, “can-do” descriptors, interdisciplinary research.*

Introduction

Background to the CEFR and the ELP

Both the CEF and the ELP are products of developments in language teaching and learning, sponsored by the Council of Europe over a period of more than four decades (The first steps were taken in the 70s!).

While trying to promote awareness of a European identity, the Council of Europe’s Modern Language Division introduced the term “plurilingualism” which reconsiders the role of languages in one’s life and develops a coherent view on languages and language use far beyond linguistic competence. Plurilingualism not only describes the linguistic profile of a European citizen and his/her ability to communicate with users of another language but it also comprises

intercultural skills allowing individuals to interact as competent social agents in a multicultural environment.

The concept of plurilingualism recognizes different levels of competence for different languages. Both the CEFR and the ELP are the tools designed to measure, to record and to describe these competences. The two sets of documents also provide common standard of reference – the *Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (CEFR) – and document the process of language learning – the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP). They were developed simultaneously, influencing each other in many ways.

The changing political European landscape has added even more emphasis to the role of the Framework and the Portfolio. The transformations occurred in Eastern Europe have faced all European educational authorities with new challenges and tasks involving mainly the mutual recognition of qualifications and the creation of a calibrated assessment pattern to describe different levels of competences and skills enabling citizens to transfer qualifications from one setting to another. Moreover, the use of the Portfolio has given a diachronic dimension to this, documenting and substantiating the process of foreign language acquisition over a long period of time.

The Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)

The *Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, Teaching and Assessment* is a comprehensive framework for all aspects of language learning and teaching at all levels and all types of educational institutions and provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, guidelines for curricula, textbooks and tests across Europe. 'It describes what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively.' (CEFR:1). Even if initially it was created for European languages, more and more institutions have been using it for non-European languages. Recently Langenscheidt has published a book for Chinese bearing the label A1/A2 of the CEFR.

The benefits of the Framework include, among other things, the enhancement of transparency of syllabuses and curricula and offers objective criteria for language description and assessment.

The Framework is of great practical importance as it defines six levels of proficiency (**A – Basic User**: A1/ Breakthrough and A2/ Waystage; **B – Independent User**: B1/Threshold and B2/ Vantage; and **C – Proficient User**: C1/Effective proficiency and C2/ Mastery) which allows an accurate assessment of learner's acquired level. These levels of proficiency are described by means of a comprehensive list (400 items) of can-do descriptors¹.

The descriptors envisage language in aural and visual reception (listening and reading), production (speaking and writing) and interaction, both in written and oral form. For example:

B2: *Can* understand the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation (**reception**). *Can* interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party (**interaction**). *Can* produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options (**production**). (CEFR: 24)

It also provides a general collection of descriptors – in *The Global Scale* – and a more personalized collection of can-do descriptors – in the *Self-Assessment Grid* (which is not only written in the *I*-form, but also describes more precise achievements which encourage learners to assess themselves at regular, short intervals).

Seen from a very practical point of view, the scale would be a tool to be mainly used by trainers and testers, while the grid is more or less a learner's instrument.

¹ Several projects concerning language teaching draw on these descriptors. For instance, The ALTE "Can Do" project developed a simplified set of 400+ descriptors for language examinations which relate to the Common Reference Levels. These descriptors are in the form of "can-do statements", each saying more simply what a learner can do at every level. There are four sections: general, social/ tourist, work and study.

Several present-day textbooks incorporate particular “can-do statements”, to help both the teacher and the learner to assess specific performances along the way. They have a double function:

- projective: they set the objectives the teacher/learner wants/needs to attain by the end of the unit;
- retrospective: they describe performance at the end of the learning unit;

For the student, the great advantage of the “can-do statements” is to facilitate learner awareness and independence. In their projective role, they help them to understand what is expected of them to achieve by the end of the unit (e.g. *At the end of this unit I will be able to...*²). In their retrospective function, they represent a useful instrument for self-assessment (e.g. *At the end of this unit I can...*). If some of the set purposes are not fulfilled (i.e. he *can not* do what he had planned to), the student will be able to go back and cover the corresponding input again.

Can-do descriptors and their competent use represent, in our opinion, the key to a successful use of both the self-assessment grid and the ELP. It is common knowledge that most people involved in learning language find it difficult to describe their language competence, or to make clear what skills they actually have. Typical self-assessment ranges from “a little”, “average”, “relatively good”, to “basic” and “not bad”. Being able to describe one’s competence and to articulate one’s goals in terms of skills is the very condition of autonomous learning.

In Board & Miron’s *Passport 2 Europe*³. *Curs de limba engleză pentru începători* (“A course of English for Beginners”) – a course designed for level A1 – each unit begins with a checklist of *learning outcomes*. For example, Unit 7, *Are bills included?* begins with a list of 9 *learning outcomes*:

² “Can-do statements” are formulated in the first person singular (...I can ...). This way, they enhance the learner’s sense of involvement in his own process of learning. By putting emphasis on the importance of self-assessment, they also suggest greater learner autonomy and responsibility.

³ Note the user-friendly title which, by exploiting the homonymy between 2 and *to*, aims to suggest that leaning English with the help of this book is fun.

- *I can understand⁴ an interlocutor who speaks very slowly, articulates words carefully and makes significant pauses so that I can understand and assimilate the meaning of his words*
- *I can understand numbers, prices, expressions of the time*
- *I can understand short messages written on postcards, e.g. greetings from holidays*
- *I can describe the place where I live*
- *I can write a message on a postcard (e.g. from my holidays)*
- *I can write simple sentences about myself, e.g. where I live, Etc...*

As the above checklist shows, the “learning outcomes” cover the four skills – listening, reading, speaking and writing – and in each case they go from general (e.g. *I can understand an interlocutor who speaks slowly ...*) to particular (e.g. *I can understand numbers, costs, ...*).

Well-known publishers, such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press and Macmillan have already published most of their English language textbooks with can-do descriptors instead of traditional “Stop and Check” lists. This type of approach shifts the focus from the teacher and assessor to the learner/student, who is invited to keep track of his progress in acquiring a certain foreign language; what is even more important, it helps him perform a fairly accurate self-assessment at various stages of the learning process. At the same time, all European Certificates (TELC) and Cambridge Examinations have adopted the CEFR scale in the description of their levels. Recently even ETS tests (like the American TOEIC, for example) have published evaluation tables showing the corresponding credits to each level of the CEFR).

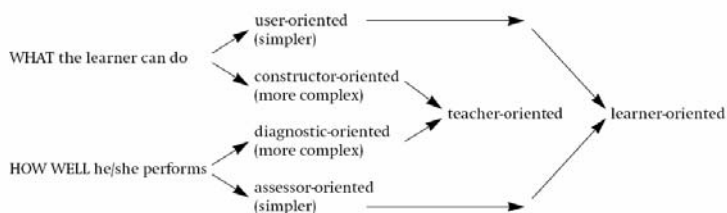
CEFR also adopts an action/task-oriented approach to the teaching of foreign languages in which any form of language use can and has to be described in terms of competences (general and linguistic), context, language activities, language processes (production, reception, interaction and mediation), text types, domains (personal,

⁴ Our translation. With the new approach, the learner’s mother tongue is again used extensively. This is because, its initiators suggest, a beginner cannot be expected to fully understand a text in the target language.

public, educational, occupational), communicative strategies and tasks.

The task-based approach of the CEFR also supports the development of learning strategies and compensation strategies. Learners acquire languages more effectively when they are asked to select from the range of language available to them to complete an authentic task with a real outcome. While doing so, they are also required to cope with communication gaps and deficits. In order to avoid failure, learners develop compensation strategies⁵.

The usefulness of the CEFR also resides in the fact that it offers an extremely useful set of inventory for three categories involved in language acquisition: the learner, the evaluator and the textbook builder. These categories are closely interrelated, but they approach language acquisition from distinct perspectives. The correlation between these three categories is shown in the figure below (CEFR: Fig.6; pg.39):



A unitary system facilitates educational and job mobility across the EU. This way, the European employer or university to which a candidate aims to gain access is given a clear (and unitary) measure of the applicant's mastery of the language: with the descriptors of performance in the four skills, and consequently, the applicant, can be placed in the position best suited for his/her abilities.

To the candidate himself, the great advantage of the CEFR is that he can make sure that his skills are assessed correctly and objectively.

⁵ Nota bene: The assessment system of the European Language Certificates rewards compensation strategies, which prevent interruptions of the dialogue during the oral testing.

Furthermore, the descriptors also demonstrate that even very low levels of performance have value and worth. This view follows the present-day European approach based on the concept of plurilingualism, according to which a person acquires skills and competencies not only through formal learning (in school), but also through his experience and along his entire life (informal and non-formal learning, and life-long learning).

European Language Portfolio (ELP)

The European Language Portfolio was developed and piloted by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe from 1998 until 2000. It was launched on pan-European level during the European Year of Languages as a tool to accompany the student in the process of life-long learning. The Language Portfolio documents both the acquisition of foreign languages and the holder's intercultural competences.

Self-assessment, with the help of clearly defined learning objectives, stands at the core of the language portfolio. (Once again, the main part in the self-assessment process is played by the can-do descriptors!) The ELP was developed in parallel with the CEFR and it consists of three major sections: The Passport; The Language Biography and The Dossier.

The **Passport** lists the languages the holder can speak and records the language skills (defined in terms of the six proficiency levels), the qualifications and experiences of the learner. It also contains a self-assessment grid in five skills and provides a list of language certificates and diplomas, as well as their equivalent level in terms of the CEFR. In keeping with the growing importance of cultural issues and cultural awareness, the passport also summarizes the intercultural experiences of the holder. It also contains the Europass, the holder's one-page passport which can be copied, filled in and sent with the application. Relevant parts of the ELP can subsequently be presented at the interview.

The **Language Biography** comprises documents recording the personal history of language learning, intercultural experiences, and instruments for self-assessment in the form of check lists of can-do descriptors. (The owner of a portfolio must be familiar with the use

of the descriptors; competent use of the descriptors is a sine qua non, and this might be the first step teachers and language trainers might want to take in the implementation of the portfolio.) The biography also lists the learners own observations concerning the learning process and it is a useful aid for further planning and goal setting, as the examples below, taken from the language biography of the German *Europäisches Sprachenportfolio für Erwachsene* (Hueber Verlag, October 2006), show:

Which languages have I learned, when, where and how? What have I done so far to learn languages? My aim..... (identify the aim, choose the way, allow a realistic amount of time to reach the aim). How do I reach my aims? (.....this helps me when I am learning) This helps me when.....I am learning. I am listening. I am reading. I am speaking.

The **Dossier** contains personal work produced by the learner: texts, letters, films, etc. The student's personal work supports the claims made in the passport and makes their claims about skills more tangible.

Even if the ELP is the property of its holder, who assumes complete responsibility for the content of it, it would be naive to think that students will start working with the portfolio just because they are told to. Proactive learners are still a rare category and therefore a certain amount of guidance and teacher's involvement is required.

Different patterns have been suggested on how the ELP should be practically implemented and most of them share the opinion that introducing one part of it would be more feasible and language trainers would face less reluctance from the part of their students. (Students might reject the work with the portfolio, which can be taxing at the beginning.) Most validated ELP also provide manuals which suggest methodologies for a smooth transition to the work with the portfolio.

The English Profile Project

The provisions of the CEFR and the ELP provided excellent basis for numerous projects and language programmes. In what follows we will briefly describe two of these projects: the English Profile and the ECL examinations.

The English Profile is a long term collaborative programme of interdisciplinary research, which aims to enhance the learning, teaching and assessment of English worldwide. English Profile is exploring the way learners of English progress through the levels of the CEFR. Besides the language reference descriptions, this project draws extensively on the Cambridge Learner Corpus, complemented by data which is being collected specifically for English Profile in several countries. These data will enable researchers to work with a larger sample of material from learners with specific linguistic and educational backgrounds. The overall objective of the English Profile is to produce a set of Reference Level Descriptions for English.

Findings from this programme have been published and will be published in the years to come as they become available. Research results have already been presented in two Conferences at Cambridge University in 2006 and one conference in Montenegro in 2008.

In the longer term the project will lead to the production of resources which will be useful to learners, teachers and course designers.

For example, at present within this project a writing skills analysis is underway. English Profile is currently studying written collections of learner's use of English (called corpora) and through this it is hoped that the English Profile team will be able to more specifically define how language is used at the six levels of the CEFR. The learners' corpora studied consist mostly of material gathered from learners completing Cambridge ESOL exams. English Profile research teams are beginning the process of adding exam rubrics (questions) to corpora so that, in time, they will be able to make correlations between what exams expect from learners and the English they produce in response at each of the six levels of the CEFR.

English Profile is an example of how the Framework can be put to use for the benefit of learners of English. Many other language programmes have been created to encourage the teaching and learning of other European languages, although it seems that for the time being the teaching of English has benefited most from the CEFR.

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