Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

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Framing the Issue

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) is a book of 260 pages that provides the user with a toolkit for describing communicative language proficiency in terms of language use. The toolkit has two dimensions: (1) the communicative activities that the user/learner may need to perform in a variety of contexts, and (2) the competences on which successful performance depends. In the first of these dimensions the CEFR identifies four modes of language use: (1) reception (listening and reading), (2) production (speaking and writing), (3) interaction (spoken and written), and (4) mediation (oral and/or written activities that make communication possible between two or more persons who cannot communicate directly). In the second dimension, the CEFR distinguishes between general and communicative language competences. General competences are divided into four types: (1) declarative knowledge (knowledge of the world, sociocultural knowledge, intercultural awareness); (2) skills and know-how (practical and intercultural skills); (3) existential competence (which includes attitudes, motivations, values, and beliefs); and (4) ability to learn. Communicative language competences are divided into three kinds: linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic.

The CEFR's taxonomic treatment of communicative language activities and the user/learner's competences includes illustrative scales that use "can do" descriptors to define six levels of proficiency: A1 and A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), C1 and C2 (proficient user). There are five scales for spoken production, three for written production, three for production strategies, five for listening, five for reading, one for audio-visual reception, one for receptive strategies, nine for spoken interaction, three for written interaction, and three for interaction strategies. There are no scales for mediation in the original version of the CEFR, but a project to develop mediation descriptors and scales was launched in

2013 and its results are due to be published in 2017. The description of the user/ learner's competences includes scales for grammatical accuracy, vocabulary range, vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, phonological control, orthographic control, sociolinguistic appropriateness, flexibility, turn-taking, thematic development, coherence and cohesion, spoken fluency, and propositional precision.

The so-called self-assessment grid summarizes this complex scheme for the activities of listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing at each of the six levels (note that written production and written interaction are merged). A1 reading proficiency, for example, is described thus: "I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example, on notices and posters or in catalogues" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 26); and C2 spoken production thus: "I can present a clear, smoothly flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 27). The self-assessment grid serves as a reminder that a user/learner's proficiency may vary considerably from activity to activity, so that it is often more useful to think in terms of a proficiency profile rather than assigning him or her to a single proficiency level. By contrast, the so-called global scale provides a summary description for each level. B1, for example, is summarized thus:

> Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24)

The CEFR was intended to provide Council of Europe member states with a common basis for developing language education policy, language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, and examinations. Accordingly, in addition to its treatment of language use and the user/learner's competences, the CEFR outlines the Council of Europe's language education policy, explains its action-oriented approach to the description of proficiency, introduces the common reference (proficiency) levels, and discusses language learning and teaching, the role of tasks in language teaching, linguistic diversification in the curriculum, and assessment. The impact of the CEFR's proficiency levels has been very great, especially on language test providers; the influence of its other dimensions has been more muted. By 2014, the CEFR existed in 39 different languages, not all of them European. The Council of Europe's website provides a wealth of information (http://www.coe.int/lang/).

Making the Case

The CEFR stands at the end of three decades of Council of Europe projects designed to promote and facilitate language learning and teaching. From the beginning these projects had a political dimension that is ultimately rooted in the European

Convention on Human Rights (1950) and the European Cultural Convention (1954): the Council of Europe's education policies in general are designed to develop the individual citizen's capacity to participate fully in a democratic society, while its language education policies aim to support all forms of international communication and exchange.

The Council of Europe's first modern languages projects, carried out in the 1970s under the aegis of the Committee for Out-of-School Education, were concerned to find ways of supporting increased levels of mobility in Europe. They emphasized the importance of analyzing adult learners' needs and helping them to meet those needs as quickly and efficiently as possible. This led to the development of a functional-notional approach to the definition of learning objectives: an approach that identifies the communicative functions (purposes or tasks) that the learner needs to be able to fulfill and the notions (semantic and grammatical resources) needed to fulfill them. The Council of Europe's first functional-notional inventory was *The Threshold Level* (1975), which sought to define the communicative repertoire that an adult learner of English needs in order to cross the threshold into temporary membership of an English-speaking society. It was followed by similar specifications for French (*Un niveau seuil*, 1976) and German (*Kontaktschwelle*, 1980). In the 1980s and 1990s, Threshold Level specifications were developed for more than 20 languages.

After Threshold Level three further proficiency levels were defined: Waystage (below Threshold), Vantage (above Threshold), and Breakthrough (below Waystage). The four levels correspond broadly to the first four levels of the CEFR: A1 (Breakthrough), A2 (Waystage), B1 (Threshold), B2 (Vantage); they thus provided a basis for the development of a comprehensive scheme of common reference levels. At the same time, agencies responsible for language proficiency assessment and certification increasingly felt a need for internationally recognized proficiency scales against which to reference their efforts. Thus, by the beginning of the 1990s, the development of the CEFR seemed an obvious next step.

The CEFR's descriptors and proficiency levels are the product of a research project that was funded by the federal Swiss authorities. The project involved almost 300 teachers and some 2,800 learners from lower secondary, upper secondary, vocational, and adult education. The teachers first participated in workshops designed to test the robustness of descriptors and assign them to levels, then assessed a representative sample of their learners using a series of questionnaires comprising the descriptors that the workshops had found to be the clearest, most focused and most relevant. A summary of the principles governing the research and the procedures used is provided in Appendixes A and B of the CEFR.

The CEFR has sometimes been criticized for neglecting the findings of second language acquisition research; but it is unclear how those findings, in all their (sometimes contradictory) complexity, could serve as the basis for a functionally oriented description of proficiency. In any case, the CEFR is a language-independent document; those wishing to use its scales of linguistic competence in relation to a

particular language must first clothe its descriptors in language-specific substance. For example, the illustrative scale for grammatical accuracy defines the user/learner's capacity at level A1 like this: "Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 114). In order to use this descriptor as a learning target or assessment criterion, it is necessary to specify which simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns of the language in question are relevant to the learner group in focus, and then to define in language-specific terms what is meant by "only limited control."

The CEFR is an open rather than a closed system, in at least three senses. Although it seeks to be comprehensive, it does not claim to be exhaustive; the complexity of its descriptive apparatus is such that it must always be used selectively—no curriculum, language program, or assessment instrument can possibly take all of its dimensions into account; and it opens up new perspectives by introducing two concepts that have been central to the Council of Europe's subsequent work on language education: plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, respectively the individual's capacity to communicate in two or more languages, at any level of proficiency, and to participate in two or more cultures.

Pedagogical Implications

Although the CEFR defines language proficiency as language use, it does not advocate any one approach to teaching and learning. This is partly because its function is to describe, analyze, discuss, and present options, and partly because the Council of Europe respects the diversity of its member states' educational traditions and cultures. The CEFR nevertheless carries strong implications for language learning and teaching. This is how it summarizes its action-oriented approach (the words and phrases in italics refer to the main components of its descriptive apparatus):

> Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of *competences*, both *general* and in particular *communicative language competences*. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various *conditions* and under various *constraints* to engage in *language activities* involving *language processes* to produce and/or receive *texts* in relation to *themes* in specific *domains*, activating those *strategies* which seem most appropriate for carrying out the *tasks* to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 9)

According to this summary, language use is a matter of drawing on our competences to engage in communicative activities. Language learning is a variety of language use in the sense that proficiency is the product of sustained interaction between the learner's gradually developing competences and the communicative tasks whose performance requires him or her to use the target language; in other words, communicative language use is central to language learning. This has unmistakable

pedagogical implications. It is important, moreover, not to overlook the last sentence of the summary, which assigns a key role to the agency of the individual learner. In its discussion of language learning and teaching the CEFR points out that it is learners who "have to develop the competences and strategies … and carry out the tasks, activities and processes needed to participate effectively in communicative events" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 141). It acknowledges that most learners simply follow the instructions and carry out the activities prescribed by teachers and textbooks, but points out that "once teaching stops, further learning has to be autonomous" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 141). The Council of Europe has always been strongly committed to the idea of lifelong learning, and its work on modern languages has always been concerned to promote the agency of the individual learner; hence the conception of the CEFR's companion piece, the European Language Portfolio, as a means of supporting individual learning in a lifelong perspective.

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has three obligatory components: (1) a language passport that summarizes the owner's experience of learning and using second and foreign languages and records his or her cumulative self-assessment; (2) a language biography that provides a reflective accompaniment to language learning and language use; and (3) a dossier in which the owner keeps work in progress and/or collects evidence of his or her achieved proficiency. The ELP has three pedagogical focuses—the development of learner autonomy, intercultural awareness/competence, and plurilingualism; and two functions—pedagogical and reporting. It is linked to the CEFR by goal-setting and self-assessment checklists of "I can" descriptors arranged by CEFR activities and levels.

The Council of Europe did not develop a single version of the ELP, or a family of ELPs aimed at different age groups. Instead it elaborated Principles and Guidelines (Council of Europe, 2011) that define the ELP's purposes and describe its different sections, and established an ELP Validation Committee whose function was to receive draft ELPs from member states and determine whether or not they complied with the Principles and Guidelines. Between 2000 and 2010, when validation was replaced by registration based on self-declaration, the committee validated and accredited 118 ELPs submitted by agencies in 33 Council of Europe member states and by six international non-governmental organizations. Full details of the ELP are available from the Council of Europe's ELP website (http://www.coe.int/portfolio).

SEE ALSO: Communicative Competence; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Curriculum Development; Functional-Notional Approach; Needs Analysis; Portfolios; Self-Assessment

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Suggested Readings

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