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The CEFR: Development, Theoretical and Practical issues

L'histoire du Cadre Européen de Référence débute en 1991 à Rüschlikon à une époque où les diplômes et les examens de langues ne proposaient pas d'équivalences. En retraçant les moments-clés d'un long processus qui nous mène à une standardisation des systèmes d'évaluation, Brian North aborde les questions suivantes: quels sont les objectifs du CER? Comment les différents niveaux ont été définis? Quelles compétences les descripteurs doivent-ils permettre d'évaluer?

Bien que la dimension communicative du CER soit au premier plan de cette vaste entreprise, les auteurs du CER se refusent à promouvoir un modèle théorique ou une méthodologie. Le portfolio qui est un des jalons les plus importants sur le chemin de la standardisation des niveaux de compétences langagières est un outil exclusivement descriptif. Cette tâche soulève pourtant quelques problématiques: décrire à un moment précis de l'apprentissage un processus d'une grande complexité implique dans une certaine mesure une simplification et la formulation des descripteurs reste parfois sujette à l'interprétation. (red.)

Origin and Purpose of the CEFR

The “Common European Framework of Reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment” (CEFR) was developed between 1993 and 1996 by a Council of Europe international working party² following the recommendation of an intergovernmental Symposium “Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe” hosted by Switzerland and coordinated by Eurocentres at Rüschlikon, near Zurich in November 1991. The main aim of the Symposium had been to investigate the feasibility of relating language courses and assessments in Europe to each other through some kind of common framework. Many school certificates awarded for language learning contained statements like “followed a course of English at intermediate level” or “successfully completed a course in Foundation French,” whilst others reported “Grade C” or “4.5” or “sehr gut.” Examination certificates tended to follow a similar pattern. It was very difficult to relate such results to each other because what they said was not very *transparent*: you have to be familiar with the particular course or exam to make sense of the result. Since no person or institution can be familiar with more than a few of the courses and exams around, this caused a lack of *coherence* in the organisation of language learning and in the reporting of results achieved at it. After piloting with two internal editions, the CEFR was published with Cambridge University Press for English and with Didier for French (Council of Europe 2001) and is currently available in over 20 languages.

The CEFR was written with three main aims.

- To establish a metalanguage common across educational sectors, national and linguistic boundaries that could be used to talk about objectives and language levels. It was hoped that this would make it easier for practitioners to tell each other and their clientele, what they wish to help learners to achieve and how they attempt to do so.
- To encourage practitioners in the language field to reflect on their current practice, particularly in relation to learners’ practical language learning needs, the setting of suitable objectives and the tracking of learner progress.
- To agree common reference points based on the work on objectives that had taken place in the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages projects since the 1970s.

In time, the existence of such a common reference framework would, it was hoped, help to relate courses and examinations to each other and thus achieve the “transparency and coherence” that had been the subject of the Rüschlikon Symposium. This was not seen as a harmonisation project. The aim of the CEFR was to provide a mental framework that can value and encourage diversity. It was intended to provide a tool that would enable people to say where they were, not a specification telling them where they ought to be. Right at the very beginning, the authors emphasise: “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 CEF to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they should employ.” (Council of Europe

2001: xi Note to the User). Council of Europe 2001: 2.

In the late 1990s, the issue of linking assessments, tests and examinations to the CEFR was still hardly discussed at an academic level. Claims of relationships to the CEFR were based on little more than self declaration or the personal opinions of small groups of experts, despite the fact that linking methodologies had existed for decades and had even been applied in school contexts, for example, in Eurocentres (North 2000a). Appeals for guidance in this area led the Council of Europe to set up a project group, co-ordinated by the current writer³, to produce a Manual “*Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)*” (Council of Europe 2003; Figueras et al 2005). This manual, currently being piloted in some 20 case studies, proposes a linking process undertaken through three sets of procedures:

- *Specification* of the context and purpose of the examination plus of the coverage of its tests and sub-tests in relation to the CEFR,
- *Standardisation* of the interpretation of the CEFR levels by those involved with the examination, plus
- *Empirical validation* including external validation that the results reported by the test-in-operation relate to the CEFR in the manner intended.

Descriptive Scheme

The core of the CEFR is a *descriptive scheme* defining relevant activities and relevant qualities of language and a set of *common reference levels* defining proficiency at six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) in as many of these categories as has so far proved possible. The descriptive scheme is introduced in Chapter 2 and then fleshed out in Chapters 4 and 5. The common refer-

ence levels are introduced in Chapter 3, and used to present descriptor scales for aspects of the descriptive scheme in Chapters 4 and 5.

The descriptive scheme can be considered to be, in Mislevy’s terms, a learner model “... a simplified description of selected aspects of the infinite varieties of skills and knowledge that characterise real students” (Mislevy 1995:343).

“A learner’s state of competence at a given point in time is a complex constellation of facts and concepts, and the networks that interconnect them; of automatized procedures and conscious heuristics,; of perspectives and strategies, and the management capabilities by which the learner focuses his efforts. There is no hope of providing a description of such a state. Neither is there any need to.” (Mislevy 1993: 28)

The core of the scheme is the set of *communicative language activities* plus the set of *communicative language competences*.

Communicative language activities are organised in three main categories: *reception*, *interaction*, *production*, each subdivided for spoken and written mode. Each of these macro categories has lists of activities that come under that heading. This tri-part division reflects the thoughts of several applied linguists. Breen and Candlin (1980: 92) posited three underlying abilities: “Interpretation,” “Negotiation” and “Interpretation,” which they considered to be not primarily linguistic, but which Brumfit (1984: 69–70; 1987: 26) developed into “Comprehension,” “Conversation or Discussion” and “Extended Speaking” (with Extended Writing as a supplementary category appropriate on some occasions) which he described as “independent modes of behaviour” (1984: 70). Swales (1990) considered these issues from a genre angle, arguing that certain types of language use can be regarded

as pre-generic and common to all societies: casual conversation or “chat”, and “ordinary” narrative storytelling (Swales 1990: 58–61). The former “chat”, is interactive with short turns, its coherence provided through the way participants weave their contributions together. It can be related to Cummins (1979; 1980) concept BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communications skills), tending to low cognitive complexity and high contextual support (implicature). It can be considered to underlie all the genres of more specialised communicative interaction developed in different cultures (Swales *ibid*). The latter, storytelling, is productive, often prepared, rehearsed (or redrafted), its coherence provided in the text by the speaker/writer. It can be considered to underlie literacy and can be related to Canale’s (1984) concept “autonomous competence” (as opposed to communicative competence), tending to high cognitive complexity and low contextual support. This distinction between interactive and productive language is also related to the distinction made by Brown et al (1984) between short and long turns. “Long turns which are used to transfer information—to recount an anecdote, justify a position, give instructions about how to take some medicine, describe a route—demand skill in construction and practice in execution.” Very young children do not attempt long turns, and young people in general (and some adults) have great difficulty organising them when under communicative stress (Brown et al 1984: 15). Storytelling, production, long turns, then create an inverse receptive role as an auditor/recipient. North (1992a) as a result proposed summary scales for the “macro-skills” Reception, Interaction and Production at the Rüschlikon Symposium. The development can be summarised by Table 1. A fourth category Processing (integrated skills) was later developed by the Framework Working Party into the concept of Mediation.

Table 1: Alternatives Categories to the Four Skills

Underlying Abilities	Major Activities	Pre-genres	Macro-skill
Interpretation	Comprehension	[Listening to story-telling]	Reception
Negotiation	Conversation	Conversation	Interaction
Expression	Extended Speaking/ Writing	Story-telling	Production

The categories for the CEFR descriptor scales emerged through an interplay between the work of the Council of Europe authoring group, and experimentation with categories in workshops with teachers in a Swiss national research project carried out 1993-6 (North and Schneider 1998, North 2000b, Schneider and North 2000). The categories in Table 3 were validated in a series of 32 workshops with Swiss teachers in 1994-5. In these workshops, teachers were given

“Conversation”, “Obtaining information and services” and “Discussion” and asked to put each descriptor into an appropriate envelope. An extra envelope was supplied for descriptors the teachers found sub-standard or for which they could not decide which the appropriate category was. This tested not only the clarity of the descriptors, but also the feasibility of the categories. The categories that resulted for Interaction and Production are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Categories for Communicative Activities: Interaction & Production

	Interaction		Production	
	<i>Spoken</i>	<i>Written</i>	<i>Spoken</i>	<i>Written</i>
Transactional	Service encounters Information exchanges Interviews Telephone transactions	Form-filling Notes & messages Formal letters	Formal presentations	Formal reports
Creative, Inter-personal	Conversation	Personal letters	Describing, narrating and interpreting experience	
Evaluative, Problem-solving	Discussion Negotiating Formal meetings	- -	Putting a case	

a pile of about 60 descriptors for three or four similar categories, (e.g. Conversation, Obtaining information and services, Discussion) with the descriptors presented individually on strips of paper like confetti. They were given empty labelled envelopes (e.g. labelled

The approach taken for Listening was to a considerable extent influenced by the work of Rost’s (1990) on learner roles as interactive participant, addressee or overhearer:

- Overall listening comprehension
- Understanding conversation be-

tween native speakers

- Listening as a member of a live audience
- Listening to audio media and recordings
- Listening to announcements and instructions

For Reading the distinction adopted between the CEFR descriptor scales is more by purpose, although the descriptors in the scales also deal with text types:

Overall reading comprehension

- Reading correspondence
- Reading for orientation
- Reading for information and argument
- Reading instructions

Communicative language competences are again organised in three main categories: linguistic competences, pragmatic competences and socio-linguistic competences. Again, each of these macro categories has lists of aspects that come under that heading, as shown in Table 3. Space does not permit a detailed discussion as to why fluency is included as a scale category under pragmatic competence. This issue is covered at length in North (1997, 2000b). The expression “She’s a really fluent speaker,” especially if used of a native speaker, would suggest not just the linguistic automaticity of the actual “fluency” scale, but also a high degree of flexibility and precision of formulation (speaker meaning), not to mention coherence, thematic development and, in conversation, turn taking skills (all aspects of discourse competence).

Socio-linguistic competence, and other aspects of socio-cultural competence, proved very difficult at the formulation stage, in the workshops with teachers, and in the statistical analysis of teachers using descriptors to assess their students. It was not clear how much the problems were caused (a) by the concept being a quite separate construct from language pro-

iciency and hence not “fitting” in the analysis; (b) by rather vague descriptors, or (c) by inconsistent responses by the teachers in the data collection. Socio-cultural and socio-linguistic aspects are therefore under-defined in the published document.

B2. In the 1970s the Council of Europe defined a lower level called “The Threshold Level” (now B1), originally to specify what kind of language an immigrant or visitor needed to operate effectively in society. Threshold was quickly followed by “Waystage”

framework in the form of a unit-credit scheme linked to common levels. In 1992 the Council of Europe’s “Common Framework Working Party” adopted the following six “Common Reference Levels” for the future CEFR: Breakthrough (later A1), Waystage (later A2), Threshold (later B1), Vantage (later B2), “Effective Operational Proficiency” - exemplified by Cambridge CAE and the DALF (Diplôme Approfondi de Langue Française) from the CIEP (later C1), and “Mastery” - exemplified by Cambridge CPE and by the KDS (Kleines Deutsches Sprachdiplom) from the Goethe Institute (later C2). These six levels corresponded both to Wilkins’ seven levels (minus the top level) and (apart from A1) to the five levels used by Cambridge ESOL and adopted by ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe: founded by Cambridge in 1991). The following year, in 1993, the Swiss National Science Research Council project set up to develop descriptors for the CEFR adopted the six levels as targets.

As a result of this process of convergence, the CEFR levels (e.g. A2) , the names of Council of Europe-related specifications (e.g. “Waystage”) and the levels of Cambridge ESOL exams (e.g. Key English Test) all relate to each other as shown in Table 4.

Table 3: Scale Categories for Linguistic and Pragmatic Competence

Linguistic		Pragmatic
Language Resources		Language Use
Usage		Use
What can be said (sentence/dictionary meaning)		What people say (speaker meaning)
Knowing a language		Knowing how to use a language
Scale Categories		
Range: (Knowledge)	General Vocabulary	Fluency Flexibility Precision
Accuracy: (Control)	Grammatical Vocabulary Pronunciation	Turntaking Coherence Thematic Development

Common Reference Levels

The common reference levels in the CEFR describe learner achievement in the communicative language activities and communicative language competences in 54 illustrative scales distributed in the relevant sections of Chapters 4 and 5.

Origin: The CEFR levels did not suddenly appear from nowhere. They have emerged in a gradual, collective recognition of what the late Peter Hargreaves (Cambridge ESOL) described during the 1991 Rüschlikon Symposium as “natural levels” in the sense of useful curriculum and examination levels. The process of defining these levels started in 1913 with the Cambridge Proficiency exam (CPE) that defines a practical mastery of the language as a non-native speaker. This level has become C2. Just before the last war, Cambridge introduced the First Certificate (FCE) – still widely seen as the first level of proficiency of interest for office work, now associated with

(now A2), a staging point half way to Threshold. The first time all these concepts were described as a possible set of “Council of Europe levels” was in a presentation by David Wilkins (author of “The Functional Approach”) at the 1977 Ludwighaven Symposium (Trim 1978). This symposium had represented the first - unsuccessful - attempt to move towards a common European

Table 4: Emergence of Common Reference Levels

Wilkins, 1977/8 Ludwigshafen	Cambridge 1992	Council of Europe/ Swiss Project 1992-7	CEFR Levels
Ambilingual Proficiency			
Comprehensive Operational Proficiency	CPE	Mastery	C2
Adequate Operational Proficiency	CAE	Effective Operational Proficiency	C1
Limited Operational Proficiency	FCE	Vantage	B2
Basic Operational Proficiency (Threshold Level)	PET	Threshold	B1
Survival Proficiency	KET	Waystage	A2
Formulaic Proficiency		Breakthrough	A1

Development: The 1993-6 Swiss project was set up to provide descriptors for the CEFR and the prototype Portfolio, the descriptors for the latter being self-assessment versions of those for the former. The project, described in North (2000b), North and Schneider (1998) and Schneider and North (2000), had a principled methodology:

- **Qualitative research:** The first drafts of the descriptors were edited in 1993 from a wide documentation of over 30 existing sets of language proficiency statements. This “descriptor pool” was then completed by authoring descriptors for strategic and socio-cultural competence. Exact formulations and the viability of categories used were checked through the series of some 32 workshops with teachers referred to above when discussing the Descriptive Scheme.
- **Quantitative research:** The best descriptors – those that were sorted consistently to the correct pile and that were marked as clear and useful – were then used to create a series of overlapping 50-item checklists of descriptors for different levels. The descriptors on the different questionnaires were “calibrated” onto the same mathematical scale through an analysis of the way in which teachers interpreted them in using the checklists to assess learners in their classes at the end of the school year. Data was collected for English in 1994, and then for English, French and German in 1995 – using the descriptors in all three languages. Lower & upper secondary, vocational and adult sectors were involved in a reasonably representative manner and altogether some 2,800 learners, 500 classes and 300 teachers were involved. After the analysis, each individual descriptor had a difficulty value (e.g. 176 or 053) on the scale. Replication of this rank ordering of the descriptors found in follow-up

projects has been extremely high: in the second year of the Swiss CEFR research project with French and German (0.99: North 2000b: 339), in conjunction with ALTE Can Do statements in their self-assessment format (0.97: Jones 2002:176), in relation to listening, reading and writing descriptors used in their self-assessment form by DIALANG (0.96 for listening and Reading, 0.92 for Writing): Kaftandjieva and Takala 2002: 114-121) and in a self-assessment instrument developed for Basle university (0.90: North 2002: 162).

- **Exploitation:** The final step was to identify where on this list of rank ordered descriptors one level stopped and the next level started. In other words the continuous scale of descriptors had to be “cut” into levels. A conscious effort was made in this process to match up the descriptors to the set of levels that had gradually become established in Council of Europe circles in the 1970s and 1980s as discussed above.

Salient Characteristics: The resulting series of ascending levels can be briefly summarised as follows:

Level A1 is the point at which the learner can:

- *interact in a simple way, ask and answer simple questions about themselves, where they live, people they know, and things they have, initiate and respond to simple statements in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics,*
- *rather than relying purely on a rehearsed repertoire of (tourist) phrases.*

Level A2 reflects the Waystage specification with:

- *the majority of descriptors stating social functions: greet people, ask how they are and react to news; handle very short social exchanges; ask and answer questions about what they do at work and in free time;*

make and respond to invitations; discuss what to do, where to go and make arrangements to meet; make and accept offers,

- *plus descriptors on getting out and about: make simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks; get simple information about travel; ask for and provide everyday goods and services.*

Level B1 reflects The Threshold Level, with two particular features:

- *maintaining interaction and getting across what you want to: give or seek personal views and opinions in an informal discussion with friends; express the main point he/she wants to make comprehensibly; keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production,*
- *plus coping flexibly with problems in everyday life: deal with most situations likely to arise when making travel arrangements through an agent or when actually travelling; enter unprepared into conversations on familiar topics; make a complaint.*

Level B2 reflects three new emphases:

- *effective argument: account for and sustain opinions in discussion by providing relevant explanations, arguments and comments; explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various option,*
- *holding your own in social discourse: interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without imposing strain on either party; adjust to the changes of direction, style and emphasis normally found in conversation,*
- *plus a new degree of language awareness: correct mistakes if they have*

led to misunderstandings; make a note of “favourite mistakes” and consciously monitor speech for them.

Level C1 is characterised by access to a broad range of language that results in fluent, spontaneous communication:

- *express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly; has a good command of a broad lexical repertoire allowing gaps to be readily overcome with circumlocutions; there is little obvious searching for expressions or avoidance strategies - only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language,*
- *produce clear, smoothly-flowing, well-structured speech, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.*

Level C2 represents the degree of precision and ease with the language of highly successful learners:

- *convey finer shades of meaning precisely by using, with reasonable accuracy, a wide range of modification devices,*
- *and a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative level of meaning.*

Plus Levels: The research project actually identified 10 rather than 6 bands of proficiency. Between what can be described as the criterion level for A2 and the criterion level for B1 there was found to be what came to be described as a “plus level.” The same was the case for between B1 and B2 (B1+) and between B2 and C1 (B2+). Such “plus levels” were characterised by a stronger performance in relation to the same features found at the criterion level, plus hints of features that became salient at the next level. Descriptors for “Plus levels” are excluded from three summary charts that present the levels in the CEFR (Table 1: Global scale; Ta-

ble 2: Portfolio Self-assessment Grid; Table 3: Qualitative aspects of spoken language). However, in the 54 descriptor scales distributed in Chapters 4 and 5, descriptors at the main “criterion level” are shown below a horizontal line, with those for the “plus level” above the horizontal line. If there is no such line, all the descriptors for that aspect at that level were calibrated at the normal, “criterion level.” The “Plus level” concept can be very useful in relation to school assessment because narrower levels allow learners to see more progress.

Curriculum and Assessment

The correct answer to the question “What methodology does the CEFR promote?” is “None.” The CEFR is strictly neutral as regards teaching or testing methodologies. It is intended to be “comprehensive” in that it is possible to situate any style of teaching within the conceptual framework provided. However, no system of description can be fully neutral. The approach taken in the CEF, and explained in CEFR Chapter 2, is described as “action-oriented.” On the other hand, the fact that the CEFR provides “Can do” descriptors, and the fact that these illustrative descriptors are the part of the CEFR that has perhaps received most attention, does not mean that the CEFR promotes a functional approach or a task-based approach at the expense of ensuring that learners acquire a knowledge and mastery of the system of the language and of the inter-cultural competences adequate for their needs. After all, fully a third of the illustrative scales concern aspects of learner competences. For example, there are six scales just on aspects of linguistic competence.

At the risk of oversimplifying, it could be said that the pedagogic implications of the CEFR focus on the following related points. These points do not dictate



any particular medium of instruction, methodology or teaching style. They are essentially meta activities:

- **Needs analysis:** Teaching what the particular group of learners concerned need in relation to (a) what activities they are going to have to perform in the language, and (b) the gaps in their current knowledge, the difficulties they have with the language concerned.
- **Transparency:** Informing learners about the learning objectives and sub-objectives and involving them to an extent appropriate to their age and experience in the process of setting these objectives and in monitoring their achievement of them.
- **Action-orientation:** Presenting objectives in terms of what learners will be able to *do* in the language; emphasising the reasons for practicing particular language elements in order to achieve those ends; providing fluency practice in communicative activities for learners to gain automaticity with the language they are learning.
- **Partial Competences:** Teaching Reception well ahead of Production – including giving learners a receptive understanding of grammar (e.g. past tense) long before they are taught it actively. Accepting that a limited goal (e.g. reception only or “ping-pong” interaction only) is appropriate for a third or fourth foreign language.
- **Self-assessment:** Encouraging learners to reflect on their needs and their achievements in terms of communicative activities and qualitative aspects of their performance.

In these areas descriptors taken or adapted from or inspired by the CEFR/ELP can be very helpful. However, one should perhaps re-emphasise that there is no “CEFR Method.” The prime purpose of the CEFR is to encourage reflection, not to harmonise or standardise practice.

In Eurocentres, the overall scale of CEFR levels, the learning objectives for the CEFR level in question (“Our Aims”) and the objectives of the actual week’s work are shown in a standardised classroom display. The weekly plan is introduced by the teacher on the Monday, and achievement of the objectives is reviewed with the class on the Friday as discussed below. Learners are thus treated as fully involved partners in the learning and teaching process.

With regard to assessment, the most effective and most enjoyable way to achieve a common interpretation of the CEFR levels is standardisation training with videos. People can interpret the written word (the descriptors) in different ways; some people are just stricter than others. However, discussing concrete examples of performances in relation to common criteria, supported by detailed documentation that explains why a performance is one particular level, is a very effective way of counter-acting this. To assist in this process, the Council of Europe and Eurocentres have made available DVDs illustrating performances at different CEFR levels for English (Eurocentres / Migros Club Schools) and French (Eurocentres / CIEP). DVDs for German and Italian are in the process of production and other languages are expected to follow.

Simply stated there are three main types of assessment that occur on a regular basis in a language programme:

- Placement
(at entry)
- Verification of learning
(during course)

- Evaluation of progress
(during course or just at exit for certification)

Placement: Placement testing determines the level of the learner in order to place them in an appropriate group and/or to prepare a suitable course for them. This step is rarely undertaken in mainstream state sector education.

Verification of learning: In the language testing literature this type of assessment is called “achievement testing.” One way to use the CEFR/Portfolio descriptors is to select a group of them as the objectives of a specific module. In so doing, it is sensible to analyse what language resources are prerequisites for the different communicative activities. Learners can then be informed which descriptors form the objectives for the current module, and what language will be necessary to perform those activities.

In language stays abroad at Eurocentres, weekly objectives are presented in terms of (a) communicative activities, (b) grammar and vocabulary, the latter being the language necessary to achieve the former. At the end of each week, in a review lesson, teacher and class discuss achievement of the objectives, and do a test or revision activity. In Eurocentres France, a questionnaire lists the 5 or 6 most important communicative objectives and the 5 or 6 most important linguistic objectives. Learners are asked for each individual objective (communicative and linguistic) whether they (a) feel comfortable with their achievement of the objective, (b) feel they master it better than before or (c) would like some more practice on the point concerned. Teachers take the feedback into account in planning the following week and in giving advice for individual work in the independent learning centre.

Assessment of level reached: This type of testing assesses a learner’s current language proficiency level. If

a school curriculum is aligned to the CEFR levels, then it makes sense to relate certification to the CEFR level achieved. This is the type of assessment to which people are usually referring when they talk about relating assessment to the CEFR.

In Eurocentres, a communicative approach with small group activities is used (North 1992b, 1993). What the activities have in common is that they provide three phases, each generating different kinds of discourse: a Collaborative Phase working out what to do (short, slow turns with high use of communication strategies); an Exchange Phase in which each student has a chance to take the floor (long, coherent turns which are semi-prepared), and a Discussion Phase (spontaneous, short turns). The three phases of the activity (Collaborative, Exchange, Discussion) are exploited for three phases of assessment: (Impression, Analysis with criteria, Considered judgement). CEFR-based criteria are defined for each level for Range (amount and complexity of language), Accuracy (control), Delivery (fluency and pronunciation) and Interaction. This communicative assessment is supplemented by formal tests drawn from an item bank developed from language specifications for the CEFR levels.

Conclusion

The CEFR aims to encourage reflection on current practice, a common metalanguage to talk about it, and a common set of references points for profiling objectives, competences, achievements. To do so it offers a rich descriptive framework of categories for communicative competence, activities and strategies, defined for different levels in illustrative descriptor scales. It suggests an “action-oriented approach,” teaching what people need, including the definition of partial competences (e.g. receptive

skills only) for certain circumstances. The transparency brought by the descriptors lends itself to involving the learners as partners in the learning and teaching process.

The CEFR is a concertina-like reference tool that provides categories and levels that educational professionals can expand/contract, elaborate/summarise, adopt/adapt according to the needs of their context. The aim is for users to adopt activities, competences and proficiency stepping-stones that are appropriate to their local context, yet can be related to the greater scheme of things and thus communicated more easily to colleagues in other educational institutions and to other stakeholders like learners, parents and employers.

A methodology exists for relating formal assessments to the CEFR through sets of procedures for specification of content, standardisation of interpretation of the levels, and empirical validation of the results.

Up-to-date information about the CEFR and tools related to it can be found on www.coe.int/portfolio.

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Footnotes

¹ Eurocentres: The Swiss-based not-for-profit Eurocentres Foundation (www.eurocentres.com) has since 1968 had Consultative Status No 1 as an NGO to the Council of Europe for the learning of modern languages. Eurocentres organised, on behalf of the Swiss government, both the 1971 Rüschlikon Symposium that launched the Council of Europe’s original Modern Languages Project and the 1991 Rüschlikon Symposium that launched the development of the Common European Framework of Reference and the European Language Portfolio. Eurocentres has 21 schools worldwide teaching English, French, Spanish, German, Italian and Japanese.

² The authoring group consisted of John Trim (project director), Daniel Coste (CREDIF), Brian North (Eurocentres Foundation) and Joe Sheils (Council of Europe Secretariat).

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