

1 The Common European Framework in its political and educational context

1.1 What is the *Common European Framework*?

The Common European Framework provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way 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. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis.

The Common European Framework is intended to overcome the barriers to communication among professionals working in the field of modern languages arising from the different educational systems in Europe. It provides the means for educational administrators, course designers, teachers, teacher trainers, examining bodies, etc., to reflect on their current practice, with a view to situating and co-ordinating their efforts and to ensuring that they meet the real needs of the learners for whom they are responsible.

By providing a common basis for the explicit description of objectives, content and methods, the Framework will enhance the transparency of courses, syllabuses and qualifications, thus promoting international co-operation in the field of modern languages. The provision of objective criteria for describing language proficiency will facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications gained in different learning contexts, and accordingly will aid European mobility.

The taxonomic nature of the Framework inevitably means trying to handle the great complexity of human language by breaking language competence down into separate components. This confronts us with psychological and pedagogical problems of some depth. Communication calls upon the whole human being. The competences separated and classified below interact in complex ways in the development of each unique human personality. As a social agent, each individual forms relationships with a widening cluster of overlapping social groups, which together define identity. In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture. It must be left to teachers and the learners themselves to reintegrate the many parts into a healthily developing whole.

The Framework includes the description of 'partial' qualifications, appropriate when only a more restricted knowledge of a language is required (e.g. for understanding rather than speaking), or when a limited amount of time is available for the learning of a third or fourth language and more useful results can perhaps be attained by aiming

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at, say, recognition rather than recall skills. Giving formal recognition to such abilities will help to promote plurilingualism through the learning of a wider variety of European languages.

1.2 The aims and objectives of Council of Europe language policy

CEF serves the overall aim of the Council of Europe as defined in Recommendations R (82) 18 and R (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers: ‘to achieve greater unity among its members’ and to pursue this aim ‘by the adoption of common action in the cultural field’.

The work of the Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe with regard to modern languages, organised since its foundation in a series of medium-term projects, has derived its coherence and continuity from adherence to three basic principles set down in the preamble to Recommendation R (82) 18 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe:

- that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding;
- that it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination;
- that member states, when adopting or developing national policies in the field of modern language learning and teaching, may achieve greater convergence at the European level by means of appropriate arrangements for ongoing co-operation and co-ordination of policies.

In the pursuit of these principles, the Committee of Ministers called upon member governments

(F14) To promote the national and international collaboration of governmental and non-governmental institutions engaged in the development of methods of teaching and evaluation in the field of modern language learning and in the production and use of materials, including institutions engaged in the production and use of multi-media materials.

(F17) To take such steps as are necessary to complete the establishment of an effective European system of information exchange covering all aspects of language learning, teaching and research, and making full use of information technology.

Consequently, the activities of the CDCC (Council for Cultural Co-operation), its Committee for Education and its Modern Languages Section, have been concerned to encourage, support and co-ordinate the efforts of member governments and non-governmental institutions to improve language learning in accordance with these funda-

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mental principles and in particular the steps which they take to implement the general measures set out in the Appendix to R(82)18:

A. General measures

1. To ensure, as far as possible, that all sections of their populations have access to effective means of acquiring a knowledge of the languages of other member states (or of other communities within their own country) as well as the skills in the use of those languages that will enable them to satisfy their communicative needs and in particular:
 - 1.1 to deal with the business of everyday life in another country, and to help foreigners staying in their own country to do so;
 - 1.2 to exchange information and ideas with young people and adults who speak a different language and to communicate their thoughts and feelings to them;
 - 1.3 to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the way of life and forms of thought of other peoples and of their cultural heritage.
2. To promote, encourage and support the efforts of teachers and learners at all levels to apply in their own situation the principles of the construction of language-learning systems (as these are progressively developed within the Council of Europe 'Modern languages' programme):
 - 2.1 by basing language teaching and learning on the needs, motivations, characteristics and resources of learners;
 - 2.2 by defining worthwhile and realistic objectives as explicitly as possible;
 - 2.3 by developing appropriate methods and materials;
 - 2.4 by developing suitable forms and instruments for the evaluating of learning programmes.
3. To promote research and development programmes leading to the introduction, at all educational levels, of methods and materials best suited to enabling different classes and types of student to acquire a communicative proficiency appropriate to their specific needs.

The preamble to R(98)6 reaffirms the political objectives of its actions in the field of modern languages:

- To equip all Europeans for the challenges of intensified international mobility and closer co-operation not only in education, culture and science but also in trade and industry.
- To promote mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication.
- To maintain and further develop the richness and diversity of European cultural life through greater mutual knowledge of national and regional languages, including those less widely taught.
- To meet the needs of a multilingual and multicultural Europe by appreciably developing the ability of Europeans to communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries, which requires a sustained, lifelong effort to be encouraged, put on an organised footing and financed at all levels of education by the competent bodies.

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- To avert the dangers that might result from the marginalisation of those lacking the skills necessary to communicate in an interactive Europe.

Particular urgency was attached to these objectives by the First Summit of Heads of State, which identified xenophobia and ultra-nationalist backlashes as a primary obstacle to European mobility and integration, and as a major threat to European stability and to the healthy functioning of democracy. The second summit made preparation for democratic citizenship a priority educational objective, thus giving added importance to a further objective pursued in recent projects, namely:

To promote methods of modern language teaching which will strengthen independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility.

In the light of these objectives, the Committee of Ministers stressed ‘the political importance at the present time and in the future of developing specific fields of action, such as strategies for diversifying and intensifying language learning in order to promote plurilingualism in a pan-European context’ and drew attention to the value of further developing educational links and exchanges and of exploiting the full potential of new communication and information technologies.

1.3 What is ‘plurilingualism’?

In recent years, the concept of plurilingualism has grown in importance in the Council of Europe’s approach to language learning. Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society. Multilingualism may be attained by simply diversifying the languages on offer in a particular school or educational system, or by encouraging pupils to learn more than one foreign language, or reducing the dominant position of English in international communication. Beyond this, the plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. In different situations, a person can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor. For instance, partners may switch from one language or dialect to another, exploiting the ability of each to express themselves in one language and to understand the other; or a person may call upon the knowledge of a number of languages to make sense of a text, written or even spoken, in a previously ‘unknown’ language, recognising words from a common international store in a new guise. Those with some knowledge, even slight, may use it to help those with none to communicate by mediating between individuals with no common language. In the absence of a mediator, such individuals may nevertheless achieve some degree of communication by bringing the whole of their linguistic equipment into play,

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experimenting with alternative forms of expression in different languages or dialects, exploiting paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression, etc.) and radically simplifying their use of language.

From this perspective, the aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place. This implies, of course, that the languages offered in educational institutions should be diversified and students given the opportunity to develop a plurilingual competence. Furthermore, once it is recognised that language learning is a lifelong task, the development of a young person’s motivation, skill and confidence in facing new language experience out of school comes to be of central importance. The responsibilities of educational authorities, qualifying examining bodies and teachers cannot simply be confined to the attainment of a given level of proficiency in a particular language at a particular moment in time, important though that undoubtedly is.

The full implications of such a paradigm shift have yet to be worked out and translated into action. The recent developments in the Council of Europe’s language programme have been designed to produce tools for use by all members of the language teaching profession in the promotion of plurilingualism. In particular, The European Language Portfolio (ELP) provides a format in which language learning and intercultural experiences of the most diverse kinds can be recorded and formally recognised. For this purpose, CEF not only provides a scaling of overall language proficiency in a given language, but also a breakdown of language use and language competences which will make it easier for practitioners to specify objectives and describe achievements of the most diverse kinds in accordance with the varying needs, characteristics and resources of learners.

1.4 Why is CEF needed?

In the words of the Intergovernmental Symposium held in Rüşchlikon, Switzerland November 1991, on the initiative of the Swiss Federal Government, on: ‘Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe: Objectives, Evaluation, Certification’:

1. A further intensification of language learning and teaching in member countries is necessary in the interests of greater mobility, more effective international communication combined with respect for identity and cultural diversity, better access to information, more intensive personal interaction, improved working relations and a deeper mutual understanding.
2. To achieve these aims language learning is necessarily a life-long task to be promoted and facilitated throughout educational systems, from pre-school through to adult education.
3. It is desirable to develop a Common European Framework of reference for language learning at all levels, 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;

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- assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts.

Plurilingualism has itself to be seen in the context of pluriculturalism. Language is not only a major aspect of culture, but also a means of access to cultural manifestations. Much of what is said above applies equally in the more general field: in a person's cultural competence, the various cultures (national, regional, social) to which that person has gained access do not simply co-exist side by side; they are compared, contrasted and actively interact to produce an enriched, integrated pluricultural competence, of which plurilingual competence is one component, again interacting with other components.

1.5 For what uses is CEF intended?

The uses of the Framework include:

The planning of language learning programmes in terms of:

- their assumptions regarding prior knowledge, and their articulation with earlier learning, particularly at interfaces between primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and higher/further education;
- their objectives;
- their content.

The planning of language certification in terms of:

- the content syllabus of examinations;
- assessment criteria, in terms of positive achievement rather than negative deficiencies.

The planning of self-directed learning, including:

- raising the learner's awareness of his or her present state of knowledge;
- self-setting of feasible and worthwhile objectives;
- selection of materials;
- self-assessment.

Learning programmes and certification can be:

- *global*, bringing a learner forward in all dimensions of language proficiency and communicative competence;
- *modular*, improving the learner's proficiency in a restricted area for a particular purpose;
- *weighted*, emphasising learning in certain directions and producing a 'profile' in which a higher level is attained in some areas of knowledge and skill than others;
- *partial*, taking responsibility only for certain activities and skills (e.g. reception) and leaving others aside.

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The Common European Framework is constructed so as to accommodate these various forms.

In considering the role of a common framework at more advanced stages of language learning it is necessary to take into account changes in the nature of needs of learners and the context in which they live, study and work. There is a need for general qualifications at a level beyond threshold, which may be situated with reference to the CEF. They have, of course, to be well defined, properly adapted to national situations and embrace new areas, particularly in the cultural field and more specialised domains. In addition, a considerable role may be played by modules or clusters of modules geared to the specific needs, characteristics and resources of learners.

1.6 What criteria must CEF meet?

In order to fulfil its functions, such a Common European Framework must be comprehensive, transparent and coherent.

By 'comprehensive' is meant that the Common European Framework should attempt to specify as full a range of language knowledge, skills and use as possible (without of course attempting to forecast *a priori* all possible uses of language in all situations – an impossible task), and that all users should be able to describe their objectives, etc., by reference to it. CEF should differentiate the various dimensions in which language proficiency is described, and provide a series of reference points (levels or steps) by which progress in learning can be calibrated. It should be borne in mind that the development of communicative proficiency involves other dimensions than the strictly linguistic (e.g. sociocultural awareness, imaginative experience, affective relations, learning to learn, etc.).

By 'transparent' is meant that information must be clearly formulated and explicit, available and readily comprehensible to users.

By 'coherent' is meant that the description is free from internal contradictions. With regard to educational systems, coherence requires that there is a harmonious relation among their components:

- the identification of needs;
- the determination of objectives;
- the definition of content;
- the selection or creation of material;
- the establishment of teaching/learning programmes;
- the teaching and learning methods employed;
- evaluation, testing and assessment.

The construction of a comprehensive, transparent and coherent framework for language learning and teaching does not imply the imposition of one single uniform system. On the contrary, the framework should be open and flexible, so that it can be applied, with such adaptations as prove necessary, to particular situations. CEF should be:

- *multi-purpose*: usable for the full variety of purposes involved in the planning and provision of facilities for language learning
- *flexible*: adaptable for use in different circumstances

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- *open*: capable of further extension and refinement
- *dynamic*: in continuous evolution in response to experience in its use
- *user-friendly*: presented in a form readily understandable and usable by those to whom it is addressed
- *non-dogmatic*: not irrevocably and exclusively attached to any one of a number of competing linguistic or educational theories or practices.

2 Approach adopted

2.1 An action-oriented approach

A comprehensive, transparent and coherent frame of reference for language learning, teaching and assessment must relate to a very general view of language use and learning. The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents’, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. We speak of ‘tasks’ in so far as the actions are performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competences to achieve a given result. The action-based approach therefore also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent.

Accordingly, any form of language use and learning could be described as follows:

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.

- *Competences* are the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions.
- *General competences* are those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities.
- *Communicative language competences* are those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means.
- *Context* refers to the constellation of events and situational factors (physical and others), both internal and external to a person, in which acts of communication are embedded.

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- *Language activities* involve the exercise of one's communicative language competence in a specific domain in processing (receptively and/or productively) one or more texts in order to carry out a task.
- *Language processes* refer to the chain of events, neurological and physiological, involved in the production and reception of speech and writing.
- *Text* is any sequence or discourse (spoken and/or written) related to a specific domain and which in the course of carrying out a task becomes the occasion of a language activity, whether as a support or as a goal, as product or process.
- *Domain* refers to the broad sectors of social life in which social agents operate. A higher order categorisation has been adopted here limiting these to major categories relevant to language learning/teaching and use: the educational, occupational, public and personal domains.
- A *strategy* is any organised, purposeful and regulated line of action chosen by an individual to carry out a task which he or she sets for himself or herself or with which he or she is confronted.
- A *task* is defined as any purposeful action considered by an individual as necessary in order to achieve a given result in the context of a problem to be solved, an obligation to fulfil or an objective to be achieved. This definition would cover a wide range of actions such as moving a wardrobe, writing a book, obtaining certain conditions in the negotiation of a contract, playing a game of cards, ordering a meal in a restaurant, translating a foreign language text or preparing a class newspaper through group work.

If it is accepted that the different dimensions highlighted above are interrelated in all forms of language use and learning, then any act of language learning or teaching is in some way concerned with each of these dimensions: strategies, tasks, texts, an individual's general competences, communicative language competence, language activities, language processes, contexts and domains.

At the same time, it is also possible in learning and teaching that the objective, and therefore assessment, may be focused on a particular component or sub-component (the other components then being considered as means to an end, or as aspects to be given more emphasis at other times, or as not being relevant to the circumstances). Learners, teachers, course designers, authors of teaching material and test designers are inevitably involved in this process of focusing on a particular dimension and deciding on the extent to which other dimensions should be considered and ways of taking account of these: this is illustrated with examples below. It is immediately clear, however, that although the often stated aim of a teaching/learning programme is to develop communication skills (possibly because this is most representative of a methodological approach?), certain programmes in reality strive to achieve a qualitative or quantitative development of language activities in a foreign language, others stress performance in a particular domain, yet others the development of certain general competences, while others are primarily concerned with refining strategies. The claim that 'everything is connected' does not mean that the objectives cannot be differentiated.

Each of the main categories outlined above can be divided into sub-categories, still very generic, which will be looked at in the following chapters. Here, we are looking only at the various components of general competences, communicative competence, language activities and domains.