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Edited by Waldemar Martyniuk

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Manual for *Relating language examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* in the context of the Council of Europe's work on language education

Brian North, Waldemar Martyniuk and Johanna Panthier

The Council of Europe and language education

Intergovernmental co-operation programmes in the area of language education have been carried out by the Language Policy Division (formerly the Modern Languages Section) of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg for almost five decades, and by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz, Austria, since it was established by a Partial Agreement in 1994.

The Division is responsible for designing and implementing initiatives for the development and analysis of language education policies aimed at promoting linguistic diversity and plurilingual education. The Division is particularly engaged in developing tools and standards to help member states elaborate transparent and coherent language policies. These instruments, which are disseminated and used not only throughout Europe but all over the world, are making a vital contribution to the establishment of a European education area for modern languages and serve as benchmarks for other bodies and institutions, including the European Union. The Division's programmes cover all languages – mother tongue/first language/language(s) of education as well as foreign, second or minority languages – and address the needs of all of the 48 states that have ratified the European Cultural Convention¹. The Division also provides a forum for debate on policy development and assists member states in reviewing their policies with a view to enhancing plurilingual and intercultural education.

Early programmes of international co-operation in Strasbourg focused on the democratisation of language learning for the mobility of persons and

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ideas, and on the promotion of the European heritage of cultural and linguistic diversity. Projects assisted member states in implementing reforms aimed at developing learners' communication skills and encouraged innovation in language teaching and teacher training, with an emphasis on a learner-centred approach. While continuing to promote innovation for successful communication and intercultural skills, more recent projects have increasingly addressed the social and political dimensions of language learning, focusing on language education for democratic citizenship, diversification in language learning, improving coherence and transparency in language provision, and the language education rights of minorities. The European Year of Languages (2001) led to further initiatives to support member states in developing policy responses to the new challenges to social cohesion and integration. The results of these projects have been embodied in a Resolution² and a number of Recommendations³ of the Committee of Ministers and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

The recent priorities of the Council of Europe were established by the Heads of State and Government of the Member States of the Council of Europe at their Third Summit (Warsaw 2005). They confirmed the core objective of preserving and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. All activities must contribute to this fundamental objective. The Heads of State and Government committed themselves to developing those principles and, in propagating these values, they resolved to enhance the role of the Council of Europe as an effective mechanism for pan-European co-operation in all relevant fields.

The Language Policy Division's medium-term programme 'Language Policies for Democratic Citizenship and Social Inclusion' (2006–09) provides a follow-up to the priorities established by the Heads of State and Government. Its activities include the development of European standard setting and other instruments to promote social inclusion, intercultural dialogue, human rights and democratic citizenship through language education. The Division assists member states in the renewal of policies for these purposes and is involved in education policies for national/official and minority languages as well as foreign languages. It has recently launched new projects on language policies for the integration of adult migrants and on policies and European reference standards for competence in the languages of school education, with a special focus on policies for disadvantaged and migrant children. Further information is available at: www.coe.int/lang and www.coe.int/portfolio

The work of the Language Policy Division is supported by implementation activities at the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) for the 34 states of the Enlarged Partial Agreement in Graz, Austria. The two units, which – together with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages – form the Department of Language Education and Policy, have

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distinct but complementary missions and working methods. The Centre in Graz, in accordance with its Statutes, has as its mission the implementation of language policies and the promotion of innovative approaches to the learning and teaching of modern languages. To respond to this mission the ECML organises international language education projects primarily targeting teacher trainers, researchers and key multipliers in the field. These essentially aim to raise awareness on critical issues, provide training to language education practitioners and facilitate networks of specialists. The ECML offers educational facilities at its premises in Graz, including a resource centre housing the collection of reference works and papers of Dr John Trim, who was Project Director for the programmes of the Language Policy Division in Strasbourg from 1971 to 1997. The ECML's third medium-term programme 'Empowering Language Professionals' (2008–11) includes 20 projects organised in four main thematic strands:

- Evaluation
- Continuity in language learning
- Content and language education
- Plurilingual education.

Further information is available at: www.ecml.at

The Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR)

The purpose of the CEFR

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) was developed between 1993 and 1996 by a Council of Europe international working party following the recommendation of an intergovernmental symposium *Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe* held at Rüşchlikon, near Zurich, Switzerland, in November 1991. One of the aims of the CEFR was to introduce common reference points, in the form of the 'common reference levels'. It was hoped that, in time, the existence of such common reference points would help to relate courses and examinations to each other and thus achieve the 'transparency and coherence' that had been the subject of the Rüşchlikon symposium.

The CEFR is not a harmonisation project. The aim of the CEFR is to provide a mental framework that enables people to say where they are, not a specification telling them where they ought to be. Right at the very beginning of the CEFR, the authors emphasise:

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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).

There is no conflict between on the one hand a common framework desirable to organise education and encourage productive networking, and on the other hand the local strategies and decisions necessary to facilitate successful learning in any given context. The aim of the CEFR is to facilitate reflection, communication and networking. The aim of any local strategy ought to be to meet needs in context. The key to linking the two into a coherent system is flexibility. The CEFR is a concertina-like reference tool that provides categories, levels and descriptors that educational professionals can merge or sub-divide, elaborate or summarise, adopt or adapt according to the needs of their context – whilst still relating to the common hierarchical structure. It is for users to choose 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 such as learners, parents and employers.

The common reference levels

The CEFR levels (A1–C2) did not suddenly appear from nowhere. The first reference to a possible set of ‘Council of Europe levels’ – based around Waystage, Threshold Level and similar such concepts – was in a presentation by David Wilkins (author of *The Functional Approach*) at the 1977 Ludwigshafen symposium (Trim 1978). This symposium had represented the first – unsuccessful – attempt to move towards a common European framework in the form of a unit–credit scheme linked to common levels. The six CEFR common reference levels correspond both to the seven levels suggested by Wilkins in 1977 (minus the top level) and (with the addition of A1) to the five levels adopted in 1991 by ALTE – the Association of Language Testers in Europe – in which Cambridge ESOL was a founding member. The illustrative descriptors for these levels were developed in a 1993–96 project by two members of the CEFR Working Party (North 2000a, North and Schneider 1998, Schneider and North 2000), who co-ordinated the research work supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

It is perhaps worth emphasising the salient features of the levels, as illustrated by the empirically calibrated descriptors:

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,*

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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 communicate: *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 are 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 options*
- 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*

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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 naturalness typical 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.*

Relating language examinations to the CEFR – the purpose of a Manual

North and Schneider (1998:243) emphasised that the production of a common scale was only the first step in the implementation of a common framework, and that ensuring a common interpretation through standardised performance samples and monitoring data from tests was necessary. The process of standardising the interpretation of the levels has been supported by the development of the draft Manual *Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)* (Council of Europe 2003). The Manual was developed following a seminar hosted by the Finnish authorities in Helsinki in July 2002. The drafting and piloting of the Manual was a response by the Council of Europe to the need to assist examination providers to relate their examinations to the CEFR. It was conceived as a contribution to the co-operative endeavour of improving the transparency of and comparability between language qualifications in Europe. It was intended as a continuation of the work of the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division in developing planning tools which provide reference points and common objectives as the basis for a coherent and transparent structure for effective teaching/learning and assessment relevant to the needs of learners as well as society, and that can facilitate intercultural understanding and personal mobility.

The primary aim of the Manual is to help the providers of examinations to develop, apply and report transparent, practical procedures in a cumulative process of continuing improvement in order to situate their examination(s) in relation to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

The approach developed offers guidance to users to:

- describe the examination coverage, administration and analysis procedures

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- relate results reported from the examination to the 'common reference levels of language proficiency' of the CEFR
- provide supporting evidence that reports the procedures followed to do so.

Following the best traditions of Council of Europe action in developing language education policy, however, the Manual has wider aims to actively promote and facilitate co-operation among relevant institutions and experts in member countries. The Manual aims to:

- contribute to competence building in the area of linking assessments to the CEFR
- encourage increased transparency on the part of examination providers
- encourage the development of both formal and informal national and international networks of institutions and experts.

Relating an examination or test to the CEFR is a complex endeavour. The existence of such a relation is not a simple observable fact, but is an assertion for which the examination provider needs to provide both theoretical and empirical evidence. The procedures by which such evidence is put forward can be summarised by the term 'validation of the claim'.

The approach adopted

The pilot version of the Manual presents four inter-related sets of procedures that users are advised to follow in order to design a linking scheme in terms of self-contained, manageable activities. The activities carried out in all four sets of procedures contribute to the validation process.

Familiarisation: a selection of activities designed to ensure that participants in the linking process have a detailed knowledge of the CEFR. This familiarisation stage is necessary at the start of both the Specification and the Standardisation procedures.

In terms of validation, these procedures are an indispensable starting point. An account of the activities taken and the results obtained is an essential component of the validation report.

Specification: a self-audit of the coverage of the examination (content and task types) profiled in relation to the categories presented in the CEFR. As well as serving a reporting function, this exercise also has a certain awareness-raising function that may assist in further improving the quality of the examination concerned.

These procedures assure that the definition and production of the test have been undertaken carefully, following good practice. Content specification grids are available to help when implementing them (see below).

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Standardisation: suggested procedures to facilitate the implementation of a common understanding of the 'common reference levels' presented in the CEFR.

These procedures assure that judgements taken in rating performances reflect the constructs described in the CEFR, and that decisions about task and item difficulty are taken in a principled manner on the basis of evidence from pretesting as well as expert judgement. Samples of oral and written production illustrating the CEFR levels and calibrated items to test comprehension skills are available to support the standardisation procedures (see below).

Empirical Validation: the collection and analysis of test data and ratings from assessments in order to provide evidence that both the examination itself and the linking to the CEFR are sound. Suggestions and criteria are provided for adequate and credible validation appropriate for different contexts.

These procedures assure that the claims formulated through Specification and Standardisation ('test-under-construction') can indeed be confirmed when the examination is administered in practice ('test-in-action'). This scheme was adopted (a) because these categories are a good way of grouping linking methodologies found in the literature, (b) because they reflect the classic stages of quality management (design, implementation, evaluation), (c) because such broad concepts could thus be applied equally to formal, high-stakes assessment situations (examinations) and to lower-stakes school and teacher assessments.

Relating examinations to the CEFR can best be seen as a process of 'building an argument' based on a theoretical rationale. As noted above, the central concept within this process is 'validity'. **Therefore, before an examination can be linked to an external framework like the CEFR (external validity), it must demonstrate the validity of the construct, and the consistency and stability of the examination (internal validity).**

The approach adopted in this process is an inclusive one. The recommended procedures encourage alignment of examinations to the CEFR with differing degrees of rigour appropriate to different testing contexts. The Manual aims to encourage the application of principles of best practice even in situations in which modest resources and expertise are available. First steps may be modest, but the aim is to help examination providers to work within a structure, so that later work can build on what has been done before, and a common structure may offer the possibility for institutions to more easily pool efforts in certain areas.

Not all examination providers may consider they can undertake studies in all of the areas outlined above. Some institutions in 'low-stakes' contexts may decide to concentrate on Specification and Standardisation, and may

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not be able to take the process to its logical conclusion of full-scale Empirical Validation as outlined in internationally recognised codes and standards for testing and measurement⁴. However, it is highly recommended that even less well-resourced examination providers should select techniques from all areas. The linking of a qualification to the CEFR will be far stronger if the claims based on test specifications and their content are supported by both standardisation of judgements and empirical validation of test data. Every examination provider – even examination providers who have only limited resources or countries that have decentralised traditions – can demonstrate in one way or another through a selection of techniques both the internal quality and validity of their examination and its external validity: the validity of the claimed relationship to the CEFR.

Piloting the Manual

In addition to the ‘Sounding Board’ of 16 experts employed as consultants during and after the development process, the Manual was piloted at different levels of intensity: (a) through formal feedback – without necessarily employing the techniques in a project, (b) through trialling procedure, (c) in documented case studies such as those published in this volume. In 2005–06, 40 institutions from 20 countries registered for the pilot phase of the Manual following an international seminar organised by the Language Policy Division in Strasbourg. The feedback indicated that the structure (familiarisation, specification, standardisation, validation) worked well. It was also felt to be a very effective way to mediate the CEFR, though several users reported on the difficulty of following the suggested procedures without a full set of calibrated performance samples and test items for the standardisation training, and for incorporation in cross validation studies. The other main points made were the following:

- The Manual appeared to be a good way to critically review and evaluate the content and the statistical characteristics of an exam. Some respondents found the specification forms labelled A1–A21 time-consuming, whilst others stressed their awareness-raising value.
- Some stressed that the CEFR cannot be a test specification because, since it is a policy reference document, it lacks the necessary detail. Others felt that the Manual – and the content specification grids now associated with it – provided a good way of developing CEFR-based tests.
- The procedures proposed by the Manual should be integrated into the test development and production process and used to assist the maintenance of standards from year to year, not just for a one-off study.

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- Standardisation training and standard setting should be split, presented in different chapters. Standardisation training with illustrative examples can in fact be seen as Familiarisation.
- Standard-setting techniques should also cover data-based candidate-centred procedures (only procedures for external validation are proposed in the pilot version).
- The Manual would be improved if shortened and made more user-friendly with chapter outlines and a representation of different entry points and routes. The 'didactic' approach taken in 'Standardisation training' could be adopted elsewhere.

Supporting materials

The work of institutions that piloted the preliminary draft of the Manual was supported by a set of multilingual reference materials. Up-to-date documents and links are available on the website www.coe.int/portfolio. They include:

Reference Supplement

- Quantitative and qualitative considerations in relating certificates and diplomas to the CEFR.
- Different approaches in standard setting.

Content Analysis Grids

- CEFR content analysis grid for listening and reading (sometimes referred to as 'the Dutch CEFR Grid'): Appendix B1 of the revised version of the Manual (Council of Europe 2008). The Grid can be accessed at: www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/cefgrid
- CEFR content analysis grids for speaking and writing, developed by ALTE: Appendix B2 of the revised version of the Manual (Council of Europe 2008).

Illustrative Descriptors

- The collated set of descriptors from the CEFR.
- The descriptor bank from the European Language Portfolio, documenting the relationship between those descriptors and the original CEFR descriptors.
- A collation of C1/C2 descriptors (in English) from the CEFR and related projects that indicates which descriptors were calibrated to CEFR levels and which were not.

Illustrative Samples

- A *Guide* for the organisation of a seminar to calibrate examples of spoken performances in line with the scales of the CEFR⁵. This is based