Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment

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Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment

Council for Cultural Co-operation
Education Committee
Modern Languages Division, Strasbourg

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Prefatory note

This restructured edition of the Common European Framework of reference for language learning, teaching and assessment represents the latest stage in a process which has been actively pursued since 1971 and owes much to the collaboration of many members of the teaching profession across Europe and beyond.

   The Council of Europe therefore acknowledges with gratitude the contribution made by:

- The Project Group *Language Learning for European Citizenship*, representing all member countries of the Council for Cultural Co-operation with Canada as a participating observer, for their general oversight of its development.
- The Working Party set up by the Project Group, with twenty representatives from member countries representing the different professional interests concerned, as well as representatives of the European Commission and its LINGUA programme, for their invaluable advice and supervision of the project.
- The Authoring Group set up by the Working Party, consisting of Dr J. L. M. Trim (Project Director), Professor D. Coste (Ecole Normale Supérieure de Fontenay/Saint Cloud, CREDIF, France), Dr B. North (Eurocentres Foundation, Switzerland) together with Mr J. Sheils (Secretariat). The Council of Europe expresses its thanks to the institutions mentioned for making it possible for the experts concerned to contribute to this important work.
- The Swiss National Science Foundation for their support of the work by Dr B. North and Professor G. Schneider (University of Fribourg) to develop and scale descriptors of language proficiency for the Common Reference Levels.
- The Eurocentres Foundation for making available their experience in defining and scaling levels of language proficiency
- The U. S. National Foreign Languages Center for providing Mellon Fellowships to Dr Trim and Dr North which facilitated their contribution.
- The many colleagues and institutions across Europe who responded, often with great care and in concrete detail, to the request for feedback on earlier drafts.

The feedback received has been taken into account in revising the Framework and User Guides prior to their adoption on a Europe-wide basis. This revision was carried out by Dr J. L. M. Trim and Dr B. North.

Notes for the user

The aim of these notes is to help you to use the Common European Framework for language learning, teaching and assessment more effectively, either as a language learner or as a member of one of the professions concerned with language teaching and assessment. They will not be concerned with specific ways in which teachers, examiners, textbook writers, teacher trainers, educational administrators, etc. may use the Framework. These are the subject of special guidance addressed to the particular category of user concerned, contained in a fuller User Guide available from the Council of Europe, which can also be consulted on its website. These notes are meant as a first introduction to the Framework for all its users.

You may, of course, use the Framework document in any way you wish, as with any other publication. Indeed, we hope that some readers may be stimulated to use it in ways we have not foreseen. However, it has been written with two main aims in mind:

1. To encourage practitioners of all kinds in the language field, including language learners themselves, to reflect on such questions as:
   - What do we actually do when we speak (or write) to each other?
   - What enables us to act in this way?
   - How much of this do we need to learn when we try to use a new language?
   - How do we set our objectives and mark our progress along the path from total ignorance to effective mastery?
   - How does language learning take place?
   - What can we do to help ourselves and other people to learn a language better?
2. To make it easier for practitioners to tell each other and their clientèle what they wish to help learners to achieve, and how they attempt to do so.

One thing should be made clear right away. 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 Common European Framework to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they should employ.

This does not mean that the Council of Europe is indifferent to these issues. Indeed, a great deal of thought and work has been put into the principles and practice of language learning, teaching and assessment over the years by colleagues in our member countries working together in the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Projects. You will find the basic principles and their practical consequences set out in Chapter 1. You will see that the Council is concerned to improve the quality of communication among Europeans of different language and cultural backgrounds. This is because better communication leads

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to freer mobility and more direct contact, which in turn leads to better understanding and closer co-operation. The Council also supports methods of learning and teaching which help young people and indeed older learners to build up the attitudes, knowledge and skills they need to become more independent in thought and action, and also more responsible and co-operative in relation to other people. In this way the work contributes to the promotion of democratic citizenship.

Given these fundamental aims, the Council encourages all those concerned with the organisation of language learning to base their work on the needs, motivations, characteristics and resources of learners. This means answering questions such as:

- What will learners need to do with the language?
- What do they need to learn in order to be able to use the language to achieve those ends?
- What makes them want to learn?
- What sort of people are they (age, sex, social and educational background, etc.)?
- What knowledge, skills and experiences do their teachers possess?
- What access do they have to course books, works of reference (dictionaries, grammars, etc.), audio-visual aids, computer hardware and software, etc.?
- How much time can they afford (or are willing, or able) to spend?

On the basis of this analysis of the learning/teaching situation, it is seen as fundamentally important to define, clearly and explicitly, objectives which are at once worthwhile in terms of learner needs and realistic in terms of their characteristics and resources. Many parties are concerned with organised language learning, not only the teachers and learners in the classroom, but also educational authorities, examiners, textbook writers and publishers, etc. If they agree on objectives, they can work coherently, even if quite separately, to help learners achieve them. They are also in a position to make their own objectives and methods clear and explicit for the benefit of those who use the products of their work.

As explained in Chapter 1, it is for this purpose that the Common European Framework of reference has been developed. To perform its function it must satisfy certain criteria. It must be comprehensive, transparent and coherent.

These criteria are also set out and explained in Chapter 1. A further word may be useful in respect of 'comprehensive'. This means simply that you should find in it all you need to describe your objectives, methods and products. The scheme of parameters, categories and examples explained in Chapter 2 (most compactly in the boxed text at the beginning) and presented in some detail in Chapters 4 and 5 is intended to give a clear picture of the competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes) which language users build up in the course of their experience of language use and which enable them to meet the challenges of communication across language and cultural boundaries (i.e. to carry out communicative tasks and activities in the various contexts of social life with their conditions and constraints). The common reference levels introduced in Chapter 3 offer a means to map progress as learners build up their proficiency across the parameters of the descriptive scheme.

On the assumption that the aim of language teaching is to make learners competent and proficient in the language concerned, the scheme should enable you to define and describe your objectives clearly and comprehensively. You may well find that this

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scheme contains more than you yourself need. From Chapter 4 onwards you will find sets of questions at the end of each section, which invite you to consider whether the section is relevant to your objectives and concerns, and if so how. You may decide that it is not relevant, perhaps because it is not appropriate to the learners you have in mind, or that, while it would be useful to them, it is not a priority given limited time and other resources. In that case you can ignore the section. If however it is relevant (and perhaps seeing it in context may draw it to your attention), Chapters 4 and 5 of the Framework will supply names for major parameters and categories for your use, with some examples.

Neither the categories nor the examples claim to be exhaustive. If you want to describe a specialised area, you may well need to sub-categorise further than the present classification goes. The examples are suggestive only. You may well wish to keep some, reject others and add some of your own. You should feel quite free to do so, since it must be for you to decide on your objectives and your product. Remember that what you find unnecessary has its place in the Framework because someone else, with a different background, working in a different situation and responsible for a different set of learners, may find it essential. In the case of 'conditions and constraints' for instance, a school teacher may find it quite unnecessary to take noise levels into account, but a teacher of airline pilots who fails to train them to recognise digits 100% in appallingly noisy ground-to-air communication may condemn them and their passengers to death! On the other hand, the additional categories and exponents you find it necessary to add may well be found useful by other users. For this reason, the taxonomic scheme presented in Chapters 4 and 5 of the Framework is not seen as a closed system, but one which is open to further development in the light of experience.

This principle also applies to the description of levels of proficiency. Chapter 3 explains clearly that the number of levels which a particular user wishes to distinguish is determined by the reason for making the distinction, the use to be made of the resulting information. Levels, like entities, should not be multiplied beyond necessity! The 'hypertext' branching principle, set out in section 3.4, enables practitioners to establish broad- or narrow-band levels in accordance with their need to make finer or coarser distinctions among a population of learners. It is also, of course, possible (even usual) to distinguish between objectives in terms of levels, and the achievement of those objectives in terms of grades.

The six-level frame used throughout is based on the normal practice of a number of public examining bodies. The descriptors proposed are based on those which 'have been found transparent, useful and relevant by groups of non-native and native-speaker teachers from a variety of educational sectors with very different profiles in terms of linguistic training and teaching experience' (p. 30). They are nevertheless presented as recommendations and are not in any way mandatory, 'as a basis for reflection, discussion and further action . . . The aim of the examples is to open new possibilities, not to pre-empt decisions' (ibid.). It is already clear, however, that a set of common reference levels as a calibrating instrument is particularly welcomed by practitioners of all kinds who, as in many other fields, find it advantageous to work with stable, accepted standards of measurement and format.

As a user, you are invited to use the scaling system and associated descriptors critically. The Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe will be glad to receive a report of your experience in putting them into use. Please note also that scales are provided not

Notes for the user

only for a global proficiency, but for many of the parameters of language proficiency detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. This makes it possible to specify differentiated profiles for particular learners or groups of learners.

In Chapter 6, attention turns to questions of method. How is a new language acquired or learnt? What can we do to facilitate that learning or acquisition process? Here again, the aim of the Framework is not to prescribe or even recommend a particular method, but to present options, inviting you to reflect on your current practice, to take decisions accordingly and to describe what you actually do. Of course, when considering your aims and objectives we would encourage you to take into consideration the Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers, but the aim of the Framework is to assist you in your own decision-taking. Chapter 7 is devoted to a closer examination of the role of tasks in language learning and teaching, as one of the main areas of advance in recent years.

Chapter 8 discusses the principles of curriculum design involving the differentiation of language learning objectives, especially in the context of building an individual's plurilingual and pluricultural competence in order to deal with the communicative challenges posed by living in a multilingual and multicultural Europe. The chapter deserves close study by those who are devising curricula covering a number of languages and considering the options open to them in seeking the best way to distribute resources for various categories of learners.

Chapter 9 passes finally to questions of assessment, explaining the relevance of the Framework to the assessment of language proficiency and achievement, and then with assessment criteria and different approaches to the assessment process.

The appendices deal with some further aspects of scaling which interested users may find useful. Appendix A deals with some general and theoretical concerns for the benefit of users who wish to develop scales specifically geared to a particular population of learners. Appendix B gives information concerning the Swiss project that developed the scaling descriptors used in this Framework. Appendices C and D present scales developed by other agencies, namely the DIALANG Language Assessment System and the 'Can Do' scales of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE).

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Synopsis

Chapter 1 defines the *aims, objectives and functions* of the proposed Framework in the light of the overall language policy of the Council of Europe and in particular the promotion of *plurilingualism* in response to European linguistic and cultural diversity. It then sets out the *criteria* which the Framework should satisfy.

Chapter 2 explains the *approach* adopted. The descriptive scheme is based on an analysis of language use in terms of the *strategies* used by learners to activate *general* and *communicative competences* in order to carry out the *activities* and *processes* involved in the *production* and *reception* of *texts* and the construction of discourse dealing with particular *themes*, which enable them to fulfil the *tasks* facing them under the given *conditions and constraints* in the *situations* which arise in the various *domains* of social existence. The words in italics designate the parameters for the description of language use and the user/learner's ability to use language.

Chapter 3 introduces the *common reference levels*. Progress in language learning with regard to the parameters of the descriptive scheme can be calibrated in terms of a *flexible series of levels of attainment* defined by appropriate descriptors. This apparatus should be rich enough to accommodate the full range of learner needs and thus the objectives pursued by different providers, or required of candidates for language qualifications.

Chapter 4 establishes in some (but not exhaustive or definitive) detail the categories (scaled where possible) needed for the description of *language use and the language user/learner* according to the parameters identified, covering in turn: the domains and situations providing the context for language use; the themes, tasks and purposes of communication; communicative activities, strategies and processes; and text; especially in relation to activities and media.

Chapter 5 categorises in detail the user/learner's *general and communicative competences,* scaled where possible.

Chapter 6 considers the *processes of language learning and teaching*, dealing with the relation between acquisition and learning and with the nature and development of plurilingual competence, as well as with *methodological options* of a general or more specific kind, in relation to the categories set out in Chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 7 examines in greater detail the role of *tasks* in language learning and teaching.

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Synopsis

Chapter 8   is concerned with the implications of *linguistic diversification* for *curriculum design* and considers such issues as: plurilingualism and pluriculturalism; differentiated learning objectives; principles of curriculum design; curricular scenarios; life-long language learning; modularity and partial competences.

Chapter 9   discusses the various purposes of *assessment* and corresponding assessment types, in the light of the need to reconcile the competing criteria of comprehensiveness, precision and operational feasibility.

The General Bibliography contains a selection of books and articles which users of the Framework may wish to consult in order to go into greater depth with regard to the issues raised. The bibliography contains relevant Council of Europe documents as well as works published elsewhere.

Appendix A discusses development of descriptors of language proficiency. Methods of, and criteria for, scaling, and the requirements for formulating descriptors for the parameters and categories presented elsewhere, are explained.

Appendix B gives an overview of the project in Switzerland which developed and scaled the illustrative descriptors. The illustrative scales in the text are listed with page references.

Appendix C contains the descriptors for self-assessment at series of levels adopted by the DIALANG Project of the European Commission for use on the Internet.

Appendix D contains the 'Can Do' descriptors at the series of levels developed by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE).