Making good use of the CEFR: some reflections on the PRO-Signs project

The PRO-Signs project's adaptation of the CEFR to sign languages (SLs) is greatly to be welcomed, as is its decision to use the CEFR's proficiency levels to guide the training, assessment and certification of SL professionals. These are important steps forward in the professionalization of SL education at European level. At the same time it is important to recognize that this is only a beginning: adapting and adopting the CEFR implies a long-term commitment to research and development on a number of fronts. Unfortunately this message has not got through to mainstream language education in Europe.

As the second part of its title indicates – *Learning, teaching, assessment* – the CEFR reflects the Council of Europe's concern with language learning and teaching as well as assessment. Yet the CEFR's impact on language testing far outweighs its impact on language learning and teaching. Many national curricula use the CEFR's levels to indicate expected learning outcomes in foreign languages, but in the most general terms; there are few curricula that apply the detail of the CEFR's descriptive scheme to the definition of curriculum content. And because the authors of the CEFR insist that it is not their purpose to advocate any particular approach to language teaching, it is widely assumed that the CEFR says nothing about teaching and learning.

In fact, however, the "can do" approach to the description of language proficiency challenges us to bring curriculum, teaching/learning and assessment into closer interaction than has traditionally been the case. Each "can do" descriptor can simultaneously serve three functions: to define a curriculum goal, to imply a focus for teaching and learning, and to provide a basis for the development of assessment criteria. There have been few attempts to use the CEFR as a tool of "constructive alignment" (Biggs & Tang 2011). The reflections that follow are offered in the hope that they may help the PRO-Signs project to show Europe's education systems what effective implementation of the CEFR really means.

The CEFR's descriptive scheme

Behavioural and cognitive dimensions

Chapter 4 of the CEFR is concerned with the behavioural dimension of language proficiency: what learners can do in their target language at each of the six reference levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2). For this purpose it divides language activity into four modes: reception (listening and reading), production (speaking and writing), interaction (spoken and written), and mediation (supporting communication between two or more people who do not have a language in common); and it provides illustrative scales for the first three modes. For SLs the modes are reduced to three, each of which is limited to a single channel: reception (understanding SL), production (engaging in SL monologue), and interaction (engaging in SL dialogue); interpreting is probably best treated as bilingual interaction. It is important to bear in mind that Chapter 4 is also concerned with the context of language use, communication themes, and communicative tasks and purposes, all of which are directly relevant to the

concerns of PRO-Signs. In particular it is necessary to reflect carefully on domains of language use, of which the CEFR identifies four: personal, public, occupational, and educational.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the cognitive dimension of language proficiency: the competences on which we draw when we engage in language activities. It distinguishes between general and communicative language competences. General competences are divided into four kinds: declarative knowledge (knowledge of the world), skills and know-how, "existential competence" (which have to do with selfhood factors like attitudes, motivations, values and beliefs), and ability to learn. Communicative language competences are divided into three kinds: linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic. There are thirteen illustrative scales for linguistic competences, which need to be interpreted and used with the learner's general competences in mind.

A non-language-specific description

The CEFR has sometimes been criticised for being too general. Language testers, for example, have claimed that the descriptors for communicative language competences lack precision and detail. But this is to overlook the fact that the CEFR is a non-language-specific document. The A1 descriptor for GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY reads as follows: *Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire* (Council of Europe 2001: 114). If we wish to apply this to the learning/teaching/assessment of (say) French, we must specify which *simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns* we expect learners to know, and we must do so from the behavioural perspective provided by Chapter 4; we must also explain what we understand by *limited control*. Similar procedures will need to be applied to any implementation of the PRO-Signs project. Ideally an international network of users would create a template for recording how descriptors are "translated" into different SLs.

The implied trajectory of learning

The CEFR's six proficiency levels are not equidistant points on a linear scale. It is possible to master an A1 repertoire relatively quickly, but each of the following proficiency levels takes several times longer to master than the level immediately below it. The authors of the CEFR suggest that this can be represented visually by an inverted three-dimensional cone divided into increasingly broad segments (Council of Europe 2001: 18). Such an image is certainly appropriate to the cognitive dimension of proficiency: each successive level entails, for example, a larger vocabulary and a more differentiated and flexible mastery of grammar. But in my view the image of the inverted cone fails to capture an important feature of the CEFR's behavioural dimension. At levels A1–B1, reading and writing are mostly subordinate to listening and speaking; by contrast, levels B2–C2 increasingly specify activities that entail academic or professional use of the target language and thus presuppose relatively advanced levels of receptive and productive literacy. This shift in focus has sometimes been explained in terms of Jim Cummins's (1979) distinction between BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills) and CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency). More informally one might say that levels A1–B1 are concerned with everyday communication and thus define goals for "general" language learning, while levels B2–C2 imply some kind of academic/

professional and therefore linguistic specialisation. To make matters still more complicated, it's necessary to bear in mind that most language users can understand significantly more than they can produce, especially at more advanced levels of proficiency. Thus if we use an inverted cone to represent the successive levels of linguistic competence, we should probably represent the behavioural dimension by superimposing on the cone an upward spiral that gradually widens through levels A1–B1, then narrows according to the learner's academic or professional specialism, becoming wider again as his/her proficiency develops further. We can accommodate the difference between receptive and productive proficiency at this level by dividing the spiral into two, nesting a narrower productive within a broader receptive spiral.

All of his has, I think, two implications for PRO-Signs. First, SL learners who achieve B1 are by definition capable of communicating freely with native signers; this is the platform that they need in order to embark on professional interpreter training. Secondly, although SL interpreters must to be able to cope with a wide range of (sometimes unpredictable) communicative activities, responding to the challenges of specialist domains requires careful preparation, almost certainly supported by deploying their literacy skills in their spoken L1.

Implications for language teaching and learning

At the beginning of Chapter 2 the CEFR's "action-oriented" approach to the description of language proficiency is summarized 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. (Council of Europe 2001: 9; emphasis in original – the words and phrases set in boldface refer to the principal components of the CEFR's descriptive scheme)

According to this summary, language use entails that we draw on our competences in order to engage in communicative activities. Language learning is a variety of language use in the sense that proficiency develops from sustained interaction between the learner's gradually developing competences and the communicative tasks whose performance requires him or her to use the target language. If learners are to develop a proficiency that gives them the capacity to act as "individuals and social agents", the target language should be the principal medium of learning; and learning should be organized so as to give them every opportunity to exercise initiating as well as responding roles.

The last sentence of the summary deserves special attention: "The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences."

Intentional and explicit monitoring is central to reflective learning of any kind. When the goal of learning is proficiency in a second or foreign language and the target language is the principal medium of learning, monitoring that is at first intentional and explicit should also gradually become involuntary and implicit. In other words, the CEFR's action-oriented approach describes a proficiency that is both communicative and metacognitive; and it implies learning in which, from the beginning, the target language is the principal channel of the learners' agency – the communicative and metacognitive medium through which, individually and collaboratively, they plan, execute, monitor and evaluate their own learning. One of the functions of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) is to support this kind of approach to language learning; it is linked to the CEFR by goal-setting and self-assessment checklists of "I can" descriptors arranged according to language activity and proficiency level.

Since the 1970s the Council of Europe has been a powerful advocate of learner autonomy (Holec 1979) because it is committed to the democratization of education and to lifelong learning. As the authors of the CEFR point out, learners themselves are "the persons ultimately concerned with language acquisition and learning processes" (Council of Europe 2001: 141):

> It is they who have to develop the competences and strategies (in so far as they have not already done so) and carry out the tasks, activities and processes needed to participate effectively in communicative events. However, relatively few learn proactively, taking initiatives to plan, structure and execute their own learning processes. Most learn reactively, following the instructions and carrying out the activities prescribed for them by teachers and textbooks. However, once teaching stops, further learning *has* to be autonomous. Autonomous learning can be promoted if "learning to learn" is regarded as an integral part of language learning, so that learners become increasingly aware of the way they learn, the options open to them, and the options that best suit them. Even within the institutional system they can then be brought increasingly to make choices in respect of objectives, materials and working methods in the light of their own needs, motivations, characteristics and resources. (Council of Europe 2001: 141–142)

It is not necessary to labour the relevance of these words to the education and especially the in-career development of SL professionals: a version of the ELP tailored to the needs of SL learners is among the deliverables of the PRO-Signs project.

The paragraph I have just quoted from the CEFR ends as follows:

> We hope that the Framework […] will be of use not only to teachers and their support services, but also directly to learners in helping to make them, too, more aware of the options open to them and articulate concerning the choices they make. (Council of Europe 2001: 142)

The remainder of this document rests on the assumption that the PRO-Signs project has the same hope for its adaptation of the CEFR. However, the idea that language learners can pick up the CEFR and easily find their way through its multiple complexities has always struck me

as fanciful: it needs to be presented to them selectively, in documents that are obviously relevant to their purposes and easy to digest and use. The same consideration applies to the PRO-Signs project.

Bringing together the descriptors for each of the six proficiency levels: an essential tool

The PRO-Signs scales and descriptors should be published (with appropriate accompanying text) in the same order as the CEFR's illustrative scales to facilitate comparison between SL descriptors and the originals. But responsible and effective use of the CEFR requires that all relevant dimensions of its descriptive scheme are simultaneously available for each language activity when curricula, teaching/learning programmes and assessment instruments are being devised for any one of its levels. Appendix 1 shows what this exercise entails when it is applied to the CEFR descriptors relevant to WRITING at level B2. If the PRO-Signs descriptors are organized in this way for RECEPTION, PRODUCTION and INTERACTION at each of the six proficiency levels, it will be much easier to use them in ways that do justice to the complexity of the CEFR's descriptive scheme. The eighteen documents that such an exercise would generate might be adopted internationally as the basis for SL-specific elaboration of the descriptors.

Constructing CEFR-related curricula

I noted in my introduction that few curricula apply the detail of the CEFR's descriptive scheme to the definition of curriculum content. Notable exceptions are the curriculum frameworks (*English Language Proficiency Benchmarks*) that Integrate Ireland Language and Training developed to guide the teaching of English as an additional language to immigrant pupils and students in Irish primary and post-primary schools (available at www.ncca.ie/iilt). Both documents are divided into three parts, all presented in the form of grids (cf. the CEFR's self-assessment grid; Council of Europe 2001: 26–27). The first part summarizes overall communicative proficiency for the activities of LISTENING, READING, SPOKEN INTERACTION, SPOKEN PRODUCTION and WRITING for each of the three proficiency levels in question (A1–B1); the second part summarizes key language competences (GRAMMAR, VOCABULARY, PHONOLOGY, ORTHOGRAPHY) at the same three levels; and the third part restates overall proficiency in relation to recurrent curriculum themes (primary) and different curriculum subjects (post-primary). Both sets of *Benchmarks* were used as the basis for developing "I can" descriptors for versions of the ELP as well as a wide range of learning activities and materials and an assessment kit with accompanying rating scales and scoring grids (all also available at www.ncca.ie/iilt).

I suggest that two documents of this kind should be created on the basis of the PRO-Signs descriptors, the first for general language learning (A1–B1) and the second for interpreter training (B2–C2). Especially if they were translated into the spoken languages of the communities in which they were to be used, such documents would serve a number of important informational purposes, helping to disseminate the PRO-Signs version of the CEFR's proficiency levels and descriptors to educational authorities, Deaf organizations, SL teachers

and SL learners.

PRO-Signs versions of the European Language Portfolio

I recommend the development of (i) a single version of the LANGUAGE PASSPORT, (ii) two versions of the LANGUAGE BIOGRAPHY and goal-setting/self-assessment checklists (one for general SL learning, A1–B1; one for SL interpreters, B2–C2); and (iii) multiple configurations of the DOSSIER to accommodate the specificities of particular courses.

Towards common approaches to assessment

Tests of proficiency in spoken languages fall into two distinct categories. The receptive skills of listening and reading can only be tested indirectly; this is done by presenting test takers with a spoken or written text and requiring them to respond to multiple-choice questions. The writing of test items for such tests requires high levels of skill, and piloting (sometimes extensive) is necessary in order to establish confidence in a test's validity and reliability. The productive skills of speaking and writing, one the other hand, can be tested directly; that is, test takers are given a task that elicits a sample of speech or writing, which is then rated and scored. Indirect tests that use multiple-choice questions are challenging to develop but can be scored by non-experts; direct tests, by contrast, are relatively straightforward to design but require expert raters if they are to be valid and reliable.

High-stakes assessment of SL proficiency presumably focuses on INTERACTION (which includes reception/comprehension) and PRODUCTION, both of which can be tested directly. It would be a major advance if institutions responsible for SL training across Europe were to adopt common principles of test design and the same rating procedures. This would greatly enhance transparency and would encourage a common approach to rater training and the monitoring of rater performance. So the last thing I recommend in this paper is the development of a basic rating grid/scoring scheme in which each criterion is interpreted by reference to the detailed SL-specific elaborations of the PRO-Signs descriptors. Here is a rating grid/scoring scheme that I developed for a test of writing at level B2. Questions 2–4 are derived from the relevant B2 descriptors:

1. *Overall impression of written text*

   Is the text clear, detailed and well expressed?

(NO)				(YES)
Not at all	Substantially not	Not quite	|| Reasonably so	Substantially so	Excellently so

2. *Range and control of vocabulary and grammar*

   Does the text contain a wide range of accurately-used words and structures?

(NO)				(YES)
Not at all	Substantially not	Not quite	|| Reasonably so	Substantially so	Excellently so

3. *Coherence and orthographic control*

   Is the text coherent and well-formatted with accurate spelling?

(NO)		(YES)
Not at all | Substantially not | Not quite	||	Reasonably so | Substantially so | Excellently so

4. *Appropriateness of language*

   Is the language used appropriate for a text of this nature on this topic?

(NO)		(YES)
Not at all | Substantially not | Not quite	||	Reasonably so | Substantially so | Excellently so

5. *Comprehension and use of materials provided*

   Has good use been made of the source materials?

(NO)		(YES)
Not at all | Substantially not | Not quite	||	Reasonably so | Substantially so | Excellently so

In conclusion

I remarked at the beginning of this paper that mainstream language education has mostly failed to grasp the extent of the challenge posed by the CEFR. In 2011 I published two articles that address this failure. The first (Little 2011a) is addressed to university language departments and explains how their courses should make use of the CEFR and the ELP; the second (Little 2011b) outlines a research agenda calculated to support the implementation and further development of the CEFR. I am submitting both articles with this paper in the hope that their arguments will also suggests ways forward for the PRO-Signs project.

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Appendix 1

Dimensions of a B2 writing repertoire

Dimension / descriptors	Relevant?	Teach?	Test?	Texts / text types used to teach / test
WRITTEN INTERACTION				
Overall written interaction				
Can express news and views effectively in writing, and relate to those of others.				
Correspondence				
Can write letters conveying degrees of emotion and highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences and commenting on the correspondent's news and views.				
Can take a series of follow up questions with a degree of fluency and spontaneity which poses no strain for either him/herself or the audience.				
WRITTEN PRODUCTION				
Overall written production				
Can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources.				
Creative writing				
Can write clear, detailed descriptions on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest.				
Can write a review of a film, book or play.				
Reports and essays				
Can write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options.				
Can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources.				
WORKING WITH TEXT				
Note-taking (lectures, seminars, etc.)				
Can understand a clearly structured lecture on a familiar subject, and can take notes on points which strike him/her as important, even though he/she tends to concentrate on the words themselves and therefore to miss some information.				

Dimension / descriptors	Relevant?	Teach?	Test?	Texts / text types used to teach / test
Processing text				
Can summarise a wide range of factual and imaginative texts, commenting on and discussing contrasting points of view and the main themes.				
Can summarise extracts from news items, interviews or documentaries containing opinions, argument and discussion.				
Can summarise the plot and sequence of events in a film or play.				
COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE COMPETENCE				
Linguistic range				
General linguistic range				
Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints and develop arguments without much conspicuous searching for words, using some complex sentence forms to do so.				
Vocabulary range				
Has a good range of vocabulary for matters connected to his field and most general topics? Can vary formulation to avoid frequent repetition, but lexical gaps can still cause hesitation and circumlocution.				
Linguistic control				
Grammatical accuracy				
Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make mistakes which lead to misunderstanding.				
Vocabulary control				
Lexical accuracy is generally high, though some confusion and incorrect word choice does occur without hindering communication.				
Orthographic control				
Can produce clearly intelligible continuous writing, which follows standard layout and paragraphing conventions.				
Spelling and punctuation are reasonably accurate but may show signs of mother tongue influence.				

Dimension / descriptors	Relevant?	Teach?	Test?	Texts / text types used to teach / test
Pragmatic				
Flexibility				
Can vary formulation of what he/she wants to say.				
Thematic development				
Can develop a clear description or narrative, expanding and supporting his/her main points with relevant supporting detail and examples.				
Coherence				
Can use a limited number of cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse, though there may be some "jumpiness" in a long contribution.				
Propositional precision				
Can pass on detailed information reliably.				