

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE REVISITED

From Communicative to Action-Oriented: New Perspectives For a New Millennium¹

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Abstract

Nearly a decade after the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), when looking at the European reality, it is important to explore the following questions: Have the announced aims been attained, at least partially? Have attitudes towards language learning and teaching, both among practitioners and researchers, changed? Based on my involvement in the project "Encouraging the Culture of Evaluation among Practitioners (ECEP)" sponsored by the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe, I focus this article on major concepts of the new philosophy that the CEFR has introduced in Europe, considering their impact both at the institutional level and in everyday teaching practices. In particular, I discuss the shift towards a more complex vision of language teaching and learning, which still considers communication as a major factor but which includes several other aspects of a linguistic, cognitive, emotional, cultural and social nature as well as general ideas of transparency, coherence and quality assurance in curricula for language programs.

The CEFR ten years after: Where are we now?

In less than a year, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) will celebrate its first ten years of existence. This is its "real" life, the one following paper publication, but as is the case for all the Council of Europe documents, a previous, virtual life existed. Back in the late 1990s a draft version of the CEFR was made available on the website produced by an international working party active from 1993 to 1996. This, in turn, was the result of a process which had been initiated at the beginning of the decade, in 1991, in

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1. I was working at the University of Grenoble (France) until July 2009, before assuming my present position in Toronto, so the perspective adopted is internal to Europe, as are the references to the research leading to the ECEP project of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, <http://ecep.ecml.at/>. I would like to thank professor Alister Cumming for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper as well as Merlin Charles for her help with linguistic revision and editing.

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Switzerland, when a Council of Europe symposium "Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe: objectives, evaluation, certification" took place in Rüslikon, near Zurich, organized by several Swiss institutions.

As North (2007, p. 22) pointed out, "the main aim of the Symposium had been to investigate the feasibility of relating language courses and assessments in Europe to each other through some kind of common framework." In fact, the landscape of school certificates and language benchmarking across Europe had developed along diverse lines, thus often resulting in a rather blurred picture, where different institutions referred to such diverse proficiency levels as "beginners/intermediate/advanced" or to grades (be it in letters or all sorts of numeric scales, or a coded series of synthetic judgments). The idea was to develop an extensive, coherent and transparent reference tool to describe communicative language competences and language proficiency in order to overcome the ongoing vague professional discourse. In addition, another working group was set up to establish possible forms and functions of a European Language Portfolio, in which individuals could enter all their experiences and qualifications in the area of language learning, and to devise some Portfolio prototypes.

“What was meant to be a reference instrument for the comparability of language certificates now covers not just assessment, but also teaching and learning...”

The initial aims of the project were far less ambitious than the actual results might indicate. Indeed, the CEFR has no doubt had—and is still having—a major impact on language teaching practices throughout Europe and in many parts of the world beyond. It was John Trim who had a real “vision” and who was able to transform “a project which was, in a sense, technical to start with, into something vastly more ambitious and far-reaching” (Coste, 2007, p. 38). What was meant to be a reference instrument for the comparability of language certificates now covers not just assessment, but also teaching and learning—and does so with no methodological dogmatism, but rather as an instrument for dialogue and co-operation among different countries, with different educational and teaching traditions (Coste, 2007).

In considering the initial aim of the project, that of providing a tool for systematizing descriptions and for comparing exams and, above all, certifications provided by different agencies in different countries, it can be affirmed that the stated aims of the CEFR have been fully attained. From Moscow to Lisbon, from Reykjavik to Cyprus, every language teacher in Europe now speaks in terms of A1, B2 or C1. In turn, expressions like false beginner, beginner or intermediate have simply lost their significance.

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2. The term “practitioners” is used in this article as opposed to “researcher.” In this sense it overlaps with the term “teacher.” Here the two are thus to be considered as synonyms.

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Of course, at a deeper level, practitioners² are still struggling with the inevitable question, “Is your B1 the same as my B1?” But considering how different educational traditions are in Europe, sharing a common basis for understanding is already a remarkable result. At this point several projects are being conducted, aimed at fine-tuning the perceptions and therefore the coherent definitions of the levels.³

Moving to a higher taxonomic level, however, there is the core question of if and how the CEFR has changed both attitudes and practices in the field of language teaching and learning. Here there is a far more complex and diverse scenario. This situation relates to the extent to which teachers have been exposed to targeted professional development as well as to the quality of professional development itself. But this is not the whole picture; it is a simplified vision of the problem. The main issue is the attitude towards the CEFR, which links to both the nature of the document itself and to the educational as well as pedagogical culture of each country. While the implementation of the CEFR as a reference tool is spreading all over Europe and beyond, too often teachers are rather puzzled when they are faced with the conceptual density of this document. In fact, they usually tend to limit themselves to using the assessment grids just the way they are. In the process, they forget—or are unable—to see that the tool is really what they themselves will decide to make out of it. Indeed, the CEFR’s assessment grids are often used as a series of juxtaposed de-

scriptors, without considering (and adapting) them in light of different contexts, representations and teaching/learning cultures.

The principal deficiency that has been identified in the CEFR concerns the nature of the Framework as a tool for reference:

The CEFR is a descriptive not pre-scriptive framework. It does not tell practitioners what to do, or how to do it. It raises questions for reflection and offers options compatible with the vision and goals of the [Council of Europe] CoE. The standard introductory phrase to the different set of questions in the framework is: “Users of the Framework may wish to consider and where appropriate state.”

As it is not the function of the CEFR to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they should employ, it has to provide decision makers with options and reference points to stimulate reflection and facilitate the formulation of coherent objectives for their specific educational context. (Schärer, 2007, p.8).

The descriptive nature of the CEFR allows it to be considered as a meta-system able to provide reference points, to establish a metalan-

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3. Among the several projects, the most complete and specific one is the project which has produced a Manual for relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Manuel1_FR.asp, together with several related documents. Other projects are to be found at the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe website, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/default_EN.asp

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guage common across educational sectors as well as national and linguistic boundaries, rather than as a tool to be implemented without further elaboration and adaptation to local circumstances (North, 2007, as cited in Schärer, 2007, p. 9). Moving from this tool — and in alignment with it — teachers are expected to reconsider their own teaching approaches in order to develop their own tools for assessment within their specific contexts, instead of adopting the tool itself wholesale and, worse, reducing it to a scale of proficiency.

Coste has recently explained this odd use of the CEFR by means of an enlightening figurative device. He talks of “a kind of reverse metonymy: instead of a part denoting the whole (like the old use of “a sail” to mean “a ship”), the whole designates a part: “the ship” means “the sail,” and “the framework” means “the levels of proficiency” (Coste, 2007, p. 41). He adds:

If people say “sail” when they mean “ship”, the reason may be that the sail is the thing they see first from a distance, and the thing which propels the whole by responding to the wind. In the Framework’s case, the six levels are clearly the most eye-catching feature, and the part most responsive to the trends of the moment. At the same time (in keeping with this simple metaphor), the sail, though it may provide propulsion, is nothing without the hull and its contents: the people it carries, who regulate the course.

I would like to go one step further with this image. No doubt the people who regulate the course are very important, but the type of ship itself makes a big difference. How different it is to steer a yacht compared to a cabin cruiser? How much more skill the former requires is widely known. In a sailing ship all different devices need to be taken into consideration as well as their interaction and interdependence: the inclination angle, the length of each rope, the extension of the sails, when it is better to increase or to reduce them, the act of operating the sails and being on the helm at the same time, on power and direction, and so on and so forth, until you arrive at the moment you need to cut down all sail power and to start the engine because no other solution is possible. This type of scenario is exactly what was envisaged for the CEFR: coping with a large quantity of diverse elements, which all play a role in the process. As in a sailing ship, none of them is meaningless and their synergy can be extremely powerful as well as “environmentally friendly.” This synergy is indeed what can help to move from communicative language teaching to an action-oriented approach.

Practitioners facing change: Threads observed and reasons for a project

Changes in pedagogy are not only the result of progress in research: They have always been connected to societal factors. Among these, dealing with change has never been an easy task. Europe has undergone a profound process of change since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and that process is still ongoing. The need for more extended communication to create a common space for dialogue and cooperation has been one of the key conditions underpinning the development of a shared reference tool. The CEFR has shown itself to be a

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powerful tool to introduce change, exerting considerable impact on language pedagogy and, generally, on education at different levels. As Schärer (2007, p. 10) observed,

Evidence is emerging that the visions and concepts at the heart of the CEFR do have a predominately positive effect on learning and teaching, but also that a sustained effort over a long period of time will be needed to implement the visions and concepts into the daily school routine. Europe and the “state-of-the-art” in language education have changed profoundly since 1991 and 2001. Certainly not all credit can be attributed to the CoE and the CEFR. There is evidence, however, that their contributions have been considerable.

Collective reflection on what researchers and experts have pointed out in various contexts, together with personal, hands-on experience in different areas of the diverse realities characterizing Europe, have been at the origin of the ECEP project, which is being conducted within the present program of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). ECEP stands for “Encouraging the Culture of Evaluation among Professionals: The case of language teachers.” It is, as mentioned above, a project of the ECML, which, in turn, has been established through an enlarged mandate of the Council of Europe. The aim of the ECML is to support language policies set by the Council of Europe at different levels and to foster teacher development and applied research in language education.

ECEP is a four-year project, which is now at the half-way point. The publication of the final product will be in 2011. The project is integrated into the thematic strand “Evaluation” of the 2008-2011 program “Empowering language professionals. Competences, networks, impact, quality.” The ECEP international project team includes members who are actively involved in both research and teacher development in four different countries (France, Germany, Italy and Poland) plus additional consultants from Finland and Canada. The exploratory and piloting phases (November 2007 to May 2008) showed results which were quite homogeneous in the various countries and contexts despite differences in their cultures of teaching and learning, consistent with the problem pointed out by Coste above.

The data collected for this initial phase of the project included the exploration of the culture of evaluation in four different national contexts. This exploratory phase was conducted through:

- Exchanges with teachers (through interviews and questionnaires);
- Recordings from focus groups in secondary schools;
- Analyses of assessment formats and grids; and
- Analyses of French masters’ theses on assessment.

The results showed a rather ambivalent relationship to the CEFR: Teachers were all faced with an institutional injunction (which was more or less coercive according to each organization and national context), but this institutional demand resulted in different reactions

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among practitioners (sometimes even opposite ones). Some teachers resisted it, or at least were extremely critical, as they considered this document another burden on their already busy professional lives. Others, on the contrary, were extremely pleased to find their teaching and assessing practices valued and encouraged at last, finding a space for freedom of growth and progress. In between these two extremes, there were two main positions: “the spectators”, observing how things were going to develop, somehow attracted but still very cautious, and “the good students”, trying to study and understand such a complex document in order to exploit it for their own practices.

For nearly all of them, including the enthusiastic ones, the most visible part of the CECR (i.e., the global scale and, to a greater or lesser extent, the other scales of descriptors) was also the most important one. Only a small minority proceeded to explore the different key-concepts of the CEFR, often doing so out of personal interest, not because they had received any specific professional development, which inspired them to follow that path. A possible explanation for this trend is the paucity of reflective learning theory in ordinary teacher education, especially during in-service education, a common scenario also confirmed by other projects of the ECML (Fenner & Newby, 2006). Teachers’ tendency to ignore theories behind the various pedagogical principles is a very risky attitude indeed, one that can leave them at the mercy of pedagogical dogma. Most

of the teachers encountered felt rather hesitant, asking themselves if what they were doing—and had been doing—suited the CEFR. This scenario, with some minor variations, was observed in all the countries involved in the initial phase of the project. According to the literature, there seemed to be a similar pattern in other countries as well.

Despite the differing reception, and consideration, of the CEFR itself as a change-fostering reference, several of its major threads are to be seen in language classes, implemented by different practitioners, be it at a conscious or unconscious level. The project team was therefore encouraged in pursuing the main aim of the ECEP project, that of building self-confidence among language teachers, whose image and mission too often suffer from social, technological and political changes. The idea was to enable them to develop a free and autonomous attitude towards the Common European Framework, beyond the

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“for or against” debates, to make them aware of the character of openness and flexibility that the philosophy of the CEFR intends to provide, and to support them by confirming the relevance of some of their most innovative pedagogical choices. The “for or against” debates have been observed at all levels, and they too often have ended up by hiding the very nature of the CEFR as just a framework, not at all prescriptive material. But above all, they hide the fact that the CEFR is not some kind of strange and disturbing ministerial construction, but rather the

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product of a rich pedagogical development achieved through diverse and multidisciplinary research as well as through numerous contributions from different cultures.

The ECEP project will produce a theoretical and practical reference tool for teacher educators, and therefore for teachers too. This tool will consist of two parts: (a) a guide to the CEFR, getting to the nitty-gritty of the key-concepts and to their links with (and impact on) assessment, and (b) a training kit, aimed at fostering reflection on these same concepts as well as at supporting practical implementation in teacher development sessions. The Guide is already in final draft form and has undergone a thorough process of sharing and revision by language professionals from all over the Council of Europe. The kit is presently under construction and will undergo the same large-scale revision before publication.

The CEFR: Non-dogmatic but challenging?

The sense of insecurity towards the CEFR, as discussed above, is not just the consequence of poor or lacking teacher development, even if this factor certainly plays a major role. There is another aspect that deserves greater attention. I am referring to the “*horror vacui*” or “horror of empty spaces” that seizes some practitioners when faced with the considerable freedom the CEFR allows them. This can be viewed as a consequence of the well-known attitude to search for “the” method, for some readymade or guaranteed solutions to be applied in language classes. Well, the CEFR claims exactly the opposite. Not only does it declare itself as open and non-dogmatic but above all, it is introducing in Europe a new “philosophy” with regards to language teach-

ing and learning. This new vision is having a noticeable impact on classroom reality and on language learning in general, inside and outside institutions, even though it requires a great commitment from practitioners, who are called to choose options and be decision-makers at all levels of the process, and from learners, who are made responsible for their own learning processes. By declaring itself as non-dogmatic, the CEFR does not intend to leave language educators unequipped for their profession and daily practices; on the contrary, teachers are faced with a very rewarding, though demanding role.

A closer look at the concepts underpinning this new vision of language teaching and learning is appropriate at this point. Probably the major parameter shift fostered by the CEFR concerns the role of learners and teachers in the process of language learning, the teachers being professionals, decision-makers, mentors and mediators, the learners bearing responsibility for the learning process in and out of the institution. In accepting the term “post-communicative foreign language learning/teaching” (Byram, 1988), there has been a move from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to the Action-oriented Approach proposed by the CEFR. This move is strongly linked to the view of language and the theories of acquisition proposed by applied linguistics in recent years, urging that language education “need[s] to be expanded to take on board more general learning theories emanating in particular from the direction of cognitive psychology” (Newby, 2006, p.113). This Action-oriented Approach—in line with so-called post-communicative language teaching—is visibly linked to constructivism and this “in its various forms is at the core of principles relating to apparently diverse areas such as learner autonomy, intercultural awareness and grammar.”

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Practitioners should be aware that there is no such thing as theoretically neutral methodology (Newby, 2006, p.116) and that all different teaching methodologies are linked to a foundation theory. What characterizes the Action-oriented Approach and the threads indicated by the CEFR, however, is emphasis on the wealth and complexity of the underpinning theory. Constructivism can be viewed as the core reference theory, but many other theories have contributed to it. As the product of shared expertise and collective contributions, which brought together different pedagogical traditions in Europe, the CEFR was nurtured by diverse research and ended up incorporating different threads and forcibly providing coherence.

Drawing from diverse theories and research to move a step forward

In considering the development of language pedagogy research over the past few decades, methodologists have enriched their theoretical frameworks with several new areas of study. This tendency may be perceived by practitioners as another burden on their teaching load (Newby, 2006, p.113). In reality, this development does not have to be viewed as incremental, but rather as cyclical. With the introduction of CLT in the 1970s, grammatical competence was not to be seen as juxtaposed to communicative competence, although this was unfortunately the result of some misinterpreta-

tions of CLT (Fenner, 2006, p.11). Rather, grammatical competence is embedded within the more comprehensive concept of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Brown, 2001, p. 43). Language learning aims were to be considered “as redefined in terms of skills and performance” (Newby, 2006, p.113). In a similar way, the CEFR’s Action-oriented Approach has embedded the idea of communicative competence in a broader and deeper three-folded general competence scheme. This is rooted in the concept of “existential competence” (*savoir être*), in which learners are able not only to display declarative knowledge (*savoir*) by means of targeted skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*), but to increase and self-develop through the ability to learn how to learn (*savoir apprendre*).

This complex vision of general competence is paralleled by a complex vision of communicative language competence, which includes linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. Bearing in mind the classical difference between competence and performance⁴, the CEFR includes what were previously called “the four skills,” now renamed “communicative activities,” as a component of overall language proficiency, but supplemented with two new communicative activities, “interaction” and “mediation.” The former, especially, is having a considerable impact on teaching practice. The idea of interaction helps practitioners move from a somewhat conventional, unilateral vision of communication, to a new dynamic view, where exchange and co-construction of texts—be they oral or written—

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4. In stressing this dichotomy I am referring both to notion of performance proposed by Chomsky and to the term communicative competence proposed by Hymes (which eventually describes language in terms of acts of communication), as they both, beyond all contrasts, focus on the description of the language in terms of use.

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are vital. With reference to underlying research, this is the concept that is directly linked to studies in discourse analysis, but not exclusively, as discussed below. The impact of sociocultural theory has also proved very strong, especially in some cultures, to the point that even the construction of learner autonomy is seen as a collaborative, social and interactive process (Fenner, 2006).

Furthermore, an Action-oriented Approach implies a real shift in paradigm from one of knowledge and disjunction to one of competence and complexity. Object and subject, reflection and action, learner and user are not separated, but united with the aim of using the language in more or less complex situations, e.g., from reading a leaflet to reading a play by William Shakespeare (Bourguignon, 2006, p. 63). But because action is unpredictable, teachers need to prepare learners to deal with unforeseen situations (Bourguignon, 2006; Markee, 1996; Tudor, 2001). This can be achieved by developing different strategies that are both language- and action-oriented. The notion of competence needs to be supplemented by the notion of dynamics—by constructing, modifying, adapting knowledge (*savoir*) as well as skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*) within actions (Tudor, 2001, p. 65).

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This change in paradigm is in line with societal changes and with changes in the roles of teachers and learners (Piccardo, 2006). There is a move from communication to action or—to use a better term—to “communication,” as Bourguignon (2006) suggests, because the latter is not opposite to, but rather inclusive of, the former. At the European level, the notion of key competences for citizens is becoming a central policy issue (Parlement Européen, 2006; Cignatta, 2006). As opposed to simply transmitting knowledge, the purpose of school is to prepare students for social and professional life. The notion of professionalism as the ability to deal with uncertainty is emerging (Le Boterf, 2000) together with related professionally-oriented concepts such as situated action, specific action, complex action, differentiated competences, existential competence, ability to “put into action,” reflective dimension, and autonomy (Richer, 2009).

The notion of task to provide coherence

The language learner’s ability to communicate is realized through complex, collective tasks, where speaking and doing are intermingled, thus putting into practice an Action-oriented perspective on language. This ability to communicate linguistically sets in motion a strategic component that requires from the speaker reflexivity as well as autonomy (Richer, 2009, pp. 203-204). The notion of task is central in the CEFR, which devotes an entire chapter to the topic. Tasks bring together and organize

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the complexity of language learning and teaching. Nevertheless, tasks are described naturally as a feature of everyday life in the personal, public, educational or occupational domains (CEFR 2001, p. 157).

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 be fulfilled 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 (CEFR, 2001, p.10). The term “task” refers to concrete experiences: “Task accomplishment by an individual involves the strategic activation of specific competences in order to carry out a set of purposeful actions in a particular domain with a clearly defined goal and a specific outcome” (CEFR, p. 157).

To accomplish a task, several elements are activated and play a vital role:

- General competence;
- Communicative language competences with their different components;
- Cognitive factors;
- Affective factors;
- General strategies;
- Communicative strategies; and
- Conditions and constraints.

Chapter 4 of the CEFR, which contains its descriptive scheme, is appropriately titled: “Language use and the language user/learner” (p.43). The dual perspective on learning and using the language emphasizes the individual and the social in combination. As a matter of fact, the importance given by the CEFR to the social nature of tasks shows the influence of socio-constructivism and sociocultural theory as underpinning concepts. The dual nature of the learning process as well as of language use is fundamental to the CEFR. The same duality is to be found in the expression “social actor” that the CEFR proposes. A metaphor to explain this might involve some kind of play where the script would be a sketch, an outline, aiming at scaffolding an actor able to involve the audience in an interactive performance, thereby constructing the play with them, in a constant balance between personal contribution and social adaptation. Interestingly, along similar lines, Ian Tudor chooses the metaphor of a “jam session” for the language class (Tudor, 2001). In the same way as in theatre the use of different codes is considered natural and inevitable, in task accomplishment one can rely on a greater or smaller amount of “language”, as other codes for communication—not to mention other “languages”—inevitably appear to a greater or smaller extent. As Fenner and Newby (2006, p. 114) explain,

Whereas the communicative approach saw the learner essentially as a user of language, post-communicative teaching has restated the fact that language learning is not merely a question of simulating the contexts and processing of the outside world, but... acknowledging that the classroom represents a very real world for the

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learner. Authenticity is no longer a vicarious state but one which can be embedded within classroom learning situations.

Or, the perspective could be reversed, and say, according to Shakespeare, that individuals are eventually aware that “all life is a stage.”

This open vision of language use and learning helps avoid the risk of reductionism as far as the notion of competence is concerned. Developing competences should not end up by producing utilitarian teaching in the sense of aiming only at short-term, training types of goals. Instead it should provide long-term core knowledge and intellectual tools, so that learners can cope with a variety of tasks and situations (Roegiers, 2000, p. 286).

The learner: A social actor between affect and cognition

As colleagues and I have stated,

the student, on whom the CEFR focuses, thus stands in between two dimensions, the individual, on the one hand, and the social, on the other. The former focuses on a more personal construction that requires the learner’s personal knowledge and skill; the second simply presents an exchange and mutual sharing process. Amid this duality, strategic roles become essential. (Piccardo, Berchoud, Cignatta, Mentz, Pamula, 2009).

The individual dimension includes two complementary components: affect and cognition. Any

task needs to make sense to the learner, and to be embedded in a realistic and familiar context. It needs to provide a scenario for the realization of a project with clearly established and culturally appropriate goals in order for the learner to engage in a strategically effective way. (CEFR, 2001, pp. 157-167; Nunan, 1988, 1993). Both components need to be triggered, the affective one through the nature of the scenario and goals, the cognitive one through the logical and targeted manipulation of language structures. As a result, the dichotomy between affect and cognition is overcome on an individual level. This disjuncture was one of the reasons for some misinterpretations of the communicative approach. On a social level the new focus on intercultural awareness—, which includes sociocultural knowledge and competence, but is by no means limited to these factors—opens a new perspective for language learning and teaching. An effective learner is somebody who can use appropriate and efficient strategies to accomplish diverse tasks successfully. The CEFR (2001) attaches considerable importance to learning strategies, which feature in several passages and skill evaluation charts (Chapters 2.1.5, 4 and 6). “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” (CEFR, p.10). Furthermore, the CEFR defines strategies as

...a means the language user exploits to mobilise and balance her or his resources, to activate skills and procedures, in order to fulfill the demands of communication in context and successfully complete the task in question in the most comprehensive or most economical way feasible (p. 57).

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This concept is the political base of education in Europe. (Parlement Européen, 2006; North, 2007; Schärer, 2007; European Parliament, 2008). In the present economic market, business requires good qualifications, flexibility, and knowing how to operate with unknown factors as well as how to progress and improve oneself over the lifespan. Learners who get good results know how to use efficient learning strategies. Strategies and knowledge awareness are also crucial to learners becoming autonomous (Holec, 1981; Wolff, 2003). These skills are useful for education and throughout life (Parlement Européen, 2006).

The dynamic notion that links all these aspects in the CEFR is the educational aim of “learning to learn” which is directly related to theories of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Kelly, 1953; Little, 1991). What the CEFR describes as “ability to learn” (*savoir apprendre*) goes beyond the traditional vision of autonomy as an exclusively individual capacity, embedding it instead in a more social and interactive perspective. Social exchange and interaction, together with a reflective individual attitude, allow learners to improve their language competence and to increase their cultural awareness. The CEFR stresses the link between language and culture (pp. 4-6, 43, 133-138, 168), nevertheless, not in the sense of piling up different competences, but rather by highlighting the notion of “awareness”: awareness of other cultures and consequently awareness of one’s own culture as well. This backwash effect—

which potentially happens whenever there is contact with “others”—is asserted throughout the CEFR. It is directly connected with the notion of dynamic construction of competence and with the notion of profiles, which are different linguistic and cultural landscapes.

Learning a new language: An unbalanced process within a changing system.

Linguistic competence is not constructed in a vacuum. Adopting a systemic theory⁵, the CEFR (2001) stresses that each new acquisition changes the previous situation, the previous landscape, and the previous system. The CEFR insists on flexible notions with respect to unbalanced and changing competencies. These are discussed in terms of “plurilingual” and “pluricultural” dimensions (p.133). For this reason, the CEFR introduces the notions of “profile” and “partial competences” (p. 135).

Individuals learn a language through a series of filters and mental procedures. The CEFR insists on this basic fact: Learning another language and the knowledge of another culture is not made to the detriment – or even independently – of a student’s own language. There is no such thing as two separate languages and cultures. On the contrary, each language modifies the other (or several others) and this process contributes to developing multilingual abilities and intercultural capacities for understanding (Hufeiser & Neuner, 2004).

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5. The term goes back to the title of a book written by Bertalanffy (1968) "General System theory: Foundations, Development, Applications," who wanted to bring together under one heading the organismic science that he had observed in his work as a biologist. The systems theory is an interdisciplinary theory about the nature of complex systems in nature, society, and science, and is a framework by which one can investigate and/or describe any group of objects that work together to produce some result.

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The notion of plurilingualism is a dynamic one (Stratilaki, 2005; Beacco & Byram, 2007). **Plurilingualism** is an individual's ability to develop “a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact.” (CEFR, 2001, p. 4) According to the type of communication required in a variety of situations, the individual can “call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor.” In contrast, **multilingualism** refers more specifically to the condition of a social group in which more than two languages co-exist. From its outset, the CEFR promotes a plurilingual approach, that is, a seamless approach to the acquisition or learning of a number of languages throughout the lifespan of the learner. This process involves constantly relating these languages to each other so as to build up a plurilingual competence, which includes a plurilingual repertoire. Knowledge of the shared values and beliefs held by social groups in other countries and regions, such as religious beliefs, taboos, assumed common history is seen as essential to intercultural communication in the CEFR (2001, p.11).

These multiple areas of knowledge vary from individual to individual. They may be culture-specific, but nevertheless also relate to more universal parameters and constants. Any

“The CEFR insists on this basic fact: Learning another language and the knowledge of another culture is not made to the detriment – or even independently – of a student’s own language.”

new knowledge is not simply added to the knowledge one had before but is conditioned by the nature, richness and structure of one's previous knowledge and, furthermore, serves to modify and restructure the latter, at least partially. Clearly, the knowledge that an individual has already acquired is directly relevant to language learning (CEFR, p. 11). This conceptualization is consistent with my initial point about the overarching competence fostered by the CEFR, the existential competence (*savoir être*), which draws on what Van Eck (1986) referred to as “optimal personal ability”, embracing culture, language and learning, and therefore learner autonomy, language competence and intercultural awareness. Such a dynamic vision has a considerable impact on assessment too.

Completing the circle: Assessment according to the CEFR

The framework of the CEFR provides for a systematic, coherent, and meaningful approach to evaluation. The way in which learners fulfil tasks allows teachers to determine their level of competence: “Different communicative activities will be assessed in an integrated manner within a global assessment, which takes into consideration not only the linguistic, but also the pragmatic dimension” (Bourguignon, 2006, p. 68, my translation). Teachers need to assess the way in which learners reach an action-oriented goal by using the language appropriately.

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The perspective adopted in the CEFR for devising assessment criteria—the well-known “can-do statements”—are consistent with the dynamic vision of language acquisition as well as with autonomous learning. The European language portfolio is the tool whereby reflexive attitudes and strategy acquisition in the process of language learning are most evident. The question of assessment is thoroughly addressed in the CEFR prompting teachers to adopt different and complementary perspectives and to consciously select the most suitable approach to each particular situation.

Above all, assessment is integrated with learning from the very beginning. The CEFR was originally meant to be a tool aiming at systematizing assessment, thereby fostering transparency and allowing comparability. Hence, if 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, individual 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. Other components can then be considered as means to an end or as aspects to be given more emphasis at other times, or as not being relevant to the circum-

stances. 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 the various ways of taking them into account. (CEFR, p.10).

This view of assessment as integrated to the whole process of language learning and teaching is having the greatest impact on educational practices in Europe. Institutions have started with assessment and require new perspective s from practitioners. Practitioners in turn are becoming aware of the profound link between the new vision of assessment and the philosophy of the CEFR. This is the main reason why the CEFR is having such a strong impact on language education practices at all levels. It is also the main reason why certain practitioners still feel hesitant. They need to build and develop confidence based on the whole CEFR, on its key-concepts and not just on the evaluation scale or the assessment grids. This is also the main rationale for our ECEP project. Teachers need to feel fully equipped in order to face the new millennium. ❖

“The CEFR was originally meant to be a tool aiming at systematizing assessment... fostering transparency and allowing comparability.”

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