

# The Common European Framework



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The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment* has been developed, over a period of some nine years, by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2001). The Council's language policy has been concerned on the one hand with the protection of the language rights of minority groups (Council of Europe 1992) and on the other with the promotion of the learning and teaching of the languages of its member states. In the latter respect, its policy has been formulated in three Recommendations to member governments: R(69)2, R(82)18 and R(98)6. In its preamble to R(98)6 the Committee of Ministers:

'Stressing the political importance at the present time and in the future of developing specific fields of action, such as strategies for diversifying

and intensifying language learning in order to promote plurilingualism in a pan-European context, further developing links and exchanges, and exploiting new communication and information technologies;

'Aware of the growing need to equip all Europeans for the challenges of intensified international mobility and closer co-operation not only in education, culture and science but also in trade and industry;

'Anxious to promote mutual understanding and tolerance and to respect identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication;

'Wishing to maintain and further develop the richness and diversity

of European cultural life through greater mutual knowledge of national and regional languages, including those less widely used;

'Considering the needs of a multilingual and multicultural Europe can be met only by appreciably developing Europeans' ability to communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries and that this requires a sustained, lifelong effort which must be encouraged, put on an organised footing and financed at all levels of education by the component bodies;

'Aware of the dangers that might result from the marginalisation of those who lack the skills necessary to communicate in an interactive Europe;

'Considering that the formulation and implementation of education and culture policies in the language field may be facilitated through arrangements at European level for closer co-operation among member states and among their education authorities and institutions'

made 37 detailed recommendations covering all educational sectors as well as initial and in-service teacher training. Many of its general recommendations were designed to promote plurilingualism, by:

- encouraging all Europeans to achieve a degree of communicative ability in a number of languages;
- diversifying the languages on offer and setting objectives appropriate to

each language;

- encouraging teaching programmes at all levels that use a flexible approach – including modular courses and those which aim to develop partial competences – and giving them appropriate recognition in national qualifications systems, in particular public examinations;
- encouraging the use of foreign languages in the teaching of non-linguistic subjects (for example history, geography, mathematics) and create favourable conditions for such teaching;
- supporting the application of communication and information technologies to disseminate teaching and learning materials for all European national or regional languages;
- supporting the development of links and exchanges with institutions and persons at all levels of education in other countries so as to offer to all the possibility of authentic experience of the language and culture of others;
- facilitating lifelong language learning through the provision of appropriate resources.

It is within this policy context that the Committee made further recommendations regarding the specification of objectives and documentation of achievement:

- For all European national and regional languages, develop realistic and valid learning objectives - such as are to be found in 'threshold level' type specifications developed by the Council of Europe - so as to ens-

ure quality in language learning and teaching through coherence and transparency of objectives.

- Encourage institutions to use the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference to plan or review language teaching in a coherent and transparent manner in the interests of better international co-ordination and more diversified language learning.
- Encourage the development and use by learners in all educational sectors of a personal document (European language portfolio) in which they can record their qualifications and other significant linguistic and cultural experiences in an internationally transparent manner, thus motivating learners and acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language learning at all levels in a lifelong perspective.

The *Threshold Level* series is now available or under development for 25 European languages and has been updated and extended to a lower *Waystage* and a higher *Vantage Level*. Whereas *Threshold* specifies and thus to some extent recommends a particular objective for a defined public, the *Common European Framework* and the *European Language Portfolio* are neutral instruments. Neither is in itself a policy document. The Framework provides a valuable tool for the planning and formulation of policy and the Portfolio a way of stimulating and recognising learning.

In November 1991, the Swiss Govern-

ment hosted a Council of Europe Inter-governmental Symposium in Rüschiikon to examine the desirability and practicability of developing a common framework of reference in the language field (Council of Europe 1992). In its conclusions, the Symposium set out the aims of the Framework, its expected uses and the criteria it should satisfy. They considered the introduction of a Common European Framework of Reference to be desirable:

- to promote and facilitate co-operation among educational institutions in different countries
- the mutual recognition of language qualifications
- to assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts.

The uses foreseen for the Framework were:

- the planning of language learning programmes in terms of
  - their assumptions regarding prior knowledge, and their articulation with earlier learning, particularly at interfaces between primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and higher / further education;
  - their objectives;
  - their content;
- the planning of language certification in terms of
  - the content syllabus of examinations;
  - assessment criteria, which can, even at lower levels, be stated in terms of positive achievement rather than negative deficiencies;

- the planning of self-directed learning, including:
  - raising the learner's awareness of his or her present state of knowledge and skill;
  - self-setting of feasible and worthwhile objectives;
  - selection of materials;
  - self assessment.

The Symposium also laid down the criteria the Framework should satisfy:

- In order to fulfil its functions, such a Common European Framework must be comprehensive, transparent and coherent.
- By *'comprehensive'* is meant that the Common European Framework should specify the full range of language knowledge, skills and use. It should differentiate the various dimensions in which language proficiency is described, and provide a series of reference points (levels or steps) by which progress in learning can be calibrated. It should be borne in mind that the development of communicative proficiency involves other dimensions than the strictly linguistic (e.g. socio-cultural awareness, imaginative experience, affective relations, learning to learn, etc.).
- By *'transparent'* is meant that information must be clearly formulated and explicit, available and readily comprehensible to users.
- By *'coherent'* is meant that the description is free from internal contradictions

The construction of a comprehensive, transparent and coherent Framework for language learning

and teaching does not imply the imposition of one single uniform system. On the contrary, the framework should be open and flexible, so that it can be applied, with such adaptations as prove necessary, to particular situations.

It should be clear from the above that the Rüşchlikon Symposium was at some pains to emphasise that the role of the Framework was not to enforce uniformity, but to liberate teachers and where possible learners who had been brought to the necessary level of autonomy, by giving them direct access to a powerful tool which will enable them to reflect on their current practice and plan their future activities. It is with this aim in mind that the authoring group set up following the Symposium (D.Coste, B.North, and J.L.M.Trim) have carried out their task.

The basic structure of the Framework, following introductory chapters in which the aims and basic approach are set out, presents a classified inventory of, first, the externally observable aspects of language use - what the language user has to do in order to communicate and, secondly, what internal competences (knowledge and skills) a person has to develop in order to be able to act effectively. Wherever possible, a brief characterisation is given of the way proficiency progresses, both globally and in respect of each of its aspects. Proficiency is scaled in six levels. The descriptors used were selected and developed in a project, involving large numbers of teachers as judges, carried out in Switzerland in

the early 90's. The level system is already widely used for the calibration of courses and qualifications and as a tool for self-assessment in the various versions of the European Language Portfolio now under development in a number of countries as well as in the European Union's Internet self-assessment Project DIALANG, described in Appendix C of the Framework.

The level descriptors used are brief and cannot cover all the proficiency factors

concerned in the depth and explicitness provided by the *Threshold Level* model. The classification of aspects of performance and competence set out in Chapters 4 and 5 of the Framework provides the skeleton of parameters and categories on which practitioners in the field can put the flesh and blood of language – the words and sentences of texts in actual use. The nature and relation of the high-level parameters of the description are set out in a single paragraph.

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.

Each of the bolded items in this text provides the basic parameters for a comprehensive categorisation of human communication through language, perhaps the most complete yet attempted. It is the result of many years, indeed generations, of reflection and research. Of course, the Framework is still only an outline sketch, for practitioners to reflect upon and to fill in with the necessary concrete particulars whenever they feel that a particular parameter or category is of concern to the learners they have in mind.

The Framework also deals with the

processes of teaching and learning. Again, no particular methods or approaches are recommended. Instead, a full range of options is presented and teachers are invited to identify which they at present follow and to reflect on the alternatives. Openness and freedom from dogmatism are among the criteria the Framework has to satisfy. If a teacher is convinced that, for the students they have to deal with, say the grammar / translation method produces the best results, we want them to question themselves, consider the evidence for communicative methods, perhaps experiment. But if,

at the end of the day, they still believe that they are right, we prefer them to come out into the open and fight their corner in free debate. The basic principles of the Council of Europe do not lead to any method being recommended as being correct in all cases. The best is what suits the learner's needs, characteristics and resources, including, of course, the human resource which is the teacher, with his/her own unique personality and combination of knowledge, skills and experience.

The Framework next discusses questions of curricular design, particularly with the interrelation of different languages in a multilingual curriculum. At this point an issue of great importance arises. Both the Council of Europe and the European Union support and promote the learning of more than one foreign language during compulsory education, with a view to the development throughout life of a 'plurilingual' competence, in which what has been learnt of all the languages that have come a person's way interact to produce a complex communicative competence. This objective conflicts with the policy in some countries to concentrate heavily, perhaps exclusively, on reaching a very high level of proficiency in English, so that English becomes in effect more a second than a foreign language. This issue is of European, indeed global concern. The Framework cannot resolve it, but provides the means for articulating it and stimulating reflection and debate. What does a single language achieve, and at what cost? What would be gained and lost by a change of

policy, or, if more than one language is taught, a change in the language balance? Are different aims, contents and methods appropriate to different languages in the curriculum?

Similarly, a treatment of assessment in the first chapter sets out a number of polarities in the forms of assessment and invites users to select what is most appropriate to their situation. In the appendices, the proficiency scales used by the European Union's DIALANG Project for Internet self-assessment and by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) are presented for comparison.

I trust that by now it will be clear that the Common European Framework is not a scheme for the *Gleichschaltung* of language education in Europe, but rather a tool for effective, intelligent decision-making as close as possible to the point of learning. Let us make sure that the Framework is indeed used in the way it is intended by ourselves making use of it in our daily professional practice!

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