

The Common European Framework

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Background

The Common European Framework (CEF) has its origin in over 40 years of work on modern languages in various projects of the Council of Europe (COE). This activity led to a series of detailed syllabus specifications, at several different language learning levels, namely the *Threshold Level* (van Ek 1977) and the *Waystage* and *Vantage Levels* (van Ek and Trim 1991; 1997). All these documents illustrate a communicative, action-based, learner-centred view of language learning, similar to that in other Council of Europe projects, on, for example, needs analysis (Richterich and Chancerel 1980) and learner autonomy and self-assessment (Oskarsson 1980). The Council's work on language education has also historically embodied a political agenda, promoting plurilingualism as a means to facilitate mobility in Europe and encouraging linguistic tolerance and respect.

What is the Common European Framework?

All these trends are reflected in the development of the CEF, the COE's most ambitious project of its kind to date. A first draft of the Framework was published in 1995, and later in a revised version (Council of Europe 2001), as part of the European Year of Languages (Trim 2001). In a nutshell, it seeks to:

provide a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. (Council of Europe 2001: 1).

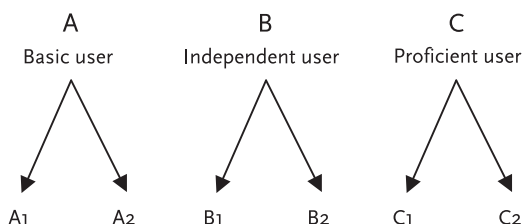
In other words, the CEF attempts to bring together, under a single umbrella, a comprehensive tool for enabling syllabus designers, materials writers, examination bodies, teachers, learners, and others to locate their various types of involvement in modern language teaching in relation an overall, unified, descriptive frame of reference. It consists of two main, closely-linked aspects, the 'Common Reference Levels' on the one hand, and a detailed description of an action-oriented view of language learning and teaching on the other.

The Common Reference Levels

The Common Reference Levels are at the core of the Framework and are its best-known feature. They consist of a comprehensive description of levels of language learning, structured as follows:

- A global scale of six levels—A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2—with general descriptions of language competence for each level. Each descriptor is expressed in positive ‘can-do’ terms (even at the lowest level) and follows the order reception, production, interaction, mediation (= translation, interpretation). The scale is organized as shown in Figure 1:

FIGURE 1
The common reference levels



- A self-assessment grid, with descriptors of different skills (understanding, speaking, writing) at six levels.
- A rating scale for spoken proficiency, describing qualitative aspects of language at each of the levels, and providing assessment criteria for range, accuracy, fluency, interaction and coherence.
- 58 more specific scales covering areas of linguistic, socio-linguistic, strategic and pragmatic competence.
- Collections of ‘can do’ statements provided by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) (www.alte.org) and the DIALANG project (www.dialang.org), all using the six levels.

The Common Reference Levels are becoming increasingly important in the organization of language teaching and assessment. The members of ALTE (Cambridge ESOL, the Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française and other national bodies) have calibrated their examinations according to the six levels, and they are influencing the way in which course book levels are indicated. The ‘European Language Portfolios’—collections of documents consisting of a ‘language passport’, a language biography, and a dossier of the learner’s own work (Little and Perclová 2001)—are also based on the levels. Over 60 of these have been produced for different age groups and in different countries and validated by the Council of Europe. The levels have also been adopted as a language assessment scale in a number of European countries.

The other parts of the Framework

The description of the Common Reference Levels is the part of the Framework which has so far had the most direct influence on language teaching, but it needs to be seen in the context of the description of teaching, learning, and assessment which forms the remainder of the CEF. This part includes a detailed analytic account of the domains of language use and language learning, of different kinds of competence (including an important section on the notion of partial competences—linguistic, socio-linguistic, inter-cultural, etc.), of the nature of texts and tasks, methodological options for teaching, chapters on the consequences for the curriculum of a policy promoting linguistic diversity, and so on.

It should be stressed that the Framework does not set out to prescribe a particular approach to language teaching and encourages readers to

reflect on their own practice. However, it is not neutral; one of its main aims is to:

promote methods of modern language teaching which will strengthen independence of thought, judgment and action, combined with social skills and responsibility. (Council of Europe 2001: 4)

Here a clear connection can once again be seen between the traditions of the COE's earlier work on modern language teaching, as outlined at the beginning of this article, and the CEF project.

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Further reading

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The author

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