State-of-the-art article

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Content, purpose, origin, reception and impact

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Since its circulation in two draft versions in 1996, and especially since its commercial publication in English and French in 2001, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has come to dominate discussion of L2 curricula, the assessment of L2 proficiency, and L2 teaching and learning in Europe. Although it is widely referred to, however, the CEFR remains relatively little known beyond the summaries of its six proficiency levels presented in the so-called 'global scale' and 'self-assessment grid'. This article summarises the CEFR's content, purpose, and origins; describes its reception, paying particular attention to its impact on L2 teaching and learning (especially via its companion piece, the European Language Portfolio) and on the assessment of L2 proficiency; and concludes with a brief consideration of present challenges and future prospects.

1. What is the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*?

The Council of Europe published the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in two draft versions in 1996 (Council of Europe 1996a, b). On the basis of feedback received from a wide range of users and potential users, the document was revised and commercially published in English and French, the two official languages of the Council of Europe, in 2001 (Council of Europe 2001a, b). A German translation followed almost immediately (Council of Europe 2001c), and at the time of writing (April 2006) the Council of Europe web site, <http://www.coe.int>, reports translations into 21 other languages: Albanian, Armenian, Basque, Catalan, Croatian, Czech, Finnish, Friulian, Galician, Georgian, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Moldovan, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian (Iekavian version), Spanish and Ukrainian. Further translations are in preparation. There is no doubt, then, that the CEFR has had an immediate and significant impact at some level in many of the Council of Europe's member states and further afield. Yet the number of language professionals who are closely familiar with the CEFR evidently remains rather limited. In 2005 the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division conducted a survey on the use of the CEFR.[1] A short questionnaire was sent by e-mail to all the Council of Europe's language contacts and published on the Council's web site. It elicited 111 responses from 39 countries, which in itself tends to confirm that knowledge and use of the CEFR is confined to a minority of specialists. The survey also confirmed that easily the best known and most frequently used parts of the CEFR are the summary versions of its common reference levels of language proficiency, the so-called 'global scale' (Table 1) and 'self-assessment grid' (Table 2). There is, however, a great deal more to the CEFR than the global scale and the self-assessment grid, and it is appropriate to begin this review with a summary description of its content.

1.1 Content

The CEFR is a descriptive scheme that can be used to analyse L2 learners' needs, specify L2 learning goals, guide the development of L2 learning materials and activities, and provide orientation for the assessment of L2 learning outcomes. It 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

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Table 1 CEFR Common Reference Levels: global scale (Council of Europe 2001: 24)

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

designate the parameters for the description of language use and the user/learner's ability to use the language. (Council of Europe 2001a: xv; emphasis in original)

The descriptive scheme has a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension uses 'can do' descriptors to define six levels of communicative proficiency in three bands (A1, A2 – BASIC USER; B1, B2 – INDEPENDENT USER; C1, C2 – PROFICIENT USER). There are six levels because there appears to be 'a wide, though by no means universal, consensus on the number and nature of levels appropriate to the organisation of language learning and the public recognition of achievement' (Council of Europe 2001a: 22f.). The results of the Swiss research project that developed the levels, on the other hand, 'suggest a scale of 9 more or less equally sized, coherent levels' (ibid.: 31), which the CEFR labels thus: A1, A2, A2+, B1, B1+, B2, B2+, C1, C2. The 'plus' levels appear in the illustrative scales, in the upper half of the cells labelled A2, B1 and B2 (see Table 3 for examples). Communicative language activities involve RECEPTION, PRODUCTION, INTERACTION and MEDIATION. Accordingly there are scales for LISTENING and READING, SPOKEN PRODUCTION (e.g. making a speech, giving a lecture), WRITTEN PRODUCTION, SPOKEN INTERACTION and WRITTEN INTERACTION (e.g. letter writing). However, the distinction between WRITTEN PRODUCTION and WRITTEN INTERACTION is not maintained in the self-assessment grid (Table 2), and there are no scales for MEDIATION. The scales that constitute the vertical dimension of the CEFR are user- or learner-oriented: because they describe communicative behaviour – what the learner can do in his or her target language – they are as accessible to learners as to curriculum designers, textbook authors, teachers and examiners.

The horizontal dimension of the CEFR is concerned with the learner's communicative language competences and the strategies that serve as a hinge between these competences (the learner's linguistic resources) and communicative activities (what he or she can do with them). Like communicative activities, competences and strategies are scaled, but the scaling is subordinate to the scaling of communicative behaviour and is not the product of

independent empirical research. Thus, for example, the A2 descriptor for ACCURACY – '[u]ses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes' (Council of Europe 2001a: 31) – attempts to capture the degree of grammatical control that is necessary for the performance of A2 productive tasks. Whereas the behavioural scales are user-oriented, the scales of competences and strategies are designed with teachers and assessors in mind and are oriented to diagnosis and assessment. The horizontal dimension also offers taxonomies for the analysis of contexts of language use: domains, situations, conditions and constraints, mental context, themes, and communicative tasks and purposes.

In keeping with the Council of Europe's non-directive ethos, the CEFR refrains from saying how languages should actually be taught. However, the behavioural terms in which communicative proficiency is defined point unambiguously in the direction of task-based teaching and learning, and this is reinforced by a detailed discussion of tasks and their role in language teaching. The CEFR also refrains from prescribing how communicative proficiency should be assessed, though again the action-oriented approach in general and the discussion of assessment in particular imply a strongly communicative orientation. Finally, it is important to note that the CEFR's presentation of its descriptive scheme is bracketed by an account of relevant Council of Europe policy and a discussion of linguistic diversification and the curriculum. Table 4 provides a detailed overview of the CEFR's structure and content.

1.2 Purpose and principles

The declared purpose of the CEFR is to provide 'a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe' (Council of Europe 2001a: 1) and in doing so to serve the Council of Europe's political, cultural and educational agenda. Early in the first chapter the authors quote Recommendation no.R (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States concerning modern languages, which insists on the need to 'equip all Europeans for the challenges of intensified international mobility and closer co-operation', 'promote mutual understanding and tolerance', 'maintain and further develop the richness and diversity of European cultural life through greater mutual knowledge', and 'meet the needs of a multilingual and multicultural Europe by appreciably developing the ability of Europeans to communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries' (ibid.: 3). Language learning is 'necessarily a life-long task' (ibid.: 5), which means that the CEFR must cater for all domains of language learning. It must also adopt plurilingualism

and pluriculturalism as general goals, not just for education but for life, and it must respond to the inevitable fact that many of us will develop partial competences (e.g. in listening and speaking only, or in reading only) in at least some of the languages we learn.

The CEFR is intended to 'promote and facilitate co-operation among educational institutions in different countries', 'provide a sound basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications', and 'assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts' (Council of Europe 2001a: 5f.). In other words, it is offered as a basis for sustained international co-operation in the development of language education policy, the construction of language curricula, the implementation of language learning and teaching, and the assessment of language learning outcomes. To this end, the CEFR seeks to be comprehensive, specifying 'as full a range of language knowledge, skills and use as possible'; transparent – 'information must be clearly formulated and explicit, available and readily comprehensible to users'; and coherent – the descriptions should be 'free from internal contradictions' (ibid.: 7).

1.3 The levels and scales: some clarifications

Although the CEFR contains a great deal more than levels and scales, the levels and scales are nevertheless central to its descriptive system. It may therefore be useful to offer four clarifications at this point.

First, the scales are multidimensional. The global scale, the self-assessment grid, and the illustrative scales for the activities of listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, written interaction, written production, note-taking, and processing text refer to communicative behaviour: what the language user/learner can do with the target language. But these scales should be read, interpreted and used together with the scales of linguistic competence/language quality (general linguistic range, vocabulary range, vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, phonological control, orthographic control, sociolinguistic appropriateness, flexibility, turntaking, thematic development, coherence and cohesion, spoken fluency, propositional precision) and the strategic scales (planning, compensating, monitoring/repair; identifying cues and inferring; turntaking, cooperating, asking for clarification). The CEFR's action-oriented approach is based on the principle that in performing COMMUNICATIVE ACTS we use STRATEGIES to determine how to make most appropriate and effective use of our LINGUISTIC RESOURCES.

Secondly, the levels and scales describe learning outcomes. The progression that emerges in particular from the lower levels reflects orders of TEACHING that

Table 2 CEFR Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid (Council of Europe 2001: 26f.)

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
UNDERSTANDING						
Listening	I can understand familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.
Reading	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.
SPEAKING						
Spoken interaction	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.

Spoken production	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can present a clear, smoothly-flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.
WRITING Writing	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select a style appropriate to the reader in mind.	I can write clear, smoothly-flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.

Table 3 CEFR Common Reference Levels: illustrative scale for *SPOKEN INTERACTION: CONVERSATION* (Council of Europe 2001: 74)

	OVERALL SPOKEN INTERACTION
C2	Has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative levels of meaning. Can convey finer shades of meaning precisely by using, with reasonable accuracy, a wide range of modification devices. Can backtrack and restructure around a difficulty so smoothly the interlocutor is hardly aware of it.
C1	Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Has a good command of a broad lexical repertoire allowing gaps to be readily overcome with circumlocutions. There is little obvious searching for expressions or avoidance strategies; only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language.
B2	Can use the language fluently, accurately and effectively on a wide range of general, academic, vocational or leisure topics, marking clearly the relationships between ideas. Can communicate spontaneously with good grammatical control without much sign of having to restrict what he/she wants to say, adopting a level of formality appropriate to the circumstances.
	Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction, and sustained relationships with native speakers quite possible without imposing strain on either party. Can highlight the personal significance of events and experiences, account for and sustain views clearly by providing relevant explanations and arguments.
B1	Can communicate with some confidence on familiar routine and non-routine matters related to his/her interests and professional field. Can exchange, check and confirm information, deal with less routine situations and explain why something is a problem. Can express thoughts on more abstract, cultural topics, such as films, books, music etc.
	Can exploit a wide range of simple language to deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling. Can enter unprepared into conversation on familiar topics, express personal opinions and exchange information on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).
A2	Can interact with reasonable ease in structured situations and short conversations, provided the other person helps if necessary. Can manage simple, routine exchanges without undue effort; can ask and answer questions and exchange ideas and information on familiar topics in predictable everyday situations.
	Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters to do with work and free time. Can handle very short social exchanges but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord.
A1	Can interact in a simple way but communication is totally dependent on repetition at a slower rate of speech, rephrasing and repair. Can ask and answer simple questions, initiate and respond to simple statements in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.

are familiar to us from syllabuses and textbooks; it does not claim to be an order of acquisition, far less a description of the acquisition process itself. Also, there is more to successful language learning than upward progress, as the CEFR itself points out:

One . . . needs to remember that levels only reflect a vertical dimension. They can take only limited account of the fact that learning a language is a matter of horizontal as well as vertical progress as learners acquire the proficiency to perform in a wider range of communicative activities. Progress is not merely a question of moving up a vertical scale. There is no particular logical requirement for a learner to pass through all the lower levels on a sub-scale. They may make lateral progress (from a neighbouring category) by broadening their performance capabilities rather than increasing their proficiency in terms of the same category. Conversely, the expression 'deepening one's knowledge' recognises that one may well feel the need at some point to underpin such pragmatic gains by having a look at 'the basics' (that is: lower level skills) in an area into which one has moved laterally. (Council of Europe 2001a: 17).

Thirdly, the levels and scales are not an alternative system of grading, in the sense that in the same language class one should expect to encounter some learners who are C2, some who are C1, some who are B2, and so on. On the contrary, the levels and scales describe a succession of language learning outcomes that take many years to achieve. As Appendix B of the CEFR explains, the empirical research project that produced the illustrative scales of descriptors surveyed teachers and learners in four educational domains: lower secondary, upper secondary, vocational, and adult. Language user/learners who achieve the highest proficiency levels are likely to have pursued their learning through each of these domains and perhaps into their professional life. Across Europe, however, the largest concentration of language learners is at lower secondary level; and most of them will spend several years mastering A1, A2 and perhaps part of B1. This fact underlines the importance of recognising horizontal as well as vertical progress.

Table 4 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: overview of contents

Chapter 1	states the aims, objectives and functions of the CEFR in the light of the Council of Europe's overall language policy, a key component of which is the promotion of plurilingualism (the ability to communicate in two or more languages) as a response to the challenge of Europe's linguistic diversity.
Chapter 2	introduces the CEFR's action-oriented approach and its descriptive scheme.
Chapter 3	introduces and summarizes the Common Reference Levels, six empirically derived levels of attainment arranged in three bands: BASIC USER – A1, A2; INDEPENDENT USER – B1, B2; PROFICIENT USER – C1, C2. This chapter contains the global scale, the self-assessment grid, and scales of five qualitative aspects of spoken language use: range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence.
Chapter 4	presents categories for describing language use and the language user/learner: the domains, situations, conditions and constraints that determine the context of language use; the themes, tasks and purposes of communication; communicative activities, strategies and processes; and text, especially in relation to activities and media. This chapter contains 34 illustrative scales for oral production, written production, listening, reading, spoken interaction, written interaction, note-taking, and processing text. It also contains scales for planning, compensating, and monitoring/repair; for the receptive strategies of identifying cues and inferring; and for the interaction strategies of turn-taking, cooperating, and asking for clarification.
Chapter 5	describes the competences on which the language user/learner depends in order to carry out communicative tasks: general competences (declarative knowledge, skills and know-how, 'existential' competence, ability to learn) and communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic). Scales are provided for 13 dimensions of communicative language competence: general linguistic range, vocabulary range, vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, phonological control, orthographic control, sociolinguistic appropriateness, flexibility, turn-taking, thematic development, coherence and cohesion, spoken fluency, propositional precision.
Chapter 6	is concerned with language learning and teaching: what learners have to learn or acquire; the processes of language learning; how the CEFR can be used to facilitate language learning; methodological options for language learning and teaching; errors and mistakes.
Chapter 7	examines the role of tasks in language learning and teaching, dealing in turn with task description, task performance, and task difficulty. This chapter provides an integrative perspective on the CEFR's action-oriented approach, setting forth some of the considerations that must be taken into account when using the scales and descriptors to generate a programme of language teaching/learning.
Chapter 8	discusses the implications of linguistic diversification for curriculum design, considering plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, differentiated learning objectives, some principles of curriculum design, two possible curricular scenarios, lifelong language learning, and partial competences. This chapter acknowledges that significant language learning takes place outside as well as inside systems of formal education, and proposes the European Language Portfolio as a means of documenting progress towards plurilingual competence.
Chapter 9	is concerned with the ways in which the CEFR can support the assessment of communicative proficiency, dealing briefly with the specification of test content and criteria and the various types of assessment.
Appendix A	discusses the description of levels of language attainment from a technical perspective. It identifies five essential features of good descriptors – they must be positive, definite, clear, brief, and independent; and summarises intuitive, qualitative, and quantitative approaches to scale development. The appendix concludes with an annotated bibliography.
Appendix B	describes the Swiss research project that developed the illustrative descriptors for the CEFR (it involved almost 300 teachers and about 2,800 learners drawn from lower secondary, upper secondary, vocational and adult education). Appendix B provides a clear summary of the methodology involved and thus a starting point for anyone who wishes to undertake similar work.
Appendix C	presents DIALANG, an on-line assessment system that uses the scales and descriptors of the CEFR to provide language learners with diagnostic information about their L2 proficiency.
Appendix D	describes the ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) 'can do' statements, which were developed, related to ALTE language examinations, and anchored to the CEFR.

Fourthly, the behavioural dimension of the highest levels implies maturity, general educational achievement, and professional experience. A1 SPOKEN PRODUCTION as described in the self-assessment grid can be mastered by learners of any age (in an age-appropriate way): 'I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know' (Council of Europe 2001a: 26). But the same does not apply to C2 SPOKEN PRODUCTION, which is described thus: 'I can present a clear, smoothly flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points' (ibid.: 27). This complex activity lies far beyond the cognitive range of learners at primary or lower secondary level, and some way beyond the experiential range of the great majority of learners at upper secondary level. The same consideration applies to the other communicative activities. This characteristic of the CEFR's levels and scales means that they can be adapted to the needs and circumstances of younger learners to a limited extent only. Those who insist otherwise have usually failed to grasp that a high level of linguistic competence does not necessarily entail a precocious range of communicative proficiency.

2. Where did the *CEFR* come from?

2.1 The Council of Europe's involvement in language policy, curriculum, teaching and learning

The CEFR did not spring fully formed from the void. Rather, it is among the latest products of the Council of Europe's three and a half decades of work on language teaching and learning, which has always been politically as well as culturally and educationally motivated. The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 to defend human rights, parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, develop agreements to standardise social and legal practices in the member states, and promote awareness of a European identity based on shared values. The three meetings of Heads of State and Government that have been held in the Council's fifty-seven-year history have all reasserted these fundamental concerns.[2] The moral, political, and social values that shape the Council of Europe's purposes are enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (1950). The promotion of these values in the member states requires a continuous educational effort in which the teaching and learning of languages play an indispensable role. Thus the second article of the European Cultural Convention (1954) focuses on the need for each member state not only to encourage study of the languages, history and civilisation of other member states but to promote in the latter the

study of its own language(s), history and civilisation. Clearly, mutual understanding, effective educational and cultural exchange, and the mobility of citizens all require large-scale and successful language learning.

Since the early 1970s, the Council of Europe's work in language policy and language education has shown a steady commitment to fundamental principles that coincide with its political, cultural and educational agenda. From the beginning, the idea of learning languages for purposes of communication generated two fundamental concerns: to analyse learners' communicative needs, and to describe the language they must learn in order to fulfil those needs. On this basis documents produced in the 1970s argued the case for developing a unit/credit scheme for adult language learning that would provide for 'the fully participatory development of language learning systems appropriate to different learning situations at different times and places' (Trim 1978: 22). Pursuit of this goal led to ground-breaking work in three areas: the analysis of learners' needs (Richterich 1973; Richterich & Chancerel 1978; Porcher 1980); the development of a notional-functional approach (Wilkins 1973, 1976) to the definition of a 'threshold level' of communicative proficiency in a foreign language (van Ek 1975; see also Coste et al. 1976, Baldegger et al. 1980); and the elaboration and promotion of the concept of autonomy in foreign language learning. Each of these concerns helped to shape the CEFR as well as its companion piece, the European Language Portfolio.

2.2 Threshold Level and its successors: functions and notions

The Threshold Level was designed to meet the needs of adult learners of English,

people who want to prepare themselves, in a general way, to be able to communicate socially on straightforward everyday matters with people from other countries who come their way, and to be able to get around and lead a reasonably normal social life when they visit another country. This is not simply a matter of buying bread and milk and toothpaste and getting repairs carried out to a car. People want to be able to make contact with each other as people, to exchange information and opinions, talk about experiences, likes and dislikes, to explore our similarities and differences, the unity in diversity of our complicated and crowded continent. (Trim 1975: ii)

The Threshold Level set out to define the communicative repertoire that such learners need in terms of the situations in which they must be able to understand speech and speak, the language activities they will be likely to engage in, the language functions (communicative purposes) they will have to perform, and the notions (general and specific meanings) they will need to express. One is immediately struck by the document's ambition: it clearly seeks to achieve very much more than the 'phrase book'

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[2] For further details and key policy documents, see the Council of Europe's web site, <http://www.coe.int>.

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approach that the functional-notional model has sometimes been accused of promoting.

It is important to draw attention to two limitations of The Threshold Level, however. First, it is concerned only with oral communication: 'A general ability to read and to write the foreign language is not part of the T-level objective. What has been specified is a strictly limited ability' (van Ek 1975: 114) – though the document concedes that written materials are likely to be used extensively to support learning, so that 'on reaching T-level the majority of learners will have a much more general ability to use the written forms of the language – especially receptively – than what has been described in the objective' (ibid.: 18). It should be noted in passing that *Un Niveau Seuil* (Coste et al. 1976), The Threshold Level's French counterpart, included written communication in its descriptive system and did not confine itself to the needs of a single target group. However, The Threshold Level rather than *Un Niveau Seuil* provided the model that was applied to other languages and was used as the basis for specifying two lower levels, *Breakthrough* (unpublished) and *Waystage* (van Ek, Alexander & Fitzpatrick 1977), and one higher level, *Vantage* (van Ek & Trim 1997). These four specifications provided the labels for the first four of the CEFR's common reference levels: A1 BREAKTHROUGH, A2 WAYSTAGE, B1 THRESHOLD, and B2 VANTAGE.

A second limitation of The Threshold Level lies in the fact that it specifies what learners should be able to do in their target language, but does not specify in detail how well they should be able to do it. Instead it defines two general criteria for judging the efficiency of communication: as speakers, learners should be able to make themselves 'easily' understood, and as listeners they should be able to understand 'the essence' of what is said to them without having to exert themselves 'unduly' (van Ek 1975: 113). Given its brief and very general treatment of the degree of skill that learners need to develop, it is hardly surprising that The Threshold Level has little to say about assessing learning outcomes. But it briefly distinguishes between tests of communicative tasks and tests of sub-skills, coming down in favour of the former (ibid.: 114f.) and thus lending its support to communicative language testing without providing detailed pointers. These were forthcoming, however, in the following decade (e.g. Council of Europe 1987).

In keeping with other Council of Europe documents of the 1970s (see especially Trim 1978), The Threshold Level's definitional approach reflects the view that linguistic performance depends on more than linguistic knowledge. To this extent it was related to Hymes's (1972) concept of 'communicative competence' and the similar though later definitions of Canale & Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). This relationship became fully explicit in the next phase of the Council of Europe's work on the specification of language learning objectives, focusing on scope (van Ek 1986) and levels (van Ek 1987). In the first of these publications van Ek identifies five dimensions of communicative ability – linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, socio-cultural, and social competence – which are not discrete elements but 'different aspects of one and the same thing, different aspects to focus on for the purpose of a systematic exploration of the concept' (van Ek 1986: 36). This restates the model of communicative competence that underlies *The Threshold Level* and is carried forward into the CEFR. On the other hand, van Ek's study of levels points forward to one of the central innovative features of the CEFR, the scaled description of L2 proficiency.

2.3 The communicative approach, learner-centredness, and the Council of Europe's interest in learner autonomy and self-assessment

The unit/credit approach to adult language learning first elaborated in *Systems development in adult language learning* (Council of Europe 1973) took as its starting point the analysis of learners' needs, defined as 'the requirements which arise from the use of . . . language in the multitude of situations which may arise in the social lives of individuals and groups' (ibid.: 32). The analysis of 'needs' in this objective sense was fundamental to the construction of language learning 'units', and thus a matter of systems development (see also Bung 1973a, b). 'Needs' were held to be distinct from 'motivations', which are created by 'the social lives of individuals and groups' (Council of Europe 1973: 32). But by accepting that different learners have different needs, the unit/credit approach brought the learner's individuality into focus and was thus (objectively) learner-centred.

In the 1970s the Council of Europe was also concerned with an approach to adult education in general that sought to take account of learners' 'motivations' (which implicate their subjective needs). Thus, Trim (1978: 1) declares that one of the Council of Europe's ideals is to

make the process of language learning more democratic by providing the conceptual tools for the planning, construction and conduct of courses closely geared to the needs, motivations and characteristics of the learner and enabling him so far as possible to steer and control his own progress.

According to this view, adult education should itself be a democratic process that

becomes an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man, and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man 'product of his society', one moves to the idea of man 'producer of his society'. (Janne 1977: 15)

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The application of this general idea to language learning was made fully explicit in Henri Holec's *Autonomy and foreign language learning* (1979). Here learner autonomy, understood as the learner's capacity to plan, monitor and evaluate his or her own learning, comes to be seen as a prerequisite for the success of a needs-based approach to language learning for communication. Self-assessment ('internal evaluation') is fundamental to the process of autonomous learning:

It is one of the stages of learning, that during which the learner evaluates the attainments he has lately made as compared with what he was aiming at so that, in the first place, he can be certain that he really has acquired something – and the learning process is not at an end until this evaluation, whether positive or negative, has been carried out – and in the second place so that he can plan his subsequent learning. (Holec 1979: 21)

As we shall see, one of the functions of the European Language Portfolio is to support the development of learner autonomy; and learner self-assessment using checklists based on the CEFR's common reference levels is fundamental to its effective use.

2.4 Plurilingualism: a new turn in language education policy

In the foreword to The Threshold Level we read:

The overall aim of the Project is to make the free movement of men and ideas in the European area easier by increasing the scale and effectiveness of language learning. Partly, this aim can be achieved by offering every European child the opportunity to learn – and use – one of the major languages of international intercourse during the period of compulsory education. (Trim 1975: i)

It is easy to overlook how revolutionary The Threshold Level was when it first appeared. In many quarters the idea that large numbers of adults might learn to communicate in just one foreign language was already too ambitious by half. But whereas The Threshold Level assumed that schools should teach and adults might want to learn one foreign language, the CEFR starts from the assumption that the Council of Europe's political, social and educational agenda demands both more language learning and the learning of more languages. The CEFR also associates plurilingualism with partial competences.

It is possible to argue that the goal of plurilingualism has always been implicit in the Council of Europe's founding texts, beginning with the European Cultural Convention of 1954 (Beacco & Byram 2003). What is more, The Threshold Level prepared the way for the CEFR's more thoroughgoing approach to the definition of partial competences in two ways. By first describing a target communicative repertoire in behavioural terms and only then identifying the vocabulary and grammar required by such a repertoire, it contradicted the traditional notion that learning a foreign language entails complete mastery of the target linguistic system; and by specifying a repertoire for speaking (and listening) but not for reading and writing, it asserted the possibility of focussing language learning on the development of a limited range of communicative skills. Nevertheless, it is only in more recent years that the term plurilingualism has been explicitly identified as a key educational goal of the Council of Europe. For example, Recommendation No. R (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states includes the following:

Promote widespread plurilingualism ... by encouraging all Europeans to achieve a degree of communicative ability in a number of languages; ... by diversifying the languages on offer and setting objectives suitable to each language; [... and] by encouraging teaching programmes at all levels that use a flexible approach. (Council of Europe 1998)

Recommendation 1539 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the European Year of Languages states that plurilingualism 'should be understood as a certain ability to communicate in several languages, and not necessarily as perfect mastery of them', and recommends that the Committee of Ministers call upon member states to 'maintain and develop further the Council of Europe's language policy initiatives for promoting plurilingualism, cultural diversity and understanding among peoples and nations' and to 'encourage all Europeans to acquire a certain ability to communicate in several languages, for example by promoting diversified novel approaches adapted to individual needs' (Council of Europe 2001d).

The movement towards a more explicit promotion of the goal of plurilingualism has run parallel to three significant developments. First, greater prominence has been given to regional and minority languages, which has had the effect of raising their status. For example, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was opened for signature in November 1992, while the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995) agreed to 'undertake to promote the conditions necessary for persons belonging to national minorities to maintain and develop their culture, and to preserve the essential elements of their identity, namely their religion, language, traditions and cultural heritage' (cit. Beacco & Byram 2003: 33). These intergovernmental measures, and actions arising from them, have done much to increase awareness of this dimension of the European heritage; though as Beacco has pointed out (2005: 18f.), census returns and other forms of survey may tell us what percentages of a population speak different languages, but they tend not to tell us anything about the different plurilingual profiles present in the population.

Secondly, high levels of migration have had a significant impact on the linguistic profiles of most western European countries, many of which were largely or wholly monoglot until the recent past (Gogolin 2002). In other words, where plurilingualism was previously rooted in the history of particular regions, it is now the inevitable consequence of the large-scale mobility of populations. To take just two recent examples, from Ireland: Integrate Ireland Language and Training has reported that 74 different nationalities (and roughly the same number of first languages) were represented in the English language courses it provided in 2004 for adult immigrants with refugee status (Integrate Ireland Language and Training 2005: 5); while in one primary school in the Dublin area 80% of the September 2005 intake did not know English.[3] Similar examples can, of course, be cited for most major cities in western Europe, where increasing percentages of the population are plurilingual independently of educational intervention.

Thirdly, the explicit identification of plurilingualism as an educational goal may be understood in part as a response to the increasing dominance of English in the language classrooms of all European countries except the United Kingdom and Ireland. For while it is true that English is a *de facto* lingua franca in many areas of international communication, it is also true that Europe's many other languages remain the medium of social, cultural and political life in the countries and regions where they are native. Thus if the British and the Irish learn no foreign languages, and the rest of Europe learns only English, enormous swathes of European culture will be accessible only to native speakers of the languages in which they are expressed. Alternatively, to put the matter more positively and with an eye on increased awareness of plurilingualism as a social fact, it may be through plurilingual education that Europeans finally find a sense of European identity: 'Europe could be identified, not by the languages spoken there, whether or not they are indigenous languages, but by adherence to principles that define a common relationship with languages' (Beacco & Byram 2003: 30).

As the CEFR makes clear (Council of Europe 2001a: chapter 8), if we adopt plurilingualism as an educational goal, we commit ourselves to diversification in two senses: making more languages available to learners, and recognising that different objectives may be appropriate for different learners and different languages. But we also commit ourselves to developing integrated language curricula in which 'linguistic knowledge (*savoir*) and skills (*savoir-faire*), along with the ability to learn (*savoir-apprendre*), play not only a specific role in a given language but also a transversal or transferable role across languages' (ibid. 2001a: 169).

To sum up: in its action-oriented approach the CEFR is in direct line of descent from *The Threshold Level* and its successors, though its descriptive apparatus fully embraces reading and writing as well as listening and speaking. Itself an instrument of needs analysis, it balances a concern with learners' objective needs with a focus on the subjective dimension of language learning and use in its treatment of the learner's individual capacities. This continuing commitment to learner-centredness is also signalled by the CEFR's sub-title, which puts learning before teaching and assessment. It is perhaps unlikely that many individual learners will use it to plan programmes of self-directed learning in the way the CEFR itself proposes (Council of Europe 2001a: 6); but the concept of the European Language Portfolio took shape in parallel with the CEFR as a way of mediating key concepts and issues while at the same time fostering the development of learner autonomy. Finally, the CEFR's promotion of plurilingualism as a central goal of language education policy reflects a significant development in the Council of Europe's thinking that corresponds to equally significant developments in Europe's linguistic situation.

3. The reception of the *CEFR*

Already in the pilot phase (1997–2000) the Council of Europe supported the dissemination of the CEFR by commissioning a series of brief guides aimed at different categories of potential user. Most of these guides were subsequently gathered together in two volumes. The first (Council of Europe 2002a) contains a general introduction to the CEFR (Trim 2002) and introductions for adult learners (Bailly, Gremmo & Riley 2002), teachers and learners (Devitt 2002), primary and secondary teachers and teacher trainers (B. Jones 2002), those responsible for language curriculum design and revision (Stoks 2002), those responsible for language curriculum organisation and delivery (Makosch 2002), those concerned with quality assurance and quality control (Heyworth 2002), and those involved in the production and design of textbooks and other language learning materials (Hopkins 2002). The second volume (Council of Europe 2002b) is devoted to language assessment and test development. Between them these two volumes still constitute the best general introduction to the CEFR. A good interactive on-line introduction to the CEFR and the common reference levels is provided by the EU-funded CEFTrain Project's web site, <http://www.ceftrain.net>, which offers samples in video and print to illustrate listening, speaking, reading and writing at each level, allowing users to match their judgements against those of the web site's authors.

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[3] I am grateful to Deirdre Kirwan for providing me with this information.

The Council of Europe has also coordinated projects designed to support the mediation of the CEFR via the European Language Portfolio and to facilitate the application of the common reference levels to language examinations and tests. These will be dealt with separately, but first it is necessary to consider the more general impact of the CEFR. This can be done only very approximately, for two reasons. First, much of the available evidence is anecdotal and thus difficult to evaluate – a rumour, for example, which may or may not be based on fact, that school leavers in a particular country will henceforth be required to achieve B2 in their first and B1 in their second foreign language. Secondly, precisely because the CEFR's impact is truly international (recall the number of translations which have already been made), it is generating applications, research and publications in many different languages, only a small number of which can be accessible to any one person. A systematic study of the CEFR's impact would require an extensive network of researchers, at least one in each Council of Europe member state that has engaged in any way with the CEFR. This caveat notwithstanding, it is nevertheless possible to indicate the general range of the CEFR's impact and to report briefly on applications of the descriptive apparatus to particular languages, two important convergent developments, and two attempts to use the descriptive apparatus to develop L2 curricula for specific audiences.

3.1 Range of impact

To date two collections of papers have been published in English reporting on applications of the CEFR to different domains. The first was commissioned by the Council of Europe (Alderson 2002) and brings together twelve case studies. Two are internal to the CEFR, reporting on the development and validation of its proficiency scales (respectively North 2002a and Kaftandjieva & Takala 2002), two more are concerned with the use of the scales in self-administered on-line tests (DIALANG; Huhta et al. 2002) and self-assessment (North 2002b), one reports on the project to relate the ALTE Framework to the CEFR (N. Jones 2002), and one reports on the adaptation and expansion of the CEFR for German as a foreign language (Wertenschlag, Müller & Schmitz 2002). The remaining six studies report on the use made of the CEFR in the Polish educational reform of 1999 (Komorowska 2002), as a point of reference and a 'tool for reflection' in the development of language education in Catalonia (Figueras & Melcion 2002), as a basis for developing third-level Spanish courses in the Open University, UK (Garrido & Beaven 2002), as a means of helping primary and secondary language teachers to develop the learning skills of their pupils (Jaakkola et al. 2002), as a basis for elaborating English language programmes for adult

refugees admitted to Ireland (Little, Lazenby Simpson & O'Connor 2002), and as the underpinning for the European Language Portfolio (Lenz & Schneider 2002).

The second collection of papers, Morrow (2004a) shares some authors with the first and covers a partially overlapping range of topics. Morrow (2004) summarises the background to the CEFR; Heyworth (2004) explains its importance; Lenz (2004) introduces the European Language Portfolio; Mariani (2004) deals with the CEFR's treatment of the ability to learn languages and the development of language learning skills; Keddle (2004) reports on an attempt to create an interface between the CEFR and the language classroom; Komorowska (2004) explains how the CEFR has been used in pre- and in-service language teacher education in Poland; Huhta & Figueras (2004) describe the development of DIALANG, the on-line self-testing service (see also section 5.3 below); and North (2004) summarises procedures for relating assessments, examinations and courses to the CEFR. The volume concludes with three case studies, on the use of the CEFR to develop an ESL curriculum for newcomer pupils in Irish primary schools (Little & Lazenby Simpson 2004), English courses for teenagers at the British Council Milan (Manasseh 2004), and English courses for adults at the University of Gloucestershire (Wall 2004).

These two books are probably an accurate reflection of the CEFR's general impact in two respects: to date it has been applied to testing and assessment as much as to all other domains together; and in those other domains – notably teacher education, curriculum and course design, and reflective pedagogy – projects have mostly been on a limited and local scale.

3.2 Applying the model to specific languages

The CEFR's descriptive apparatus and proficiency levels are language-independent, and their application to specific languages lies beyond the scope of the Council of Europe's work. However, two significant initiatives of this kind have been undertaken, in France and Germany, with the Council of Europe's explicit approval. In France publication has begun of a series of reference books each of which is devoted to a single proficiency level. The first to appear (Beacco, Bouquet & Porquier 2004) combines a number of background readings with a detailed elaboration and exemplification of level B2 in French; the second (Beacco, de Ferrari & Lhote 2006) does the same for level A1.1, the lowest level for which certification is provided in French as a foreign language.

As noted above, the German translation of the CEFR appeared very soon after the 'canonical' English and French versions in 2001. The following

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year saw the publication of the first version of *Profile Deutsch*, a CD-ROM accompanied by a detailed handbook (Glaboniat et al. 2002). *Profile Deutsch* is effectively a blend of the CEFR and *Kontaktschwelle* (Baldegger et al. 1980; for an account of the preparatory work, see Wertenschlag et al. 2002). The CD-ROM presents the common reference levels as global and detailed 'can do' statements for the first four common reference levels (A1, A2, B1, B2), together with a corresponding functional-notional resource (speech acts and their culture-specific realisations, general notions, and specific notions/vocabulary), functional and systematic treatments of German grammar, an overview of text types and their realisations, and an overview of communication and learning strategies. *Profile Deutsch* can be used to plan, implement and evaluate learning programmes in German as a second and foreign language. Working from the CD-ROM the user can collect material from the various sections to compile a syllabus or establish communicative ('can do' but also functional-notional) and lexico-grammatical resources to guide the development of learning materials and assessment tasks. The second version of *Profile Deutsch* (Glaboniat et al. 2005) covers all six common reference levels and goes beyond the CEFR itself by introducing at levels C1 and C2 a wealth of new descriptors that in principle could be applied to any other language but also drawn back into the non-language-specific model. This aspect of the development of *Profile Deutsch* helpfully confirms two things about levels C1 and C2. First, the higher the level, the more specific, concrete and needs-oriented learner expectations tend to be; and second, the higher the level, the more difficult it is to define level-specific linguistic resources (ibid.: 46).

The production of a set of reference level descriptors for English, along the lines of *Profile Deutsch*, is currently being addressed by a consortium comprising the British Council, Cambridge University Press, English UK, the Research Centre for English and Applied Linguistics (University of Cambridge), University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, and the University of Luton, with the participation also of the Council of Europe and the Association of Language Testers in Europe.[4]

3.3 Two closely related developments

As we have seen, The Threshold Level was designed to meet the needs of adult language learners. Yet its most immediate impact was on language teaching at school: in the series of workshops for language teacher trainers that the Council of Europe coordinated between 1984 and 1987 to support the development of communicative language teaching, about 60% of the events focussed exclusively on language

teaching and learning at school (Council of Europe 1988). A similar fate has befallen the CEFR. As we have seen, the descriptors that define the common reference levels were developed on the basis of empirical research involving teachers and learners in lower and upper secondary, vocational, and adult education; and reading the scales from bottom to top gives one a sense (among other things) of the traditional language learning trajectory, which starts for the majority at the beginning of secondary education and continues for a minority to the end of formal education and into professional life. Yet one of the major developments in language teaching across Europe in the past decade has been the introduction of lower starting ages for learning at least the first foreign language. The question thus arises, to what extent are the CEFR's common reference levels applicable to young language learners? To date the most substantial attempt to answer this question has come from the Bergen 'Can-do' Project (Hasselgreen 2003, 2005), which began as a local project administered from the University of Bergen but subsequently became part of the 2000–2003 medium-term programme of the European Centre for Modern Languages, Graz. Taking as its starting point the desire to develop national testing procedures for English that would be harmonious with the CEFR's levels, the project set out to find ways of adapting the CEFR's descriptors to take account of the characteristics and needs of children and young teenagers while preserving the CEFR's integrity. This is an important undertaking that appears to have had less impact than it should have done, especially on the European Language Portfolio.

Whereas the Bergen 'Can-do' Project seeks to extend the application of the CEFR's levels to younger learners, the UK's Languages Ladder (Department for Education and Skills, UK, 2004) was conceived as a parallel development that would apply the 'can do' dimension of the CEFR's action-oriented approach to the UK's levels of certification. The web site of the Department for Education and Skills, <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languages>, puts it as follows:

One of the three overarching objectives of The National Languages Strategy is to introduce a voluntary recognition scheme to complement existing national qualification frameworks and the Common European Framework. This would give people credit for their language skills and form a ladder of recognition from beginner level to a standard which sits alongside GCSE, A Level and NVQs.

The Languages Ladder comprises six stages divided into grades as follows: Breakthrough (grades 1–3; entry level); Preliminary (grades 4–6; level 1); Intermediate (grades 7–9; level 2); Advanced (grades 10–12; level 3); Proficiency (grades 13–15; higher levels 4–6); Mastery (grades 16–17; higher levels 7–8). The Department for Education and Skills describes

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[4] I owe this information to Nick Saville, Cambridge ESOL.

these six stages as approximately equivalent to the CEFR's six levels. Breakthrough covers A1 and some elements of A2; Preliminary covers A2 and some elements of B1; Intermediate and Advanced are equivalent to B1 and B2 respectively; while descriptors for Proficiency and Mastery, currently under development, will correspond to CEFR levels C1 and C2. External assessment leading to a qualification recognised within the National Qualifications Framework is under development by the UCLES Asset Languages project, <www.assetlanguages.org.uk>. Each language skill will be assessed separately, so that over time learners will be able to develop a unique profile. Assessment is already available for the first three stages in eight languages: Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Panjabi, Spanish and Urdu.

The development of the Languages Ladder scheme provides an interesting example of the power of the CEFR. To begin with, the Languages Ladder was conceived as a system of levels in some ways parallel to but certainly independent of the CEFR. What is more, it differs from the CEFR in two important respects: it does not distinguish between spoken (and written) interaction and production; and the development of its descriptors was not supported by empirical research. But such has been the CEFR's impact on the international language testing scene that the pressure to align the stages of the Ladder to the CEFR levels has become irresistible. It will be interesting to see how far this process continues in the years to come. For example, if descriptors for Proficiency and Mastery are developed in full harmony with CEFR levels C1 and C2, and if the Asset Languages assessment scheme is taken up to a significant extent, will the labels attached to the Languages Ladder's six stages be dropped in favour of the CEFR's labels?

3.4 Using the CEFR as the basis for developing new L2 curricula[5]

The two collections of papers on different aspects of the impact and reception of the CEFR referred to above (Alderson 2002; Morrow 2004a) contain several pieces that describe the application of the CEFR to curricula of various kinds. To date, however, there are few examples of curricula that have been (re)constructed from the bottom up using the descriptive apparatus of the CEFR to specify learning targets at different levels of proficiency. Two instances that have been documented are the Swiss IEF Project and the curriculum for English as a second language that has been developed for use in Irish primary schools. It is not coincidental that in

both cases the implementation tool is a version of the European Language Portfolio.

3.4.1 Example 1: The Swiss IEF project[6]

This project was carried out by the Centre for Language Teaching and Research of the University of Fribourg on behalf of the German-speaking Swiss cantons. Its purpose was to promote the quality and effectiveness of school-based foreign-language teaching and learning by improving the quality, coherence and transparency of assessment; it also contributed goal-setting and self-assessment checklists to the Swiss European Language Portfolio for lower secondary learners. Taking the CEFR as its basis, the project developed age-appropriate descriptors for sub-divisions of the first three common reference levels: A1.1 and A1.2, A2.1 and A2.2, B1.1 and B1.2. The bank of new descriptors (written in German, but to be translated into French, Italian, Romansch and English) was compiled in four steps as follows:

(i) Descriptors relevant to the needs of younger learners were collected from ELPs that had been validated by the Council of Europe and derived from textbooks and tests.

(ii) These descriptors were then qualitatively validated in teacher workshops: teachers decided on their relevance, assigned them to the common reference levels, and added to them on the basis of their experience.

(iii) Experts finalised the wording of the 'can do' statements and added further descriptors. They then made a selection of descriptors to cover the whole range of levels from A1.1 to B1.2, as well as a wide range of (sub-)skills and tasks.

(iv) 126 teachers each assessed seven of their pupils. The assessment was based on a series of nine partly overlapping questionnaires, all of which comprised 50 'can do' statements. The questionnaires contained a number of descriptors from the CEFR as level anchors; these provided a means of linking the questionnaires to one another. The teacher assessments were subjected to Rasch analysis, the results of which caused a number of descriptors to be eliminated. The remaining descriptors were scaled (i.e. put in order of difficulty) and anchored in relation to the common reference levels. Finally, the level thresholds established for the CEFR by the Swiss National Science Foundation Project led by Günther Schneider and Brian North (North & Schneider 1998; Schneider & North 1999) were

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[5] This section draws on a discussion paper prepared for the Council of Europe on age-appropriate descriptors. I am grateful to the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division for permission to reproduce the material here.

[6] These paragraphs are based on information provided by Peter Lenz, Centre for Language Teaching and Research, University of Fribourg. Further information (in German) is available from <http://www.babylonia-ti.ch/BABY204/baby204en.htm> accessed 29/4/2006.

applied in order to assign the descriptors to their levels.

Two further steps led to the development of checklists and an age-appropriate self-assessment grid for the Swiss ELP for lower secondary learners:

 (v) Selected 'can do' statements were reworded as 'I can' statements in order to make them suitable for self-assessment. They were then piloted in a number of classes in order to discover whether or not learners could make sense of the descriptors and use them to assess their own proficiency. The results of the piloting were used to rephrase the whole collection of descriptors.

(vi) Finally, checklists for levels A1.1, A1.2, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1, and B1.2 were developed, together with a new self-assessment grid. The IEF descriptor bank served as the main source; additional descriptors were taken from the CEFR and the Swiss ELP for adolescents and adults (Schneider, North & Koch 2001), mainly in order to provide a more comprehensive description of levels B1 and B2.

3.4.2 Example 2: ESL curricula for non-English-speaking pupils/students in Irish primary/post-primary schools

Integrated Ireland Language and Training has developed English Language Proficiency Benchmarks for learners of English as a second language in primary and post-primary (secondary) schools. Both sets of benchmarks (Integrate Ireland Language and Training 2003a, b) are based on the first three common reference levels (A1–B1) and offer a scaled curriculum designed to bring non-English-speaking learners to the point where they can access English-medium education without intensive English language support. The benchmarks were developed by bringing the self-assessment grid and illustrative scales of the CEFR into interaction with the official curricula and the results of classroom observation. Both documents begin with 'global benchmarks', which are effectively age-appropriate and domain-specific versions of the self-assessment grid. These are followed by a number of grids that refer respectively to recurrent themes in the primary curriculum and the main subject areas of the post-primary curriculum. The versions of the ELP that were developed on the basis of the benchmarks contain an abbreviation of the 'global benchmarks' in place of the self-assessment grid (which, however, is included as an appendix to each model) together with checklists derived from the relevant benchmarks.

The interrelation of these various descriptors can be illustrated with reference to the post-primary benchmarks. In the global benchmarks the following descriptors are given for SPOKEN INTERACTION at A1:

- *Can greet, take leave, say* please *and* thank you, *and use very basic words and phrases to ask for directions to another place in the school.*
- *Can ask for attention in class.*
- *Can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things and help him/her reformulate what he/she is trying to say.*
- *Can make basic requests in the classroom or playground (e.g. for the loan of a pencil) and respond appropriately to the basic requests of others.*

In the language passport section of the corresponding ELP these descriptors are summarised as:

- *I can say* hello *and* goodbye, please *and* thank you, *can ask for directions in the school, and can ask and answer simple questions.*

The benchmarks for A1 SPOKEN INTERACTION in the context of history and geography lessons are:

- *Can indicate lack of comprehension and ask for assistance with vocabulary specific to history/geography.*
- *Can use basic words and phrases and visual support (e.g. pointing to appropriate pictures or graphics in the textbook) to participate in group work.*

Finally, in the corresponding ELP the relevant descriptor in the history/geography A1 checklist is:

- *I can use some key words in group work.*

As these examples show, the Irish descriptors are not only age-appropriate but strongly domain-specific: they define the communicative proficiency required by learners OF A CERTAIN AGE who are learning IN A PARTICULAR EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT.

The two sets of benchmarks and their respective ELPs have provided an effective and robust basis for teaching English as a second language in Irish schools. In developing them, every effort was made to find secure anchors in the CEF scales. However, it has not been possible to validate the descriptors empirically, so the relation of the benchmarks to the CEFR's common reference levels remains a matter of faith. This will be true of any other adaptation of the CEFR descriptors that is not supported by empirical validation. It would, however, be possible to add descriptors from a source like this to a core collection of descriptors that had been empirically validated, like the IEF bank (this was the procedure used to develop the Council of Europe's bank of descriptors for use in adolescent and adult ELPs; see section 4.3 below). For further information on the Irish project, see Little & Lazenby Simpson (2004), Little (2005).

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4. Mediating the CEFR to L2 learners: the European Language Portfolio

4.1 The structure and functions of the European Language Portfolio and their relation to the CEF

From the beginning the European Language Portfolio was conceived as a way of mediating the CEFR to language learners. In 1991 the Rüschlikon Symposium, 'Transparency and coherence in language learning in Europe: objectives, evaluation, certification' (Council of Europe 1992), recommended that the Council of Europe should establish 'a comprehensive, coherent and transparent framework for the description of language proficiency'; it also considered that 'once the Common Framework has been elaborated, there should be devised, at the European level, a common instrument allowing individuals who so desire to maintain a record of their language learning achievement and experience, formal or informal' (ibid.: 39). The symposium recommended that the Council of Europe should set up two working parties, one to elaborate the Common Framework and the other to consider possible forms and functions of a European Language Portfolio (ibid.: 39f.):

> The Portfolio should contain a section in which formal qualifications are related to a common European scale, another in which the learner him or herself keeps a personal record of language learning experiences and possibly a third which contains examples of work done. Where appropriate, entries should be situated within the Common Framework. (ibid.: 40)

This description of the ELP clearly anticipates the tripartite structure of language passport, language biography, and dossier. At this early stage, however, the ELP was seen as a means of recording language learning experience and achievement; its pedagogical function had not yet begun to emerge.

In 1997 the Council of Europe held an intergovernmental conference in Strasbourg (Council of Europe 1997b) to launch the second draft of the CEFR (Council of Europe 1996b) and to present a collection of studies that considered how the ELP might be configured for language learners of different ages in different domains (Council of Europe 1997a). Over the next three years further work on the CEFR produced the version that was published in English and French in 2001 (Council of Europe 2001a, b) and is the subject of this article. Simultaneously projects in fifteen Council of Europe member states and three international non-governmental organisations developed, piloted, and revised versions of the ELP for language learners in primary, lower and upper secondary, vocational, tertiary, and adult education (for details, see Schärer 2000; for further background, see Little 2002). The leaders of these pilot projects met twice each year to report on experience and exchange ideas, which meant that there was a great deal of cross-fertilisation in the design of different ELP models. During the pilot phase the *Principles and Guidelines* that define the ELP and its functions in relation to Council of Europe policy were gradually elaborated and refined (Council of Europe 2000).

In keeping with the Council of Europe's ethos, it was never intended to develop 'canonical' ELP models for different categories of learner. Instead, the Council of Europe established a Validation Committee and invited competent authorities in the member states to develop ELPs and submit them to the committee for validation (a matter of establishing their conformity with the *Principles and Guidelines*) and accreditation. At the time of writing (April 2006), the Council of Europe's ELP web site lists 75 accredited models from 26 member states and three international non-governmental organisations.

4.2 Policy implications of the ELP

The *Principles and Guidelines* (Council of Europe 2000) are divided into four sections. The first declares that the ELP reflects the Council of Europe's concern with

- the deepening of mutual understanding among citizens in Europe;
- respect for diversity of cultures and ways of life;
- the protection and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity;
- the development of plurilingualism as a life-long process;
- the development of the language learner;
- the development of the capacity for independent language learning;
- transparency and coherence in language learning programmes.

(Council of Europe 2000: 2)

The first three of these concerns have always been fundamental to the Council of Europe's political, cultural and educational agenda, and the fifth and sixth (having to do with the development of the individual learner) have also been present since the 1970s. It is the fourth and seventh, with their focus respectively on plurilingualism and transparency and coherence, that reflect concerns specific to the CEFR.

The second section of the *Principles and Guidelines* explains that the ELP

- is a tool to promote plurilingualism and pluriculturalism;
- is the property of the learner;
- values the full range of the learner's language and intercultural competence and experience regardless of whether acquired within or outside formal education;

- is a tool to promote learner autonomy;
- has both a pedagogic function to guide and support the learner in the process of language learning and a reporting function to record proficiency in languages;
- is based on the CEFR with explicit reference to the common levels of competence;
- encourages learner self-assessment and the recording of assessment by teachers, educational authorities and examination bodies;
- incorporates a minimum of common features which make it recognisable and comprehensible across Europe;
- may be one of a series of ELP models that the individual learner will possess in the course of life-long learning.

(Council of Europe 2000: 2)

This description of the ELP succinctly captures the challenge that it poses to language education. It is designed to promote plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, which thus become explicit educational goals (cf. the discussion of plurilingualism in section 2.4 above); it insists on the equal status of all language learning, wherever it may take place; it aims to foster the development of learner autonomy and assigns as much importance to learner self-assessment as to assessment by teachers and external authorities; and by making explicit reference to the CEFR's common reference levels it implies that in any context language learning goals and content can be expressed as a collection of 'I can' descriptors.

The third section of the *Principles and Guidelines* is addressed to ELP developers; it briefly describes the functions of the ELP's three parts and lays down basic design criteria. On their own these criteria will not get the novice ELP developer very far, but detailed guidance is provided by Schneider & Lenz (2001) and the annotations that the Validation Committee has added to the *Principles and Guidelines* (Council of Europe 2004b). The fourth section addresses implementation issues: what an educational authority needs to do in order to promote the effective use of its ELP(s).

4.3 The ELP's goal-setting/self-assessment checklists as learner-centred curriculum

The common levels of the CEFR are fundamental to the ELP, not just because they make explicit the relation between the ELP and the CEFR, but because without them it is difficult to imagine a coherent ELP concept capable of being translated into many different forms, all of them sharing a strong family resemblance. Early in the ELP pilot projects (1998–2000) it became clear that in order to plan and evaluate their learning, learners need more than the summary level descriptions of the self-assessment

grid (Council of Europe 2001a: 26f.). Thus, although the *Principles and Guidelines* do not explicitly require it (see, however, the annotated version; Council of Europe 2004b), the inclusion of detailed checklists of descriptors arranged by level and skill quickly became obligatory; and it is fair to say that the checklists play a key role in the dynamic that supports effective ELP use. The language passport allows the learner/owner to maintain a summary of language learning achievement and intercultural experience, and he or she can collect concrete evidence of that achievement in the dossier. But if the ELP comes to play a central role in the language learning process, it does so by virtue of the reflective processes of planning, monitoring and evaluating learning on the basis of the checklists. These processes are stimulated and captured in the language biography. This explains why the single most important practical support the Council of Europe has provided for ELP developers is a bank of descriptors compiled by Günther Schneider and Peter Lenz, which takes as its starting point the empirically derived descriptors of the Swiss ELP for older adolescents and adults (Schneider et al. 2001) and supplements them with descriptors drawn from other validated ELPs (see the Council of Europe's ELP web site, <http://www.coe.int/portfolio>, for the descriptor bank and a revised version of chapter 6 of Schneider & Lenz 2001). It also explains why there is a need to develop descriptors that meet the special needs of young learners without impairing the integrity of the common reference levels (cf. Hasselgreen 2003, 2005).

As far as the ELP user is concerned, the checklists quickly become the curriculum, expressed in communicative/behavioural terms. In some cases the construction of checklists is itself an act of curriculum development (cf. the ESL curricula for Irish primary and post-primary schools described in section 3.4.2 above); in others ELP developers must construct their checklists by translating an existing curriculum into an inventory of communicative tasks (see e.g. Ushioda & Ridley 2002). Clearly, a close fit between checklists, curriculum and examination requirements is essential if an ELP is to be implemented successfully.

4.4 Pedagogical impact of the ELP

Although the ELP was originally conceived primarily as a means of recording language learning experience and achievement, the pilot projects (1998–2000) were largely concerned to develop its pedagogical function. This is hardly surprising, for the ELP is unlikely to mean much to learners of any age unless it has played a central role in the learning process. In other words, the ELP's recording and pedagogical functions are necessarily interdependent. Without a strongly developed pedagogical function, there is unlikely to be much worth recording; on

the other hand, the attempt to record aspects of the learning process as well as learning outcomes is what drives the pedagogical function forward. Available reports suggest that the pedagogical impact of the ELP arises from two factors, both connected to the action-oriented description of language proficiency developed in the CEFR. The checklists of 'I can' descriptors help teachers and learners to adopt a task-based orientation to teaching and learning (cf. the example of a Czech teacher cited by Little & Perclová 2001: 38f.; also the nine brief case studies from seven countries collected in Little 2003b); but the checklists also provide a means of helping learners to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. Teachers participating in the pilot projects reported that the ELP had a strongly positive effect on learner motivation (Little & Perclová 2001: 18) and accommodated a wide range of learner ability (ibid.: 19). Despite persistent rumours of ELP-oriented research, published findings that are more than anecdotal remain a rarity; where they do exist, however, they tend to confirm the feedback collected from the pilot projects (e.g. Ushioda & Ridley 2002; Sisamakis 2006). Although there is by now ample anecdotal evidence that the ELP can have a transformative impact on individual classrooms where particular languages are being taught and learnt, we do not yet have an empirical study of its use as a means of bringing the teaching and learning of different languages into interaction with one another so that it helps learners to become explicitly aware of their developing plurilingual profile. Moreover, study of the ELP models validated to date shows that we have a long way to go before we can claim that the ELP has had its intended impact on the development of intercultural learning and intercultural awareness.

5. The CEFR and the assessment of L2 proficiency

We have noted more than once that the common reference levels, especially in summary form, are easily the best known part of the CEFR; and it is true to say that in discussion and use of the CEFR much more attention has been paid to the 'vertical' than to the 'horizontal' dimension of language learning. One obvious reason for this is the attractiveness of 'universal' scales of language proficiency at a time when populations are increasingly mobile and the easy comparability of language qualifications has so much to offer. Another reason can be found in the genesis of the CEFR. Those parts of the document that focus on the 'horizontal' dimension of language learning synthesise research findings at one remove, drawing on a number of preliminary studies, for example, those on strategic competence and strategies by Holec (1996), Little (1996a, b) and Richterich (1996), and on sociocultural competences by Byram, Zarate &

Neuner (1997). Those parts of the CEFR that have to do with the 'vertical' dimension, on the other hand, are rooted in original research: the CEFR's 'Can do' scales and their descriptors were arrived at on the basis of rigorous empirical and statistical procedures (for detailed accounts of this research, see North & Schneider 1998; Schneider & North 1999, 2000; North 2000a, b, 2002a, 2004). What is more, this work ran parallel to the development of the ALTE 'can do' statements, work on which began in 1992 (N. Jones 2002: 168), the year of the Rüschlikon Symposium, while the DIALANG descriptors were developed in parallel with the CEFR. Both sets of descriptors are included in the 2001 edition of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001a, b).

5.1 Linking existing examinations to the CEFR's proficiency levels

At the beginning of chapter 3 of the CEFR, which introduces the common reference levels, we read: 'One of the aims of the Framework is to help partners to describe the levels of proficiency required by existing standards, tests and examinations in order to facilitate comparisons between different systems of qualification' (Council of Europe 2001a: 21). In 2002 the Council of Europe launched a project to assist this process. The first outcome of the project was a preliminary pilot version of a manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR (Council of Europe 2003; the authors of the manual are Brian North, Neus Figueras, Sauli Takala, Norman Verhelst and Piet van Avermaet). The manual is designed to support four sets of procedures: familiarisation with the CEFR's common reference levels; specification of examinations in terms of content, test development, marking and grading, and test analysis, and the relation of that specification to the CEFR scales; standardisation in assessing performance and judging the difficulty of test items in relation to the CEFR scales; and empirical validation through the analysis of test data (for a description of these procedures and a summary of possible future benefits but also less desirable consequences, see Figueras et al. 2005). The Council of Europe has also published a reference supplement to the preliminary pilot version of the manual, written by Jayanti Banerjee, Felianka Kaftandjieva and Norman Verhelst, and edited by Sauli Takala (Council of Europe 2004a). The supplement discusses approaches to standard setting, classical test theory, qualitative methods in test validation, generalisability theory, factor analysis, and item response theory.

The purpose of the so-called Manual Project is not only to provide these foundational tools, however, but to produce samples in various languages that illustrate the different language skills at the different CEFR levels. Details of the materials currently available can be found on the Council

of Europe web site,[7] which also offers a guide to organising seminars to calibrate examples of written performance (Council of Europe 2005) and other supporting documentation. In addition, the various procedures elaborated in the manual are being piloted in 41 projects in 21 countries.[8]

5.2 Using the CEFR as the basis for developing new assessment instruments

On the first page of the CEFR we are told that it 'provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe' (Council of Europe 2001a: 1). In other words, the descriptive apparatus that embodies the CEFR's action-oriented approach is intended to apply not only to the comparison of language examinations but to the specification of learning goals, the development of teaching and learning materials and procedures, and the design of examinations and tests. Some measure of the extent to which the CEFR has become a key reference point in language test development is provided by Eckes et al. (2005), a series of brief reports on the reform of language assessment in the Baltic States, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia.

Chapter 9 of the CEFR, devoted to assessment, proposes that there are three main ways in which it can be used in relation to language tests:

(i) For the specification of the content of tests and examinations: WHAT IS ASSESSED.
(ii) For stating the criteria to determine the attainment of a learning objective: HOW PERFORMANCE IS INTERPRETED.
(iii) For describing the levels of proficiency in existing tests and examinations thus enabling comparisons to be made across different systems of qualifications: HOW COMPARISONS CAN BE MADE. (Council of Europe 2001a: 178; emphasis in original)

These are strong claims if they are taken literally: as Weir (2005: 283) points out, test developers require more comprehensive specifications than the CEFR itself contains (the same point is made in practical rather than theoretical terms by Little et al. 2002 and Little 2005). In fact, however, the claims should rather be taken to mean that in each respect the CEFR is intended to serve as a starting point and basic reference; hence, for example, the detailed support provided by the manual for relating

language examinations to the CEFR and its reference supplement.

To date the so-called Dutch CEF Construct Project (Alderson et al. 2004) is the most substantial response to the need to supplement the CEFR's scales and descriptors in order to generate test content. The project involved 'gathering expert judgments on the usability of the CEF for test construction, identifying what might be missing from the CEF, developing a frame for analysis of tests and specifications, and then examining a range of test specifications, guidelines to item writers, and sample test tasks at the six levels of the CEF' (ibid.: ii). As well as a critical review of the CEFR, the project produced compilations of CEFR scales and test specifications at the different CEFR levels and a series of classification systems, which led to the development of a web-based instrument for characterising tests and items in relation to the CEFR.[9] The Dutch CEF Construct Project was concerned with listening and reading: there is a clear need for a similar project focussed on speaking and writing. At the same time there is no doubt that the CEFR's action-oriented approach can be drawn on to support the development of communicative language tests in contexts where they may still be a novelty. Little (2005), for example, describes the development of batteries of placement, progress and achievement tests for the graded primary ESL curriculum described in section 3.4.2 above.

5.3 DIALANG

Because the CEFR's action-oriented approach assigns a central role to the description of communicative behaviour in terms of 'I can' and 'Can do' statements, it brings language learning/teaching and assessment into a much closer relation to each other than has often been the case. What is more, that relation is accessible to learners as well as teachers and test developers. Although learners may not always be able to identify formal deficiencies in their use of the target language, they generally know which communicative tasks they can and cannot perform, and with what degree of assurance. One of the first projects to exploit this fact was DIALANG, <http://www.dialang.org>, an on-line language assessment system whose development was funded by the European Union. Currently tests are available at all six common reference levels in fourteen languages (Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Icelandic, Irish, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish) for the skills of listening, reading and writing, and for structures and vocabulary. The tests are free of charge; no certificates are issued.

There are five steps in the DIALANG procedure. First users choose which test to take (language and

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[7] <http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/Languages/Language_Policy/Common_Framework_of_Reference/3illustrationse.asp> accessed 29/4/2006.
[8] I am grateful to Waldemar Martyniuk for providing this information.

[9] <http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/cefgrid> accessed 29/4/2006.

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skill focus). Then they are presented with an optional placement test that requires them to say whether 75 words presented on screen belong to the target language or are invented. The third step is self–assessment against a series of 'I can' statements, designed to get users to reflect on their language skills. The second and third steps are both optional, but users who skip them run the risk of being given a test that is inappropriate to their proficiency level. On the other hand, if users take the second and third steps and what follows suggests that they have under– or overestimated their skills, DIALANG tells them so. The fourth step is the test itself, in the language and skill chosen in the first step. The final step gives users a great deal of feedback on their test performance. The essential underpinning for the system is provided by the DIALANG scales, which were developed on the basis of the second draft of the CEFR (Council of Europe 1996b), descriptors being translated from English into the thirteen other languages of the system. The development of DIALANG has been described by Huhta et al. (2002), Huhta & Figueras (2004), and Alderson & Huhta (2005).

5.4 Reconciling assessment by examination boards and teachers with the culture of self-assessment promoted by the ELP

Published accounts of DIALANG emphasise that its function is diagnostic: by using its tests language learners can become more aware of the skills they already possess, learn to make informed judgements about their behavioural capacities in their target language(s), and thus support their further language learning. The 'I can' checklists that are central to the ELP perform much the same function as the self-assessment module in DIALANG, the difference being that the ELP user does not receive automatic feedback; though in some teaching/learning contexts learners who make a claim about their target language proficiency are expected to be ready to substantiate it to their teacher or other learners (see e.g. Little & Perclová 2001: 38).

Checklists derived from the common reference levels of the CEFR mark an important advance for self-assessment in language learning, for they make it possible for learners to assess themselves using the same objective scales that in principle may underpin the tests and examinations they are required to take. At the same time, the presence of such checklists as a key element in the ELP adds a significant new dimension to portfolio–based language learning and assessment. Proponents of this approach claim that it 'enables instruction to be linked to assessment, promotes reflection, helps learners to take responsibility for their own learning, enables learners to see gaps in their learning, and enables learners to take risks' (Ekbatani 2000: 6–7; see also

Kohonen 1999). Similar considerations underlie the claim in the *Principles and Guidelines* that the ELP is designed to foster the development of learner autonomy. But as with earlier approaches to self-assessment, so with portfolio learning and assessment the problem has been to devise appropriate assessment criteria. The checklists provide a solution.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that when it is undertaken using carefully developed instruments, self-assessment can correlate well with teacher assessment and examinations (e.g. Oscarson 1978, 1984, 1989; Ross 1998). Spolsky (1992: 36) proposes, however, that the accuracy of self-assessment depends on whether or not two basic conditions are met: there should be no advantage in giving inaccurate answers; and the responses required must focus on aspects of language proficiency which lie within the responder's experience. The 'I can' basis of self-assessment in the ELP arguably meets the second of these conditions. Whether it will be possible to develop an assessment culture that accommodates self-assessment alongside assessment by tests and examinations remains an open question. There is no doubt that the ease with which materials can be downloaded from the Internet has provided an enormous boost to plagiarism; on the other hand, seriously exaggerated claims made on the basis of plagiarised material can quickly be exposed in an oral exam in which the learner presents his or her ELP to the examiner (for further discussion of this point, see Little 2003a).

6. Challenges and prospects

It should be clear by now that the CEFR has had a significant if partial and uneven impact on the teaching, learning and assessment of languages in Europe. Since it was first given wide distribution in 1996, but more especially since its commercial pub–lication in 2001, applications of the CEFR in various domains raise the question whether the descriptive model needs to be consolidated and perhaps expanded. For example, although the levels and scales that constitute the CEFR's vertical dimension were developed on the basis of rigorous research, not all of the descriptors were empirically derived: those for written production were 'mainly developed from those for spoken production' (CEFR, Appen–dix B; Council of Europe 2001a: 220). This implies that it may be appropriate to undertake a new phase of empirical development. Further work could also usefully be done on the CEFR's horizontal dimension, where some of the descriptors are open to challenge. For instance, fluency is defined largely in terms of hesitation (Council of Europe 2001a: 28f.), yet native speakers often hesitate in the production of indisputably fluent speech. More generally, it would be worth exploring the relation (if any) between the teaching progression that is reflected in the CEFR's

'Can do' scales and the orders of L2 acquisition uncovered by empirical research. Finally, the fact that language test developers require more information than the CEFR itself can possibly provide suggests (as noted above) the need for another project like the Dutch CEF Construct Project but focused on speaking and writing.

Over the past decade and a half plurilingualism has become increasingly central to the Council of Europe's policy declarations and projects, but neither the CEFR nor the ELP does full justice to the concept. Our plurilingualism is rooted in our first language, as the CEFR acknowledges: 'an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience)' (Council of Europe 2001a: 10). Yet the CEFR offers an apparatus for describing second and foreign language proficiency, and the ELP is explicitly concerned with learning languages other than the mother tongue. The Council of Europe has begun to address the first of these contradictions by launching a new project on languages of school education. According to the Council's web site, the aim of the project is

to support social inclusion and equal opportunities for successful learning by (i) analysing and defining approaches to curricula for language(s) of school education/mother tongue education, taking into account the language skills needed for study in all curriculum areas; (ii) examining possible links with learning, teaching and assessment in foreign (and other) languages in order to promote a coherent approach to language education.[10]

If this project succeeds in its second aim to the extent of developing a descriptive apparatus that applies to first as well as second and foreign languages, this will have important consequences not only for the CEFR but for the ELP and the elaboration of language curricula. Meanwhile, general policy issues arising from the concept of plurilingualism are central to the Council of Europe's *Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe* (Beacco & Byram 2003) and play an important role in the language education policy profiles that the Council of Europe helps member states to develop (to date profiles are available for three countries – Cyprus, Hungary and Norway; and in progress for seven more – Ireland, Lithuania, Lombardy, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovenia and the Slovak Republic).

The CEFR poses a challenge to language education across Europe by virtue of its comprehensiveness. As we have seen, its action-oriented approach entails that it is possible to use the same 'can do' descriptor to identify a learning target, shape the learning/teaching

process, and guide the assessment of learning outcomes. This is perhaps the CEFR's single most innovative feature: that it brings curriculum, teaching/learning and assessment into much closer interdependence than has usually been the case. But the coherence thus achieved means that the application of the CEFR to just one of the domains it addresses may very well generate problems in one or more of the other domains. Revising school leaving exams to bring them into line with the common reference levels, for example, may create difficulties for teachers if the curriculum and textbooks are not revised at the same time as part of the same process. A version of this challenge confronts the ELP, which seems most likely to succeed long-term when it is integral to the reform of curricula, teaching approaches and assessment. But although many (perhaps most) ELPs were designed with pedagogical reform in view, few of them have been accompanied by thoroughgoing curricular reform or programmes of teacher education.

In the end, of course, the Council of Europe can only develop tools and provide expert support; what use is made of the tools and support depends on the member states. In their account of the development of the manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR, Figueras et al. (2005: 276f.) sketch two possible scenarios. In one, the process of relating tests, examinations and certificates to the CEFR results in greater professionalism and increased transparency; in the other, claims of linkage to the CEFR are made without due process and validation and are thus meaningless. As Figueras et al. (2005) acknowledge, both scenarios already exist side by side; and the same is likely to become increasingly true in the other domains of CEFR application, curriculum development and pedagogy. But this is only to be expected. Just as the CEFR itself may strive to be comprehensive in its descriptions but can never be exhaustive, so its impact may be wide-ranging and profound but can never be total.

Acknowledgements

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