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The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: multi-faceted and intriguing

Qu'en est-il six ans après la validation du Cadre de Référence? Qu'en est-il de cette vaste campagne pour le plurilinguisme qui réunit différentes cultures, différents pays et différentes langues?

La traduction du CER dans 36 langues, son instrumentalisation et les projets d'implémentation dans les écoles montrent l'importance et l'impact de cette création du Conseil de l'Europe au niveau politique, pour l'éducation et dans le domaine de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage.

Cet article tente d'analyser sous ces trois différents angles les objectifs déclarés, mais aussi les extrapolations possibles à partir de ces déclarations. Le CER tout comme le PEL nous sont présentés comme des outils certes importants et utiles, mais qui devront au cours du temps évoluer et répondre à de nouveaux besoins. (red.)

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) was officially published in 2001, the European Year of Languages.

It has since been translated into 36 languages; an indication of perceived relevance and immediate impact on innovation in foreign language learning, teaching and assessment.

The CEFR is one of a series of tools of the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe designed to foster linguistic and cultural diversity and promote plurilingualism.

Six years after the official publication of the CEFR, an International Forum[1] in Strasbourg (6-8 February 2007) held an in-depth discussion on the role, use, impact and influence of the CEFR. It also examined appropriate forms of assistance and guidance to foster an even broader use of the framework in the spirit of its underlying principles.

This article reviews the current debate on the CEFR from three different closely related perspectives: a) the political context b) the educational context c) learning and teaching. It traces current use and relates discernable effects to declared and non-declared goals and expectations.

The Common European Framework of reference in its political context

The Council of Europe[2](CoE) itself is an intergovernmental organisation of 46 member countries, including Switzerland and all the 27 European Union states.

The CoE is concerned with the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, democratic citizenship, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue. Its overarching goals hence reach beyond language learning, yet the promotion of plurilingualism and intercultural competence has been one of its major activities ever since the 1960s. It is part of its strive to foster mutual understanding, respect and dialogue beyond cultural, national and social boundaries.

The idea of a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and its twin, the European Language Portfolio, was launched at a Council of Europe Symposium[3] in Rüschlikon, Switzerland in 1991 shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall.

The CEFR[4] was developed by a Council of Europe (CoE) international working group set up by the Language Policy Division with a view to promote transparency and coherence in language learning and teaching in Europe.

The main functions defined at the outset were:

a) To provide a metalanguage common across educational sectors, national and linguistic boundaries that could be used to talk about objectives and language levels.

b) To agree common reference points based on the work on objectives that had taken place in the Council of Europe's Modern Languages projects since the 1970s.

c) To encourage practitioners in the language field to reflect on their practice, in relation to learners' practical language learning needs, the setting of suitable objectives and the tracking of learner progress.

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

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

The CEFR has nine chapters. Chapter three "Common Reference Levels" and the related appendices A to D have so far on the political level attracted the most attention and produced the most visible effects. The danger seems to loom that the framework is perceived as one common European standard prescribed from above.

For some, there seems to be an inherent tension if not a paradox between two opposing functions and claims of the CEFR. How is it possible that it is only descriptive and at the same time a clearly defined and stable yardstick, a central and single system for scaling language competence?

Daniel Coste, one of the authors of the CEFR, in his paper on "Contextualising uses of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages"[5] brilliantly analysed the inherent strengths and dangers of a descriptive tool, which once published is interpreted and used by different interested stakeholder groups as they choose.

He considers various demands users make on the framework and analyses five types of contextualisation[6], assuming that contextualisation whatever form it takes, is meaningful only when it is part of a plan for change and development and not when it is a mere re-labelling exercise.

The questions "who is responsible to whom?" in creating a new European educational space and "which levels of subsidiarity apply when putting the CEFR to a consistent and transparent use?" was addressed by Francis Goullier[7] at the CoE Forum.

The CEFR and the Council of Europe's various language policy tools have clearly had a very significant impact throughout Europe. They profoundly transformed the European educational space. For Goullier, member states have at least as great a responsibility to each other as to the CoE. The key question to be considered today is "who is responsible for what?" rather than "what can the CoE do for us?".

The dynamic in the various interlinked spheres of development is not even. Political priorities stimulate action in a good number of domains; persuasion is still needed in others. One of the key characteristics of the CEFR is that it affects different groups of players and that all involved will have to face major changes. Transparency and coherence is of essence in presenting, mediating and explaining expected outcomes.

To place the CEFR into its political context a number of other initiatives and tools closely related to the framework need to be considered.

The Language Policy Division of the CoE published at the beginning of 2007 the main version of the "*Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe*"[8]

The guide is a response to the need to develop language policies on the basis of a coherent approach: clarifying principles and defining goals, analysing situations, identifying resources, expectations and needs, and the implementation of these measures.

A central principle of the document is that educational policies should be based on plurilingualism as a value and a competence.

The concept of plurilingualism is defined simply as 'the potential and/or the ability to use several languages to varying levels of proficiency and for different purposes' and more precisely, using the CEFR (p 168) as: 'Plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw'.

The aim of the guide is to offer an analytical tool which can serve as a reference for formulating or reorganis-

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ing language teaching in member states (essentially in education systems) and, through it, an examination of language policies. Like all tools of the CoE, it is not prescriptive and seeks rather to gain support for principles and actions that can be shared.

The *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies* is available in two versions to make it accessible to readers with different backgrounds and needs:

a) the main reference version for professionals interested in all aspects of language policy making including the technical dimensions.

b) an executive version for those involved in language education policy decision-making; it addresses the question 'how can a policy that aims to preserve and develop linguistic diversity be drawn up?'

The guide emphasises the central place of languages in all educational systems including mother tongues, minority and migrant languages, languages of instruction and languages taught as a subject, putting them into relation to the social and educational challenges that have to be confronted in Europe on the basis of common principles. It draws on the CEFR, focussing on the political agenda of language education.

The guide for the development of language education policies and the CEFR are supporting tools for another service offered by the Language Policy Division of the CoE: the development of *Language Education Policy Profiles.* So far seven country or regional profiles have been drawn up in cooperation between the inviting national or regional authorities and teams of international experts, others are in progress or in preparation.

The CEFR has over the last few years been officially adopted by most member states of the CoE and the EU as the reference document on which to base further discussions and developments. It has established itself as common

metalanguage across national and linguistic boundaries when discussing language policy as was initially planned and beyond as a metalanguage between language professionals engaged in different sectors and domains. It facilitated dialogue and contributed in so doing significantly to increased transparency of reform processes, their effects and outcomes.

However, transparency has not only been perceived as a blessing; incoherencies exposed require remedial action and thus are pose challenges. Transparency needs sustained attention and unwavering determination to reach higher levels of quality, and higher levels of coherence.

To build coherence needs time and sustained effort, transparency needs acceptance of never-ending reflection and the will to balance goals with reality.

The Common European Framework of reference in its educational context

Tools and documents once published lead their own lives. They tend to be interpreted, used or not used, applauded or criticised out of a wide variety of perspectives.

Being a descriptive not a prescriptive document, the CEFR seems to be pre-destined and ideally suited to multiple approaches and uses fostering unity in diversity.

During the Language Forum of the CoE disquiet was expressed at a number of occasions that interpretations and uses made of the CEFR tended to be too one-sided or too partial.

Levels and descriptors were compared to sails of a ship visible at the horizon long before the whole vessel can be seen. The most visible and undeniable impact of the CEFR in the domains of assessment and testing was compared to the sails on the horizon.

The implied concern that interest might have been focused too much

on assessment and testing, possibly to the detriment of other aspects of learning and teaching, is difficult to sustain fully when current uses of the CEFR in educational contexts are considered.

The spectrum of current use of the CEFR includes among others: a) curriculum development b) negotiation and communication of coherent standards c) transfer of competence at change points in the educational system d) reflection and negotiation of school language policies e) developments around the European Language Portfolio: ownership, life-long learning, self-assessment, competence profiles, reporting, intercultural competence, etc. f) teacher training and education g) testing and assessment h) publishing i) promoting plurilingualism.

The papers presented during the Policy Forum[9] offered useful reminders to the "true" intent of the CEFR, examples of use and new perspectives, among them:

- *The CEFR Common Reference Levels: validated reference points and local strategies*, Brian North, February 2007, restating the descriptive nature of the framework as a descriptive metasystem which provides reference points and is not a tool to be implemented without further elaboration and adaptation to local circumstances.

- Introduction and feedback from the preliminary pilot phase of the *Manual Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR.* The manual aims a) to contribute to competence building in the area of linking assessments to the CEFR b) to encourage increased transparency on the part of examination providers c) to encourage the creation of formal and informal national and international networks of institutions and experts.

- A draft report of the Conference "*Languages of Schooling: towards a framework for Europe*" organised by the Language Policy Division in Strasbourg in October 2006.

The aims of the conference were a) to inform participants of the preliminary work undertaken which has sought to clarify concepts and lay the ground work for this new project b) to seek feedback from participants on how a new European framework of reference for 'languages of schooling' within the wider context of 'language education' might best address the challenges facing member states when seeking to raise achievement.

Each of these papers addresses core issues in response to frequently asked questions or concerns which have arisen when using the CEFR. They explain and guide.

The state-of-the-art paper *"The CEFR: Contents, purpose, origin, reception and impact"*[10] by David Little provides a complementary overview of categories of uses with brief considerations of present challenges and future prospects.

To grasp reactions, activities and effects generated by the CEFR more fully it is advisable to have another look at the horizon; ever increasing number of sails, a whole fleet is to be discovered.

The CEFR has been used as a reference tool for multiple purposes in multiple settings. An increasingly large poll of examples bares witness to creative attempts to contextualise and harmonise local goals and priorities with common European principles.

The CEFR has been used as a basis a) for developing new L2 curricula b) for developing supporting tools (e.g. Language Portfolio models, benchmarks, assessment tools, etc.) c) to structure related learner and teacher education and training d) to engage in and conduct meaningful dialogue between different groups of stake-holders e) to set, communicate and explain transparent and coherent learning objectives f) to introduce and manage change g) to promote educational quality development h) to assess learning outcome i) to foster cooperation and dialogue, etc.

Development work has been undertaken at different hierarchical levels in many different locations and hence know-how and experience accumulated in a wide variety of contexts. Much of this information is not always easily accessible; it is scattered around in Europe and beyond.

Yet the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe generally publishes key publications, studies, recommendations, guidelines and information gathered during its activities on its website. Links normally lead to further information. Two specific pools of information provide more detailed, pertinent information related to the use, activities and effects of the CEFR.
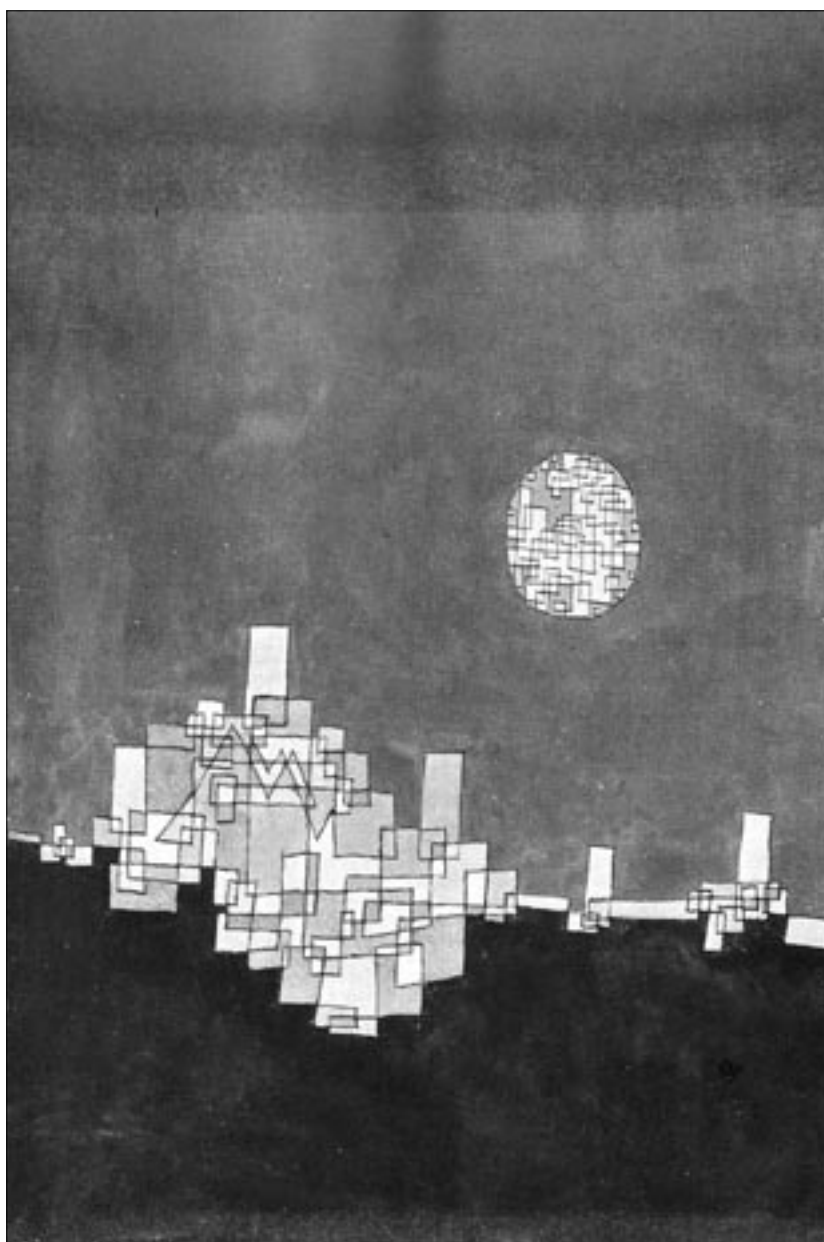
Paul Klee, Lieu d'élection.

- ***The European Language Portfolio project***

  The ELP is a tool mediating the CEFR to teachers, learners and other interested parties. Some 80 ELP models covering a wide variety of target groups and contexts have so far been validated; many are still being developed or piloted. Each validated model conforms to sets of common European principles and guidelines and is hence an example of successful contextualisation. Progress reports[11] featuring an executive summary, a core section relating development to objectives and an overview of activities in the member states are produced annually.
- ***The second medium term programme of the ECML[12] in Graz***

  It features projects directly related both to the CEFR and the ELP.

Much additional information is contained in national, regional and institutional reports produced out of different perspectives, for different purposes, in different contexts, at different times, in many different languages.

Taken together they show that the CEFR is a tool with great potential to enhance quality of dialogue, processes, products and outcome across many old boundaries.

The need to share this accumulated wealth of know-how and experience has been recognised in the conclusions of the CEFR Policy Forum in Strasbourg.

The CEFR in the context of learning and teaching

The CEFR has entered the schools. It exercises its influence mediated through curricula, official instructions, pedagogic materials, assessment tools, the ELP, learner and teacher training, etc.

It has started to open new horizons and expectations, among them a) the vision of a common European educational space b) the concepts of plurilingualism and life-long learning c) the concept of reflective learning d) the goal to create a new assessment culture including self-assessment e) the goal to develop learner autonomy, etc.

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

Footnotes

[1] "The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the development of language policies: challenges and responsibilities", Intergovernmental Forum, CoE Strasbourg, 2007.

[2] General information see: www.coe.int Language Policy Division see: www.coe.int/lang

[3] Council of Europe, Intergovernmental Symposium „Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe: Objectives, Assessment and Certification", held in Rüschlikon, Switzerland in 1991.

[4] Authoring group: John Trim, Daniel Coste, Brian North and Joseph Sheils.

[5] Daniel Cost February 2007, "Contextualising uses of the CEFR", paper presented at the Policy Forum of the Council of Europe.

[6] Taking account of the multi-referentiality of the proficiency scales; Exploiting methodological and pedagogical avenues and openings; Supplementing and extending the reference tools in certain directions; Full commitment to plurilingual education; Plurilingualism, social cohesion and participatory democracy.

[7] Francis Goullier February 2007 " Impact of the CEFR and the Council of Europe's work on the new European educational space", paper presented at the Policy Forum of the Council of Europe.

[8] Language Policy Division of the CoE, 2007: "From linguistic diversity to plurilingual education: Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe". Authoring team: Jean-Claude Beacco and Michael Byram. Down-

loadable from: www.coe.int/lang

[9] May be downloaded from: www.coe.int/lang

[10] in Language Teaching, the International research resource for language professionals, Volume 39/ 3, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[11] CoE, Schärer 2001 ELP final report on the pilot project; 2004 ELP from piloting to implementation.
Consolidated report; 2005 and 2006 ELP interim progress reports.

[12] www.ecml.at

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