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Edited by Lynda Taylor and Cyril J. Weir

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1 Relating language examinations to the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

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About the Council of Europe

The Council of Europe is the continent's oldest intergovernmental organisation, founded in 1949, with its permanent headquarters in Strasbourg, France. At the time of writing, it serves 800 million people in 46 member states, with five observers (Canada, Japan, the Holy See, Mexico and the United States).

The main aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve a greater unity between its members. It was created to: protect human rights and the rule of law in all member states; consolidate democratic stability in Europe by backing political, legal and constitutional reforms undertaken nationally, regionally and locally; seek solutions to social problems such as intolerance, discrimination against minorities, human cloning, drugs, terrorism, corruption and organised crime; promote and develop a European cultural identity, with special emphasis on education; and promote social cohesion and social rights.

The Council of Europe has been active in the area of languages for over 40 years now. Its programmes are co-coordinated by two complementary bodies: the Language Policy Division in Strasbourg and the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz (Austria). The Division in Strasbourg focuses on instruments and initiatives for the development and analysis of language education policy for the countries which have ratified the European Cultural Convention and provides a forum for debate on policy development. The Centre in Graz (ECML), established in 1995, has as its mission the implementation of language policies, including support for the policy instruments developed in Strasbourg, and the

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promotion of innovative approaches. Its strategic objectives include the practice of modern language learning and teaching and the training of language educators.

Language education policy aims and principles

The Council of Europe language education policies aim to promote:

- **PLURILINGUALISM:** all are entitled to develop a degree of communicative ability in a number of languages over their lifetime in accordance with their needs.
- **LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY:** Europe is multilingual and all its languages are equally valuable modes of communication and expressions of identity; the right to use and to learn one's language(s) is protected in Council of Europe Conventions.
- **MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING:** the opportunity to learn other languages is an essential condition for intercultural communication and acceptance of cultural differences.
- **DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP:** participation in democratic and social processes in multilingual societies is facilitated by the plurilingual competence of individuals.
- **SOCIAL COHESION:** equality of opportunity for personal development, education, employment, mobility, access to information and cultural enrichment depends on access to language learning throughout life.¹

The following guiding principles define the CoE language education policy:

- Language learning is for *all*: opportunities for developing their plurilingual repertoire is a necessity for all citizens in contemporary Europe.
- Language learning is for the *learner*: it should be based on worthwhile, realistic objectives reflecting needs, interests, motivation, abilities.
- Language learning is for *intercultural communication*: it is crucial for ensuring successful interaction across linguistic and cultural boundaries and developing openness to the plurilingual repertoire of others.
- Language learning is for *life*: it should develop learner responsibility and the independence necessary to respond to the challenges of lifelong language learning.
- Language teaching is *co-ordinated*: it should be planned as a whole, covering the specification of objectives, the use of teaching/learning

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materials and methods, the assessment of learner achievement, and the development of appropriate convergences between all languages that learners have in their repertoire or wish to add to it.

- Language teaching is *coherent and transparent*: policy makers, curriculum designers, textbook authors, examination bodies, teacher trainers, teachers and learners need to share the same aims, objectives and assessment criteria.
- Language learning and teaching are *dynamic* lifelong processes, responding to experience as well as changing conditions and use.²

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)

The CEFR was developed by a Council of Europe international working party between 1993 and 1996 with a view to promoting transparency and coherence in language learning and teaching in Europe. After a pilot scheme, it was officially published in 2001, the European Year of Languages.³ In addition to the two official Council of Europe versions in English and French, the document is now (September 2005) available in Basque, Catalan, Croatian, Czech, Finnish, Friulian, Galician, Georgian, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Moldovan, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish and Ukrainian. Further versions are in preparation. The document quickly became one of the most influential publications of the last decade in the field of language learning, teaching and specifically language testing in Europe and elsewhere.

The CEFR is a comprehensive descriptive scheme offering a tool for reflecting on what is involved not only in language use, but also in language learning and teaching. The Framework provides a common basis and a common language for the elaboration of syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, textbooks, teacher training programmes, and for relating language examinations to one another. It allows the different partners involved in planning and delivering language provision and in assessing language progress and proficiency, to co-ordinate and situate their efforts.

The CEFR is based on an action-oriented approach to language learning and use. One of its aims 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 qualifications. For this purpose a Common Reference Level system was developed, a system of six ascending levels of proficiency with specific outcomes – a compendium of descriptors of language proficiency (proficiency implying not only the knowledge of a language, but also the degree of skill in using it). The scheme proposed in the

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CEFR adopts a ‘Hypertext’ branching principle, starting from an initial division into three broad levels:

- Basic User: A1 and A2
- Independent User: B1 and B2
- Proficient User: C1 and C2.

The CEFR is in effect a common reference tool across languages – the Framework is non-language specific, i.e. it is not referring to any single, concrete language but to the concept of language as such – and meant to be used in developing coherence in provision across different languages. It is also used in policy making as a means of ensuring coherence and transparency through the different sectors or stages in language education. Many countries have used the opportunity of the appearance of the Framework to stimulate curriculum and examination reforms in different educational sectors. The application of the principles laid out in the Framework may significantly contribute to the improvement of quality in language education.

The use of the CEFR

A survey on the use of the CEFR conducted in May 2005 by the Council of Europe Language Policy Division produced the following results⁴:

- the CEFR is fairly widely known in the responding institutions (3.16 on a 0–4 scale) and it is quite widely used (2.24 on a 0–4 scale)
- it is used mostly by teachers, teacher trainers, test writers, and materials writers
- it is used mostly in the domains of teacher training (pre-service and in-service), language testing/assessment, language curriculum development, textbook/materials production, and communication with stakeholders (learners, parents, teachers, staff, clients, etc.)
- clearly the best known/most frequently used parts of the CEFR are the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency (the global scale, the self-assessment grid, and the scales of illustrative descriptors)
- the usefulness of the CEFR has been rated at 2.44 on a 0–3 scale
- the CEFR proved to be most useful in the domains of testing/assessment/certification (2.70 on a 0–3 scale) and curriculum/syllabus development (2.66 on a 0–3 scale)
- institutionally, the CEFR proved to be most useful for the examination providers (2.88 on a 0–3 scale).

In general, the results of the survey indicate that the document’s major impact is in the areas of teacher training and testing/assessment, with its Common Reference Scales of language proficiency being the part mostly looked at.

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European Language Portfolio (ELP)

The most successful implementation of the approach proposed in the CEFR is the European Language Portfolio (ELP), launched during the European Year of Languages 2001. The ELP is a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language – whether at school or outside school – can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences.⁵

The Portfolio contains a language passport which its owner regularly updates. A grid – adapted from the Common Reference Level scales of the CEFR – is provided where a learner's language competences can be described to serve as a complement to customary certificates. The document also contains a detailed language biography describing the owner's experiences in each language and which is designed to guide the learner in planning and assessing progress. Finally, there is a dossier where examples of personal work can be kept to illustrate one's language competences.

The Ministers of Education of the Member States of the Council of Europe have recommended that governments, in keeping with their education policy, support the introduction of a European Language Portfolio.⁶ Several different models of the ELP have been or are being developed in Council of Europe Member States for specific groups of learners and for national contexts. However, all models must conform to the agreed principles and be approved by the European Validation Committee in order to use the Council of Europe logo.⁷ The Validation Committee is an organ appointed by the Education Committee of the Council of Europe to assure the conformity of European Language Portfolio models to the common European Principles and Guidelines set down in document CC-ED (2000) 20.

European Union initiatives

In a communication from the Commission of the European Communities regarding the Action Plan 2004–2006 for Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity, the CEFR is mentioned as an important reference document:

The Common Reference Scales of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages provide a good basis for schemes to describe individuals' language skills in an objective, practical, transparent and portable manner. Effective mechanisms are needed to regulate the use of these scales by examining bodies. Teachers and others involved in testing language skills need adequate training in the practical application of the Framework. European networks of relevant professionals could do much to help share good practice in this field.⁸

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The CEFR Common Reference Level scales have been included in the Europass CV and in the Europass Language Passport (adapted part of the European Language Portfolio). Europass is a scheme which aims to facilitate mobility for those who wish to work or study abroad.⁹

At the European Council meeting in Barcelona, Heads of State and Government called for the establishment of a European Indicator of Language Competence. The purpose of the indicator is to measure overall foreign language competencies in each Member State. It is intended to have high levels of accuracy and reliability, with political acceptance to follow. The objective is to provide Member States with hard data on which any necessary adjustment in their approach to foreign language teaching and learning can be based. The CEFR Common Reference Scales are used as reference:

The indicator should record the proficiency at each of the six levels of the scales of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe). This is already widely accepted and used by several Member States for determining their own benchmarks in this area.¹⁰

National and institutional level

The CEFR Common Reference Levels are widely used by ministries, examination bodies and providers, curriculum developers, textbook writers and publishers. One example of this is the objectives set in France by the French Ministry of Education for the academic year 2007/8 onwards:

- at the end of primary education, learners should reach Level A1 of the CEFR in the language studied
- at the end of compulsory schooling, learners should reach Level B1 of the CEFR in the first language studied and A2 in the second language studied
- at the Baccalaureate level, learners should reach Level B2 of the CEFR in the first language studied and B1 in the second language studied.¹¹

More and more examination providers, language schools, textbook authors and publishers are using the CEFR Common Reference Levels.

International level

In addition to a growing number of non-European countries using the CEFR (Australia, China, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, USA, etc.) the United Nations has also adopted the Common Reference Level system, using it for teacher training and staff in-service training in all United Nations institutions across the world.

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The growing acceptance of the standards presented in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has created a situation in which public bodies, examination institutes, language schools and university departments concerned with the teaching and testing of languages are increasingly interested in relating their curricula and examinations to the Common Reference Levels. A problem that arises in this regard is the question of assuring a consistent interpretation of the levels in different contexts.

The Language Policy Division is already responding in a comprehensive manner to the increasing number of requests from Member States for further guidance concerning the use of the Common Reference Level system. A pilot version of a Manual for relating language examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages¹² was developed in order to assist Member States, national and international providers of examinations in relating their certificates and diplomas to the CEFR in a reliable and proven manner.

In 2002, an authoring group of experts in the field of language assessment was nominated to draft, revise and deliver a pilot version of the Manual. An initial set of reference material already calibrated to the CEFR has been made available (CD-ROM + DVD) for the piloting. Several international benchmarking events are being planned to produce further CEFR calibrated reference material for a variety of languages. A range of language examining bodies and institutions from different CoE member countries and diversified educational contexts have been approached to participate in the pilot phase. They are asked to provide feedback from the piloting and to prepare full scale case study reports for selection of examples of good practice.

By September 2005 38 institutions from 19 countries were registered for the pilot phase of the Manual. Their work is supported by a Reference Supplement containing quantitative and qualitative considerations in relating certificates and diplomas to the CEFR and presenting different approaches to standard setting (its first draft is already available on the web pages of the Language Policy Division) – as well as by a growing set of multilingual reference materials accompanying the preliminary draft of the Manual: CD-ROMs with calibrated illustrative test items for listening and reading and calibrated samples of written performances, and DVDs/videos with calibrated illustrative samples of spoken performances. The final version of the Manual is planned to be published as a CoE document in 2008.

The preliminary draft of the Manual envisages the process of linking an examination to the CEFR in three stages:

- Specification: define the coverage of the examination in categories of the CEFR.

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- **Standardisation:** ensure a consistent interpretation of the Common Reference Levels, using illustrative test items and samples of performances already calibrated to the CEFR elsewhere.
- **Empirical Validation:** check that the results produced by the examination relate to the levels of the CEFR in the way foreseen.

The general aims of the Manual project are to improve the quality of language education and to achieve transparency and comparability in language assessment. The project is intended to assist ministries of education and examination bodies to plan and measure student progress and to facilitate transparency and comparability in language assessment.

The specific objective is to provide reference material, tools and procedures for relating local language examinations to the CEFR. The expected results (outputs) are:

- sets of reference material for different languages (CEFR benchmarked test items and performance samples)
- case study reports from the piloting phase, with examples of good practice
- a Manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR – piloted, revised, published, promoted and disseminated by 2008
- a Reference Supplement to the Manual.

In a parallel project, the Common Reference Levels are being described in linguistic details for specific languages, referred to as '*Reference level descriptions for national or regional languages*' (such as *Profile Deutsch* or *B2 pour le français*, etc.). All these documents and tools are part of the *CEFR-toolkit* currently being developed by the Language Policy Division. The European Commission is contributing to the project as well, and it is currently producing a reading and listening item bank at Level B1 in English, French and German.

The following materials developed to support the piloting have been made available so far by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe (as of September 2005):

a) Reference Supplement to the Preliminary Pilot version of the Manual

The Reference Supplement, published by the Council of Europe Language Policy Division in December 2004 accompanies the Pilot Manual.¹³ Its aim is to provide the users of the Pilot Manual with additional information which will help them in their efforts to relate their certificates and diplomas to the CEFR.

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The Reference Supplement contains three main components: a) quantitative and b) qualitative considerations in relating certificates and diplomas to the CEFR and c) different approaches in standard setting.

The authors note that the link between language examinations and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) can be established in at least three different ways:

- direct linkage to the CEFR scales of language proficiency
- indirect linkage via linkage to some local scales of language proficiency which have already been linked to CEFR scales
- indirect linkage via equation to an existing test already linked to the CEFR scales.

Whatever approach is adopted in the particular concrete situation, the authors stress that the linkage always requires standard setting and thus standard setting is a key element in the linkage process.

The editor of the Reference Supplement is confident that it will prove very useful for the language testing and assessment community in general. It contains information which is not readily available in the mainstream language testing literature. More specifically, it provides good support for those who wish to contribute to the development of the Manual by providing feedback, by piloting the Manual and by writing case studies of some aspects or the whole process of linking examinations to the CEFR and hopefully will contribute to the improvement of language testing quality.

b) DVD with French spoken performance samples illustrating the CEFR levels (including a report on the rating seminar in Sèvres and a guide for organising benchmarking events)

Users piloting the Manual have been encouraged to contribute towards collecting a set of videos and scripts of learner performances, whether or not they are writing up a case study. Such performances should be graded and documented in relation to CEFR levels following the procedures outlined in the Manual. A representative selection from samples collected will be very useful in illustrating future editions of the Manual for different languages, in different educational sectors and including speakers of different mother-tongues. A *Guide for the organisation of a seminar to calibrate examples of spoken performances in line with the scales of the CEFR* is available.¹⁴ It is based on the experiences gathered during a seminar organised in Sèvres by the Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques (CIEP) and Eurocentres aimed at calibrating samples of oral performances in French to the CEFR levels.¹⁵ A DVD resulting from this seminar is already available.¹⁶

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c) CD-ROM with listening and reading items (and a grid to classify them)

The materials made available on this CD-ROM¹⁷ are intended to facilitate the standardisation process for reading and listening described in the preliminary pilot version of the Manual.

The activities described in the standardisation phase of the Manual are expected to foster discussion amongst professionals piloting the Preliminary Version during the training sessions and as a result to contribute to building a common understanding in order to relate locally relevant test items to the CEFR levels and gain insights into developing test items that can eventually claim to be related to the CEFR levels.

The CD-ROM will also be useful for institutions and examination boards preparing Case Studies which will follow and document the process of validating the linking of a particular language examination to the CEFR levels. The feedback and materials resulting from the Piloting and the Case Studies will inform the main text of a revised version of the Manual, and provide standardised exemplar items to be included in a revised version of the CD-ROM.

The items and tasks contained in this CD-ROM are for English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish. They have been kindly supplied by examination providers operating in different contexts and for different languages: Cambridge ESOL, Goethe-Institut, WBT, TestDaF, CIEP, a recent EU-funded project with a pan-European perspective (DIALANG), and a national examination system from a Ministry of Education (YKI, Finnish Matriculation Examination Board).

To facilitate the use of the CD-ROM, the institutions characterised their items and tasks according to an agreed framework – the summary page of the Grid developed by the Dutch CEFR Construct Project – in order to analyse texts, items and tasks in terms of the CEFR descriptive scheme and levels. The Project aimed to help test developers and other language professionals to construct or relate test items to the CEFR. Since the CEFR is not directly relevant for the construction of test specifications, or the evaluation of test items, it was necessary to supplement guidance provided in the CEFR itself with information from other sources on what reading and listening tests might contain. One major outcome of the Project was an Internet-based Grid which can be used to help characterise reading and listening texts, items and tasks, and this Grid has been used in this way with the samples on the CD-ROM. The Grid can be accessed at: www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/cefgrid

It should be noted that the items in the CD-ROM should be considered to be a pilot in the same way as the Manual, and as part of a process which will feed into a new version of the Manual. Hence, the CD-ROM provides examples of good and appropriate practice in linking examinations to the CEFR.