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THE EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE AND L2 LEARNERS WITH A LOW LEVEL OF EDUCATION

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1   The European Framework of Reference

The aim of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) (Council of Europe, 2001) is to achieve more coherence and harmony in the field of languages and comparability of language qualifications within the European Community. The core of the document consists of descriptions of communicative activities and matching descriptions of communicative language competence at six levels. Three types of language users are distinguished: Basic user, Independent user and Proficient user.

The levels A1 (Breakthrough) and A2 (Waystage) are sublevels of the basic level. Within the levels of the Independent and Proficient user, sublevels B1 (Threshold) and B2 (Vantage), C1 (Effective proficiency and C2 (Mastery) are distinguished. A basic user is someone at an elementary level of competence, but who, in communication situations, is dependent on the willingness of the conversation partner to adapt to his/her level. An independent user is someone who is able to manage in everyday practice, can make himself/herself understood without too much effort and is in general able to understand speech spoken at a normal rate. Proficient users can communicate without any impediments.

Along with the CEF a European Language Portfolio was developed. An official portfolio has to be validated by an international validation commission of the Council of Europe. Finally, in the DIALANG project checklists were developed for all languages within the European Union that enable people to assess their own level in terms of the CEF.

5.1   Concepts Underlying the Model

The framework is based on different existing models for language competence and language use, among which Canale & Swain's (1980) model is arguably the most influential one. North & Schneider (1998: 226) summarize the result as follows:

> "… the scheme sees communicative language competence (linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic) as a part of general human competences (including socio-cultural competence). Learners draw on these

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> competences to the extent that they can, given conditions and
> constraints operating, and adopt in the process strategies appropriate to
> their purpose in the circumstances in order to complete the specific task
> in the language activity concerned."

This definition contains in a nutshell the components that play a role in language use and language learning and that are therefore included in the model of description. We will not discuss all these components in detail. One of them, however, is crucial with regard to learners with a low level of education.

General competences are subdivided into existential competence, declarative competence and 'skills and know how'. Together these three competences determine the learning capacity and the capacity to be receptive to the other. The second component, declarative knowledge includes socio-cultural knowledge, intercultural awareness and knowledge resulting from experience and of formal education. It is this aspect, formal education, which causes problems. Of course, language learners' previous knowledge plays an important role and has to be taken into account in language teaching and language testing. It certainly deserves attention in the model. It is not right, however, to subsequently assign such a dominant role to declarative knowledge that it is almost impossible for language learners with a low level of education to show progress in language proficiency up to higher levels. We will elaborate on this topic later.

5.2   *Development of the Framework*

The framework was developed in close cooperation with 292 Swiss foreign language teachers working in secondary education, vocational training and adult education. The project started out with gathering a pool of descriptors, taken from existing scales for the description of levels of language proficiency (North, 1993). Making use of the experience and expertise of the teachers these descriptors were selected, reformulated and categorised. Next the teachers evaluated ten of their pupils using the selected descriptors and two weeks later video recordings (of oral communication in English only) were assessed. The results of the assessments were subjected to statistical calibrations that made it possible to scale the descriptors. That is, to rank them on the six levels of the proficiency scale. Descriptors that did not fit were eliminated. It appeared that teachers found it difficult to scale communicative activities they did not practice in class, like making phone calls or participating in meetings. This means that the framework is not straightforwardly appropriate for second language learners.

1.3   *Structure of the Framework*

In the framework progression can be shown on a horizontal and a vertical dimension. Progression on a horizontal dimension entails extension of the number of types of communicative activities within a certain level. Vertical progression means moving to the next level of proficiency (see appendix). The assumption is that mastery of a certain level implies mastery of all levels below that level.

Different scales were developed for communicative activities in reading, listening, oral interaction, oral production and writing, each of which were subdivided into more

specific scales. For each of these (sub)scales six levels of communicative activities were described, to be used in self-assessment, in the form of 'can do' statements.

To assess the quality of production, scales for communicative language competence were developed. They are subdivided into pragmatic and linguistic aspects. Pragmatic aspects include spoken fluency, flexibility, coherence and precision. There is a general linguistic scale, but more specific scales for vocabulary range, vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, phonological control and orthographic control are available.

In order to show that one has mastered, let's say, level B1, one has to perform the communicative tasks of that level as well as meet the pragmatic and linguistic demands required at level B1.

2   *The Language Portfolio*

A language portfolio consists, in the CEF setting, of three components: a passport, a biography and a dossier. The language passport serves the purpose of reporting to third parties. It contains two kinds of information; language certificates on which it is indicated which level of the CEF has been reached and self-assessment data. For self-assessment, checklists are used that are based on the CEF. In the language biography, all kinds of language learning experiences, both inside and outside school, can be documented. The biography is an opportunity par excellence for second language learners to show their experience with languages that are generally not taught in school and to show their ability to function in every day life outside school. The dossier is filled by the learner with samples of his own work that demonstrate mastery of certain communicative tasks at the level reported in the passport. The function of the dossier is merely a pedagogic one. It requires making choices, judging whether requirements have been fulfilled and reflection on learning activities. If the dossier is used as a show case, it also has a reporting function.

The advantage of working with a portfolio in education is that it forces teachers to differentiate and to guide individual learners. The owner of the portfolio is the learner himself/herself.

Experiments with the language portfolio in the Netherlands (Stoks, 2001) have shown, among other things, that the language used in the portfolio and the CEF scales was too difficult and too abstract (for instance terms as 'frequent words') for young learners and learners with a low level of education.

3   *Problems for Second Language Learners with a Low Level of Education*

The CEF is a rich document, but the fact that it has been developed for foreign languages in a formal educational setting has some drawbacks for second language learners (both inside and outside the classroom) and for learners with a low level of previous education. The fact that certain everyday activities have not been scaled is a minor problem, compared to the fact that a higher level of language proficiency goes hand in hand with a higher level of education and cognitive development. We will try to demonstrate this with respect to listening comprehension. At the lowest level, A1, one can recognize familiar words and very basic phrases, concerning oneself, one's family and immediate concrete surroundings, when people speak slowly and clearly. Mind: it is

a matter of recognition not of understanding. At the next level, A2, one does understand phrases and the most frequent vocabulary, also related to areas of most immediate personal relevance, but this time extended to the domains of shopping, local geography and employment. Messages are simple and clear. At B1, one can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, at school, during leisure activities etc. One can also 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. The first point at which slow speech and clear articulation are not mentioned is at level B2, but at the same time one has to understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. Migrants, however, who have to function socially and vocationally do not function in surroundings where speech is slow, clearly articulated and standard. Yet, many of them do understand their colleagues very well and speak fluently, albeit not about chaos theory.

Apparently the compilers of the CEF were aware of this problem. Hence the suggestion that, if vertical progress is no longer possible, horizontal extension still indicates progress. That, however, does not seem to be a fruitful idea, since the model must be interpreted as a conic one, small at the bottom, broad at the top. This means that possibilities of extension to other domains or text types at the lowest levels are sparse, and it also means that qualitative aspects, such as normal rate of speech in listening or fluent production, do not occur at those levels. For educational purposes, lower level communicative activities could be combined with higher level qualitative characteristics and vice versa. This procedure, however, is not applicable in the passport that reports CEF levels.

Another drawback of the fact that scales have been developed for foreign language learners in formal education is that it is assumed that learners can read and write in their native language and that learners share the same native language. Checklists and descriptors to describe communicative activities and their characteristics can be used in the L1. This is not possible in second language classes in which generally a variety of native languages are represented. For second language learners the wording has to be adapted to the learners' levels of language proficiency. Furthermore, for non-literate learners the starting point of the reading and writing scales lies at the end of a route in which it is learned how to read and write in a technical way. How these problems have been addressed in DSL education will be reported on in the contribution by Willemijn Stockmann in this volume.

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Appendix 1: Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid (source: Council of Europe, 2001).

	A1	A2
Listening	I can recognise 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.
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.
Spoken interaction	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person in 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.
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.
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 relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.

Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid (part II)

B1	B2
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 or 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 understand the majority of films in standard dialect.
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 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 ad sustaining my views.
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 filed of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impression.	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.

Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid (part III)

C1	C2
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.
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 words.
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 contributions 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. I f I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.
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.
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 report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select 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.