

## **Making Bologna Work: The Common European Framework of Reference**

### **1. Speaking the same language?**

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment, or simply, the CEFR, was published by the Council of Europe and Cambridge University Press in 2001. It is the result of over 30 years collaboration between researchers, applied linguists, and pedagogical specialists from 41 member states of the Council of Europe, from Europe and beyond.

It was written with many purposes in mind, but what makes it relevant to the Bologna Process is the striking similarity of buzz or key words. Bologna lays the foundations for the creation of a European Higher Education Area – an area which values transparency, coherence and quality assurance, convergence yet diversity, learning to learn, autonomy and life-long learning for greater student and teacher mobility within Europe. The CEFR, on the other hand, has been written with numerous political aims in mind, reflecting those of the Council of Europe, a body distinct from the European Union. It, too, is concerned with transparency, coherence and quality assurance, convergence yet diversity, learning to learn, autonomy and life-long learning, and, of course, mobility.

As the Bologna Process moves forward, greater attention is being given to communication about and transparency in foreign language proficiency. At a conference on 31 January – 1 February 2005, the European Commission officially launched the implementation of the Europass (following its approval by the European Parliament and Council on December 15, 2004). The Europass comprises 5 documents which are intended to help individuals have their skills and qualifications recognised and understood at European level, and to promote and facilitate mobility. One of the documents included in the Europass is the European Language Portfolio, a collection of documents which were developed simultaneously to, and draw on, the CEFR.

Language learners, including students wishing to continue part of their higher education studies in different cultural and educational contexts, can record attainment levels and document their progress using descriptions of levels presented in the CEFR. The Europass also includes what is called the Diploma Supplement, a translation of degrees which all European Higher education institutions will supply to graduating students from 2005.

In this paper I would like to summarise what the Framework has to offer on the subject of the teaching, learning and assessment of languages for communicative purposes. I will explain how the Framework realises the principles laid down for the Bologna Process in the European Higher Education Area, how it might bring change to foreign language classrooms, and how it might serve as a tool to help remove linguistic borders and barriers. In short, how it can contribute to making Bologna work.

### **2. A position on languages**

The CEFR focuses on what we do with languages and consequently advocates what is called an action-oriented approach to language use rather than a more traditional knowledge-based approach. The difference between these approaches are exemplified by the sadly familiar scenario of a language learner who can explain the rules for reported speech for one language or another, but when faced with the prospect of telling someone what somebody else said, is rendered speechless. Although current teaching methodology tends to emphasise communication, the fruits of an overly knowledge-based approach are still very much in evidence today.

What we are engaged in when we learn languages is effecting change in human behaviour, and this requires much more than covert attention to linguistic form. An action-oriented approach gives us the opportunity to break language down and identify activities performed through language. Examples include *describing where you live or buying something in a shop*, and this encourages both teachers and learners to view linguistic competence in terms of ‘surrender value’, that is, the extent to which the immediate practical application of what is focussed on in the classroom is available for effective use in the real world.

This approach defines language use as .....

..... embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of **competences**, both **general** and in **particular communicative language competences**. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts and under various conditions and under various **constraints** to engage in language activities involving language **processes** to produce and/or receive **texts** in relation to **themes** in specific **domains**, activating those **strategies** which seem most appropriate for carrying out the **tasks** to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcing or modification of their competences. (Council of Europe 2001: 9)

Clear definitions of the bolded concepts are given in the CEFR, based on extensive research. The importance of this definition, however, is that it frames what follows and if language learners, teachers and course planners subscribe to anything different, then, in a way, the CEFR makes little or no sense.

In the BOE, núm. 215 Viernes 7 septiembre 2001, we find the same description of language use, this time in the preamble to the teaching of foreign languages for Educación Secundaria, Obligatoria and Bachillerato:

El Consejo de Europa establece un marco de referencia común europeo para el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, indicando que para desarrollar progresivamente la competencia comunicativa en una determinada lengua, el alumnado debe ser capaz de llevar a cabo una serie de *tareas de comunicación*. Las *tareas de comunicación* configuran un conjunto de acciones que tienen una finalidad comunicativa concreta dentro de un ámbito específico. Para su realización, se activa *la competencia comunicativa*, se ponen en juego diversas *estrategias* y se utilizan diferentes *destrezas lingüísticas y discursivas* de forma contextualizada. Por lo tanto, las actividades en las que se usa la lengua extranjera están enmarcadas en ámbitos que pueden ser de tipo público (todo lo relacionado con la interacción social cotidiana), personal (relaciones familiares y prácticas sociales individuales), laboral o educativo. La *competencia comunicativa*, que se desarrollará en el proceso de realización de tareas de comunicación, incluirá las siguientes subcompetencias: competencia lingüística (elementos semánticos, morfosintácticos y fonológicos), competencia pragmática o discursiva (funciones, actos de habla, conversación, etc.) y competencia sociolingüística (convenciones sociales, intencionalidad comunicativa, registros, etc.). La competencia estratégica se podría incluir también como subcompetencia de la competencia comunicativa.

Both CEFR and MEC descriptions naturally apply to all languages and such uptake by the ‘ministerio’ reflects the fact that European educational authorities are starting to draw on the CEFR for language teaching policy.

Following the definition of an action-oriented approach, the CEFR divides the wider application of language use into 4 general domains; personal, public, occupational and educational. Examples of different situations and topics provided for in each domain neatly encapsulate the varying degrees of complexity and specificity for general language use by society at large. At the same time, the domain-specific matrix provides a template for description of and variation in different cultural contexts. In all domains, the detailed analysis provides the basis for course design for general language courses, as well as language courses for academic or professional purposes, clearly of much utility in the Bologna context.

### **3. Divisions of communicative competence and language learning transparency**

Following the overview of an approach to language and descriptions of areas of language use, the CEFR provides what is known as the Global Scale - a division of communicative competence into 6 levels, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2. The lower levels, 'basic', are labelled A1 and A2, the middle levels, (B1, B2), represent what is called an 'independent' level and the upper levels, (C1, C2) reflect a 'proficient' level. It is this terminology which students will use to describe foreign language competence levels in the Europass. For each level there is a positively-worded description of what the user of a language can do. The levels describe benchmarks or standards on a continuum, from beginner to an advanced level, covering a full spectrum of possible achievement in communicative language competence.

These descriptors also provide anchor points for the elaboration of finer or more delicate descriptions of communicative competence which can be used to compare attainment in different languages. The CEFR breaks down each level down, with finer descriptors retaining their transparency by being anchored to each other through the broader CEFR levels. An example of the application of the Global Scale, and how it leads to greater transparency, is provided by the work of ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) which calibrates officially administered language examinations using the CEFR scale.

Currently, ALTE has 28 members representing 24 languages, and its goals are to establish common levels of proficiency to promote trans-national recognition of language certification in Europe. It has placed 63 different language exams on the CEFR scale, and 20 more will have been added by the end of this year. As a result of the work of ALTE we now know that, for example, the Diploma de Español - nivel inicial - is the same level as the Cambridge Preliminary Examination (PET), that is B1. Similarly, the Diploma de Español – Nivel intermedio - is equivalent to the Cambridge First Certificate exam, B2. Such transparency helps remove confusion which often occurs when a name like 'el First' is given to an examination. The FCE is often thought of as being at the lowest level in the suite of examinations for English. However, it was simply the first exam of English designed by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and this becomes evident when placed on the CEFR Global Scale. The same transparency is awarded to official examinations of Catalan, Danish, German, Euskera, French, Greek, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian and Swedish, to name but a few.

These labels will eventually replace terms like Pre-intermediate, Year 3 and Level 1, all of which are generally meaningless for students moving from one institution to another. They will also facilitate transparency across regions as well as national boundaries. The Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas have already adopted these labels and are in the process implementing change to their language courses.

### **4. Greater levels of delicacy**

A closer investigation of the description of the Independent levels in the Global Scale, levels B2 and B1, not only illustrate an action-oriented approach to language, but also the CEFR's division of skills into something more than the traditional skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

### **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 while 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.

### **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.

For both levels, the initial 'Can do' statement concern understanding, which from a Framework perspective, means reading *and* listening. The second describe learner ability in interaction, which might be spoken (in the sense of conversation, and so includes listening again), or written (that is: leaving notes, exchanging emails and so on). The final references, to producing and describing, relate to the writing or speaking skill, for example, when a person delivers a speech, a presentation, a composition or a written paper.

Bolded terms clearly illustrate the division of categories of linguistic ability into 3 over-arching areas, namely *reception*, *interaction* and *production*. What has traditionally been called *speaking* is represented in the CEFR as being either an interactive or non-interactive language endeavour. This general pattern, the division of skills into reception, interaction and production, is followed for all six levels of competence and defined further in the 54 remaining scales, namely, the illustrative scales. These summarise what a language user can do in a particular skill in general, and then, more specifically, in different contexts and to varying degrees of complexity.

Let us investigate the treatment of what is traditionally referred to as the listening skill as a means of exemplifying the nature of the illustrative scales. In general terms, at A1 a learner is able to understand when somebody speaks slowly to them. At A2, they can understand if something is said clearly, slowly and directly, in simple everyday conversation. For B1, a learner should be able to follow clearly articulated speech in everyday conversation. At B2 an ability to understand what is said in detail in standard spoken language, even in a noisy environment, is what is required. A learner who is at C1 level will be able to understand enough to follow extended speech on abstract and complex topics, beyond his or her own technical field. Finally, a C2 listener will have no problem understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, delivered at fast native speed.

The CEFR further develops this description by providing scales which describe what a foreign language learner can do when listening in different kinds of contexts. These are: understanding interaction between native speakers, listening as a member of a live audience, listening to announcements and instructions and listening to radio and audio recordings. In the same way that language learners can specify partial competences in appropriate skill areas, the illustrative scales provide a kind of menu of what different learners might want or need to be able to listen to. It

would be up to learners themselves, or, in an educational context, course planners, to focus on relevant and appropriate areas.

None of the descriptors considered so far contain explicit reference to specific grammatical, phonological or lexical properties of language. This would be, on the one hand, inappropriate as the Common European Framework of Reference is a generalised description of language use for *all* languages. 34 of the illustrative scales describe what language users can do in the different skills, and 7 describe elements of communication strategies, for example, asking for clarification or taking the floor. The remaining 13 do describe communicative language competence, which is broken down into elements of linguistic competence (that is structure, phonology and vocabulary), socio-linguistic competence and pragmatic competence.

However, it will have been noted that the proportion of illustrative scales devoted to ‘grammar’, often seen as the most important element in foreign language courses, is heavily reduced. In fact, it features only in two general scales, namely, linguistic range and linguistic control. This position is entirely coherent within the Framework, acknowledging, again, that fully competent language users need to be able to do much more than recite the rules for, say, reported speech, in any language. Rather, they have to be able to use linguistic realisations of language with different degrees of accuracy and varying degrees of complexity as they become more advanced.

## **5. A role for the learner**

The change in focus or emphasis on language, domain specification and detailed descriptions of six levels of communicative competence in the CEFR are clearly of relevance to the Bologna Process. We have already seen how a student, with a view to professional or educational mobility, can draw on the CEFR to summarise linguistic competence in the Europass and how the CEFR facilitates mobility through transparency, coherence and quality assurance, and convergence and divergence of courses which might be related to the CEFR scales. Other key learning terms in the Bologna Process are *learning to learn* and *autonomous learning*, both of which are skills developed through use of the European Language Portfolio (or ELP), a component of the Europass and developed simultaneously with the CEFR.

Very briefly, the Portfolio comprises three distinct yet interconnected documents which, when completed by a learner, result in the creation of a personal record of language learning experiences, something which is built and ages up over time. The ELP is a vehicle for the recording of personal language learning achievements (including formal examination certificates) progress, and language learning experiences and the three documents are designed in such a way as to enable a learner to become more aware of how to learn, and, consequently, more autonomous.

Learning to learn is vital as, in today’s world, people need to constantly adapt by learning new techniques and skills. Learning to learn is not itself a stranger to the language classroom as it an inherent part of our methodology to continually encourage the transferring of existent language skills into new language learning experiences. Language teachers also develop the ability to use, for example, reference works (dictionaries) and self-study materials. We also raise students’ awareness about how to get the best out of learning opportunities outside the classroom.

However, the second key term, autonomous learning, is something that is much more complex. Autonomy is all too often seen, simply, as being the skill of doing something on your own. It generates fear of abandonment in the language learner and fear of redundancy in the teacher. It also cuts across teaching, classroom and societal cultures. In fact, the developing of autonomy is an intricate and long-term process. It involves teachers empowering learners by teaching them how to

learn languages so they can learn on their own if they ever want or need to in the future. The learner retains the choice to be dependent, semi-autonomous, or fully independent in a learning endeavour.

## 5. The Bologna Process Continues

Individual institutions will make decisions according to contexts and requirements and providing for students' language needs in terms of what is required for mobility envisaged in the Bologna Process, the Common European Framework of Reference will be invaluable. It can provide the foundation for transparency, coherence and quality assurance and the related European Language Portfolio documentation will result in developing learning to learn, autonomy and life-long learning skills in the ambit of foreign language learning. The flexibility of the domains, scales and recording of partial competences together lend themselves to a policy which at the same time seeks convergence and divergence. In short, the Common European Framework can provide the practical underpinning required for mobility envisaged by the Bologna Process to function.

### Useful references and web-sites (live in March, 2005):

Council for Cultural Co-operation, Education Committee, Modern Languages Division, Strasbourg. (2001), *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching and assessment*. Cambridge, CUP.

Ministerio de Educación, Cultural y Deporte / Instituto Cervantes. (2002), *Marco común europeo de referencia para las lenguas: aprendizaje, enseñanza, evaluación*. Madrid, España

Morrow, M. (ed.) (2004), *Insights from the Common European Framework*. Oxford, OUP.

<http://www.aplicaciones.mec.es/programas-europeos> For general information: the portfolio in Spain & different models

<http://www.alte.org> The Association of Language Testers in Europe

<http://www.culture.coe.int/lang> The Council of Europe – for general European language policy information

<http://www.culture.co.int/portfolio> The Council of Europe – for ELP-related documentation and models

<http://www.eaea.org> European Association for Education of Adults

<http://www.esib.org> The National Unions of Students in Europe

<http://www.europass.cedefop.eu.int> For more information on the Europass

<http://www.eua.be> The European University Association

<http://cvc.cervantes.es/obref/marco> For the CEFR in Spanish