European Perspectives in Language Teaching, Learning, Assessment

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Uses and users

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Background

- The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is the culmination of work on modern language teaching and learning which in essence began in the 1950´s.

- It serves one of the aims of the Council of Europe which is to achieve greater unity among its members by the adoption of common action in the cultural and educational fields.

- It represents a means of developing language teaching in Europe by identifying the objectives and standards of achievement of learners in different national contexts.

Why CEFR? (1/2)

- The Council of Europe aim is to **achieve greater unity** among its members by the **adoption of common action** in the cultural and educational fields.

- One way of achieving this aim is to **provide a common basis** for the planning of language courses, development of curricula, textbooks and exams and through this to achieve **mutual recognition of qualifications** among European countries and **greater European mobility**.

Why CEFR? (2/2)

- **Providing a common basis for language curricula and curriculum artifacts**: the CEFR identifies as objectively and comprehensively as possible the criteria for describing language proficiency at various levels. These levels of proficiency allow learner progress to be measured at each stage of learning on a life long basis. The CEFR also tries to identify what a fully competent user of a language (not only English) is able to do and what knowledge, skills and attitudes the user needs to develop in order to act effectively in the second or foreign language.

What is included in the CEFR document?

The CEFR essentially consists of three main components:

1. Global scale,
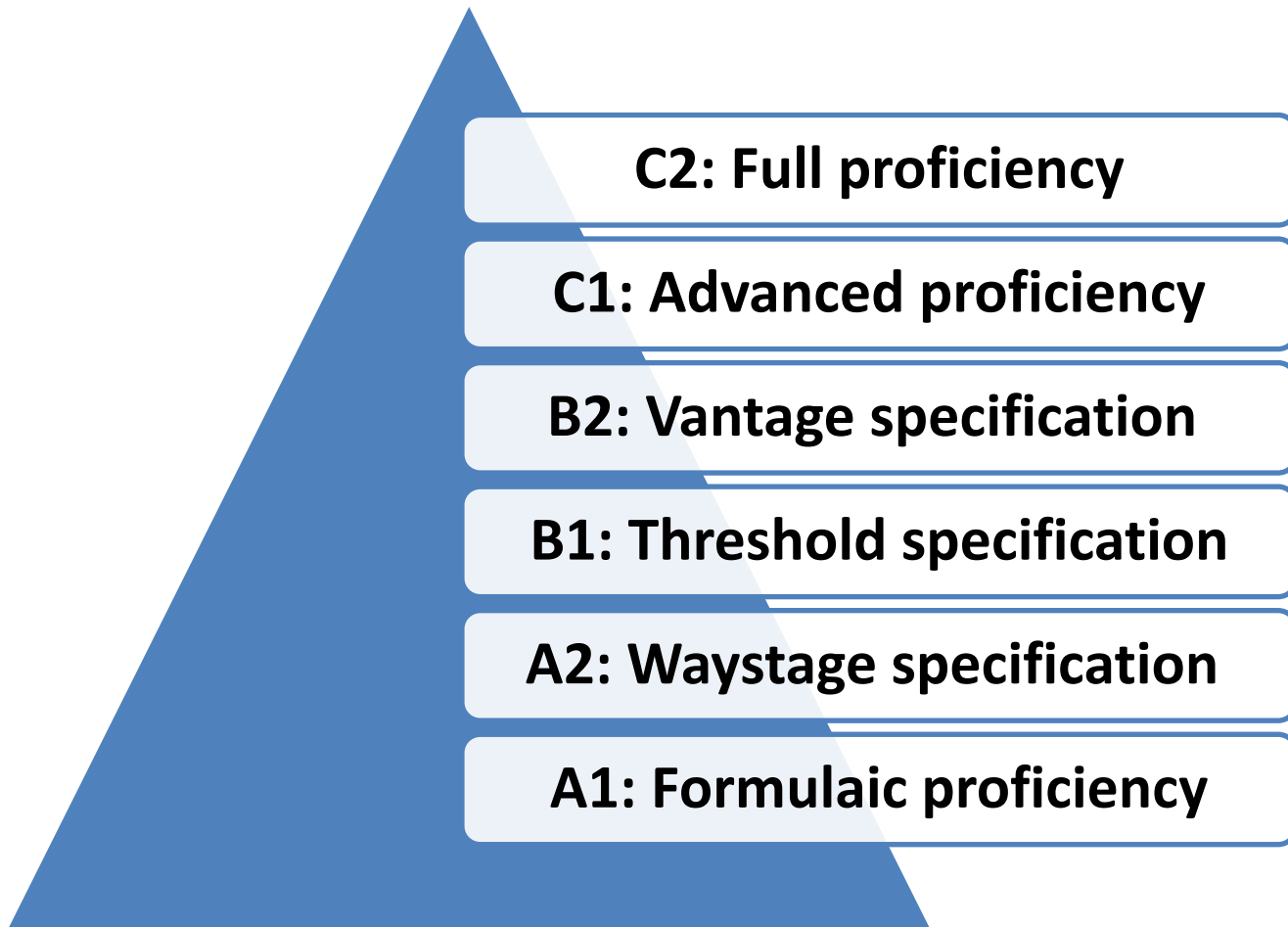2. Self-assessment grid,
3. Descriptive scheme.
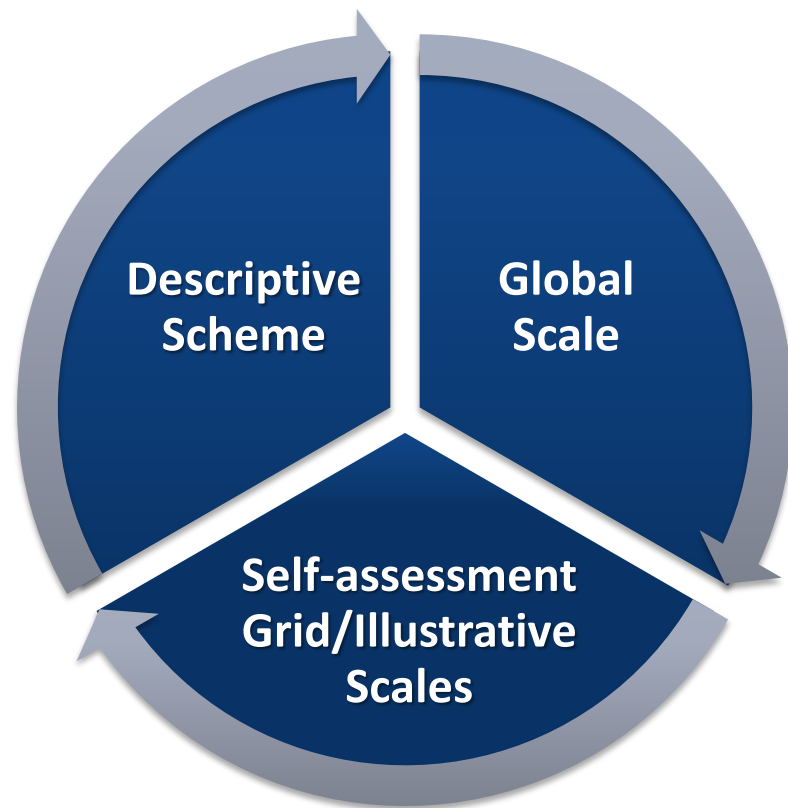
Global scale

These are levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning on a life long basis. This is called "Global scale" and consists of 6 different levels of performances ranging from basic (A1 and A2) to independent (B1 and B2) to proficient user (C1 and C2).

Common reference levels

C2: Full proficiency

C1: Advanced proficiency

B2: Vantage specification

B1: Threshold specification

A2: Waystage specification

A1: Formulaic proficiency

Self-assessment grid

- This is a tool intended to help learners self-assess their level of proficiency and chart their progress in the foreign language.

- It represents all 6 levels and is divided in the four skills. The self-assessment grid expresses levels of competence in simple language in order to be accessible to language learners.

- The statements are expressed in terms of what the learner can do in each skill and for each level. The so-called can do statements form the core of the European Language Portfolio.

Descriptive scheme

- It describes in a comprehensive way a large range of competences which make up the abilities of a user of language at a given level (what the learner needs to learn to do in order to be able to use the language effectively and what knowledge, skills and strategies the learner needs in order to use the language effectively).

- The scheme also includes factors impinging on language use such as the mental context of the learner and interlocutor and the conditions and constraints under which communication takes place.

Communicative competences (1/2)

For every one of the elements of language proficiency further sub-division, refinement, subcategories and examples are provided. Thus, for instance, communicative competence includes the following sub-competences.

- **Linguistic competence**:
    - Lexical competence.
    - Grammatical competence.
    - Semantic competence.
    - Phonological competence.
    - Orthographic competence.
    - Orthoepic competence.

Communicative competences (2/2)

- **Sociolinguistic competence:**
  - Linguistic markers of social relations.
  - Politeness conventions.
  - Expressions of folk wisdom.
  - Register differences.
  - Dialect –accent.

- **Pragmatic competence:**
  - Discourse competence.
  - Functional competence.

Features of the CEFR (1/3)

- The CEFR is a major undertaking as it tries to be as comprehensive and exhaustive as possible.

- It tries to describe in as much detail as possible the objectives of language learning at successive levels as well as the content of language learning.

- The authors compare it to a detailed map which does not prescribe your route but gives you details of the topography so you can plan your own route.

Features of the CEFR (2/3)

More specifically, the CEFR sets out to be:

- **Comprehensive:** It tries to specify the full range of language knowledge, skills and use so that all users are able to describe their objectives by reference to it.

- **Transparent**: Information must be clearly formulated, explicit, available and readily comprehensible to users.

- **Coherent:** Free from internal contradictions.

Features of the CEFR (3/3)

- **Multi-purpose**: Usable for the full variety of purposes involved in the planning and provision of facilities for language learning.

- **Flexible**: Adapted for use in different circumstances.

- **Open:** Capable of further extension and refinement.

- **Non-dogmatic**: Not irrevocably and exclusively attached to any one of a number of competing approaches.

Who are the intended users of the CEFR? (1/4)

- **Curriculum/course developers:**
    - By helping them to decide on the objectives for language learning.
    - By helping decide on the content of language learning programmes.

Who are the intended users of the CEFR? (2/4)

- **Test developers and Language Certification boards:**
  - By helping decide on their assessment criteria.
  - By helping them decide on the content of their exams.

Who are the intended users of the CEFR? (3/4)

- **Learners (through the self-assessment scale):**

  – By helping them identify their present state of knowledge.

  – By helping them set worthwhile and feasible objectives encouraging thus self assessment and learner autonomy.

Who are the intended users of the CEFR? (4/4)

- **Textbook writers and materials developers:**
  - By helping them to decide on the types of texts and tasks that need to be included in materials.

Problems with the CEFR (1/4)

- It is not a reader friendly document: Its layout is dense, its language is ponderous and very rigid and dry (Eurospeak).

- Specialist terminology is used throughout which is not necessarily compatible with terminology found in the mainstream applied linguistics literature.

- For its comprehension the document requires knowledge of applied linguistics.

Problems with the CEFR (2/4)

- It abounds in typologies and lists whose relationship is not always clear.

- The list of self-assessment descriptors refers to a reality closely linked to the world of business, travel, academic work (e.g.booking hotels, writing reports) and not to the reality of the average teenage classroom learner.

Problems with the CEFR (3/4)

- In terms of speaking (which is given particular emphasis), the descriptors tend to assume a learner who interacts with a native speaker or a user of a higher level of proficiency (likely in the real world but not in the classroom)

- The CEFR does not recommend any specific approach to learning and teaching languages. It is not based or does not promote any specific methodology. It presents options to teachers so that they can make informed choices according to their learner needs and features of their context.

Problems with the CEFR (4/4)

- The CEFR specifies in detail what you need to develop in your students in order to make them effective users of the language; it does not, however, specify how you can achieve this. Instead in chapter 6 the authors provide lists of options that teachers may choose from in order to achieve their objectives.

Financing

- The present educational material has been developed as part of the educational work of the instructor.

- The project "Open Academic Courses of the University of Athens" has only financed the reform of the educational material.

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Notes

Note on History of Published Version

The present work is the edition 1.0.

Reference Note

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