



FOCUS ON

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR LANGUAGES



Multilingualism and language learning is an important policy area fostered by the European Union. One tool used in order to assess learners' performance in language learning is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The CEFR was developed by the Council of Europe to provide unity in educational and cultural matters among its member states with regard to foreign language learning. After a pilot scheme involving extensive field consultation, the framework was officially published in 2001. The CEFR marked a major turning point in describing specifications of language learning targets, which are divided into six levels. It has now become a common reference instrument for organising language teaching and certification in many European Union Member States.

Background

The EU Council resolution of 14 February 2002 invited Member States 'to set up systems of validation of competence in language knowledge based on CEFR, taking sufficient account of skills acquired through informal learning'¹. In its 2004-2006 action plan to promote language learning and linguistic diversity² with regard to testing language skills, the Commission stated that 'CEFR provides a good basis for schemes to describe individuals' language skills in an objective, practical, transparent and portable manner'. The Commission also proposed a European Indicator of Language Competence³ and a strategy for multilingualism⁴. The European Parliament (EP) adopted resolutions endorsing these endeavours^{5,6,7}. In 2007, the Commission initiated a cross-European survey on language competences⁸ aimed at covering tests in the most taught official languages of the European Union, namely English, French, German, Spanish and Italian. The levels established in the CEFR were used in the survey. In 2008 the European Council called on the Commission and the Member States, within their respective remits, to 'promote learners' assessment on the basis of recognised tools – such as the CoE's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the Europass Language Passport – and, where appropriate, the European Indicator of Language Competence'⁹.

Study on the Implementation of the Common European Framework for Languages in European Education Systems

This study provides an assessment on the use of CEFR in school books and secondary examinations. More specifically, the project analyses the impact of the policy measures taken after the CEFR was drawn up and provides an insight into areas of language learning and teaching (for example educational background) which have not hitherto been the subject of CEFR policies and reviews. The CEFR was basically being used as a tool in the area of learners' achievements, with little attention being paid to the educational and training processes that learners go through, or to whether those processes met the requirements of CEFR.



Available in: EN, DE, FR
Executive Summary in
all EU languages

1 OJ C 50, 23.2.2002, p. 1.

2 Commission communication, Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 – 2006 (COM(2003)0449), 24.7.2003.

3 Commission communication, The European indicator of Language Competence (COM(2005)0356), 1.8.2005.

4 Commission communication, A New Framework Strategy For Multilingualism (COM(2005)0596), 22.11.2005.

5 Texts adopted, P6_TA(2006)0184, European Parliament resolution on measures to promote multilingualism and language learning in the European Union: European Indicator of Language Competence (2005/2213(INI))

6 Texts adopted, P6_TA(2006)0488, European Parliament resolution on a new framework strategy for multilingualism (2006/2083(INI))

7 Texts adopted, P6_TA(2009)0162, European Parliament resolution of 24 March 2009 on Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and shared commitment (2008/2225(INI))

8 Commission communication, Framework for the European survey on language competences (COM(2007)0184), 13.4.2007.

9 Council resolution of 21 November 2008 on a European strategy for multilingualism, OJ C 320, 16.12.2008, p. 1.

The study dealt with the following major areas (focusing on the first one):

- 1) Analysis of foreign language competences in learning outcomes of qualifications/certificates provided at the end of secondary education, making use of the CEFR as a 'translation device';
- 2) Examination of the use of the CEFR in the provision of private education (adult learning);
- 3) Assessment of the social function of language certificates.

The analysis focused on six countries (Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Austria and Scotland (UK)). Geographical scope and other characteristics of the countries concerned were taken into account in the selection criteria related to language families. The analysis also focused on one qualification type. The selected qualification in each country is comparable in scope and function, and similar with regard to its position on the European Qualifications Framework (level 4: qualifications giving access to higher education).¹⁰

Key findings

Learning a first modern foreign language is compulsory for pupils in upper secondary education in line with the language learning policies of five of the six countries selected. Major differences were identified in the policies concerning the learning of a second and third modern foreign language. In some countries (SE, NL, FR and HU) pupils have to learn more than one language, whereas in other countries this is optional (Scotland and AT). Encouraging pupils to achieve better results and higher proficiency levels in modern foreign languages is a hot topic in the countries concerned.

All six countries relate their modern foreign language learning programmes and policies to the CEFR. Most of them have implemented the CEFR to different degrees within their national and/or specific modern foreign language curricula. Only Austria and France have anchored the CEFR in law. The lack of empirical evidence provided by research studies for the link between the CEFR and learning outcomes, objectives of curricula, examination, and/or other (policy) documents which have an influence on the education system seems to be a major obstacle when it comes to the implementation of the CEFR. In addition, the implementation of the CEFR within the classroom requires different skills from modern foreign language teachers. Some countries (FR, NL, and SE) are therefore worried about the use of the CEFR by modern foreign language teachers.

Significant differences were found regarding the degree to which the CEFR is implemented and used in modern foreign language learning in education programmes involving the selected qualifications within the six countries. The table shows how the countries perform in relation to the implementation of the CEFR in specific measurements (implementation in policy documents, examinations, school books and teacher training).¹¹

Implementation degree of the CEFR

	Use of the CEFR							Degree of implementation
	Policy documents ¹²			Examinations or tests	schoolbooks	Teacher training		
	Law	NC	SC			Pre	In	
Austria	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++
Sweden	--	--	--	++	++	--	++	-
Hungary	--	++	++	++	++	--	++	+-
The Netherlands	--	--	++	++	++	++	++	+-
France	++	++	++	+	++	++	++	+
UK (Scotland)	--	++	x ¹³	--	--	--	--	--

Source: Panteia

10 The following qualifications are taken into account: Austria: Academic secondary education (*Allgemein bildende höhere Schule*); Sweden: Higher education preparatory programmes (*Högskoleförberedande program*); Netherlands: Pre-university education (*Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs*); UK (Scotland): Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications; France: Baccalaureate (*Baccalauréat*); Hungary: General secondary school and vocational secondary school (*gimnázium* and *szakközépiskola*)

11 The table gives a value for each specific measurement (++, +, +-, -, --). A final assessment is provided to indicate the overall degree of implementation for each country. The degree to which the CEFR is implemented within policy documents is included given the impact of these documents on the specific measurements. Although this assessment is not an exact science, it does provide an overview of the extent to which countries use and implement the CEFR.

12 Law: education acts; NC: National Curricula; SC: Specific foreign language Curricula.

13 This document is not applicable because in the UK (Scotland) they do not work with specific curricula for MFL.

Conclusions

- *Key conclusion 1:* Countries implement and use the CEFR to different degrees, ranging from anchoring the CEFR-related learning outcomes in law to no reference to the CEFR whatsoever. In general it can be concluded that the more the CEFR is implemented and used in policy documents (laws, national curricula), the more the CEFR is used in examination, school books and teacher training.
- *Key conclusion 2:* Major challenges in implementation concern firstly the lack of empirical evidence to establish links between learning outcomes and the CEFR levels, and secondly the ability of modern foreign language (MFL) teachers to use the CEFR in their lessons as intended.
- *Key conclusion 3:* There is general agreement concerning the CEFR indication of learning outcomes of MFL in upper secondary education. The stated learning outcomes across the six countries are generally similar. The level of learning outcomes related to the first MFL is usually set at level B2, for the second MFL in general the related level is B1.
- *Key conclusion 4:* A majority of the selected countries implement the CEFR in tests or examinations; however, there is in general a lack of empirical evidence when it comes to the links between MFL learning outcomes and CEFR levels.
- *Key conclusion 5:* The CEFR is generally used in school book development. Whether the CEFR is used depends to a large extent on whether the CEFR is implemented and used in curriculum development and is mentioned in (legal) guidance material (national curricula).
- *Key conclusion 6:* There are huge differences between countries when it comes to whether the CEFR is used in pre-service teacher training programmes. The situation with regard to in-service teacher training is much better, where five of the six selected countries offer training programmes which include the CEFR.
- *Key conclusion 7:* Whether teachers know about the CEFR depends on the emphasis placed on the CEFR in curriculum and in teacher training within the country.
- *Key conclusion 8:* There is a relationship between the degree of CEFR implementation and proficiency levels recorded; the degree of implementation appears to be higher in countries with higher proficiency levels. However, first of all the causal relationship between the two is unclear, and secondly, other (contextual) factors play a more important role in explaining the proficiency levels (such as whether the official language is widely used outside the home country, and the linguistic landscape as such).
- *Key conclusion 9:* In general, the CEFR is well embedded in practices and procedures of private providers that provide MFL certificates. The CEFR is reflected in MFL certificates by a CEFR level indication, included in the material used, and teachers are aware of the CEFR thanks to in-service training programmes.
- *Key conclusion 10:* For learners, private providers and language assessment institutes, the CEFR provides transparency and makes it possible to compare the courses on offer. The principal reason why people seek to obtain a formal certificate is to increase their chances of finding a job. Although the manuals and guidelines on the CEFR are considered helpful, the complexity of the CEFR constitutes a hindrance to its use by private providers. There are calls for more simplified versions of the CEFR.

Recommendations

The CEFR aims to make it easier to compare countries (on the basis of a shared conceptual framework for language learning) whilst also seeking to respect national traditions and systems when it comes to language proficiency standards. In order for the CEFR to be able to fulfil this role in the future with the help of European Union action, the following recommendations are provided to the European Parliament and the Member States concerning the above key conclusions:

Recommendation 1

The European Parliament and the Commission need to embrace the CEFR as a tool to stimulate policy development on foreign language learning in the Member States. The CEFR has been in existence for over 10 years now, during which time a number of major developments have taken place. Implementation, however, requires fresh impetus at political level by means of EU action to support the Council of Europe's framework. With this mind:

- the SurveyLang initiative ought to be developed further by including more countries and more languages;
- there needs to be sharing of national-level experience in making language learning policies more action-oriented;
- there needs to be a more explicit requirement for European programmes such as Erasmus Plus to support the use of the CEFR and the action-oriented approach.

Recommendation 2

Endorsement by other countries of links forged between systems and the CEFR. Although links are being made between MFL learning outcomes and the CEFR levels, these links are not being endorsed by other Member States. Although this is not necessary per se, when it comes to trusting other countries' qualifications and accredited learning outcomes, the procedures applied to substantiate the links should be understandable and acceptable for other Member States. With this in mind:

- principles need to be established to link language learning in national education systems to the CEFR;
- other countries need to be encouraged to get involved in the forging of links between language learning in national education systems and the CEFR;
- peer learning and peer review among policymakers from different countries need to be stimulated.

Recommendation 3

Step up the use of the CEFR in schools. The use of the CEFR at ground level is stimulated by high-level policy actions, such as enshrining the CEFR in law, or using the CEFR in establishing national curricula. In addition, further action is required to encourage teachers and publishers to use the CEFR. With this in mind:

- experience needs to be shared and discussions conducted with other European countries to guarantee credibility and ensure that the framework fits in as well as possible with the national context;
- the use of the CEFR levels needs to be stimulated with a view to setting yearly targets to monitor progress;
- there is a need to either stimulate the alignment of school books with national curricula, or raise awareness among teachers/schools using existing material;
- more emphasis needs to be placed on the action-oriented approach in pre-service and in-service teacher training.

Recommendation 4

Further research is needed. Although this study covered a wide area, many issues surrounding the CEFR are still unclear. This is particularly the case when it comes to social and political issues related to language learning. It would therefore be a good idea to take a closer look at issues such as: languages that are increasing in significance, and whether the CEFR is broad enough to deal with non-European languages such as Chinese; the impact of the European language indicator on language policies in Europe; and how the CEFR can be used to strengthen the position of minority and regional languages. Finally, consideration might be given to the idea of having a supra-national body or advisory group in which countries review each other's links between their individual language learning policies and the CEFR.

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