Abstract
This study aims at analysing way the compulsory school system approaches foreign language learning. It analyses the use of the CEFR in examination, curriculum development, schoolbooks and teacher training. The study concludes that although links between exams and CEFR are often not supported, the general approach to language learning of the CEFR is implemented; curricula and schoolbooks take notice of contextual language use and the related ‘can-do’ statements; and teacher training includes referenced to the CEFR. However, the CEFR could use a renewed impetus to increase its effect.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**CEFR**  Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

**MFL**  Modern Foreign Language
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction
The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (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, to promote transparency and coherence in the learning and teaching of modern languages in Europe. It was officially published in 2001. The CEFR provides a general framework which indicates what language learners need to learn to be able to use a foreign language effectively in practice. Thereby, the framework creates a common basis for language learning curricula or guidelines, qualifications, textbooks, examinations, and syllabuses across European states. The CEFR is based on an action-oriented approach to language learning and use. It includes six proficiency levels for foreign language learning. The CEFR tries not only to facilitate the comparability between countries (on the basis of a shared conceptual framework for language learning) but also to respect national traditions and systems in language proficiency standards.

In 2008, the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the use of the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) and the promotion of plurilingualism was released, to invite Member States to implement the CEFR in their education system and to promote plurilingualism. This recommendation advises governments of Member States to take their constitution, their education system, and the national, regional or local circumstances into account, for the implementation of the CEFR and the promotion of plurilingualism. For this implementation, the following measurements are described (headed by ‘general principles’ and ‘specific measures’):

- A) General principles and measures to be implemented by authorities responsible for language education at national, regional and local level which includes creating conditions to provide an effective use of the CEFR. These conditions should encourage cooperation between both education institutions and Member States. Furthermore, it should provide mutual recognition of language qualifications, guidance for language learning with the aim to maintain and develop plurilingualism among European citizens. More importantly, these conditions must encourage teachers, teacher training programmes, learners, education administrators, course designers, textbook authors, curriculum developers, and examining bodies to implement the CEFR and the underlining learner-focused, action-oriented, competence-based approach of the CEFR in foreign language learning and teaching approaches.

- B) Specific measures aimed at policy making, curriculum and textbook development, teacher training, and assessment: National, regional and local education authorities who decide to use the CEFR are encouraged to ensure an appropriate and coherent use of the framework by taking the responsibility to facilitate and coordinate cooperation between all relevant stakeholders involved in language education. This includes encouraging all language policy makers and education administrators to ensure unity in language objectives and to promote the awareness of language use and competences in education. Institutes for teacher training of language teachers should be encouraged to use the CEFR effectively for their training programmes. Furthermore, textbook developers have to be

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encouraged to take the aspects of the CEFR into account when developing language learning textbooks. The same is requested of developers of language tests, examinations and assessments.

During the years since the CEFR was developed and published, **criticism has arisen** concerning the aims of the framework, its accessibility, description and classification of language competences, the number of competence levels, and application of the CEFR in language tests. Almost every aspect of the CEFR is vulnerable to serious criticism and yet, bearing in mind the extent of its reach, those language professionals who have criticised it in writing are relatively few in number.

A number of **European Union initiatives** have been taken in the field of languages: projects within the Lifelong Learning Programme; incorporation of the CEFR in the Europass format; and the development of the European Survey on Language Competences. The Council of Europe published guidance material on how to use the CEFR in practice:

- In 2009, the Council of Europe published the manual ‘Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)’. The aim of the Manual is to help providers of examinations to relate their examinations with the CEFR by developing procedures to ensure this relation.
- The ‘First European Survey on Language Competences’ took into account the CEFR levels to identify the proficiency levels of students across fourteen European countries. In addition to analysing the proficiency levels, this survey concluded that within fourteen of the sixteen educational systems analysed, central authorities have recommended or made compulsory the use of the CEFR in language learning policies.

This study provides an insight into the extent to which the Common European Framework for Languages is implemented in European countries. This study will provide:

- An analysis of foreign language competences in learning outcomes of qualifications/ certificates provided at the end of upper secondary education;
- An examination of the use of CEFR in provision of private education;
- An assessment of the social function of language certificates.

The focus is on the first objective.

The analysis focussed on six countries (Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Austria and the United Kingdom - Scotland). In the selection criteria related to language families, geographical scope and other characteristics of the countries were taken into account. In addition, the analysis focussed on one qualification type. The selected qualification in each country is comparable in scope and function, and similar with regard to their levelling on the European Qualifications Framework (level 4: qualifications giving access to higher education). The following qualifications are taken into account: Austria: Academic secondary education (in German: Allgemein bildende höhere Schule); Sweden: Higher education preparatory programmes (in Swedish: Högskoleförberedande program); Netherlands: Pre-university education (in Dutch: Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs); UK (Scotland): Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications; France: Baccalauréate (in French: Baccalauréat); Hungary: General secondary school and vocational secondary school (in Hungarian: gimnázium and szakközépiskola)
**Key findings**

Concerning the implementation in general, the following is mentioned. Learning a first modern foreign language is mandatory for pupils in upper secondary education according to the language learning policies of five of the six selected countries. Major differences have been identified in the policies towards learning a second and a third modern foreign language. Some countries (SE, NL, FR, and HU) oblige pupils to learn more than one language whereas in other countries it is optional (UK - Scotland and AT). Encouraging pupils to achieve better results and higher proficiency levels in modern foreign languages is a hot debate topic within the selected countries.

All the selected countries relate their modern foreign language learning programmes and policies to the CEFR. Most of the countries 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 influence on the education system, seems to be a main obstacle for implementation of the CEFR. In addition, the implementation of the CEFR within the classroom demands different skills from modern foreign language teachers. Therefore several countries (FR, NL, and SE) are worried about the use of the CEFR by modern foreign language teachers.

Concerning the specific measures related to the implementation of the CEFR (examination, schoolbooks and teaching training), the following key findings have been identified:

Taking an exam or test in the first modern foreign language is mandatory in four of the six selected countries (AT, SE, NL and FR). In Austria, the Netherlands and France, passing of this exam or test is required for pupils to obtain their diploma to access higher education. An examination in a second modern foreign language is not required within any of the six selected countries. In the Netherlands and France, a second foreign language is mandatory, however this could be a modern foreign language, a classical language, or a regional language. With regards to the implementation of the CEFR in final examinations and tests, the following situations can be distinguished:

- The final exams or tests are based on the CEFR (AT, HU, SE, and NL);
- The final MFL exams are currently not based on the CEFR (FR);
- No link is made between the CEFR and the final MFL examinations UK - Scotland).

Learning outcomes which give a CEFR level indication for examination are determined within five (AT, SE, NL, HU, and FR) of the six selected countries. Only two (AT and NL) of the selected countries have determined different CEFR levels for at least four the language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). In relation to the invitation of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, to those national, regional and local education authorities who decide to use the CEFR, it can be concluded that a majority of the selected countries implemented the CEFR in tests or examinations and made this link clear by a transparent display of the modern foreign language learning outcomes in CEFR levels.

In relation to publishers of schoolbooks which are intended for the selected qualifications, a distinction can be made between countries where the development of the schoolbooks and the content is bound by State Regulations (AT and HU) and countries were there are no State Regulations concerning the development and content of schoolbooks (SE, NL, FR, and UK - Scotland). With regard to the implementation of the CEFR in these schoolbooks the selected countries can be
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divided into two groups: countries in which publishers used the CEFR indirectly (AT, HU, and SE) through obligations set in national curricula; and countries in which publishers can either decide themselves whether or not to use the CEFR, or where it is not used at all (NL, FR and UK -Scotland). In relation to the invitation of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers, it can be concluded that some governments enforce publishers of MFL schoolbooks to use the CEFR and some stimulate publishers to use the CEFR in national and/or specific MFL curricula.

In all the selected countries except the UK -Scotland, the CEFR is included in in-service teacher training programmes. Compared to the situation of the pre-service teacher training, only three of the selected countries (AT, NL, and FR) use the CEFR. Hence, differences in the use of the CEFR in teacher training among the selected countries are most clearly identified for pre-service teacher training. Therefore four situations concerning the implementation of the CEFR in pre-service teacher training can be identified:

- First, trainers of MFL pre-service teacher training programmes are obliged to use the CEFR;
- Second, the CEFR is embedded in curricula;
- Third, no advice or requirement is set for use of the CEFR; and
- Finally, no link is made.

Due to the fact that teachers are free to plan and design their lessons, for example by choosing the material such as schoolbooks and the didactic methods, it is difficult to conclude whether teachers actually use the CEFR in their lessons. However, for some of the selected countries it is assumed that these MFL teachers know the CEFR, because of the link within the curricula. In relation to the invitation of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers, it can be concluded that the implementation of the CEFR in pre-service and in-service teacher training is enforced within a few selected countries by the government.

In general, the CEFR is widely used by both private providers that offer modern foreign language courses and language assessment organisations. With regard to the reasons why people want to obtain a language certificate (increasing their chances on the labour market, required for work, access to university, personal development), or in other words the social function, a CEFR level indication seems to be of added value as it increases transparency in the courses offered and recognition of modern foreign language competence levels across the different borders.

Concerning foreign language proficiency levels, the following can be mentioned. From the different data sources a coherent picture emerges when it comes to a general assessment of MFL proficiency levels of the selected countries. The following ranking can be proposed:

- Group 1: Very high performers (Sweden and the Netherlands);
- Group 2: High performers (Austria);
- Group 3: Medium performers (Hungary and France);
- Low performers (UK -Scotland).

Although differences do occur, in general there is a relationship between the degree of CEFR implementation and proficiency levels. It cannot be concluded that this is a causal link however. Factors other than the degree of CEFR implementation impact the MFL proficiency levels, such as general traditions towards languages and whether the language is widely used or not. In general, in countries where the national language is widely used abroad (English, French), the need to learn another language is lower than in countries where the national language is less widely used (Dutch, Swedish).
Finally, the linguistic landscape of the country might explain the particular situation of a country with regard to the MFL proficiency levels.

**Conclusions**

The main conclusions are provided below:

**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, schoolbooks and teacher training.

**Key conclusion 2:** Major challenges in the implementation concern firstly, the lack of empirical evidence to establish links between learning outcomes and the CEFR levels and secondly, the ability of 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 the links between MFL learning outcomes to CEFR levels lack in general empirical evidence.

**Key conclusion 5:** In general, the CEFR is used in schoolbook 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 on 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 their home country, and the linguistic landscape as such).

**Key conclusion 9:** In general, the CEFR is well embedded in the private providers’ practices and procedures which provide MFL certificates. The CEFR is reflected in MFL certificates by a CEFR level indication, included in the used material, and teachers are aware of the CEFR by in-service training programmes.

**Key conclusion 10:** For learners, private providers and language assessment institutes, the CEFR provides transparency and creates possibilities to make comparisons of the courses offered. The reason for individuals to obtain a formal certificate is mostly to increase chance on the labour market. In addition, although the
manuals and guidelines on the CEFR are considered helpful, still the complexity of the CEFR hampers its use by private providers. There are calls for more simplified versions of the CEFR.

**Recommendations**

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages was developed by the Council of Europe to promote transparency and coherence in the learning and teaching of modern languages in Europe. The CEFR tries both to facilitate the comparability between countries (on the basis of a shared conceptual framework for language learning) and tries to respect national traditions and systems in language proficiency standards. In order to allow the CEFR fulfil this envisaged role in the future, strengthened by European Unions actions, the following recommendations are provided to the European Parliament and the Member States concerning the above mentioned key conclusions:

**Recommendation 1 (to the European Parliament): Embracing the CEFR by the European Parliament and Commission as the tool to stimulate policy development in the Member States on foreign language learning**

The CEFR has already existed for more than ten years and major developments have taken place during this time. The implementation however, could use a renewed impetus, more at a political level, through European Community actions in supporting the Council of Europe’s framework. It is therefore recommended to:

- Further develop the Survey Lang initiative by including both more countries and more languages (not only the first two most widely taught languages, but a broader range, to prevent narrowing down policy attention to the first or second language only).
- Stimulate sharing experiences at national level of reforming language learning policies towards a more action-oriented approach and creating unity in assessing and indicating competence levels of pupils. This could take the form of peer learning activities, compendia of practices, unified formats to report on developments.
- More pronouncedly demand European programmes such as the follow-up of the Lifelong Learning Programme to support the use of the CEFR and the action-oriented approach and stimulating the use of the Europass CVs. In addition, the European Qualifications Framework, which has a similar base, should be linked more clearly to the CEFR to enhance the transparency and awareness of both the action-oriented approach and the CEFR level indications.

**Recommendation 2 (to the Member States and the European Parliament): Endorsement of links between systems and the CEFR by countries**

Although links are made between MFL learning outcomes and the CEFR levels, these links are not endorsed by other Member States. As such this is not necessary, but when it comes to trusting in each others’ qualifications and accredited learning outcomes, the procedures applied to substantiate the links should be understandable and possibly acceptable for Member States. It is therefore recommended to:

- Establish principles for linking language learning in national education systems to the CEFR. These do not necessarily have to cover technical aspects, but should be used for stimulating the political/social debate on language learning. Principles could, for instance, be: involving all relevant stakeholders (policy makers, experts, teachers, schools, publishers); make use of external expertise; establish a common action plan for the referencing to the CEFR to establish agreement concerning the scope for linking to the CEFR.
- Facilitate the involvement of other countries in making links between language learning in national education systems and the CEFR. Key question is whether other countries trust the links established. Have peers (also at the level of policy
makers), preferably of different countries, to reflect on the links established, in order to increase the reliability of the link for other countries.

- Stimulate peer learning and peer review among policy makers from different countries to stimulate the establishment of clearer links between language learning in national education systems and the CEFR and hence using the CEFR as a reform agenda for language learning policies.

**Recommendation 3 (to the Member States): Increase the actual use of the CEFR in schools**

As we have seen, the use of the CEFR at ground level is stimulated by higher level policy actions, such as including the CEFR in law, or using the CEFR in determining the National Curricula. In addition, further actions are required to stimulate teachers and publishers to use the CEFR. It is therefore recommended to:

- Create credibility and a best-fit of the framework in the national context by making use of experiences and discussions with other European countries, consult experts, and use the manual of the Council of Europe. In addition, for the purpose of unambiguous use, the CEFR should be anchored in the national curricula and the MFL specific curricula to embed firmly the action-oriented approach in language learning.
- Stimulate the use of the CEFR levels to set yearly target levels to monitor progress. It could be necessary to provide guidance to set sub-levels to have the possibility for more incremental stages.
- Either stimulate the alignment of schoolbooks with national curricula, or make teachers/schools knowledgeable in making use of existing material to adopt an action-oriented approach. This can for instance be done by stimulating exchange of learning material more widely.
- Enhance the emphasis of the action-oriented approach in pre-service and in-service teacher training.

**Recommendation 4 (to the European Parliament): Further research is needed**

Although this study covered a wide area, many issues surrounding the CEFR are still unclear. This predominantly concerns social/political issues related to language learning. Hence, it is recommended to further study the following issues:

- What are the up-coming languages, and is the CEFR broad enough to deal with non-European languages, such as Chinese?
- What is the impact of the European language indicator on language policies in Europe? Establishing an indicator is a valuable tool to further stimulate policy debates, however, it should not result in a more narrow focus on language learning.
- How can the CEFR be used to strengthen the position of minority and regional languages?
- Investigate the possibility of having a supra-national body or advisory group in which countries review each others’ references between the own language learning policies and the CEFR. This supranational body could function as a platform to exchange experiences, monitor developments, provide practical guidelines, create mutual trust in each others’ references of MFL qualifications and CEFR levels, and finally, set/develop the policy agenda.