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The CEFR Companion Volume—What's new and what might it imply for teaching/learning and for assessment?

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This article discusses key aspects of the CEFR vision that are further elaborated in the CEFR Companion Volume and their potential for innovation in language education. The paper starts with an outline of the content of the CEFR/CV, and a clarification of its status and the relationship to the CEFR 2001, as well as an explanation of the background to the 2014-2020 project that produced it. The article then goes on to briefly summarise the main research perspectives—the integrationist/enactive perspective; the complex, ecological perspective; the agentic perspective; the socio-constructivist/sociocultural perspective; and the plurilingual perspective—that fed into the development of the CEFR/CV. It points out that, when the CEFR appeared, very many language professionals viewed the CEFR just as an instrument to promote communicative language teaching, which had some useful levels and descriptors. The key innovative concepts in the CEFR/CV—the social agent, the action-oriented approach, mediation, and plurilingualism—were all foregrounded by the CEFR in 2001, but required time for developments in research and from practitioners in the field to pave the ground for their elaboration and wider dissemination with the CEFR/CV. The article ends by considering the implications of these concepts and developments for the classroom and for assessment.

Keywords: CEFR; CEFR Companion Volume; innovation; social agent; action-oriented approach; mediation; plurilingualism; classroom implications

1 Introduction

This article aims to give the reader an overview of the content and significance of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment—Companion Volume* (henceforth CEFR/CV) (COE 2020). It will not describe the research project that developed the Companion Volume, for which readers are referred to North and Piccardo (2019) for an overview, and to the official report on the conceptualisation, development and validation of the descriptors for mediation and related areas (see North and Piccardo 2016 for more detail). Suffice it to say that the project ran from late 2013 to early 2020 and took place in several discrete phases. In the development of the descriptors for mediation and related areas, 189 institutes and approximately 2,000 persons were involved worldwide, with over 1,000 taking part in all three validation phases during 2015-16. This was followed by a process of consultation with individuals, institutions and associations, and member states. For researchers a detailed validation report, which provides difficulty values and standard errors for the majority of the CEFR descriptors, is available online (North 2020).

2 What does the CEFR/CV consist of?

Before we get into discussing innovations that the CEFR/CV might bring to language education, perhaps one should start by briefly outlining what exactly it contains. The main content is the following:

- a. a brief foreword from the Director General for Democracy setting the CEFR/CV in the context of the Council of Europe's mission to promote and support democracy, the rights of minorities and human rights, pointing out that the CEFR is an education project and that: "It has never been the intention that the CEFR should be used to justify a gate-keeping function of assessment instruments." (COE 2020: 11);
- b. an introduction to the volume that lays out the contents and explains changes from 2001 (Chapter 1);
- c. a 20-page text explaining and illustrating the key aspects of the CEFR for teaching and learning (Chapter 2) and the way these have evolved over time, which it is hoped will be useful in teacher education;
- d. the entire set of CEFR illustrative descriptors (Chapters 3-6, plus Appendices 1-4 for summary scales)—with some slight adaptations to scale titles and descriptor formulations to make them gender- and modality-inclusive;
- e. examples for the extension of the descriptors for mediation and online interaction for the public, personal, occupational and educational domains (Appendix 5).

In addition to this main content, the CEFR/CV also contains a preface thanking institutions and key people who took part in the development project (Preface with acknowledgements), a brief account of the development project in which some 190 institutions and 1500 persons were involved (Appendix 6; North and Piccardo 2016, 2019), a short list of 2001 descriptors that have been substantially changed (Appendix 7); a list of 'supplementary descriptors' calibrated in the project, which did not make it into the official set of illustrative descriptors for one reason or another (Appendix 8); a list of sources used (Appendix 9) and another list with related online resources (Appendix 10).

The CEFR/CV, the CEFR 2001 and a growing wealth of related resources, including presentations and example classroom materials from the current series of Council of Europe web workshops promoting the CEFR/CV, are available on the CEFR website (www.coe.int/lang-cefr). One needs to remember that the CEFR should be seen as an evolutive framework, produced in a collective endeavour with several drafts produced for consultation and piloting before a definitive version is consolidated. This is what happened between 1996 and 2001 and between 2014 and 2020. The CEFR framework has been embodied in the CEFR 2001 and the CEFR/CV 2020 respectively; no doubt in another ten or twenty years there will be a third version, which will move even further away from a book bound by two covers.

3 What is the status of the Companion Volume?

The CEFR/CV (COE 2020) renews the CEFR (COE 2001), which it replaces as a primary reference for the vast majority of new CEFR users. One does not need to look at both the CEFR and the CEFR/CV. The latter updates and extends the conceptual model of the CEFR 2001, clarifies the CEFR vision in the light of developments in our field over the past 20 years, and provides *all* the CEFR descriptors—newly developed and previously existing. The CEFR/CV puts this point as follows:

This volume presents the key messages of the CEFR in a user-friendly form and contains all CEFR illustrative descriptors. For pedagogical use of the CEFR for learning, teaching and assessment, teachers and teacher educators will find it easier to access the CEFR Companion volume as the updated framework. The Companion volume provides the links and references to also consult the chapters of the 2001 edition, where necessary. (COE 2020: 4)

The integrity of the CEFR conceptual model (CEFR 2001 Chapter 2) and the CEFR Common Reference Levels (CEFR 2001 Chapter 3) are not affected by the CEFR/CV, though each is extended. The conceptual model is further developed, particularly in relation to mediation—though the broader view taken can be claimed to be foreshadowed in the CEFR 2001 (see Piccardo 2012). The CEFR/CV also highlights many features of the CEFR vision that tended to be overlooked by many users of the CEFR 2001 (not least the move from four skills to the four modes of communication: reception, production, interaction, mediation). The Common Reference Levels are extended through the introduction of Pre-A1—though again, this was foreshadowed with the ‘Tourist’ proficiency band discussed in CEFR 2001 Chapter 3 (COE 2001: 31). The description of the ‘plus levels’, again overlooked by many users of the 2001 version, are extended. The integrity of the calibration of the new descriptors to those descriptors calibrated in the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) research project (North 2000; North and Schneider 1998; Schneider and North 2000) was assured through personnel (the current author) and methodology (see North and Piccardo 2016, 2019).

In an echo of the ambiguity of the 2001 text over whether the CEFR 2001 was ‘neutral’ or in fact proposed a particular approach, the CEFR/CV, in a similar political compromise, addresses the issue of the relationship of the CEFR/CV to the CEFR with statements like the following: “This publication updates the CEFR 2001, the conceptual framework of which remains valid” (COE 2020: 3) and “Researchers wishing to interrogate the underlying concepts and guidance in CEFR chapters about specific areas should access the 2001 edition, which remains valid” (COE 2020: 4). The name ‘Companion Volume’, does cause some confusion since it can give the impression that one still needs the CEFR 2001 as well, both documents on the table/screen at the same time. Largely for that reason, the COE Publications Department proposed that the final version of the CEFR/CV should be called the CEFR 2nd edition—since second editions of both policy texts and standards are often substantially different from the first. However, this suggestion led to lively debate amongst experts consulted and so the ‘Companion Volume’ title was kept, despite the potential for confusion, since it had by this stage achieved some ‘brand recognition’.

To summarise: The CEFR/CV is the new CEFR—the CEFR 2020 (one of the titles that was proposed). It builds on and respects the integrity of the CEFR 2001, which will always remain as a reference document, also available on the CEFR website. The CEFR conceptual model outlined in CEFR 2001 Chapter 2 is unchanged. The categories of the CEFR descriptive scheme, first proposed by North (1994), remain unchanged—but the meaning and significance of ‘mediation’ has developed considerably. The levels are unaffected—but there is now a Pre-A1 as well. Many parts of the CEFR 2001 text have stood the test of time well (e.g., on plurilingualism, on levels, on assessment). Others, however have been superseded by subsequent COE texts. For example, CEFR Chapter 8 on curriculum options is effectively replaced by the later *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* (Beacco et al. 2016) and the lists of elements in the taxonomic scheme in CEFR Chapters 4-5 have now been elaborated in the various ‘Reference Level Descriptions’ (RLDs: content specifications for the six levels in different languages). The CEFR 2001 remains a useful font of information, but the descriptors in it are now out of date and the text, which never read as prose text, is today best accessed for more detail on aspects presented in the CEFR/CV.

4 What is the background to the CEFR Companion Volume?

The CEFR 2001 made clear that the CEFR was an open-ended as well as open-minded project, as one sees in the third and fourth principles it should meet:

- *multi-purpose*: usable for the full variety of purposes involved in the planning and provision of facilities for language learning;
- *flexible*: adaptable for use in different circumstances;
- *open*: capable of further extension and refinement;
- *dynamic*: in continuous evolution in response to experience in its use;

- *user-friendly*: presented in a form readily understandable and usable by those to whom it is addressed;
- *non-dogmatic*: not irrevocably and exclusively attached to any one of a number of competing linguistic or educational theories or practices. (COE 2001: 7-8)

John Trim, first author of the CEFR, stated shortly before his death that the CEFR is “always open to amendment and further development, in an interactive international system of co-operating institutions [...] whose cumulative experience and expertise produces a solid structure of knowledge, understanding and practice shared by all” (Trim 2012: xl-xli). Even before the development of the CEFR/CV, it was recognised that the ‘CEFR’, in the intended sense of a common framework, extended beyond the published book to embrace core CEFR resources referred to on the CEFR website. These include items such as: the documented video samples of spoken performance at different levels for different languages calibrated in a series of benchmarking seminars; the banks of supplementary descriptors, often stemming from versions of the European Language Portfolio; the RLDs for different languages; the manuals for developing tests and examinations related to the CEFR (ALTE 2011) and for relating examinations to it (COE 2009), as well as further materials related to them; plus examples of calibrated test items for listening and reading.

It was also recognised that the original book had, to a great extent, failed to meet the fifth principle, user-friendliness¹. In addition, a 2007 Intergovernmental Language Policy Forum (COE 2007) emphasised that the potential of the CEFR for stimulating educational reform and the reflection on and further development of teaching practice, rather than any standardisation, was more central to their needs.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the COE Education Department decided in May 2013 to confirm the COE’s commitment to the CEFR as its most successful policy document and to update both the CEFR conceptual apparatus and the CEFR illustrative descriptors. Over the years a number of requests to develop descriptors of mediation, reactions to literature, and online interaction had in fact been received. In addition, there was also a desire to take account of developments in research and communication practices in the field since 2001.

Initially, the task of updating the CEFR conceptual model was given to Daniel Coste. Coste, together with Marisa Cavalli, produced a text on the role of mediation in schools (Coste and Cavalli 2015), which contains (early versions of) a number of descriptors from both the CEFR/CV and the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*². Since the Coste and Cavalli text did not in fact address the issue of the CEFR model and it was impossible to develop descriptors without a theoretical framework to work from, updating the CEFR conceptual model became part of the work of the descriptor project, presented in the project report (North and Piccardo 2016)³. After the completion of the development, validation, consultation, and piloting processes, it was decided to add short introductions to and rationales for all of the CEFR descriptor scales (newly developed and previously existing). Finally, to address the issue of user-friendliness, CEFR/CV Chapter 2 was developed to explain the CEFR conceptual vision in a simple and concise manner.

5 What is the theoretical background to the CEFR/CV?

1. The CEFR/CV is an attempt to address this. “With this new, user-friendly version, the Council of Europe responds to the many comments that the 2001 edition was a very complex document that many language professionals found difficult to access” (COE 2020: 21).
2. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>
3. The theoretical framework for the development of the 2001 CEFR descriptors was presented in North (2000).

The theoretical background to the CEFR/CV comes from progress in different areas of research in the 20 years following the development of the CEFR 2001 in 1993-6. These developments support and broaden hints, implications and tentative suggested moves already in the CEFR 2001. The principal areas of research, which all interrelate, are the following (see Piccardo and North 2019 Chapter 3 for a detailed account).

5.1 The integrationist and enactivist perspectives

As part of the move from a linear to a complex perspective, integrationists reject the ‘language myth’ (Harris 2001) of one-to-one relationships between words and concepts or exact equivalences of concepts across languages. Integrationists and enactivists eschew artificial divisions (e.g., mind/body/environment; the four isolated skills: listening / reading / speaking / writing) and the transactional ‘information-gap’ perspective associated with the communicative approach. Instead, they promote a holistic, integrationist vision of language education and language activity, a concept of language as action in context, with *situated experience* (Masciotra and Morel 2011) as the central pedagogical concept.

5.2 The complex, ecological perspective

The application of complexity theories, especially complex dynamic systems theory, to language education has gained momentum in the last twenty years (Larsen-Freeman 1997, 2017). In this perspective, the learner, class and school was seen as complex adaptive systems embedded in one another in a fractal pattern. In language development, Larsen-Freeman gives central importance to the concept of ‘emergence’ of both language and language learning which replaces the idea of gaining access to something that already exists. This is linked to van Lier’s ‘ecological approach’, the key to which is “perception in action”, (2004: 97) which helps users/learners to see and act on ‘affordances’ in the environment. An ecological perspective has “a conception of the learning environment as a *complex adaptive system*, of the mind as the totality of relationships between a developing person and the surrounding world, and of learning as the result of meaningful activity in an accessible environment” (van Lier 1997: 783, my emphasis). Like Halliday, with his “meaning potential” (1973: 54), van Lier sees meaning as lying in the situation, the “action potential” (2004: 92) offered by the (learning or performance) situation, with its opportunities—but also its conditions and constraints. He proposes “action-based teaching” (2007) that provides the affordances necessary to promote learner awareness and agency, and to deepen learning.

5.3 The agentive perspective

Autonomy was a theme in language education before the CEFR, and could be said to have (over-)influenced the development of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). But agency is about more than autonomy: studies into classroom discourse demonstrated the absence of learner agency in conventional classrooms (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) as well as children’s ability to work collaboratively in small groups when given the chance and training to do so (Barnes and Todd 1977). The work of these pioneers influenced the development of the concept of interaction strategies in the CEFR. However, the socio-cognitive theory of agency (Bandura 2001, 2018) goes way beyond even this, emphasising cyclical planning, working towards concrete goals, stress-free rehearsal or drafts, and self-monitoring, building the self-efficacy that stems from the experience of earned success.

5.4 The socio-constructivist / sociocultural perspective

Since the 1990s, the insight that learning is primarily a process of internalising concepts met in a social environment (learning through interaction) has steadily gained ground. This is largely related to the work of Vygotsky, which sees such mediation as key to all learning, as well as observations that, for

example, apprentices learn more from each other in 'situated learning' than they do from their trainers (Lave and Wenger 1991). The result is a greatly increased focus in all areas of education on collaborative learning in which learners think through their ideas, mediating for themselves and each other, through a process called 'linguaging' (Swain 2006).

5.5 The plurilingual perspective

The concept of a holistic, plurilingual repertoire linked to interculturality—as opposed to compartmentalisation of different languages (multilingualism⁴)—was bold when it appeared in an early draft of the CEFR. At first the concept had little impact in language education, with John Trim lamenting at the 2007 Intergovernmental Language Policy Forum that the CEFR “descriptive apparatus for communicative action and competences together with the ‘Can Do’ descriptors of levels of competence are a good basis for a plurilingual approach to language across the curriculum, *which awaits development*” (Trim 2007: 49, my emphasis). Since then, however, neurolinguistic studies have confirmed both the concept itself and the multiple benefits of plurilingualism and a considerable body of research and practices has developed (see Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford and Lawrence 2021).

5.6 Theoretical contributions to the CEFR/CV

The CEFR 2001 built upon 1980s-90s research in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, second language acquisition, and language assessment, and as a result it introduced a number of new concepts and perspectives to the field of language education. As we have discussed in this section, in the 20 years or so since the CEFR was written, many concepts touched on or hinted at in the CEFR 2001 have been considerably further developed. These theoretical contributions, listed above, have been fed into the development of the CEFR/CV. In the following section, we discuss the key innovative concepts in the CEFR/CV, referring back in several instances to the perspectives listed above.

6 What are the key innovative concepts in the CEFR/CV?

When the CEFR appeared, most people considered it an instrument to promote communicative language teaching (CLT), which therefore required little changes to practice except perhaps for the introduction of 'Can Do' descriptors into curricula and course books.

With the appearance of the CEFR/CV, the same kind of debate is starting as to whether the CEFR/CV represents something new—or whether the CEFR did all that. It is certainly true that the CEFR *implied* a paradigm shift with many of its concepts—e.g., alignment of planning, teaching, assessment; teaching for competence in action as opposed to inert knowledge; the learner seen as a social *agent*; a shift from the four skills to an integrated approach with the four modes of reception, production, interaction and mediation; and last but not least plurilingual education. However, although considerable progress was made over the next decade with the alignment of planning, teaching, assessment into coherent curricula, any *conceptual* shift was not very noticeable in practice. Partly because of the fact that many of these concepts were somewhat ahead of their time, many users, even those who worked regularly with the CEFR, do not appear to have adopted or even noticed them.

The developments in theory and research discussed in the previous section, plus the gathering of experience in the field through experimentation in practice, meant that, twenty years on, the time was ripe for the elaboration and further development of these key aspects of the CEFR vision in the CEFR/CV.

4. Not all applied linguists have adopted this distinction; many have attached to 'multilingualism' adjectives like 'dynamic,' 'holistic,' 'inclusive,' 'active' or 'integrated' to try and capture the plurilingualism concept; see the introduction in Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford and Lawrence (2021).

6.1 The social agent

The concept of the learner as a social agent was introduced in explaining the CEFR conceptual model in CEFR 2001 Chapter 2. In completing tasks, the social agent mobilises and combines *all* of their repertoire, all of their general competences (cognitive, emotional, cultural, etc.) and (plurilingual) communicative language competences in a strategic manner, further developing their competences in that process. In this view competence only exists and further develops in action. However, this model, and in particular the significance of the ‘agency’ in the expression ‘social agent’ was not greatly noticed in language education in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The vogue word at the time was ‘autonomy’ as mentioned above, by which one generally thought of learners beavering away on their own, taking responsibility for their learning, self-access, self-assessment, etc.—without much effect on classroom teaching (See Schmenk 2008; Schmenk, Breidbach and Küster 2018 on the trivialisation of the concept of autonomy in language education).

The CEFR/CV highlights the view of the learner as a social agent completing tasks in collective, collaborative action. Users/learners “co-construct [...] meaning in interaction” (COE 2020: 21) and perform tasks to “act in the social world and exert agency in the learning process” (ibid.: 28). In the way it has developed, the concept of social agent has two sides to it: firstly, regarding the social context, which (a) with its conditions and constraints determines to a great extent what one ‘can mean’ in any situation (Halliday’s 1973 ‘meaning potential’), and (b) implies learning in social, collaborative interaction. Secondly, within that context, there is agency, which has four fundamental characteristics: *intentionality*, *forethought*, *self-regulatory processes* and *self-reflection* (Bandura 2001, 2018). Consequently, learners need to be given experience of collaborative task/projects that allow them, under given conditions and constraints, to take the initiative, collaborate, plan and produce something, monitoring progress as they proceed. In this way, they learn to act in the language and develop as lifelong learners. This is the conceptual model behind the action-oriented approach.

6.2 The action-oriented approach

The meaning of the term ‘action-oriented approach’ (AoA) has developed over the years. It was introduced in the CEFR 2001, but not elaborated. In the CEFR 2001 one can identify three aspects as characterizing the AoA:

- a. The concept of the social agent discussed above.
- b. The related proposal to integrate collaborative tasks allowing learner agency in teaching and assessment—with a chapter specifically on tasks (CEFR 2001 Chapter 7). The primary purpose of tasks should not be the mere production of language, as so often is inferred in CLT, including task-based language teaching (TBLT).
- c. ‘Can do’ descriptors for target language situations to implement an action-oriented approach to curriculum, and facilitate alignment of planning, teaching and teacher, peer and self-assessment.

The CEFR/CV develops the concept of the AoA further, picking up on the agentive and complex/ecological perspectives mentioned in the previous section. The fundamental differences between the AoA and even more developed forms of TBLT (e.g., van den Branden 2006) are the concrete goals provided by descriptors, the *agency* in relation to the affordances presented by *plurilingualism*, and tasks (see Piccardo and North 2019). In the AoA student behaviour is *motivated* as opposed to casual: students have a mission and it is they, not the teacher, who make decisions about how they will carry it out (Bourguignon 2010). Secondly, all the languages a student possesses are always present in the classroom; they naturally mobilise *all* their resources and so this should be taken into account, with the teacher either defining the ‘language policy’ for each phase of the task or requiring students to do so (see plurilingualism below).

6.3 Mediation

Mediation was added as the fourth mode of communication in the CEFR 2001, replacing an earlier fourth category 'processing' (North 1992), but the concept had not been included in the Swiss research project, so there was no proper conceptualisation or descriptors. The very short section on mediation (COE 2001: 87-88) gave the impression that the concept was limited to summarizing, translating and interpreting across languages. Piccardo (2012) suggested that there was more implied by the CEFR description of mediation than what had been generally understood, and thus the notion was worth revisiting, since linguistic mediation inevitably also involved cultural and social mediation. In addition, with the concept of the social agent (see above) "although it is not stated explicitly in the 2001 text, the CEFR descriptive scheme *de facto* gives mediation and agency key positions in the AoA, similar to the role that other scholars give them when they discuss the language learning process" (Piccardo and North 2019: 186).

This broader conceptualisation on mediation found in the CEFR/CV concerns access to new knowledge and concepts and the importance of working with others in a process of co-construction. As Walqui (2006) points out, collaborative group work can double the sources of mediation for the learner. It adds mediation by a peer—and even more significantly mediation for a peer—to mediation for oneself in making sense of something, and mediation from a 'significant other' (parent, teacher, trainer etc.). The CEFR/CV provides descriptors for the CEFR 2001 *Mediation of text* and *Acting as an intermediary in informal situations*—well-established in curricula and tests in Germany (Kolb 2016) and Greece (Stathopoulou 2015). But it also adds the notion of *Mediating concepts* in collaborative work as well as broadening both the concept of *Mediating a text* (to include both non-verbal data and creative text/literature) and *Mediating communication* (by adding the *Facilitating of pluricultural space* and *Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements* to the 2001 *Acting as an intermediary*).

6.4 Plurilingualism

As mentioned above, the notion of plurilingualism was introduced in the CEFR. However, despite considerable space given to it in CEFR 2001 Section 6.1.3. and Chapter 8, there was little initial take up, as discussed in Section 5.5 above.

The CEFR/CV highlights plurilingualism as an educational goal, stating that: "Plurilinguals have a *single*, inter-related repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies in order to accomplish tasks" (COE 2020: 30). Plurilingual competence is an unstable competence changing constantly through a process of emergence (Larsen-Freeman and Todeva forthcoming; Piccardo 2017, 2018). Plurilingualism is not only concerned with individuals' linguistic (and cultural) trajectories and the flow between languages and varieties in their repertoire, it is also helping to break barriers and hierarchies between languages. Furthermore, plurilingualism is explicitly outward-looking. It also relates to the learning of additional languages and a stance of interculturality—hence the expression 'plurilingual and intercultural education,' the promotion of which is the main aim of the Council of Europe's engagement in language education. The goal is for learners to become plurilingual, intercultural speakers (Byram 2008) and develop partial competences in a constantly developing repertoire that holistically builds on different languages (languages of origin, language of schooling, additional languages, as well as any form of linguistic encounter). The CEFR/CV therefore contains three scales for plurilingual and pluricultural competence, intended to help teachers incorporate plural aims in their syllabi (*Building on pluricultural repertoire; Plurilingual comprehension; Building on plurilingual repertoire*).

In the same plurilingual perspective, CEFR Level C2 was never associated with the concept of native-speaker. However, all references in the descriptors to that concept (which were found at A1 and B2 in relation to the presence or absence of linguistic accommodation on the part of the native speaker) have also now been removed in the CEFR/CV. Also, the scale for phonological competence has been replaced in order to focus on intelligibility rather than any native speaker model and admit that even obviously C2 speakers frequently retain an accent. And in addition, as well as descriptors specifically for

signing competences (Chapter 6), all descriptors have now been made modality inclusive, following the approach taken in the ECML PRO-Sign project.

7 What implications does the CEFR/CV have for teaching/learning and assessment?

The AoA operates at both the curriculum and classroom levels. At a curriculum level it involves five principles:

- a. adopting the same framework and metalanguage for the teaching of different languages;
- b. planning backwards from learners' real-life communicative needs (= backwards design (Richards 2013));
- c. the alignment of planning, teaching and assessment;
- d. the involvement of students in the learning process, with the use of descriptors for the communication of learning aims, in order to create concrete learning goals, and
- e. the use of the descriptors to monitor performance and finally assess the achievement of those goals—where possible with peer and self- as well as teacher assessment.

The CEFR/CV broadens the scope for this kind of curriculum alignment by providing descriptors for new areas that can inspire learning goals (mediation, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, online interaction, and an action-oriented approach to literature). It also makes even clearer in all the descriptors that the goal is intelligibility and interculturality—not native-speakerness. CEFR/CV Section 2.7 also adds a significant concept for curriculum and test design: needs profiles: the use of descriptor scales to identify the communicative needs of particular groups at an early step of the planning process. It is to assist in the creation of such profiles *before* developing a curriculum or standard that is the reason for having so many different CEFR descriptor scales. The CEFR/CV provides two examples of needs profiles (pages 38-39) and suggests two ways in which they might be developed (see pages 42 to 43).⁵

Let us now turn to practical implications for classroom teaching and assessment, since other works are available that focus on CEFR-based curriculum and course planning (e.g., Beacco et al. 2016; North 2014; North et al. 2018).

7.1 Implications for the classroom: What is new?

The key implications of the CEFR/CV to consider for the classroom are perhaps complexity, integration, agency, mediation, and plurilingualism.

7.1.1 Complexity

As we saw earlier, in line with developments in education and science, the CEFR/CV embraces a complex (as opposed to linear) perspective. Instead of trying to simplify everything, breaking things into little pieces and working through them all, it stresses the need to accept complexity. Complexity inevitably occurs in two ways:

5. The concept of needs profiles was in fact illustrated in the 1998 provisional version of the CEFR but was removed after the consultation process with member states. As Krumm (2007) pointed out, such differentiated profiles—rather than just setting a global level as a required standard—are vitally important in determining an objective, particularly in an immigration context. Unfortunately, the requirement of a 'level' in all skills is still the norm across Europe for entry, permanent residence and citizenship (Rocca, Hamnes Carlsen and Deygers 2020); fewer than a handful of countries require a lower level for written skills or productive skills.

- a. in the provision of a challenging and exciting learning environment;
- b. in the language needs that come up in relation to the tasks.

In relation to the environment, the AoA suggests more complex task/projects lasting several lessons in which students create an artefact—and in which groups may work at different speeds. They may use languages that the teacher does not speak at times during that process. There is room for autonomous use of resources, for learners to make choices and decisions.

In relation to language, there is a focus on encouraging students to formulate their thoughts, to use more complex sentences patterns (syntax) and appropriate vocabulary (register, collocation, colligation).

The aims here would be to encourage the gradual development of learner autonomy and agency in the learning activities, and to encourage teachers to promote metalinguistic awareness, introducing language features as they are needed, rather than following a grammatical syllabus.

7.1.2 Integration

It has long been common practice for textbooks to have units that consist of a series of lessons that provide balanced practice of different activities and skills. Generally, the unit starts with a *texte déclencheur* (not always authentic) to introduce the topic, and sometimes it has a productive task at the end. However, it is less usual for these activities to be situated within a credible, real world-oriented scenario and to build up to a creative, culminating task in which skills, competences and strategies are integrated—and further developed through the experience (Bourguignon 2010; Piccardo, Lawrence, Germain-Rutherford and Galante (forthcoming). What action-orientation is all about is using one or more languages to complete an integrated (complex) task to:

- research and make sense of new concepts and knowledge (reception; mediating for oneself - notetaking);
- collaborate with peers to construct meaning (interaction; mediating concepts) in order to create artefacts (production);
- using local, relevant authentic materials creatively, and
- becoming aware of the importance of strategies, and developing self-belief in the process (= self-efficacy: Bandura 2001).

7.1.3 Agency (in the classroom)

When one looks at the examples of tasks given in books on TBLT, it is often remarkable how little room is left for learners to be involved in setting their goal, planning how to get there, deciding who does what and monitoring their progress. Most leave little room for the initiative necessary for learners to purposefully and strategically exert their agency. Nunan, for example, uses a very restricted example of a task to introduce the contrast between 'task', 'communicative activity' and 'exercise' (2004: 20-21). Willis and Willis offer a taxonomy of seven types of tasks in their task generator: listing; ordering and sequencing; matching; comparing; sharing personal experience; problem-solving; and "projects and creative tasks: class newspaper, poster, survey, fantasy, etc." (Willis and Willis 2007: 108). Of these, only the last two categories would allow the learners sufficient agency for the type of collaborative action-oriented task discussed above. The concepts of feed-forward (planning from goals) and feedback (from monitoring), or to use the term common to quality management and action research 'plan-do-check-reflect' are integral to the AoA—but hardly ever considered in TBLT (Piccardo and North 2019). Piloting of the new CEFR/CV descriptors showed that they are a powerful tool to guide learner action in groupwork and to help teachers and learners monitor the ongoing process.

7.1.4 Mediation (in the classroom)

Cross-linguistic, textual mediation has been proven in examinations for over 10 years and is a good place to start (see Stathopoulou 2015; Dendrinos and Karavas forthcoming; ECML METLA project). In fact 13 of the 22 mediation subscales in the CEFR/CV relate to this CEFR 2001 interpretation of mediation (the first eight of those from *Mediating a text*, the four strategies, plus *Acting as an intermediary*). However, from a classroom perspective, one should not overlook the fact that it is precisely the collaborative, goal-oriented nature of *Mediating concepts* that makes mediation action-oriented. Action-oriented tasks that require the collaborative co-construction of meaning through mediation in interaction have a broad educational as well as narrow linguistic potential. As mentioned when discussing integration, mediation implies mediating for oneself (reception and notetaking) through exchange of information and ideas gained through research (*mediating a text*) and collaboration in order to construct meaning (*mediating concepts*) during the process of planning and producing an artefact. In addition, the scales *Facilitating pluricultural space* and *Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements* add the cultural and social aspects of mediation that may be essential for learners in real life.

7.1.5 Plurilingualism

Plurilingualism can be seen from a number of different perspectives, so there are a developing range of techniques that can be used to encourage plurilingual awareness in the classroom. Plurilingualism implies overcoming the barriers between the way different languages, including the language of schooling, are taught, and encouraging learners to appreciate their plurilingual profile. These profiles can be presented in a number of ways, for example, through graphic plurilingual profiles presenting growth as the covering of terrain (see CEFR/CV Section 2.7), through language portrait silhouettes (Krumm and Jenkins 2001; Prasad 2014), language mapping (Somerville, D'warte and Brown 2014), identity texts (Cummins and Early 2011), and of course through CLIL (Bernaus et al. 2011).

Sometimes plurilingualism can be expressed and developed through reflection on similarities and differences, false friends etc. (Corcoll López and González-Davies 2016) to promote metalinguistic awareness. Sometimes this is done through the use of one-language-at-a-time, in the way suggested by the descriptors for *Mediating a text* and *Acting as an intermediary* with their talk of Language A, Language B (and potentially Language C and D), and sometimes it happens in a free-flowing process of plurilinguaging (Piccardo 2017, 2018) in which learners use all of their plurilingual and pluricultural resources in the process of completing a task. In practice, the teacher—or perhaps the students themselves—may need to define a 'language policy.' This would define the phase(s) of activity in which all languages may be used (e.g., in a research phase, or in mediating concepts), and the phase(s) in which one or more specific languages are to be used (e.g., for the artefact). Obviously, policy should vary depending on the context, the aims and priorities of the class, and the nature of the task.

7.2 What does the CEFR/CV mean for assessment

Incorporating points like the above in the classroom, and using (adapted) CEFR/CV descriptors to monitor the activity and assist self- peer and teacher assessment is quite a radical change, but it is not conceptually challenging. To the contrary, it is much in line with developments in education generally. There is a tendency for education to be seen more holistically, curriculum aims to become more integrated, and the development of competences, creativity and agency to take centre stage. When it comes to formal assessment and test development, however, things are more complicated. This is because testing, with its yearning for a clear construct, instinctively prefers to subdivide rather than integrate. This starts with the candidates. Whereas group assignments—with all the group receiving the same grade for the work—are common in continuous assessment even at degree level, in language testing, which remains focused on the individual performance, or on a series of discrete performances

by the individual in response to 'items', the idea is still revolutionary.

Perhaps one could consider implications for testing in two steps. Firstly, there are potential adjustments suggested by the CEFR/CV that do not affect the contemporary language testing paradigm. Here one starting point could be the 'plus levels,' more prominent in 2020. Many users have not realised that the global scales defining the CEFR levels in CEFR 2001 Chapter 3 (and now in CEFR/CV Appendices 1-4) do not contain any descriptors from the 'plus levels—only those for the criterion levels (A1, A2, B1, etc.). Then there are pointers in the scales and in CEFR/CV Appendix 5 for simulated online tasks and for cross-linguistic mediation of texts, already common in Greece and Germany as mentioned. Finally, oral tests might reconsider their criteria for pronunciation, to check that candidates are not penalised purely for accent, given "the well-established fact that accent is partially independent of comprehensibility and intelligibility and that the latter two are more important to successful communication" (Derwing and Munro 2015: 168).

But there are more fundamental issues implying more need for reflection. These include the provision of a credible unifying context or scenario for a set of test tasks; the integration of skills in a linked sequence of tasks—including the use of online as well as offline resources during a task; the provision for agency in approaching tasks; the treatment of group communication with the co-construction of meaning and artefacts; and above all the attitude taken to the mother tongue, plurilingualism, codeswitching, trans- and plurilinguaging. These are more difficult issues that could occupy us for years. They are considered briefly below.

7.2.1 Scenario/real world context for linked tasks

It is true that one does see more attempts to link test tasks together through a unifying topic, and this is certainly a positive development, but a primary problem in doing so is the identification of the addressee(s) or audience. Kolb (2016) considers this the main problem with the incorporation of mediation in tests in Germany where "[...] it is sometimes the case that the contextualisation with a particular addressee is considerably underspecified [so that the context given] can be seen as above all an excuse for a summary" (Kolb 2016: 52, my translation). There is also the additional problem that in language testing one generally seeks to avoid having all questions relating to just one or two topics, since this may well (dis)advantage certain learners due to their degree of familiarity with the topic. One would have to ensure that the topic of the scenario was appropriate for all test takers—easier to achieve with a test developed for a specific context; less easy with international tests. In this and other respects, James Purpura and colleagues have recently been investigating the possibilities of scenario-based language assessment (Beltrán & Lin 2017; Carroll 2017).

7.2.2 Integration of skills

In general, language testers tend to prefer separately defined test constructs, and hence to stick to testing the four skills separately. Inspired by the logic of real communication, the early 1990s saw the beginning of experimentation with integrated skills in tests by, for example, the Institute of Linguists (Luukko-Vinchenzo 1993). The idea with such tests is that information from the texts used to assess the receptive skills serves as input to the tasks for assessing the productive skills. There are, naturally, several complications with this concept. Firstly, there is the problem of creating a credible context for a series of linked tasks, as discussed above. Secondly, there is the question of defining the construct(s) and then there is the knotty issue of the scoring. Should the receptive parts of the test be scored separately—or should certain information found in the source materials provided be required in the scoring of the productive parts? Should scoring on the productive parts in that case depend on successful completion of the receptive parts? It is certainly possible to find answers to these issues. For example, the Trinity ISE (Integrated Skills in English) examinations each have two modules, for spoken language and written language respectively, the latter including both a reading-to-writing task and an independent writing task,

and the relationship of these tasks to the CEFR levels has recently been confirmed (Harsch & Paraskevi Kanistra 2020). The Greek KPG exams for different languages have long contained intralinguistic and interlinguistic tasks that require integrated skills (Dendrinis and Karavas, forthcoming) and finally the ECML's 2020-2022 VITbox project on implementing the CEFR/CV, coordinated by Johann Fischer, is pursuing integrated tasks for assessment.

7.2.3 Agency (related to assessment)

It would not be an exaggeration to say that current language tests leave little room for agency. Even the possibility of some choice over which papers or questions to answer (common in pre-scientific days) seems to have fallen out of favour. Is agency indeed feasible in a standardised test? A prototype test for the Erasmus programme, cited in the CEFR (COE 2001: 178-179), did in fact try to put the candidate 'in charge.' In this oral exam, the candidate was a subject expert who explained their discipline and/or project to the examiner, who would ask follow-up questions from a position of genuine ignorance. It is difficult to see how one can introduce agency into a standardised test without giving the candidate some kind of special initiative like this. In an educational context, one possibility could be to introduce a 'coursework' assignment to the test, in the form of a collaborative task/project. The team could get joint grades for the product from the project itself (as with such university assignments) but the project could then be the topic of one phase of the oral exam, with the individual candidate expected to explain it and answer probing follow up questions, as in the Erasmus test. Alternatively, the oral exam could be constructed so as to encourage classroom task/projects as test preparation, as is the case with the recent Austrian Certificate of Plurilingualism⁶ (Steinhuber forthcoming), which stimulates collaborative class task/projects that require the integrated use of L2 and L3⁷. Of course, that is not possible in international machine-delivered gate-keeping tests, but international tests claiming to provide an educational curriculum, like the DELF or the Cambridge, Goethe Institute and Trinity suites, could perhaps consider ideas like this.

7.2.4 Collaborative co-construction

As suggested above, the introduction of a course work element could encourage collaborative learning. However, collaborative task/projects can also be encouraged through washback, as is the case with the recently developed oral examination for the Austrian Certificate of Plurilingualism (Steinhuber forthcoming), as mentioned above. But to take account of the more collective view of communication that has developed since the 1990s, one would really want to include collaborative co-construction with peers during the test itself. The Eurocentres Foundation successfully used small group classroom tasks for assessment of level (North 1991, 1993) for over 20 years, but would this be feasible in more formal testing? Here, as with integrated skills, there were attempts in the early 1990s, noticeably in relation to the development of the Cambridge Advanced, but the constraints of the need for replicability in high stakes testing soon caused the format to atrophy into the familiar rather reductive paired tasks by the time it was introduced in practice in the Cambridge tests in the mid-1990s. But even rigidly controlled paired interviews throw up problems in rating the contributions. Pairing needs to be undertaken sensitively and it can be more difficult to avoid discourse dominance by one person and the emergence of complex group dynamics if more than two candidates are involved. With pairs it has been suggested that in formal tests both candidates should receive a joint grade (May 2009). Could this be a way forward for collaborative tasks in general?

6. https://www.cebs.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Austrian_framework_plurilingual_oral_exams-Druckausgabequalit-1.pdf (assessed 15 July 2021).

7. https://www.cebs.at/home/plurilingualism/plurilingual_lessons/ (assessed 15 July 2021).

7.2.5 Mediation (related to assessment)

Mediation of text can clearly be included in formal tests, with considerable experience being gained with cross-linguistic tasks in both Germany and Greece as mentioned above. Dendrinou (2013) and Stathopoulou (2015) each provide in English a range of examples of such test items. Several international tests of English have also started to include mediation of text in the same language. Mediation of concepts in interaction is, however, a more complicated issue since it involves the collaborative co-construction discussed above. In consultation and piloting, teachers found the descriptors for mediating concepts eminently suitable for goal-setting and beneficial for awareness-raising about the nature of collaborative group work as well as monitoring and assessment by the teacher but, perhaps reflecting the issues discussed immediately above, were less sanguine about formal tests. In the first issue of this journal, Pavlovskaya and Lankina (2019) suggest that mediation might be taught and monitored as part of the learning *process*, but that the quality of the *product* could then be assessed as usual with assessor-oriented qualitative factors. Their data showed that, at least with advanced learners, awareness-raising and training with mediation descriptors could improve the quality of that final product. Mediation of communication, particularly *Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements* is also problematic from the point of view of formal assessment. Whether it should be included in assessment really depends on the target communicative situations concerned.

7.2.6 Recognising plurilingualism

Taking account of the language repertoire of plurilinguals in assessment appears to be a coming topic and is indeed the subject of a forthcoming edited volume (Melo-Pfeiffer and Ollivier forthcoming). Clearly the place to start is with simply creating profiles of competence in different languages, as in the ELP and as in the plurilingual profiles suggested in the CEFR/CV (COE 2020: 40). In terms of assessing the alternation and/or mixing/meshing of languages, cross-linguistic mediation is one form of plurilingual assessment, and the Austrian oral examination for a Certificate of Plurilingualism has also already been mentioned. The latter is a 15-minute exam with two phases: Phase 1 mediation of text (including *Explaining data*) from language of schooling to L2 and L3 and Phase 2: *Acting as an intermediary* and collaborative mediation of concepts in L2 and L3 (Steinhuber forthcoming). No doubt other examples of plurilingual testing formats will follow. One could imagine the development of more standardised items on understanding a text in a language similar to one that the candidate has studied (intercomprehension), or language awareness items in which similarities and equivalent expressions are deduced. Then again there is CLIL: the possibility of assessing content knowledge through other languages.

Clearly in any assessment context involving interaction, the policy regarding when and how different languages are to be used needs to be clearly specified in different phases of reception, information exchange, collaborative interaction, and the artefact production. In some phases one specific language may be required, in others passing from one to another (classic cross-linguistic mediation) and in yet others free sourcing of material (if there is a project element) in whatever language desired and free-flowing translanguaging in subsequent collaborative interaction. There is no intrinsic right and wrong here. As Cummins (2017) points out, plurilingual students need to be equipped to use one-language-at-a-time when it is needed in certain real-life situations, to acknowledge and accommodate the presence of multiple languages in other situations, and to be able to determine when translanguaging is appropriate to the situation and when it is not.

8 Conclusion

This article has tried to give an overview of where the CEFR/CV is coming from in terms of its contextual background and the developments in theory and practices that it reflects. The status of the CEFR/CV was discussed, as was its relationship to the CEFR 2001, which it replaces as a primary reference for the

majority of users. The aim of the CEFR/CV is to bring the CEFR up-to-date, aligning with developments in education, especially language education, over the past 20 years. The various perspectives that have fed into the renewed CEFR vision (integrationist, complex, ecological, agentic, socio-constructivist/sociocultural, plurilingual) were briefly outlined. The key innovative concepts in the CEFR, developed and clarified in the CEFR/CV, were discussed: the social agent in an action-oriented approach, mediation in its narrower 2001 and broader 2020 senses, and again plurilingualism. The function of CEFR/CV Chapter 2 'Key aspects of the CEFR for teaching and learning' is to clarify and illustrate these and other aspects of the CEFR vision in order to balance the tendency to focus only on the CEFR levels. For more detail on the conceptualisation of mediation, readers are referred to the report on the mediation project (North & Piccardo 2016), for the AoA to Piccardo and North (2019) and for plurilingualism to Piccardo et al. (2021). One of the most important points about the innovation potential of the CEFR/CV is that the various concepts concerned—the move away from the four skills for curriculum development, the social agent, the action-oriented approach, mediation, plurilingualism—should not be seen in isolation from each other. They are all linked, as one would expect from complexity theories.

Some potential implications that the CEFR/CV could have for teaching, learning and assessment in the classroom on the one hand and for more formal assessment on the other were then presented. The essential point made is a proposal to move on from seeing language just as a subject with the teaching of language in context and the focus on getting students to use that taught language in fluency practice (as in the communicative approach). Learning is more effective when it is situated in a context of real use (Lave and Wenger 1991) in a rich, challenging yet scaffolded environment. Such an environment can offer affordances that develop learners' "perception in action" (van Lier 2004: 97) through collaborative tasks that harness and integrate *all* the learner's resources (general as well as language competences and strategies). Language programmes should therefore recognize the inevitably plurilingual nature of language learning and use.

It was admitted that it is easier to see how these concepts, though challenging, can be applied in classroom teaching and assessment than may be the case in a formal testing context. Indeed, the concepts have mostly been developed as classroom practices over the past 20 or so years, at least partly inspired by the CEFR 2001. The CEFR is after all mainly concerned with learning, teaching and assessment—in that order. An important aim of the CEFR descriptors is to provide teachers with both curriculum aims and a means to develop instruments for continuous assessment of their achievement. The CEFR promotes the broader view of assessment as assessment for learning and assessment as learning (Assessment Research Group 1999). The new descriptors provided in the CEFR/CV offer teachers the opportunity and challenge to broaden the scope of language activity in their classrooms and to involve learners in the process of planning and monitoring it.

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10 Biography

Brian North, is a researcher and consultant to the Council of Europe. After developing the CEFR levels and descriptors, he co-authored the CEFR itself, the prototype European Language Portfolio, the Manual for relating assessments to the CEFR, and Eaquals' core inventories for English and French. Recent projects include the coordination of the CEFR/CV plus co-investigation in a study of CEFR use in Canada and Switzerland, alignment of the Canadian Language Benchmarks to the CEFR and the ECML project CEFR QualiMatrix. Recent (co-)publications include *The CEFR in Practice* (CUP 2014), *Language Course Planning* (OUP 2018) and *The Action-oriented Approach* (Multilingual Matters 2019).

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