

Chapter 2

KEY ASPECTS OF THE CEFR FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) presents a comprehensive descriptive scheme of language proficiency and a set of Common Reference Levels (A1 to C2) defined in illustrative descriptor scales, plus options for curriculum design promoting plurilingual and intercultural education, further elaborated in the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* (Beacco et al. 2016a).

One of the main principles of the CEFR is the promotion of the positive formulation of educational aims and outcomes at all levels. Its “can do” definition of aspects of proficiency provides a clear, shared roadmap for learning, and a far more nuanced instrument to gauge progress than an exclusive focus on scores in tests and examinations. This principle is based on the CEFR view of language as a vehicle for opportunity and success in social, educational and professional domains. This key feature contributes to the Council of Europe’s goal of quality inclusive education as a right of all citizens. The Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers recommends the “use of the CEFR as a tool for coherent, transparent and effective plurilingual education in such a way as to promote democratic citizenship, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue”.²¹

As well as being used as a reference tool by almost all member states of the Council of Europe and the European Union, the CEFR has also had – and continues to have – considerable influence beyond Europe. In fact, the CEFR is being used not only to provide transparency and clear reference points for assessment purposes but also, increasingly, to inform curriculum reform and pedagogy. This development reflects the forward-looking conceptual underpinning of the CEFR and has paved the way for a new phase of work around the CEFR, leading to the extension of the illustrative descriptors published in this edition. Before presenting the illustrative descriptors, however, a reminder of the purpose and nature of the CEFR is outlined. First, we consider the aims of the CEFR, its descriptive scheme and the action-oriented approach, then the Common Reference Levels and creation of profiles in relation to them, plus the illustrative descriptors themselves, and finally the concepts of plurilingualism/pluriculturalism and mediation that were introduced to language education by the CEFR.

Background to the CEFR

The CEFR was developed as a continuation of the Council of Europe’s work in language education during the 1970s and 1980s. The CEFR “action-oriented approach” builds on and goes beyond the communicative approach proposed in the mid-1970s in the publication “The Threshold Level”, the first functional/notional specification of language needs.

The CEFR and the related European Language Portfolio (ELP) that accompanied it were recommended by an intergovernmental symposium held in Switzerland in 1991. As its subtitle suggests, the CEFR is concerned principally with learning and teaching. It aims to facilitate transparency and coherence between the curriculum, teaching and assessment within an institution and transparency and coherence between institutions, educational sectors, regions and countries.

The CEFR was piloted in provisional versions in 1996 and 1998 before being published in English (Cambridge University Press).

21. Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)7 of the Committee of Ministers on the use of the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the promotion of plurilingualism, available at https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805d2fb1.

2.1. AIMS OF THE CEFR

The CEFR seeks to continue the impetus that Council of Europe projects have given to educational reform. The CEFR aims to help language professionals further improve the quality and effectiveness of language learning and teaching. The CEFR is not focused on assessment, as the word order in its subtitle – *Learning, teaching, assessment* – makes clear.

In addition to promoting the teaching and learning of languages as a means of communication, the CEFR brings a new, empowering vision of the learner. The CEFR presents the language user/learner as a “social agent”, acting in the social world and exerting agency in the learning process. This implies a real paradigm shift in both course planning and teaching by promoting learner engagement and autonomy.

The CEFR’s action-oriented approach represents a shift away from syllabuses based on a linear progression through language structures, or a pre-determined set of notions and functions, towards syllabuses based on needs analysis, oriented towards real-life tasks and constructed around purposefully selected notions and functions. This promotes a “proficiency” perspective guided by “can do” descriptors rather than a “deficiency” perspective focusing on what the learners have not yet acquired. The idea is to design curricula and courses based on real-world communicative needs, organised around real-life tasks and accompanied by “can do” descriptors that communicate aims to learners. Fundamentally, the CEFR is a tool to assist the planning of curricula, courses and examinations by working backwards from what the users/learners need to be able to do in the language. The provision of a comprehensive descriptive scheme containing illustrative “can do” descriptor scales for as many aspects of the scheme as proves feasible (CEFR 2001 Chapters 4 and 5), plus associated content specifications published separately for different languages ([Reference Level Descriptions – RLDs](#))²² is intended to provide a basis for such planning.

These aims were expressed in the CEFR 2001 as follows:

The stated aims of the CEFR are to:

- ▶ promote and facilitate co-operation among educational institutions in different countries;
- ▶ provide a sound basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications;
- ▶ assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts.

(CEFR 2001 Section 1.4)

To further promote and facilitate co-operation, the CEFR also provides Common Reference Levels A1 to C2, defined by the illustrative descriptors. The Common Reference Levels were introduced in CEFR 2001 Chapter 3 and used for the descriptor scales distributed throughout CEFR 2001 Chapters 4 and 5. The provision of a common descriptive scheme, Common Reference Levels, and illustrative descriptors defining aspects of the scheme at

Priorities of the CEFR

The provision of common reference points is subsidiary to the CEFR’s main aim of facilitating quality in language education and promoting a Europe of open-minded plurilingual citizens. This was clearly confirmed at the Intergovernmental Language Policy Forum that reviewed progress with the CEFR in 2007, as well as in several recommendations from the Committee of Ministers. This main focus is emphasised yet again in the [Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education](#) (Beacco et al. 2016a). However, the Language Policy Forum also underlined the need for responsible use of the CEFR levels and exploitation of the methodologies and resources provided for developing examinations, and then relating them to the CEFR.

As the subtitle “learning, teaching, assessment” makes clear, the CEFR is not just an assessment project. CEFR 2001 Chapter 9 outlines many different approaches to assessment, most of which are alternatives to standardised tests. It explains ways in which the CEFR in general, and its illustrative descriptors in particular, can be helpful to the teacher in the assessment process, but there is no focus on language testing and no mention at all of test items.

In general, the Language Policy Forum emphasised the need for international networking and exchange of expertise in relation to the CEFR through bodies such as the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) (www.alte.org), the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA) (www.ealta.eu.org) and Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality in Language Services (Eaquals) (www.eaquals.org).

22. www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/reference-level-descriptions.

the different levels, is intended to provide a common metalanguage for the language education profession in order to facilitate communication, networking, mobility and the recognition of courses taken and examinations passed. In relation to examinations, the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division has published a [manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR](#),²³ now accompanied by a toolkit of accompanying material and a volume of case studies published by Cambridge University Press, together with a [manual for language test development and examining](#).²⁴ The Council of Europe's ECML has also produced [Relating language examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment \(CEFR\) – Highlights from the Manual](#)²⁵ and provides capacity building to member states through its [RELANG initiative](#).²⁶

However, it is important to underline once again that the CEFR is a tool to facilitate educational reform projects, not a standardisation tool. Equally, there is no body monitoring or even co-ordinating its use. The CEFR itself states right at the very beginning:

One thing should be made clear right away. We have NOT set out to tell practitioners what to do, or how to do it. We are raising questions, not answering them. It is not the function of the Common European Framework to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they should employ. (CEFR 2001, Notes to the User)

2.2. IMPLEMENTING THE ACTION-ORIENTED APPROACH

The CEFR sets out to be comprehensive, in the sense that it is possible to find the main approaches to language education in it, and neutral, in the sense that it raises questions rather than answering them and does not prescribe any particular pedagogic approach. There is, for example, no suggestion that one should stop teaching grammar or literature. There is no "right answer" given to the question of how best to assess a learner's progress. Nevertheless, the CEFR takes an innovative stance in seeing learners as language users and social agents, and thus seeing language as a vehicle for communication rather than as a subject to study. In so doing, it proposes an analysis of learners' needs and the use of "can do" descriptors and communicative tasks, on which there is a whole chapter: CEFR 2001 Chapter 7.

The methodological message of the CEFR is that language learning should be directed towards enabling learners to act in real-life situations, expressing themselves and accomplishing tasks of different natures. Thus, the criterion suggested for assessment is communicative ability in real life, in relation to a continuum of ability (Levels A1-C2). This is the original and fundamental meaning of "criterion" in the expression "criterion-referenced assessment". Descriptors from CEFR 2001 Chapters 4 and 5 provide a basis for the transparent definition of curriculum aims and of standards and criteria for assessment, with Chapter 4 focusing on activities ("the what") and Chapter 5 focusing on competences ("the how"). This is not educationally neutral. It implies that the teaching and learning process is driven by action, that it is action-oriented. It also clearly suggests planning backwards from learners' real-life communicative needs, with consequent alignment between curriculum, teaching and assessment.

A reminder of CEFR 2001 chapters

Chapter 1: The Common European Framework in its political and educational context

Chapter 2: Approach adopted

Chapter 3: Common Reference Levels

Chapter 4: Language use and the language user/learner

Chapter 5: The user/learner's competences

Chapter 6: Language learning and teaching

Chapter 7: Tasks and their role in language teaching

Chapter 8: Linguistic diversification and the curriculum

Chapter 9: Assessment

23. Council of Europe (2009), "Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) – A Manual", Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680667a2d>.

24. ALTE (2011), "Manual for language test development and examining – For use with the CEFR", Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680667a2b>.

25. Noijons J., Bérešová J., Breton G. et al. (2011), *Relating language examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) – Highlights from the Manual*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, available at: www.ecml.at/tabid/277/PublicationID/67/Default.aspx.

26. Relating language curricula, tests and examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference (RELANG): <https://relang.ecml.at/>.

At the classroom level, there are several implications of implementing the action-oriented approach. Seeing learners as social agents implies involving them in the learning process, possibly with descriptors as a means of communication. It also implies recognising the social nature of language learning and language use, namely the interaction between the social and the individual in the process of learning. Seeing learners as language users implies extensive use of the target language in the classroom – learning to use the language rather than just learning about the language (as a subject). Seeing learners as plurilingual, pluricultural beings means allowing them to use all their linguistic resources when necessary, encouraging them to see similarities and regularities as well as differences between languages and cultures. Above all, the action-oriented approach implies purposeful, collaborative tasks in the classroom, the primary focus of which is not language. If the primary focus of a task is not language, then there must be some other product or outcome (such as planning an outing, making a poster, creating a blog, designing a festival or choosing a candidate). Descriptors can be used to help design such tasks and also to observe and, if desired, to (self-)assess the language use of learners during the task.

Both the CEFR descriptive scheme and the action-oriented approach put the co-construction of meaning (through interaction) at the centre of the learning and teaching process. This has clear implications for the classroom. At times, this interaction will be between teacher and learner(s), but at times, it will be of a collaborative nature, between learners themselves. The precise balance between teacher-centred instruction and such collaborative interaction between learners in small groups is likely to reflect the context, the pedagogic tradition in that context and the proficiency level of the learners concerned. In the reality of today's increasingly diverse societies, the construction of meaning may take place across languages and draw upon user/learners' plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires.

2.3. PLURILINGUAL AND PLURICULTURAL COMPETENCE

The CEFR distinguishes between multilingualism (the coexistence of different languages at the social or individual level) and plurilingualism (the dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner). Plurilingualism is presented in the CEFR as an uneven and changing competence, in which the user/learner's resources in one language or variety may be very different in nature from their resources in another. However, the fundamental point is that plurilinguals have a *single*, interrelated, repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies in order to accomplish tasks (CEFR 2001 Section 6.1.3.2).

Plurilingual competence as explained in the CEFR 2001 Section 1.3 involves the ability to call flexibly upon an interrelated, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire to:

- ▶ switch from one language or dialect (or variety) to another;
- ▶ express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety) and understand a person speaking another;
- ▶ call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, or varieties) to make sense of a text;
- ▶ recognise words from a common international store in a new guise;
- ▶ mediate between individuals with no common language (or dialect, or variety), even if possessing only a slight knowledge oneself;
- ▶ bring the whole of one's linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression;
- ▶ exploit paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression, etc.).

The linked concepts of plurilingualism/pluriculturalism and partial competences were introduced to language education for the first time in the second provisional version of the CEFR in 1996.

They were developed as a form of dynamic, creative process of "linguaging" across the boundaries of language varieties, as a methodology and as language policy aims. The background to this development was a series of studies in bilingualism in the early 1990s at the research centre CREDIF (Centre de recherche et d'étude pour la diffusion du français) in Paris.

The curriculum examples given in CEFR 2001 Chapter 8 consciously promoted the concepts of plurilingual and pluricultural competence.

These two concepts appeared in a more elaborated form in 1997 in the paper "[Plurilingual and pluricultural competence](#)".

By a curious coincidence, 1996 was also the year in which the term “translanguaging” was first recorded (in relation to bilingual teaching in Wales). Translanguaging is an action undertaken by plurilingual persons, where more than one language may be involved. A host of similar expressions now exist, but all are encompassed by the term plurilingualism.

Plurilingualism can in fact be considered from various perspectives: as a sociological or historical fact, as a personal characteristic or ambition, as an educational philosophy or approach, or – fundamentally – as the sociopolitical aim of preserving linguistic diversity. All these perspectives are increasingly common across Europe.

Mediation between individuals with no common language is one of the activities in the list above. Because of the plurilingual nature of such mediation, descriptors were also developed and validated for the other points in the above list during the 2014-17 project to develop descriptors for mediation. This was successful except in respect of the last point (paralinguistics): unfortunately, informants could not agree on its relevance or interpret descriptors consistently.

At the time that the CEFR 2001 was published, the concepts discussed in this section, especially the idea of a holistic, interrelated plurilingual repertoire, were innovative. However, that idea has since been supported by psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic research in relation to both people who learn an additional language early in life and those who learn later, with stronger integration for the former. Plurilingualism has also been shown to result in a number of cognitive advantages, due to an enhanced executive control system in the brain (that is the ability to divert attention from distractors in task performance).

Most of the references to plurilingualism in the CEFR are to “plurilingual and pluricultural competence”. This is because the two aspects usually go hand-in-hand. Having said that, one form of unevenness may actually be that one aspect (for example, pluricultural competence) is much stronger than the other (for example, plurilingual competence; see CEFR 2001 Section 6.1.3.1).

One of the reasons for promoting the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism is that experience of them:

- ▶ “exploits pre-existing *sociolinguistic* and *pragmatic competences* which in turn develops them further;
- ▶ leads to a better perception of what is general and what is specific concerning the linguistic organisation of different languages (form of metalinguistic, interlinguistic or so to speak “hyperlinguistic” awareness);
- ▶ by its nature refines knowledge of how to learn and the capacity to enter into relations with others and new situations.

It may, therefore, to some degree accelerate subsequent learning in the linguistic and cultural areas.” (CEFR 2001 Section 6.1.3.3)

Neither pluriculturalism nor the notion of intercultural competence – referred to briefly in CEFR 2001 Sections 5.1.1.3 and 5.1.2.2 – is highly developed in the CEFR book. The implications of plurilingualism and intercultural competence for curriculum design in relation to the CEFR are outlined in the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* (Beacco et al. 2016a). In addition, a detailed taxonomy of aspects of plurilingual and pluricultural competence relevant to pluralistic approaches is available in the ECML’s *Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures* (FREPA/CARAP).²⁷

2.4. THE CEFR DESCRIPTIVE SCHEME

In this section, we outline the descriptive scheme of the CEFR and point out which elements were further developed in the 2014-17 project. As mentioned above, a core aim of the CEFR is to provide a common descriptive metalanguage to talk about language proficiency. Figure 1 presents the structure of the CEFR descriptive scheme diagrammatically.

After an introduction to relevant key concepts (CEFR 2001 Chapter 1), the CEFR approach is introduced in the very short CEFR 2001 Chapter 2. In any communicative situation, general competences (for example, knowledge of the world, sociocultural competence, intercultural competence, professional experience if any: CEFR 2001 Section 5.1) are always combined with communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences: CEFR 2001 Section 5.2) and strategies (some general, some communicative language strategies)

27. <http://carap.ecml.at/Accueil/tabid/3577/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>.

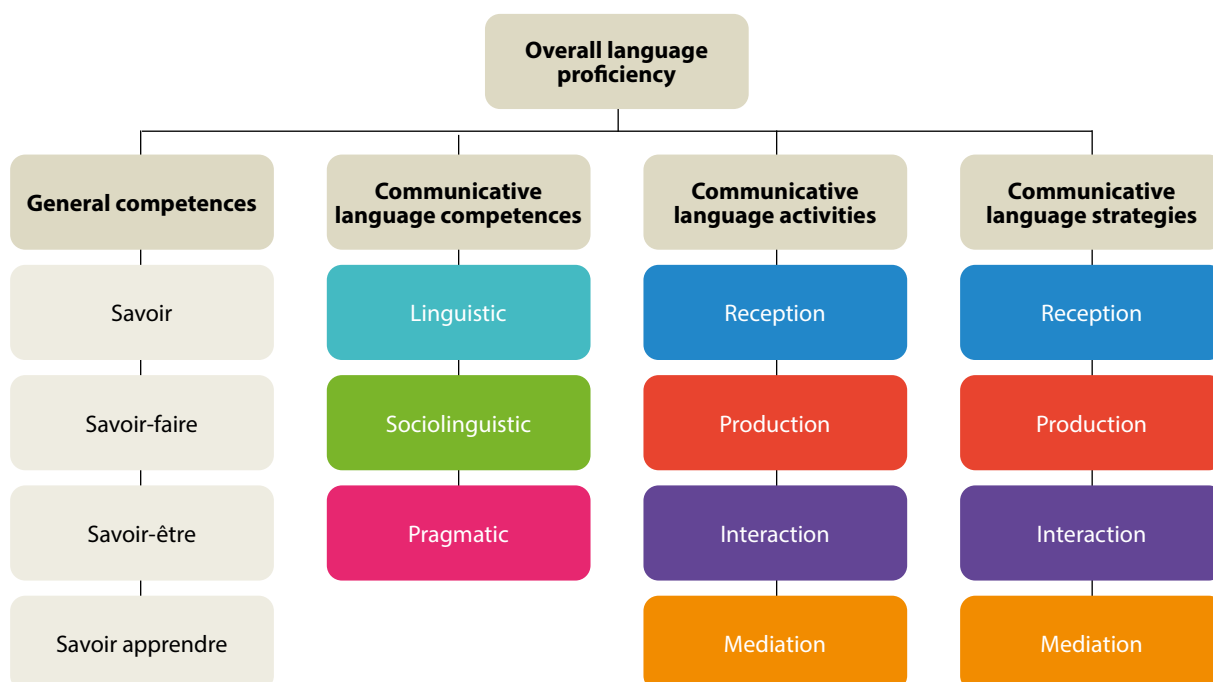
in order to complete a task (CEFR 2001 Chapter 7). Tasks often require some collaboration with others – hence the need for language. The example chosen in CEFR 2001 Chapter 2 to introduce this idea – moving – is one in which the use of language is only contingent on the task. In moving a wardrobe, some communication, preferably through language, is clearly advisable, but language is not the focus of the task. Similarly, tasks demanding greater sophistication of communication, such as agreeing on the preferred solution to an ethical problem, or holding a project meeting, focus on the task outcomes rather than the language used to achieve them.

The overall approach of the CEFR is summarised in a single paragraph:

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of **competences**, both **general** and in particular **communicative language competences**. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various **conditions** and under various **constraints** to engage in **language activities** involving **language processes** to produce and/or receive **texts** in relation to **themes** in specific **domains**, activating those **strategies** which seem most appropriate for carrying out the **tasks** to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences. (CEFR 2001 Section 2.1)

Thus, in performing tasks, competences and strategies are mobilised in the performance and in turn further developed through that experience. In an “action-oriented approach”, which translates the CEFR descriptive scheme into practice, some collaborative tasks in the language classroom are therefore essential. This is why the CEFR 2001 includes a chapter on tasks. CEFR 2001 Chapter 7 discusses real-life tasks and pedagogic tasks, possibilities for compromise between the two, factors that make tasks simple or complex from a language point of view, conditions and constraints. The precise form that tasks in the classroom may take, and the dominance that they should have in the programme, is for users of the CEFR to decide. CEFR 2001 Chapter 6 surveys language teaching methodologies, pointing out that different approaches may be appropriate for different contexts. As a matter of fact, the CEFR scheme is highly compatible with several recent approaches to second language learning, including the task-based approach, the ecological approach and in general all approaches informed by sociocultural and socio-constructivist theories. Starting from a discussion of the place of plurilingualism in language education, CEFR 2001 Chapter 8 outlines alternative options for curriculum design, a process taken further in the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* (Beacco et al. 2016a). No matter what perspective is adopted, it is implicit that tasks in the language classroom should involve communicative language activities and strategies (CEFR 2001 Section 4.4) that also occur in the real world, like those listed in the CEFR descriptive scheme.

Figure 1 – The structure of the CEFR descriptive scheme²⁸



28. From the ECEP project publication: Piccardo E. et al. (2011), *Pathways through assessing, learning and teaching in the CEFR*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, available at http://ecep.ecml.at/Portals/26/training-kit/files/2011_08_29_ECEP_EN.pdf.

With its communicative language activities and strategies, the CEFR replaces the traditional model of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), which has increasingly proved inadequate in capturing the complex reality of communication. Moreover, organisation by the four skills does not lend itself to any consideration of purpose or macro-function. The organisation proposed by the CEFR is closer to real-life language use, which is grounded in interaction in which meaning is co-constructed. Activities are presented under four modes of communication: reception, production, interaction and mediation.

The development of the CEFR categories for communicative activities was considerably influenced by the distinction between transaction and interpersonal language use, and between interpersonal and ideational language use (development of ideas). This can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3 – Macro-functional basis of CEFR categories for communicative language activities

	Reception	Production	Interaction	Mediation
Creative, interpersonal language use	e.g. Reading as a leisure activity	e.g. Sustained monologue: describing experience	e.g. Conversation	Mediating communication
Transactional language use	e.g. Reading for information and argument	e.g. Sustained monologue: giving information	e.g. Obtaining goods and services Information exchange	Mediating a text
Evaluative, problem-solving language use	<i>(merged with Reading for information and argument)</i>	e.g. Sustained monologue: presenting a case (e.g. in a debate)	e.g. Discussion	Mediating concepts

With regard to the approach to language activities set out in Table 3, the following list of advantages of such a development beyond the four skills is taken from one of the preparatory studies written in the lead-up to the development of the CEFR:²⁹

- ▶ the proposed categories (reception, production, interaction, mediation) make sense not just for insiders but also for users: such categories better reflect the way people actually use the language than the four skills do;
- ▶ since these are the types of categories used in language training for the world of work, a link between general purpose language and language for specific purposes (LSP) would be facilitated;
- ▶ pedagogic tasks involving collaborative small group interaction in the classroom, project work, pen friend correspondence and language examination interviews would be easier to situate with this model;
- ▶ organisation in terms of transparent activities in specific contexts of use would facilitate the recording and profiling of the “slices of life” that make up the language learner’s experience;
- ▶ such an approach based on genre encourages the activation of content schemata and acquisition of the formal schemata (discourse organisation) appropriate to the genre;
- ▶ categories that highlight interpersonal and sustained self-expression are central by A2 and may help counterbalance the pervasive transmission metaphor that sees language as information transfer;
- ▶ a move away from the matrix of four skills and three elements (grammatical structure, vocabulary, phonology/graphology) may promote communicative criteria for quality of performance;
- ▶ the distinction “reception, interaction, production” recalls classifications used for learning and performance strategies and may well facilitate a broader concept of strategic competence;
- ▶ the distinction “reception, interaction, production, mediation” actually marks a progression of difficulty and so might aid the development of the concept of partial qualifications;
- ▶ such relatively concrete contexts of use (tending towards supra-genres/speech events rather than abstract skills or functions) make the link to realistic assessment tasks in examinations easier to establish, and should help facilitate the provision of more concrete descriptors.

29. North B. (1994) “Perspectives on language proficiency and aspects of competence: a reference paper defining categories and levels”, CC-LANG Vol. 94, No. 20, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

One of the areas in which the CEFR has been most influential is in the recognition, in course aims and in the structure of oral examinations, of the fundamental distinction between production (= sustained monologue; long turns) and interaction (= conversational dialogue; short turns). When the CEFR 2001 was published, splitting writing in the same way by distinguishing between written production and written interaction did not meet with much public recognition. Indeed, the original version of CEFR Table 2 (self-assessment grid) was amended to merge written interaction and written production back into “writing”, giving rise to the widespread but false notion that the CEFR promotes a model of five skills.

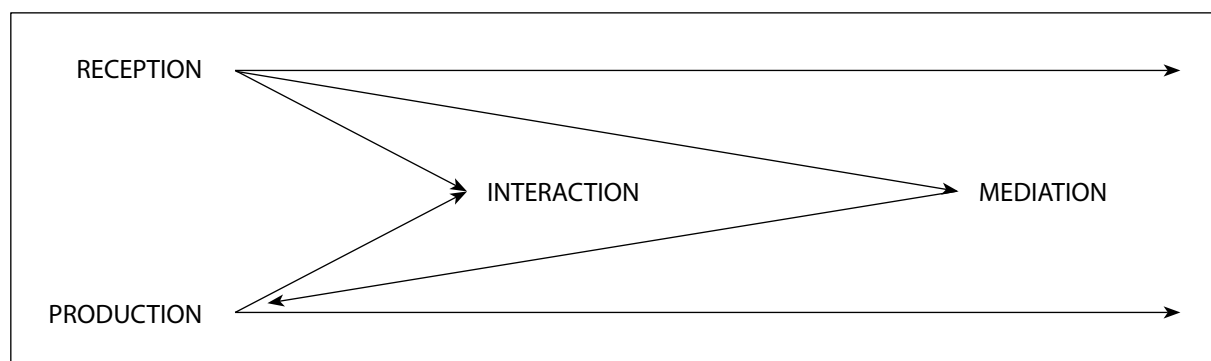
The development of e-mail, texting and social media since then shows that, as in many other areas, the CEFR was very forward-looking for its time. The fourth mode, mediation, was developed during the work of the original CEFR Authoring Group.³⁰

Figure 2, which appeared in the 1996 and 1998 provisional versions of the CEFR, shows the relationship between the four modes. Reception and production, divided into spoken and written, give the traditional four skills. Interaction involves both reception and production, but is more than the sum of those parts, and mediation involves both reception and production plus, frequently, interaction.

The CEFR introduces the concept of mediation as follows:

In both the receptive and productive modes, the written and/or oral activities of **mediation** make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly. Translation or interpretation, a paraphrase, summary or record, provides for a third party a (re)formulation of a source text to which this third party does not have direct access. Mediation language activities – (re)processing an existing text – occupy an important place in the normal linguistic functioning of our societies. (CEFR 2001 Section 2.1.3)

Figure 2 – The relationship between reception, production, interaction and mediation



As with many other aspects mentioned in the CEFR, the concepts of interaction and mediation are not greatly developed in the text. This is one disadvantage of covering so much ground in 250 pages. In consequence, the interpretation of mediation in the CEFR has tended to be reduced to interpretation and translation. It is for this reason that the 2014-17 project to develop descriptors for mediation was set up. That project emphasised a wider view of mediation, as outlined in Appendix 6 and explained in detail in “[Developing illustrative descriptors of aspects of mediation for the CEFR](#)” (North and Piccardo 2016).

The CEFR represents a departure from the traditional distinction made in applied linguistics between the Chomskyan concepts of (hidden) “competence” and (visible) “performance” – with “proficiency” normally defined as the glimpse of someone’s underlying competence derived from a specific performance. In the CEFR, “proficiency” encompasses the ability to perform communicative language activities (“can do ...”) while drawing upon both general and communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic) and activating appropriate communicative strategies.

The acquisition of proficiency is in fact seen as a circular process: by performing activities, the user/learner develops competences and acquires strategies. This approach embraces a view of competence as only existing when enacted in language use, reflecting both (a) the broader view of competence as action from applied psychology, particularly in relation to the world of work and professional training, and (b) the view taken nowadays in the sociocultural approach to learning. The CEFR “can do” descriptors epitomise this philosophy.

³⁰. The original CEFR Authoring Group was John Trim, Daniel Coste, Brian North and Joseph Sheils.

“Can do” descriptors as competence

The idea of scientifically calibrating “can do” descriptors to a scale of levels comes originally from the field of professional training for nurses. Tests were not very helpful in assessing a trainee nurse’s competence; what was needed was a systematic, informed observation by an expert nurse, guided by short descriptions of typical nursing competence at different levels of achievement.

This “can do” approach was transferred to language teaching and learning in the work of the Council of Europe in the late 1970s. This happened through three channels: (a) needs-based language training for the world of work; (b) an interest in teacher assessment based on defined, communicative criteria, and (c) experimentation with self-assessment using “can do” descriptors as a way of increasing learner reflection and motivation. Nowadays “can do” descriptors are applied to more and more disciplines in many countries in what is often referred to as a competence-based approach.

Communicative language strategies are thus seen in the CEFR as a kind of hinge between communicative language competences and communicative language activities and are attached to the latter in CEFR 2001 Section 4.4. The development of the descriptors for strategic competence was influenced by the model: plan, execute, monitor and repair. However, as can be seen from Table 4, descriptor scales were not developed for all categories. The categories in italics were also considered at the time of developing the CEFR descriptors published in 2001, but no descriptors were produced. For mediation, in the 2014-17 project, a decision was taken to develop descriptors only for execution strategies.

Table 4 – Communicative language strategies in the CEFR

	Reception	Production	Interaction	Mediation
Planning	<i>Framing</i>	Planning	N/A	
Execution	Inferring	Compensating	Turntaking Co-operating	Linking to previous knowledge Adapting language Breaking down complicated information Amplifying a dense text Streamlining a text
Evaluation and Repair	<i>Monitoring</i>	Monitoring and self-correction	Asking for clarification <i>Communication repair</i>	

2.5. MEDIATION

As mentioned in discussing the CEFR descriptive scheme above, mediation was introduced to language teaching and learning in the CEFR in the move away from the four skills, as one of the four modes of communication, namely reception, production, interaction and mediation (see Figure 2). Very often when we use a language, several activities are involved; mediation combines reception, production and interaction. Also, in many cases, when we use language it is not just to communicate a message, but rather to develop an idea through what is often called “linguaging” (talking the idea through and hence articulating the thoughts) or to facilitate understanding and communication.

Treatment of mediation in the CEFR 2001 is not limited to cross-linguistic mediation (passing on information in another language) as can be seen from the following extracts:

- ▶ Section 2.1.3: “make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly”;
- ▶ Section 4.4.4: “act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly – normally (but not exclusively) speakers of different languages”;
- ▶ Section 4.6.4: “Both input and output texts may be spoken or written and in L1 or L2.” (Note: This does not say that one is in L1 and one is in L2; it states they could both be in L1 or in L2).

Although the CEFR 2001 does not develop the concept of mediation to its full potential, it emphasises the two key notions of co-construction of meaning in interaction and constant movement between the individual and social level in language learning, mainly through its vision of the user/learner as a social agent. In addition, an emphasis on the mediator as an intermediary between interlocutors underlines the social vision of the CEFR. In this way, although it is not stated explicitly in the 2001 text, the CEFR descriptive scheme *de facto* gives mediation a key position in the action-oriented approach, similar to the role that a number of scholars now give it when they discuss the language learning process.

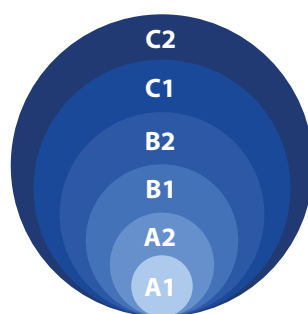
The approach taken to mediation in the 2014-17 project to extend the CEFR illustrative descriptors is thus wider than considering only cross-linguistic mediation. In addition to cross-linguistic mediation, it also encompasses mediation related to communication and learning as well as social and cultural mediation. This wider approach has been taken because of its relevance in increasingly diverse classrooms, in relation to the spread of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), and because mediation is increasingly seen as a part of all learning, but especially of all language learning.

The mediation descriptors are particularly relevant for the classroom in connection with small group, collaborative tasks. The tasks can be organised in such a way that learners have to share different inputs, explaining their information and working together in order to achieve a goal. They are even more relevant when this is undertaken in a CLIL context.

2.6. THE CEFR COMMON REFERENCE LEVELS

The CEFR has two axes: a horizontal axis of categories for describing different activities and aspects of competence, which were outlined above, and a vertical axis representing progress in proficiency in those categories. To facilitate the organisation of courses and to describe progress, the CEFR presents the six Common Reference Levels shown in Figure 3. This arrangement provides a roadmap that allows user/learners to engage with relevant aspects of the descriptive scheme in a progressive way. However, the six levels are not intended to be absolute. Firstly, they can be grouped into three broad categories: Basic user (A1 and A2), Independent user (B1 and B2) and Proficient user (C1 and C2). Secondly, the six reference levels, which represent very broad bands of language proficiency, are very often subdivided.

Figure 3 – CEFR Common Reference Levels



All categories in the humanities and liberal arts are in any case conventional, socially constructed concepts. Like the colours of the rainbow, language proficiency is actually a continuum. Yet, as with the rainbow, despite the fuzziness of the boundaries between colours, we tend to see some colours more than others, as in Figure 4. Yet, to communicate, we simplify and focus on six main colours, as in Figure 5.

Figure 4 – A rainbow



Figure 5 – The conventional six colours



The Common Reference Levels are defined in detail by the illustrative descriptors in CEFR 2001 Chapters 4 and 5, but the major characteristics of the levels are summarised briefly in CEFR 2001 Section 3.6 (see Appendix 1) and in the three tables used to introduce the levels in CEFR 2001 Chapter 3:

- ▶ CEFR Table 1: a global scale, with one short, summary paragraph per level, is provided in Appendix 1;
- ▶ CEFR Table 2: a self-assessment grid, which summarises in a simplified form CEFR descriptors for communicative language activities in CEFR 2001 Chapter 4. Table 2 is also used in the Language Passport of the many versions of the ELP and in the EU's Europass. An expanded version including "Written and online interaction" and "Mediation" is provided in Appendix 2 of this publication;
- ▶ CEFR Table 3: a selective summary of the CEFR descriptors for aspects of communicative language competence in CEFR 2001 Chapter 5. An expanded version including "Phonology" is given in this publication in Appendix 3.

It should be emphasised that the top level in the CEFR scheme, C2, has no relation whatsoever with what is sometimes referred to as the performance of an idealised "native speaker", or a "well-educated native speaker" or a "near native speaker". Such concepts were not taken as a point of reference during the development of the levels or the descriptors. C2, the top level in the CEFR scheme, is introduced in the CEFR as follows:

Level C2, whilst it has been termed "**Mastery**", is not intended to imply native-speaker or near native-speaker competence. What is intended is to characterise the degree of precision, appropriateness and ease with the language which typifies the speech of those who have been highly successful learners. (CEFR 2001 Section 3.6)

Mastery (Trim: "*comprehensive mastery*"; Wilkins: "*Comprehensive Operational Proficiency*"), corresponds to the top examination objective in the scheme adopted by ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe). It could be extended to include the more developed intercultural competence above that level which is achieved by many language professionals. (CEFR 2001 Section 3.2)

A1, the bottom level in the CEFR 2001, is not the lowest imaginable level of proficiency in an additional language either. It is described in the CEFR as follows:

Level A1 (Breakthrough) – is considered the lowest level of generative language use – the point at which the learner can *interact in a simple way, ask and answer simple questions about themselves, where they live, people they know, and things they have, initiate and respond to simple statements in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics*, rather than relying purely on a very finite rehearsed, lexically organised repertoire of situation-specific phrases. (CEFR 2001 Section 3.6)

Level A1 (*Breakthrough*) is probably the lowest "level" of generative language proficiency which can be identified. Before this stage is reached, however, there may be a range of specific tasks which learners can perform effectively using a very restricted range of language and which are relevant to the needs of the learners concerned. The 1994-5 Swiss National Science Research Council Survey, which developed and scaled the illustrative descriptors, identified a band of language use, limited to the performance of isolated tasks, which can be presupposed in the definition of Level A1. In certain contexts, for example with young learners, it may be appropriate to elaborate such a "milestone".

Background to the CEFR levels

The six-level scheme is labelled upwards from A to C precisely because C2 is not the highest imaginable level for proficiency in an additional language. In fact, a scheme including a seventh level had been proposed by David Wilkins at an intergovernmental symposium held in 1977 to discuss a possible European unit credit scheme. The CEFR Working Party adopted Wilkins' first six levels because Wilkins' seventh level is beyond the scope of mainstream education.

In the SNSF research project that empirically confirmed the levels and developed the CEFR illustrative descriptors published in 2001, the existence of this seventh level was confirmed. There were user/learners studying interpretation and translation at the University of Lausanne who were clearly above C2. Indeed, simultaneous interpreters at European institutions and professional translators operate at a level well above C2. For instance, C2 is the third of five levels for literary translation recently produced in the PETRA project. In addition many plurilingual writers display Wilkins' seventh level of "ambilingual proficiency" without being bilingual from birth.

The following descriptors relate to simple, general tasks, which were scaled below Level A1, but can constitute useful objectives for beginners:

- can make simple purchases where pointing or other gesture can support the verbal reference;
- can ask and tell day, time of day and date;
- can use some basic greetings;
- can say yes, no, excuse me, please, thank you, sorry;
- can fill in uncomplicated forms with personal details, name, address, nationality, marital status;
- can write a short, simple postcard (CEFR 2001 Section 3.5).

In the updated and extended set of descriptors in this document, the level referred to above has been labelled Pre-A1 and developed further on the basis of descriptors from the Swiss Lingua level project and the Japanese CEFR-J project, both targeted at primary and lower secondary school.

The CEFR stresses that the levels are reference levels and that, in any given context, users may well want to subdivide them, illustrating ways in which this might be done in different contexts (CEFR 2001 Section 3.5). In the same section, the CEFR introduced the idea of the plus levels.

In the illustrative descriptors a distinction is made between the “criterion levels” (for example A2 or A2.1) and the “plus levels” (for example A2+ or A2.2). The latter are distinguished from the former by a horizontal line, as in this example for “Overall oral comprehension”.

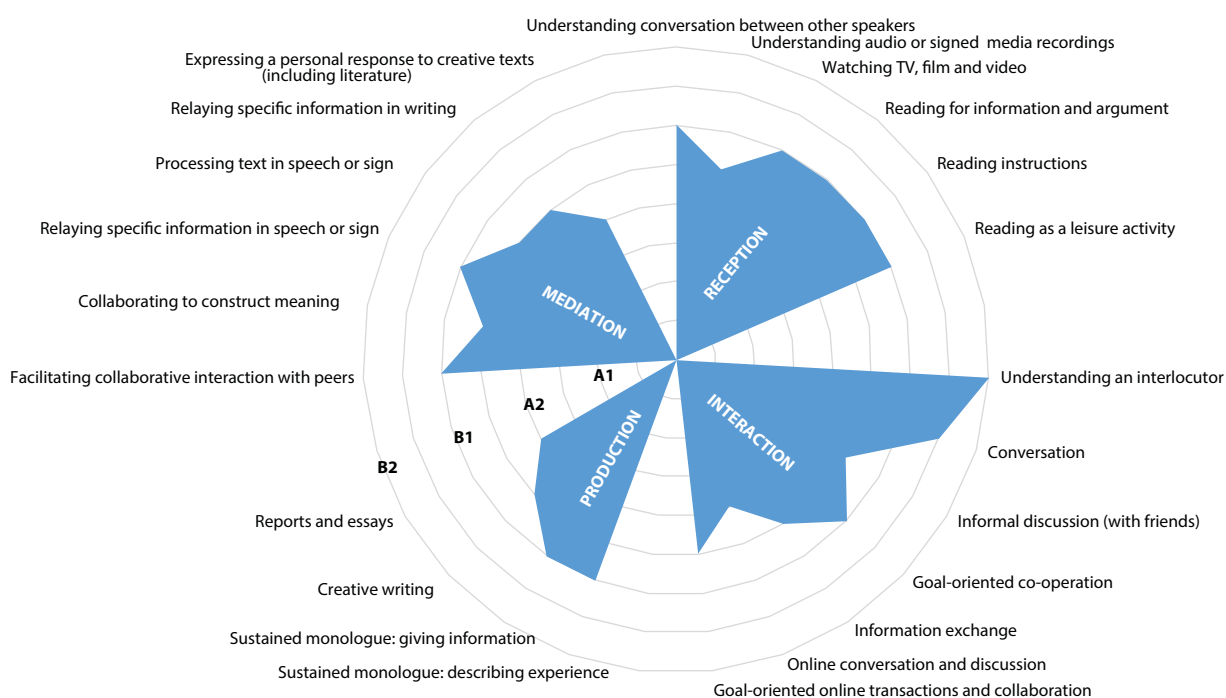
A2	Can understand enough to be able to meet needs of a concrete type, provided people articulate clearly and slowly.
	Can understand phrases and expressions related to areas of most immediate priority (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment), provided people articulate clearly and slowly.

Plus levels represent a very strong competence at a level that does not yet reach the minimum standard for the next criterion level. Generally, features of the level above are starting to appear. Descriptors from the “plus levels” are not included in the three tables that introduce the CEFR levels in CEFR 2001 Chapter 3 (CEFR Tables 1, 2 and 3).

2.7. CEFR PROFILES

Levels are a necessary simplification. We need levels in order to organise learning, track progress and answer questions like “How good is your French?” or “What proficiency should we require from candidates?” However, any simple answer like B2 – or even B2 receptive, B1 productive – hides a complex profile. The reason the CEFR includes so many descriptor scales is to encourage users to develop differentiated profiles. Descriptor scales can be used firstly to identify which language activities are relevant for a particular group of learners and, secondly, to establish which level those learners need to achieve in those activities in order to accomplish their goals. This can be illustrated with the two fictional examples of individual language profiles shown in Figures 6 and 7. In each case, the four shapes in Figures 6 and 7 show the desired profile for reception, interaction, production and mediation respectively. The labels around the edge of the circle are the descriptor scales that are considered to be relevant, and the proficiency level deemed to be desirable on each descriptor scale is indicated by the shading. Notice that the descriptor scales included in the two diagrams are not identical. Only those activities considered to be relevant would be included. Profiles like Figures 6 and 7 may be produced for individuals in the context of very intensive LSP training, but the technique is also very useful for analysing the needs of particular groups of learners.

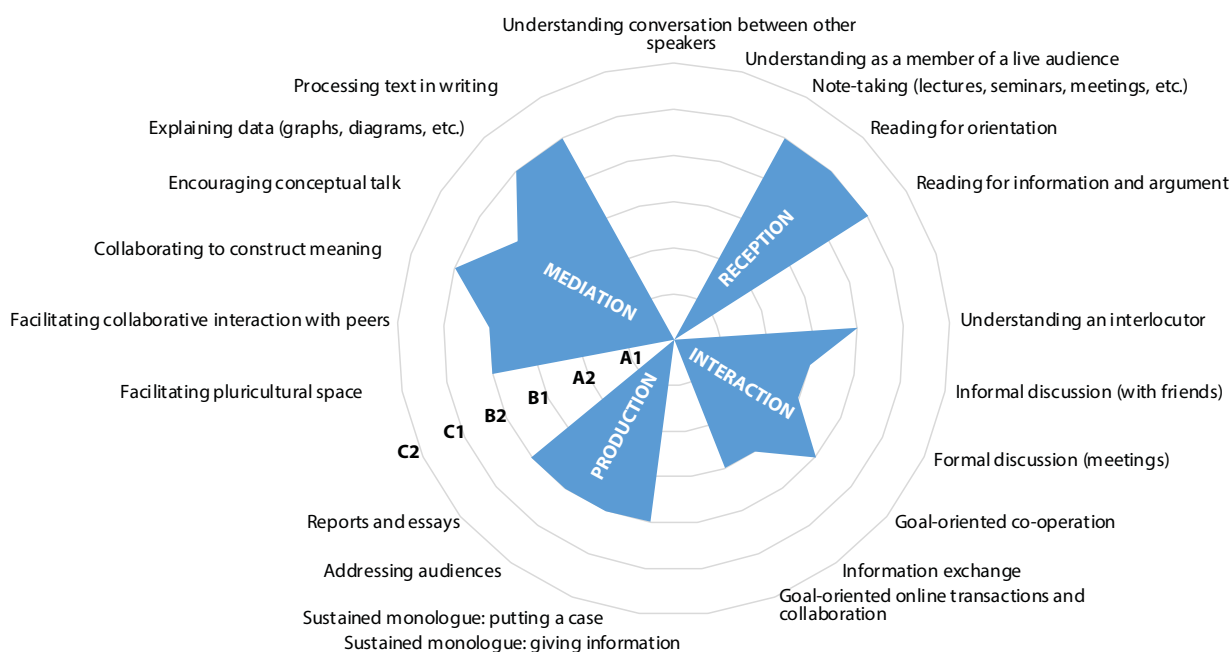
Figure 6 – A fictional profile of needs in an additional language – lower secondary CLIL



The profile shown in Figure 6 has “plus levels” between the Common Reference Levels. It sets a relatively high priority (B1) on reception – including reading as a leisure activity – on goal-oriented co-operation, facilitating collaborative interaction and oral production. The highest priority, though, is on understanding the interlocutor (B2), in this case CLIL, presumably the teacher. The profile shown in Figure 7 (postgraduate science student) also puts an emphasis on reception (C1) and on certain aspects of mediation: collaborating to construct meaning, explaining data and processing text. Profiles can be created for various groups, particularly in professional or in specialised educational areas. Stakeholders can be consulted in a two-step process: first to establish the relevant descriptor scales and secondly to determine realistic goals for each one.

Graphic profiles such as those shown in Figures 6 and 7 can also be used to describe the current language proficiency of a user/learner. One can see the development of individual proficiency as a gain of space over time: a gain in relevant terrain.³¹ A realistic graphic profile of any individual’s proficiency would be more like the uneven Figures 6 and 7 than the more abstract perfection levels shown as concentric circles in Figure 3.

Figure 7 – A profile of needs in an additional language – postgraduate natural sciences (fictional)



However, for a personal profile of proficiency, working with fewer categories is probably desirable in most circumstances. Figures 6 and 7 worked with the descriptor scales for different, detailed types of activities. A simpler alternative is to use only the seven overall scales (“Overall oral comprehension”,³² etc.). On the other hand, there is no reason why the profile should be confined to one language.

One can take things a stage further and create graphic plurilingual profiles for individual user/learners. Figure 8 shows a plurilingual profile inspired by a model developed in a Canadian project.³³ Profiles for different languages are superimposed on each other in the same graphic. The figure shows a profile of “partial competences” not atypical of an adult user/learner: far stronger in reading in all languages.

Such a profile can show the way in which the proficiency of any user/learner is almost always going to be uneven, partial. It will be influenced by home background, by the needs of the situation in which the person has found themselves, and by their experience, including transversal competences acquired in general education, in using other languages, in professional life. The profiles of any two user/learners at the same level are thus unlikely to be absolutely identical

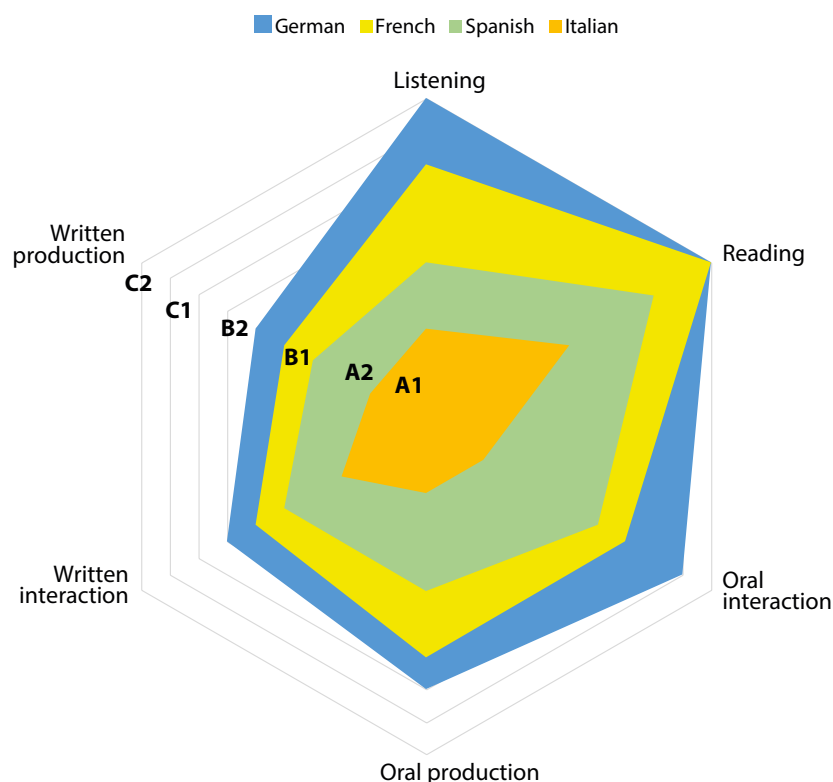
31. The 1996 and 1998 provisional versions of the CEFR contained a diagram like Figures 6 and 7 to illustrate this analogy of language proficiency profiles as spatial, territorial; in the working group the particular diagram was referred to as “Antarctica” because of its shape. It was considered too complicated a concept for the time and was dropped from the published version.

32. Oral comprehension, oral production and oral interaction are each taken to include both spoken and signed modalities, as appropriate in the context.

33. LINCDIRE: LINguistic & Cultural Diversity REinvented, available at www.lincdireproject.org/.

since they reflect the life experience of the person concerned as well as their inherent abilities, what the CEFR 2001 (Section 5.2) describes as their “general competences”.

Figure 8 – A plurilingual proficiency profile with fewer categories



In practice, there is a tendency to use more linear diagrams to profile an individual’s CEFR language proficiency. Figure 9 shows proficiency in one language in relation to the CEFR “overall” descriptor scales, and Figure 10 shows a profile across languages for oral comprehension. Graphics similar to these appear in versions of the ELP. Earlier ELPs profiled ability in one language after another (as in the example in Figure 9), while some later ones show the plurilingual profile for overall proficiency in each communicative language activity (as in Figure 10).

Figure 9 – A proficiency profile – overall proficiency in one language

Spanish	Pre-A1	A1	A2	A2+	B1	B1+	B2	B2+	C1
Oral comprehension									
Reading comprehension									
Oral interaction									
Written interaction									
Oral production									
Written production									
Mediation									

Graphic profiles have been associated with the CEFR and the ELP since their earliest versions in the late 1990s. Nowadays, it is of course far easier to produce them from a spreadsheet (for example, Excel) and with the many web tools available. However, such graphic profiles only have meaning if one can assume a familiarity with the levels and categories concerned on the part of the reader. The CEFR illustrative descriptors can bring that familiarity.

Figure 10 – A plurilingual proficiency profile – Oral comprehension across languages

	Pre-A1	A1	A2	A2+	B1	B1+	B2	B2+	C1	C2	Above C2
English											
German											
French											
Spanish											
Italian											

2.8. THE CEFR ILLUSTRATIVE DESCRIPTORS

The illustrative descriptors are presented within descriptor scales. Each descriptor scale provides examples of typical language use in a particular area that have been calibrated at different levels. Each individual descriptor has been developed and calibrated separately from the other descriptors on the scale, so that each individual descriptor provides an independent criterion statement that can be used on its own, without the context of the scale. In fact, the descriptors are mainly used in that way: independently of the scale that presents them. The aim of the descriptors is to provide input for curriculum development.

The descriptors are presented in levels for ease of use. Descriptors for the same level from several scales tend to be exploited in adapted form in checklists of descriptors for curriculum or module aims and for self-assessment (as in the ELPs). However, the association of a descriptor with a specific level should not be seen as exclusive or mandatory. The descriptors appear at the first level at which a user/learner is most likely to be able to perform the task described. This is the level at which the descriptor is most likely to be relevant as a curriculum aim: it is the level at which it is reasonable to develop the ability to do what is described. That descriptor would be a challenging, but by no means impossible, aim for user/learners at the level below. Indeed, for some types of learners, with a particular talent, experience or motivation in the area described, it could well be a fully appropriate goal. This emphasises the importance of thinking in terms of profiles (see Figures 6 to 10) as well as levels. Users may find it useful to read [CEFR 2001 Section 3.7](#), “How to read the scales of illustrative descriptors” (p. 36), and [Section 3.8](#) (p. 37), “How to use the scales of descriptors of language proficiency”.

The scales of illustrative descriptors consist of independent, stand-alone descriptors and are not primarily intended for assessment. They are not assessment scales in the sense in which the term is generally used in language assessment. They do not attempt to cover each relevant aspect at every level in the way that scales for assessing a performance conventionally do. They are illustrative, not just in the sense that they are presented as non-mandatory examples, but also in the sense that they provide only illustrations of competence in the area concerned at different levels. They focus on aspects that are new and salient; they do not attempt to describe everything relevant in a comprehensive manner. They are open-ended and incomplete.

CEFR descriptor research project

The illustrative descriptors published in the CEFR 2001 were based on results from a Swiss National Science Foundation research project set up to develop and validate descriptors for the CEFR and the ELP and to give a picture of the development of language proficiency reached at the end of different school years in the Swiss educational system. The project described in this document, to develop an extended set of illustrative descriptors, replicated the approach taken in this Swiss project, which took place from 1993 to 1997. The methodology used in that original project, and described briefly in CEFR 2001 Appendix B, comprised three phases:

Intuitive phase: Detailed analysis of existing descriptor scales and authoring of new descriptors.

Qualitative phase: 32 face-to-face workshops with groups of 4 to 12 teachers, focusing on (a) sorting descriptors into the categories they purported to describe; (b) evaluating the clarity, accuracy and relevance of the descriptors; and (c) sorting descriptors into bands of proficiency.

Quantitative phase: Rasch scaling analysis of the way 250 teachers interpreted the difficulty of the descriptors when each teacher assessed 10 learners, forming a structured sample of two of their classes at the end of the school year. These evaluations with descriptors took place when the (approximately 80% secondary school) teachers were awarding grades for the school year.

The illustrative descriptors are one source for the development of standards appropriate to the context concerned; they are not in themselves offered as standards. They are a basis for reflection, discussion and further action. The aim is to open new possibilities, not to pre-empt decisions. The CEFR itself makes this point very clearly, stating that the descriptors are presented as recommendations and are not in any way mandatory.

As a user, you are invited to use the scaling system and associated descriptors critically. The Modern Languages Section of the Council of Europe will be glad to receive a report of your experience in putting them into use. Please note also that scales are provided not only for a global proficiency, but for many of the parameters of language proficiency detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. This makes it possible to specify differentiated profiles for particular learners or groups of learners (CEFR 2001, Notes for the user: xiii-xiv).

The descriptor scales are thus reference tools. They are not intended to be used as assessment instruments, though they can be a source for the development of such instruments. These might take the form of a checklist at one level, or a grid defining several categories at different levels. Users may find it helpful to refer to [CEFR 2001 Section 9.2.2](#), “The criteria for the attainment of a learning objective”.

Each descriptor scale is now accompanied by a short rationale, which highlights key concepts represented in the descriptors as one progresses up the scale. The scales do not always provide a descriptor for every level. The absence of a descriptor does not imply the impossibility of writing one. For example, at C2 the entry is sometimes: “No descriptors available: see C1”. In such cases, the user is invited to consider whether they can formulate for the context concerned a descriptor representing a more demanding version of the definition given for C1.

In CEFR 2001 Section 3.4, the claim made for the validity of the illustrative descriptors is that they:

- ▶ draw, in their formulation, on the experience of many institutions active in the field of defining levels of proficiency;
- ▶ have been developed in tandem with the descriptive scheme presented in CEFR 2001 Chapters 4 and 5 through an interaction between (a) the theoretical work of the Authoring Group; (b) the analysis of existing scales of proficiency; and (c) the practical workshops with teachers;
- ▶ have been matched to the set of Common Reference Levels A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2;
- ▶ meet the criteria outlined in CEFR 2001 Appendix A for effective descriptors in that each is brief (up to 25 words), clear and transparent, positively formulated, describes something definite, and has independent, stand-alone integrity, not relying on the formulation of other descriptors for its interpretation;
- ▶ have been found transparent, useful and relevant by groups of non-native and native-speaker teachers from a variety of educational sectors with very different profiles in terms of linguistic training and teaching experience;
- ▶ are relevant to the description of actual learner achievement in lower and upper secondary, vocational and adult education, and could thus represent realistic objectives;
- ▶ have been “objectively calibrated” to a common scale. This means that the position of the vast majority of the descriptors on the scale is the product of how they have been interpreted to assess the achievement of learners, rather than just the opinion of the authors;
- ▶ provide a bank of criterion statements about the continuum of foreign language proficiency that can be exploited flexibly for the development of criterion-referenced assessment. They can be matched to existing local systems, elaborated by local experience and/or used to develop new sets of objectives.

As a result, the set of illustrative descriptors published in 2001 met with wide acceptance and they have been translated into 40 languages. However, the illustrative descriptors were referred to in the CEFR 2001 as a “descriptor bank” because the idea was that, as with a test item bank, they might later be extended once users developed and validated more descriptors – as has now happened with this update.

The descriptors are intended to provide a common metalanguage to facilitate networking and the development of communities of practice by groups of teachers. Users of the CEFR are invited to select the CEFR levels and illustrative descriptors that they consider to be appropriate for their learners’ needs, to adapt the formulation of the latter, in order to better suit the specific context concerned, and to supplement them with their own descriptors where they deem it necessary. This is the way that descriptors have been adapted for ELPs.

2.9. USING THE CEFR ILLUSTRATIVE DESCRIPTORS

The main function of descriptors is to help align curriculum, teaching and assessment. Educators can select CEFR descriptors according to their relevance to the particular context, adapting them in the process if necessary. In this way descriptors can provide a detailed, flexible resource for:

- ▶ relating learning aims to real-world language use, thus providing a framework for action-oriented learning;
- ▶ providing transparent “signposting” to learners, parents or sponsors;
- ▶ offering a “menu” to negotiate priorities with adult learners in a process of ongoing needs analysis;
- ▶ suggesting classroom tasks to teachers that will involve activities described in several descriptors;
- ▶ introducing criterion-referenced assessment with criteria relating to an external framework (here the CEFR).

Defining curriculum aims from a needs profile

Step 1: Select the descriptor scales that are relevant to the needs of the group of learners concerned (see Figures 6 and 7). Clearly this is best undertaken in consultation with stakeholders, including teachers and, in the case of adult learners, the learners themselves. Stakeholders can also be asked what other communicative activities are relevant.

Step 2: Determine with the stakeholders, for each relevant descriptor scale, the level that the learners should reach.

Step 3: Collate the descriptors for the target level(s) from all the relevant scales into a list. This provides the very first draft of a set of communicative aims.

Step 4: Refine the list, possibly in discussion with the stakeholders.

An alternative approach is to:

Step 1: Determine a global target level for the course.

Step 2: Collate all the descriptors for that level.

Step 3: Identify the descriptors that are relevant, in consultation with stakeholders, and delete the rest.

Very often, CEFR descriptors are referred to for inspiration in adapting or making explicit the aims of an existing course. In such a case, descriptors from particular scales are selected, adapted to the local context and added to an existing curricular document.

However, CEFR descriptors can also be used to develop a set of learning aims from scratch. In doing so, one should ideally start by creating a needs profile, such as those shown graphically in Figures 6 and 7. In practice, a short cut is often taken by starting from the checklists of CEFR-adapted descriptors already available for different levels in the Language Biography section of the many versions of the ELP.

Whichever approach is taken, any resulting list of descriptors needs to be slimmed down to a reasonable length by removing repetition and aspects that appear less relevant in the particular context. It is usually at this point that descriptors are adapted, shortened, simplified, merged with existing communicative aims and supplemented by other educational aims. What is a “reasonable” length for a list depends on the precise purpose. A list can be long (for example 60 to 80 descriptors) in designing a curriculum for an entire level, but experience suggests that any list used as an instrument for teacher assessment or self-assessment is more effective if it is much shorter (for example, 10 to 20 descriptors) and focused on activities of relevance in a particular section or module of the course.

In using the descriptors to make a list of learning objectives, one should bear in mind that the descriptors from different scales complement one another. One may wish to broaden the scope of a particular descriptor by presenting it linked to descriptors from one or two complementary scales that are relevant to the intended scope of the learning activity. For example, at B1, one might wish to create a broader educational objective for engaging with a text by associating the following descriptors from three different scales:

- ▶ Can follow the plot of stories, simple novels and comics with a clear linear storyline and high frequency everyday language, given regular use of a dictionary (Reading as a leisure activity).
- ▶ Can explain briefly the feelings and opinions that a work provoked in them (Expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature)).
- ▶ Can discuss in simple terms the way in which things that may look “strange” to them in another sociocultural context may well be “normal” for the other people concerned (Building on pluricultural repertoire).

Descriptors can also be useful as a starting point for providing transparent criteria for assessment. CEFR 2001 Chapter 9 outlines different forms of assessment and ways in which descriptors can be useful in relation to them. In discussing the exploitation of descriptors in assessment, the CEFR makes the following point:

In discussing the use of descriptors it is essential to make a distinction between:

1. Descriptors of communicative activities, which are located in Chapter 4.
2. Descriptors of aspects of proficiency related to particular competences, which are located in Chapter 5.

The former are very suitable for teacher- or self-assessment with regard to real-world tasks. Such teacher- or self-assessments are made on the basis of a detailed picture of the learner’s language ability built up during the course concerned. They are attractive because they can help to focus both learners and teachers on an action-oriented approach. (CEFR 2001 Section 9.2.2)

The latter, descriptors of aspects of competences (CEFR 2001 Chapter 5), can be a useful source for developing assessment criteria for how well user/learners are able to perform a particular task: to assess the quality of their production. This is opposed to “the what”: the communicative activities they “can do” (CEFR 2001 Chapter 4). The relationship between the two types of illustrative descriptors is shown in Table 5. Each type (what; how) can take two forms: simpler, for “outsiders”, and more elaborated, for “insiders” (usually teachers). Simple forms of descriptors about what the learner can do are often used to report results to the user/learners themselves and other stakeholders (user-oriented); more elaborated, “insider” forms help teachers or testers to construct a programme and specific tasks in it (constructor-oriented). Simpler versions of descriptors for how a learner performs in a language are used in assessment grids, which usually restrict themselves to four or five assessment criteria; in a spirit of transparency these can be shared with user/learners (assessor-oriented). More elaborated, “insider” forms, usually for a longer list of aspects of quality, can be used as a checklist to diagnose strengths and weaknesses (diagnostic-oriented). Users may wish to follow up on this point in [CEFR 2001 Sections 3.8 and 9.2.2](#), which explain these different orientations.

Table 5 – The different purposes of descriptors

	WHAT the user/learner can do (CEFR 2001 Chapter 4)	HOW WELL the user/learner performs (CEFR 2001 Chapter 5)	Of relevance to
More complex descriptors	Constructor-oriented curriculum descriptors	Diagnostic-oriented assessment descriptors	Curriculum designers Teachers
Simpler descriptors	User-oriented learning aims and “can do” learning outcomes	Self-assessment-oriented assessment descriptors	Learners Parents/employers, etc.

As mentioned, the primary function of descriptors is to facilitate the provision of transparent and coherent alignment between curriculum, teaching and assessment, particularly teacher assessment, and above all between the “language classroom world” and the real world. Real-world needs will relate to the main domains of language use: the public domain, the private domain, the occupational domain and the educational domain (CEFR 2001 Section 4.1.1; CEFR 2001 Table 5). These domains are illustrated in Appendix 5 with examples for the new scales for online and mediation activities.

The educational domain is clearly as much a real-world domain as the other three domains. Indeed, both needs profiles shown earlier concerned the educational domain (Figure 6 for CLIL; Figure 7 for university study). It is particularly evident in cases such as the language of schooling for children with an immigrant background and CLIL that teacher-learner(s) interaction and collaborative interaction between learners have mediating functions:

- ▶ that of organising collective work and the relationships between participants;
- ▶ that of facilitating access to, and the construction of, knowledge.

As diversity has increased at both the social and educational level since the CEFR was published, it has become increasingly important to make space for this diversity. This calls for a broader view of mediation, as taken in the 2014-17 project, together with a positive focus on user/learners’ diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires. Classrooms can become a place for raising awareness of and further developing learners’ plurilingual/pluricultural profiles. We very much hope that the provision of CEFR descriptors for mediating text, mediating concepts, mediating communication and for plurilingual/pluricultural competence will help to broaden the types of tasks carried out in language classrooms and to value all the developing language resources that user/learners bring.

2.10. SOME USEFUL RESOURCES FOR CEFR IMPLEMENTATION

The Council of Europe’s website contains links to many resources and articles relating to the CEFR, including a bank of supplementary descriptors, samples of performance (videos and scripts) and calibrated assessment tasks. In addition, materials from a number of CEFR-related projects are available through the [ECML website](#). The following list of web resources and books includes some of the most practical guidance in how to exploit the CEFR for language teaching and learning.

2.10.1. Web resources

“Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – A Guide for Users”,³⁴ available in English and French.

“From communicative to action-oriented: a research pathway”,³⁵ available in English and French.

A quality assurance matrix for CEFR use³⁶ (CEFR QualiMatrix), available in English and French.

CEFRain (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in Teacher Training).³⁷

34. Trim J. (ed.) (2001), “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – A Guide for Users”, Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680697848>.

35. Piccardo E. (2014), “From communicative to action-oriented: a research pathway”.

36. Available at www.ecml.at/CEFRqualitymatrix.

37. www.helsinki.fi/project/ceftrain/index.php.35.html.

Council of Europe tools for language teaching – Common European framework and portfolios,³⁸ available in English and French. Equals “Practical resources for language teaching”.³⁹

Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education (Beacco et al. 2016a), available in English and French.

Pathways through assessing, learning and teaching in the CEFR (Piccardo et al. 2011), available in English and French.

PRO-Sign: Promoting Excellence in Sign Language Instruction.⁴⁰

2.10.2. Books

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