Impact of the
Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
and the Council of Europe's work on
the new European educational area

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This presentation deals with some of the implications of the success of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It has been noted a number of times during our discussions that the Framework's subtitle is a threefold one: learning, teaching, assessment. Consideration of the Framework's impact on language policies and language teaching practices in Europe must therefore take into account all the aspects covered by this text: curricula, syllabi, teacher training, teaching materials and assessment.

The purpose of this presentation is not to provide another overview of the implementation of the CEFR in member states, however. Rather, it will look at the effects of the Framework's introduction on the emergence of a new European educational area and on the relationships that exist, or ought to exist, between the various players within that area.

I shall start by reviewing the first day of this Forum. Our discussions on the effective calibration of language proficiency examinations and certification to the reference levels set out in the Common European Framework of Reference illustrate the way in which many of those concerned perceive the nature of the relationship between the member states and the Council of Europe. The debate that has been initiated concerns the respective responsibility of each state and of the Council: should the quality of such examinations and certification be assured by the Council of Europe inspecting the documents produced with reference to the Framework, and should the Council even introduce a form of quality control? Or, on the contrary, is this a sphere in which each state enjoys complete sovereignty – with the responsibilities that entails – including over institutions and bodies which adopt these proficiency levels and which operate at the national level or represent a country or region internationally?

It has been stated by the Steering Committee for Education of the Council of Europe that it is not the Council of Europe's mission to validate linking claims to the reference levels**.** I am bringing it up again merely to illustrate what, to my mind, still characterises our thinking about the relationship between the member states and the Council of Europe. Although the term is not appropriate in this connection, we are dealing with an approach influenced by the concept of *subsidiarity*, which also governs relationships between the European Union and its member states.

As I shall argue in my presentation, however, it is clear that in practice, particularly in the modern languages field, this vertical relationship between states and the Council has been superseded by a relationship of an entirely different kind, encompassing the Council of Europe and all its member states: a relationship characterised by *shared responsibility*. It does not replace the vertical state-Council relationship with horizontal relationships between countries, but introduces a multi-faceted, mutually supportive environment that enriches the state-Council relationship by adding a third dimension consisting of the various relationships between member states.

The fact is that the rapid emergence of a European educational area for languages is "dealing a new hand" to the different players in this area.

The first, and simplest, illustration relates to the future of our languages. If we subscribe to the principle – set forth and upheld by the Council of Europe – of the overriding need for linguistic and cultural diversity, all the member states have a responsibility to promote one another's languages. Indeed, this is what Article 2 of the European Cultural Convention advocates. The European Year of Languages, the Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe and the European Language Portfolio – in short, the Council of Europe in all its expressions – reaffirm the need to promote all languages without exception, naturally including European languages. Subscribing to the Council of Europe's strategy for

promoting diversity means engaging in dialogue, not so much with the Council itself as with other European states and regions. Agreements concluded between countries or regions on a given minority language or teaching of the partner's language are to be welcomed. Consideration must also be given to languages not covered by such agreements, including national languages, if only by reiterating the relevant principles.

Consensus on the emergence of a European educational area for the teaching of modern languages

A European educational area has been talked about for a long time, sometimes with a question mark over it. It is clear that this educational area is taking shape rapidly and convincingly, particularly in the modern languages field.

One of the driving forces behind this development is the very evident synergy between the Council of Europe and the European Commission. The two bodies' work in the language field is generally regarded as being complementary, reflecting their respective roles and priorities. Without going back to the European Year of Languages, the initiatives taken are clearly helping to generate awareness of the need and scope for collaborative work in Europe with a view to achieving goals such as improving language proficiency, developing transparent language qualifications and protecting diversity. Languages are naturally part of the wider "Education and Training 2010" work programme, but have also given rise to specific initiatives. Commissioner Jan Figel's December 2005 communication on multilingualism sends a strong political signal. The European Commission's 2004-2006 Action Plan for Linguistic Diversity was equally significant. It pointed out, *inter alia,* that the Commission cannot bear sole responsibility for taking action in this area and that member states must take up the issues raised and help to achieve the goals set. It is worth noting that in September 2006 each EU member state was asked to submit a national report on its contribution to the Action Plan.

We are all aware that the issue of languages within education systems can no longer be treated just like any other issue. For obvious reasons, the very essence of this kind of learning means that the European educational area is rapidly becoming the natural arena for thinking out and effecting the necessary adjustments.

Another recent illustration of this approach is afforded by the conclusions of the Council of the European Union, published in the Official Journal of the European Union of 25 July 2006, concerning the European Indicator of Language Competence. The idea is to develop an instrument for measuring and comparing the actual language proficiency of young Europeans at the end of their compulsory schooling.

In these conclusions, the Council of the European Union affirms that foreign language skills, as well as helping to foster mutual understanding between peoples, are a prerequisite for a mobile workforce and thus contribute to the competitivity of the European Union economy. In the same text, it also affirms that periodic monitoring of performance through the use of indicators and benchmarks is an essential part of the Lisbon process, allowing good practice to be identified with a view to providing strategic guidance and steering for both short- and long-term measures of the "Education and Training 2010" work programme. Naturally, as these conclusions point out, the indicator of language competence should be linked to the levels of the Common European Framework.

This example, among others, shows that a dual process is at work:

- on the one hand, the sovereignty of each member state is respected (the Council of the European Union stresses that "the development of the Indicator should fully respect the responsibility of Member states for the organisation of their education systems (…)";

- on the other hand, however, the very idea of a European indicator makes states responsible to one another for achieving objectives set at the European level, necessitating more intensive dialogue on the methods used to achieve them.

This dual approach is not specific to modern languages, but the operative nature of the measures introduced in this field and the emphasis at all levels on the issue of languages, both in member states and at the European level, are striking. I am sure this phenomenon cannot be put down to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages alone; rather, it has come about because the realisation of the pressing need for educational instruments better geared to the variety of language skills required in Europe coincided chronologically with the CEFR providing the basic elements of a solution. In my view, this coincidence accounts for the Framework's rapid success. Conversely, its success clearly heightens awareness of the needs, insofar as it makes certain solutions technically possible.

This specific dynamic is confirmed by the quantitative and qualitative success of the process of preparing country Profiles, initiated by the Council of Europe. Every stage in the preparation of each Language Education Policy Profile (including the Country Reports and the Experts' Reports as well as the final Profiles themselves) encourages an analysis comparing the specific needs of a region or state and the Council's policy instruments. It is fascinating to read the various Profiles published and to see how effective the Council's guidelines and documents are when put to the test in specific situations.

It is clear from reading these Profiles that the European educational area is taking shape both by respecting the specific situations and needs of each of its components and by doing its utmost to ensure that the progress made possible by discussion at the European level – and formalised, *inter alia*, in Council of Europe documents – contributes to the developments under way in every European Region and state.

Example of the Validation Committee for the European Language Portfolio

The rapid development, thanks to the CEFR, of the European educational area for languages is sparking another change, one that is less visible but equally important: the rapid, widespread uptake of the CEFR in Europe is significantly altering each player's position in the new European educational area for language teaching and learning. The direct, unambiguous relationship between states and the Council of Europe is gradually dissolving into a network of mutual responsibility.

Nevertheless, an apparent counter-example to this development is often put forward: the European Validation Committee for the European Language Portfolio. May I remind you that this validation body, set up by the Steering Committee for Education in 2000, has the task of examining each European Language Portfolio model developed by a state or a public or private institution and verifying its conformity with the letter and spirit of the Principles and Guidelines adopted by the Steering Committee. It is a case of verifying that the model incorporates the specific features common to all the portfolios and possesses the necessary qualities to fulfil its role in promoting plurilingualism, developing learner autonomy, developing acceptance of linguistic and cultural diversity and ensuring transparent qualifications by referring explicitly to the Common European Framework of Reference. Only models validated by this Committee may be known as European Language Portfolios, bear the Council of Europe logo and constitute an integral part of the momentum created around this tool in Europe.

We are indeed talking about a vertical approach, to go back to the image used earlier. The Council, through this Committee, validates references to Council of Europe tools of which a ministry or institution wishes to make use.

This is the reality, and although about eighty portfolios have been validated to date, others could not be validated on the first attempt; many designers have had to make significant adjustments to their models in order to obtain such validation.

That aspect aside, however, observation of the Validation Committee's *modus operandi* since its inception shows that, while abiding by its terms of reference, the Committee members soon incorporated into their work another element of current European developments in relation to the Framework. It could even be argued that one of the most important roles played by the Committee has been to encourage all the designers of portfolios to share the advances made as a result of adjustments to the various models over time. Indeed, there has been alarm in some quarters that the Committee's criteria have evolved since its inception and that model portfolios validated at its early meetings would probably no longer be accepted in the same form today, even though the Principles and Guidelines have not changed. The "case law" established by the Validation Committee, which is clarified and explained through regular updating of the reference documents, is in fact one instance of the polymorphic relationships between the various member states and the Council of Europe. A state's relationship with the Council of Europe can no longer be considered in isolation from what other states are doing.

Similarly, it is obvious that the Council can no longer carry out its work in the modern languages field without taking account of European Union initiatives. Since we are talking here about the European Language Portfolio, it is crucial, for example, to look at the development of such portfolios for adult learners and vocational training in relation to *Europass* introduced by the European Commission in 2005. Likewise, the European Language Portfolio's short-term future clearly can no longer be envisaged in isolation from the work and discussions of the Commission and the Union in relation to basic competencies for young Europeans and the documents that could or should accompany learners in the acquisition and validation of those competencies.

Who is responsible to whom?

It is generally considered that each state and institution is responsible for the quality of its own procedures concerning the assessment of language proficiency levels. But responsible to whom? To the Council of Europe? No, not just the Council! The very nature of the issues involved in the proper calibration of certification tests shows that this question has an impact on the benefit the various states and institutions can hope to gain from using these proficiency levels. If a state allows the proficiency levels to be used inappropriately, it jeopardises the work being done in other countries, undermining their value as Europe-wide benchmarks. It also deprives learners of the benefits of reliable certification of language proficiency, making international recognition less certain and reducing the value of what is a significant asset in the context of European mobility.

An institution or state that puts the guidelines and recommendations set out in the Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR to good use, equipping itself to ensure the proper linking of such examinations or certification by means of a quality assurance process or a national or regional validation institution, does so as much because it recognises its responsibility towards its learners and its European partners as out of a concern to comply with the recommendations of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Education.

Such local, regional and national initiatives can only be encouraged. However, the Council cannot ignore the potential – and even foreseeable – inconsistencies between the various countries, regions and languages when it comes to implementing these quality assurance mechanisms. It is important not to overlook the danger that the very high stakes associated with internationally recognised certification and assessment may quickly result in certain languages or countries striding ahead of other languages. The danger is even greater for languages represented by social groups or linguistic minorities that do not enjoy the same

institutional or private support as that accorded to other languages. Although the Steering Committee for Education does not consider the Council of Europe responsible for verifying the quality of examinations and certification linked to the Framework levels, it does have responsibilities in another area: it must closely monitor developments in Europe, issue warnings when a certain degree of balance between languages comes under threat and take the necessary action – within its field of competence, of course.

Let us now take a broader view by asking exactly what is happening in the various states in relation to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.
A growing number of states have supported the translation of the Framework into their national language(s). This is consistent with the usual approach of making tools developed by the Council of Europe available to stakeholders in each country, thereby involving a "vertical" process.

The decision by some groups of countries sharing the same language to draw up specifications defining the linguistic and cultural content corresponding to different levels of the Framework has more serious implications for our discussions. This has been done for German (levels A1 to C2) and French (levels A1 and B2), and is in the process of being done for other languages such as Greek, Portuguese, Spanish and English; it will probably be extended to other languages. It is not an entirely new approach: the series of threshold levels developed in the 1980s set out, for each foreign language, those elements regarded as essential in order to communicate with its speakers. The situation has completely changed, however, owing to the adoption of these reference levels as learning targets in a growing number of countries.

This implicitly raises the following question: what implications does the existence of reference level descriptions describing the language content to be acquired at different levels of proficiency have for the development of national curricula? Should, or can, the authors of such curricula review the language content to be taught at year levels whose learning targets correspond to one of the levels of the CEFR, when reference descriptions will be available that specify precisely which content allows a particular language proficiency to be attained at level A1, B1 or B2? Does a state have the wherewithal to create the right conditions, for each language taught, for the same kind of research as that conducted, in order to develop the specifications, by those countries considering themselves to be in charge of a particular language? Is it not preferable to take advantage of the help thereby provided by partner countries? It is true that the ground a learner has to cover in studying a language depends a great deal on the languages he or she already knows, and the specifications provided for each language have nothing to say about the practicalities of achieving different levels of proficiency in the language in question. In practice, however, whether or not the content to be learned includes a verbal mood or a particular form, where the learning target corresponds to one of the levels of the CEFR, may be determined by specifications developed by others. The practical implications of this situation are not significant, although they may have a major impact on the teaching of the languages in question. On the other hand, this is an interesting example in that it raises, albeit anecdotally, the issue of the responsibility of those concerned. A ministry or state can agree to share responsibility for defining teaching content in this way only if it explicitly subscribes to the new concept of a European educational area for languages.

Naturally, it may do so without necessarily claiming to support this development, defending its decision on technical grounds. However, this will undoubtedly mean it loses an important resource when it comes to explaining and justifying changes in course content.

Another example highlights the political willingness to take advantage of the European educational area in other ways. It concerns the application, in some countries, of the principle of mutual confidence in the assessment of pupils' linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence. It is clearly essential for language learning, the discovery of cultural aspects of

the partner country and intercultural education to take into account the linguistic, educational and cultural situation of learners. The approach adopted here, however, consists in separating such learning from the assessment of its outcomes, making partner countries responsible for the certification of proficiency in their languages or, at the very least, seeking to engage in close co-operation with those countries in connection with the certification process. It is a very different approach to that adopted by other states wishing to develop their own certification systems for proficiency in foreign languages, sometimes out of a concern to take full responsibility for the teaching of those languages in their country, which is a very legitimate concern in some cases.

These two examples of explicit reliance on partner countries when it comes to defining course content and implementing forms of proficiency assessment raise, in very different ways, a new issue in the area of language teaching and assessment in Europe, namely: who is responsible for what?

Initially, we have seen that the issues around the calibration of language examinations and certification significantly broaden the scope of the debate, which is no longer confined to dialogue between member states and the Council of Europe. It is clear from these new examples that the momentum generated by the CEFR in Europe is starting to bring about a new balance in terms of responsibilities, placing increasing weight on horizontal relationships between member states and thus raising the issue of responsibility from a new perspective.

Inevitable diversification of ways of dealing with the different components of the CEFR

This development applies to all the issues connected with the CEFR.

The forum is intended to serve as a forceful reminder that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is not confined to the proficiency level scales. With a view to the future Europe we hope to see, that is, a Europe respecting and deriving strength from its diversity, it is even more important to explore the full potential of all the other components of the CEFR: real efforts to promote plurilingualism, an action-oriented approach to language learning, taking into account learners' needs and the development of learner autonomy.

Although these aspects are also developed in other Council of Europe instruments, such as the Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe and the European Language Portfolio, it has to be said that they do not receive political recognition through the same channels, in the same form or at the same pace as the issues of assessment and linking of language examinations and certification. With some exceptions, they are not included among the priorities set at the highest level.

This significant disparity in the recognition accorded to the various components of the CEFR can only be a cause for concern. As we know, all of these components are complementary and it is difficult to see how one can make the most of part of the Framework without getting to grips with the rest. Little is to be gained, for example, by trying to use the scales and proficiency levels without analysing them in detail and attempting to promote an action-oriented approach to teaching and learning in conjunction with their introduction, without taking all the necessary measures to develop learner autonomy, for instance through self-assessment, and above all without accepting the full implications of the concept of plurilingualism underpinning the levels. The main advantage of the scales is that it is no longer necessary to refer to native-speaker standard in order to set learning targets and assess proficiency levels. Stopping at this point, however, is to stop halfway. The rationale behind the scales is that such targets should be designed in accordance with learners' needs, accepting the importance and potential advantages of attaining complementary levels in different languages and thereby adopting a positive approach to the concept of partial or

specific competences. This is wholly bound up with the issue of responsibility. Allowing the CEFR to be interpreted and used in a piecemeal fashion is liable to result in a simplistic, standardising view of this tool, compromising much of the CEFR's contribution to the collective development of language teaching and assessment in Europe.

Moreover, this danger is starting to become apparent here and there with the reduction of the Framework to purely operational aspects of language learning and a focus on communication skills. In some, if not many, cases, this is coupled with disregard for the importance of familiarising pupils with the European cultural area and neglect of the cultural and intercultural components necessary for genuine communication, which also one of the justifications of the need for plurilingualism. We must pay attention to any expressions of unease that may emerge. They are a warning signal of deficiencies or imbalances in the implementation of the CEFR and the discourse associated with it.

Naturally, this does not mean nothing is being done in member states. However, the lower profile enjoyed at the European level by initiatives in these areas undoubtedly arises from the fact that they mainly involve specific measures taken in different countries and within certain education systems.

An innovative solution has been found to the problems of linking language examinations and certification in the form of a Manual and the publication of samples of learner productions intended to illustrate the different levels of proficiency. The question also arises as to whether there might be a case for the Council of Europe using this approach as a model for promoting the preparation of recommendations or even a guide to help member states make the most of what the CEFR has to offer in terms of curricula, teaching materials and teacher education.

Raising the issue of the impact of measures taken in countries or regions, in connection with the CEFR, on the European educational area comes down to considering the most effective strategies for ensuring that such measures make the greatest possible contribution to positive developments in all of these fields at the European level.

In this connection, I would like to turn around the question I asked at the beginning of my presentation in order to define the Council of Europe's responsibility in relation to the momentum generated by new developments in a given country. Although a negative response has been given to the question of whether the Council of Europe should monitor the linking of language examinations offered in the various states, it seems to me that it is both possible and desirable to ask the Council of Europe how it can draw on measures introduced in different places in order to help pool the necessary resources and expertise with a view to addressing the issues that will undoubtedly arise in respect of the implementation of key aspects of the CEFR. A perusal of the Language Education Policy Profiles already produced highlights numerous examples of such issues.

The Council of Europe has demonstrated its ability to respond appropriately to issues arising from the practices or needs of certain countries or from new developments. The way the Council grappled with the issue of languages of instruction, raised by many countries following the introduction of the CEFR, is an outstanding example. The Council responded rapidly because this is a highly political issue. However, it is also important to respond in a similar manner to issues of a less political nature, obviously in appropriate ways. Another example is the shift in emphasis since the last European seminar on the European Languages Portfolio, held in Lithuania in September 2006, where the Language Policy Division and the Validation Committee wished the discussions and exchanges to focus on the implementation of this document rather than its content. This is a development geared to the needs observed at local level in relation to the implementation of Council of Europe instruments.

In the new geography of the European educational area for languages, it seems to me that the relationship between member states and the Council must be two-way. The Council makes a decisive contribution to shaping this new educational area by developing language policy instruments and offering training in their use. By paying close attention to the needs of member states, it can probably do more to help them introduce new ideas in the implementation of plurilingual education and accept the educational implications of the concepts underpinning the CEFR.

In conclusion, the CEFR and the Council of Europe's various language policy tools have clearly had a very significant impact in Europe. For many, the rapid and widespread uptake of the CEFR – taking advantage of the need to revitalise language teaching – was an opportunity to ensure that recognition of the importance of making such teaching more effective and achieving greater transparency led to practical action. It is equally clear, however, that the use of these Council tools has given a particular shape to the process set in motion over the last few years. While responding to the needs identified and expressed for greater transparency, a common scale of proficiency levels and a more communicative approach to language teaching, the CEFR also introduces other elements of language policy that go together as a package.

This has numerous implications for the *modus operandi* of a European educational area that is both strengthened and profoundly transformed by them. In this new landscape, it is no longer a question of *"What can the Council of Europe do for us?",* but rather of *"Who does what"?* and *"Who is responsible for what"?*

Three key areas for development may be identified:

- Each member state has at least as great a responsibility to all its partners as to the Council, and each, in accordance with the specific nature of its education system, will surely have to work out the best possible way of shouldering its responsibilities.

- While the various spheres of development all complement one another, they do not move at the same pace; some of them are carried along by political priorities, while others still require efforts of explanation and persuasion. It is logical, therefore, that not all aspects of the CEFR will take the same route. As a result, the Council's responsibilities may differ from those it has in areas such as assessment.

- The issue of the Council's responsibility is gradually being displaced by the rapid uptake of the CEFR. During this presentation I discussed two examples of issues that, to my mind, reflect this shift: how can the Council alert its partners and warn them about the possibility of growing imbalances between languages in relation to the introduction of quality assurance mechanisms for assessment processes? How can it watch out for, and warn against, a counter-productive imbalance in the implementation of the various components of the CEFR?

Lastly, in relation to the latter point, our discussions would be incomplete if they were confined solely to the responsibilities of states and of the Council of Europe. Indeed, one of the key aspects of the CEFR involves a much broader range of players. I am talking about plurilingual education. There is a fundamental difference between plurilingual and intercultural education, as defined by the CEFR, and the most common approaches to language teaching. Plurilingual and intercultural education cannot be seen solely as the outcome of the language learning and teaching process, but changes the way we think about, develop and provide language education: it is an education in values as much as the acquisition of language skills; it is designed to enable each individual to develop and enhance his or her own plurilingual profile; it is geared to life-long learning thanks to the development of individual competencies, the acquisition of appropriate behaviours and

strategies and the promotion and recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity. It takes as its starting-point and end-goal the knowledge, abilities and competencies of individuals in their actual situation and social environment rather than the issues associated with teaching one or more languages. This fundamental challenge raised by the CEFR can be met only by means of responsible, concerted action by all those involved in the education process: curriculum designers, trainers, authors of teaching materials, those in charge of examinations and assessment, head teachers and language teachers, not to mention, of course, the crucial task of explaining this approach to employers and end users of education systems. We are well aware that these changes are the slowest to implement and will encounter the greatest resistance. Yet it is perhaps for this very reason that we must make them an urgent focus. The manifold players involved in such a wide-ranging transformation may give the impression that responsibilities are dispersed, leading to lack of action. Such dispersal is not inevitable. It can be avoided if all those in positions of responsibility, at whatever level, sincerely wish to understand and emphasise the fact that this approach goes hand in hand with all the other components of the CEFR.

The division of responsibilities has clearly changed a great deal, but it is continuing to undergo major changes. It must be the subject of discussion and careful monitoring. This is my belief, and the very purpose of my presentation. It is essential to take a realistic view of how the CEFR has changed the European educational area and to watch for the danger of aberrations or distortions of the potential of this tool, not only with a view to adapting to the needs in Europe, but also – and I shall finish by looking to the future – out of a responsibility to parts of the world and non-European countries that are taking a close interest in the CEFR. It is probably too soon to talk about this in detail, but it is not too soon to consider the benefit these countries will also derive from the responsible use of the CEFR on our own continent.