ELP CHECKLISTS FOR YOUNG LEARN-ERS

SOME PRINCIPLES AND PROPOSALS

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Introduction

When it was preparing for the transition from ELP validation to registration, the Validation Committee compiled a set of generic checklists for use in ELPs intended for adolescent and adult learners together with guidelines for their use. When it came to younger learners, the Validation Committee considered numerous requests to adapt the self-assessment grid from the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) and to provide a set of age-appropriate checklists. Instead of doing this, however, it decided to restrict itself to providing guidelines that focus on the extent to which it is possible to adapt the CEFR's common reference levels to the needs of younger learners and to refer to resources that can be drawn on when compiling checklists for this age group. The reasons for this decision are given below.

The self-assessment grid

According to the *Principles and Guidelines*, the ELP is "based on the Common European Framework of Reference with explicit reference to the common levels of competence" (paragraph 2.6). The annotated version of the *Principles and Guidelines* (2011) explains this as follows: "Any ELP's reporting function will be valid to the extent that it makes coherent and consistent use of the Common European Framework's common reference levels. These are summarized in the self-assessment grid and this should be included in all ELP models. An exception to this general rule is made in the case of ELP models for very young learners […]." The note to paragraph 3.2 repeats this last point, adding that in such cases "the self-assessment grid […] should be made available to teachers, parents and other stakeholders in a guide or information note". In other words, one function of the self-assessment grid is to make explicit the link between the ELP and the common reference levels of the CEFR.

The CEFR offers the self-assessment grid as "a draft for a self-assessment orientation tool based on the six levels" that is "intended to help learners to profile their main language skills, and decide at which level they might look at a checklist of more detailed descriptors in order to self-assess their level of proficiency" (Council of Europe 2001, p.25). In other words, the CEFR recognizes that self-assessment cannot not be undertaken on the basis of the self-assessment grid alone. This was confirmed by experience in the early stages of the ELP pilot projects. Paragraph 3.2 of the *Principles and Guidelines* states that "the Language Biography facilitates the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress". The note on this paragraph reflects the accumulated experience of the ELP Validation Committee: "In order to plan their learning and assess their progress, learners need goal-setting and self-assessment checklists that expand on the summary descriptors contained in the self-assessment grid. All ELPs submitted for validation and accreditation should include such checklists […]."

Two reasons have been given for developing one or more age-appropriate versions of the self-assessment grid:

1. *Accessibility* – It has been objected that younger learners find it difficult to understand the terminology used in the self-assessment grid. This argument has only limited validity, however, for two reasons. First, self-assessment against the common reference levels is central to the ELP, which means that in order to assess themselves learners of all ages must refer to descriptors of communicative behaviour expressed as "can do" statements. This introduces a metacognitive/metalinguistic dimension into the business of language learning and teaching which cannot be simplified beyond a certain point. Teachers who work with the ELP will always have to mediate descriptors to their learners. Secondly, as we have seen, the self-assessment grid is intended to provide no more than preliminary orientation; detailed self-assessment depends on checklists of "I can" descriptors. If ELP users gradually record their developing language profile in their language passport on the basis of such checklists, it is unlikely that their self-assessment will depend in any serious way on the self-assessment grid. A more important function of the grid may be as an interpretative tool for anyone who needs to understand what the ELP owner's self-assessment means (teachers, parents, etc.).

2. *Behavioural appropriateness* – It has also been objected that the descriptors in the self-assessment grid do not adequately reflect the behavioural options available to younger learners. On the whole, the self-assessment grid reflects the three domains for which the ALTE "Can Do" statements were compiled (CEFR, Appendix D; Council of Europe 2001, pp.244–57): *Social and tourist*, *Work*, and *Study*. Language courses designed for older adolescents and adults usually spend a lot of time preparing learners to communicate in the "real world" outside the classroom. Many of the tasks they learn to perform, however, lie beyond the capacity of younger learners. This applies especially to tasks that are carried out in the workplace or may be demanded of a tourist – tasks that young learners would not normally be called on to perform in their first language. Whereas simulation tends to play a central role in the language learning of older adolescents and adults, for young learners the "real world" is the classroom. Descriptors concerned with tourism and work are largely irrelevant to them, while those concerned with study and social interaction must be adapted to the specific needs of particular learning contexts. The specificity and almost infinite variability of learning contexts is the main reason why it is not possible to offer *generic* checklists for young learners.

Age-appropriate checklists

As the CEFR makes clear (Council of Europe 2001, p.25), the self-assessment grid is an attempt to summarize the descriptors contained in the illustrative scales that are presented in Chapters 4 and 5. Its validity depends on the validity of those more detailed descriptors, established in an empirical research project whose methods and procedures are summarized in Appendix A of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001, pp.205–16). In the same way, age-appropriate versions of the self-assessment grid would need to be summaries of age-appropriate scaled descriptors. The examples that follow illustrate two approaches to developing age-appropriate descriptors.

1. The Swiss IEF Project

This project was carried out by the Centre for Language Teaching and Research of the University of Fribourg on behalf of the German-speaking Swiss cantons. Its purpose was to promote the quality and effectiveness of school-based foreign-language teaching and learning by improving the quality, coherence and transparency of assessment; it also contributed goal-

setting and self-assessment checklists to the Swiss ELP for lower secondary learners. Taking the CEFR as its basis, the project developed age-appropriate descriptors for sub-divisions of the first three common reference levels: A1.1 and A1.2, A2.1 and A2.2, B1.1 and B1.2. The bank of new descriptors (available on this website in German, French, Italian and English) was compiled in four steps as follows:

(i) Descriptors relevant to the needs of younger learners were collected from ELPs and derived from textbooks and tests.

(ii) These descriptors were then qualitatively validated in teacher workshops: teachers decided on their relevance, assigned them to the common reference levels, and added to them on the basis of their experience.

(iii) Experts finalized the wording of the "can do" statements and added further descriptors. They then made a selection of descriptors to cover the whole range of levels from A1.1 to B1.2, as well as a wide range of (sub-)skills and tasks.

(iv) 126 teachers each assessed 7 of their pupils. The assessment was based on a series of nine partly overlapping questionnaires, all of which comprised 50 "can do" statements. The questionnaires contained a number of descriptors from the CEFR as level anchors; these provided a means of linking the questionnaires to one another. The teacher assessments were subjected to Rasch analysis, the results of which caused a number of descriptors to be eliminated. The remaining descriptors were scaled (i.e., put in order of difficulty) and anchored in relation to the common reference levels. Finally, the level thresholds established for the CEFR by the Swiss National Science Foundation Project led by Günther Schneider and Brian North (North and Schneider 1998, Schneider and North 1999) were applied in order to assign the descriptors to their levels.

Two further steps led to the development of checklists and an age-appropriate self-assessment grid for the Swiss ELP for lower secondary learners:

(v) Selected "can do" statements were reworded as "I can" statements in order to make them suitable for self-assessment. They were then piloted in a number of classes in order to discover whether or not learners could make sense of the descriptors and use them to assess their own proficiency. The results of the piloting were used to rephrase the whole collection of descriptors.

(vi) Finally, checklists for levels A1.1, A1.2, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1, and B1.2 were developed, together with a new self-assessment grid. The IEF descriptor bank served as the main source; additional descriptors were taken from the CEFR and the Swiss ELP for adolescents and adults (1.2000), mainly in order to provide a more comprehensive description of levels B1 and B2.

2. English Language Proficiency Benchmarks (IILT)

Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) developed English Language Proficiency Benchmarks for learners of English as a second language in primary and post-primary (secondary) schools. Both sets of benchmarks (downloadable from *www.ncca.ie/iilt*) are based on the first three common reference levels (A1–B1) and offer a scaled curriculum framework that plots the English-language development of immigrant learners to the point where they can access English-medium education without intensive English language support. The benchmarks were developed by bringing the CEFR (self-assessment grid and illustrative scales) into interaction with the official curricula and the results of classroom observation. Both documents begin with "global benchmarks", which are effectively age-appropriate and domain-specific versions of the self-assessment grid. These are followed by a number of grids that refer respectively to recurrent themes in the primary curriculum and the main subject areas of

the post-primary curriculum. The versions of the ELP that were developed on the basis of the benchmarks both contain an abbreviation of the "global benchmarks" in place of the self-assessment grid (which, however, is included as an appendix to each model) together with checklists derived from the relevant benchmarks.

The interrelation of these various descriptors can be illustrated with reference to the post-primary benchmarks. In the global benchmarks the following descriptors are given for SPOKEN INTERACTION at A1:

- *Can greet, take leave, say* please *and* thank you, *and use very basic words and phrases to ask for directions to another place in the school.*

- *Can ask for attention in class.*

- *Can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or re-phrase things and help him/her reformulate what he/she is trying to say.*

- *Can make basic requests in the classroom or playground (e.g., for the loan of a pen-cil) and respond appropriately to the basic requests of others.*

In the language passport section of the corresponding ELP these descriptors are abbreviated as:

- *I can say* hello *and* goodbye, please *and* thank you, *can ask for directions in the school, and can ask and answer simple questions.*

The benchmarks for A1 SPOKEN INTERACTION in the context of history and geography lessons are:

- *Can indicate lack of comprehension and ask for assistance with vocabulary specific to history/geography.*

- *Can use basic words and phrases and visual support (e.g., pointing to appropriate pictures or graphics in the textbook) to participate in group work.*

Finally, in the corresponding ELP the relevant descriptor in the history/geography A1 check-list is:

- *I can use some key words in group work.*

As these examples show, the Irish descriptors are not only age-appropriate but strongly do-main-specific: they define the communicative proficiency required by learners *of a certain age* who are learning *in a particular educational context*.

The two sets of benchmarks and their respective ELPs have proved an effective and robust means of teaching English as a second language in Irish schools. In developing them every effort was made to find secure anchors in the CEFR scales. However, it was not possible to validate the descriptors empirically, so the relation of the benchmarks to the common refer-ence levels remains a matter of faith. This will be true of any other adaptation of the CEFR descriptors that is not supported by empirical validation. It would, however, be possible to add descriptors from a source like this to a core collection of descriptors that had been empiri-cally validated, like the IEF bank (this was the procedure used to develop the Council of Eu-rope's bank of descriptors for use in adolescent and adult ELPs). For further information on the Irish project, see Little and Lazenby Simpson (2004), Little (2005).

Age-appropriateness and the common reference levels: how far can we go?

Most discussion about age-appropriate descriptors and the subdivision of levels has focused on A2 and B1. The question nevertheless arises: In terms of the common reference levels as defined in the CEFR, how far can younger learners realistically be expected to progress?

A number of ELPs designed for younger learners (primary as well as lower secondary) include the self-assessment grid in the language passport and a table that allows learners to rate themselves from A1 to C2. This is usually defended on the ground that in most school systems there are learners whose language proficiency is unusually well developed for reasons that have nothing to do with language learning at school. Two commonly cited examples are migrant pupils who may use the ELP to state what they can do in their home language, and pupils whose first language is one of the foreign languages of the curriculum.

It is perhaps insufficiently appreciated that the action-oriented approach adopted by the CEFR distinguishes between communicative proficiency (a capacity to perform tasks that involve the use of language – Chapter 4) and linguistic competence (the internalized knowledge on which language use depends – Chapter 5). In order to perform the tasks specified for B2, C1 and C2 one needs more than a high level of linguistic competence. Consider, for example, the summary of C1 READING given in the self-assessment grid:

- *I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialized articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.*

The presence here of *specialized articles*, *longer technical instructions* and *my field* implies a level of education and/or professional experience that lies far in the future for primary and lower secondary language learners.

One way of resolving this issue is to confine age-appropriate adaptation to the lower common reference levels. After all, even when the proficiency of younger learners is underpinned by native or near-native levels of linguistic competence, what they can actually do in the language will always be constrained by their lack of maturity, experience and education. In any case, it is always possible to leave space in ELPs for learners to record aspects of their communicative proficiency that are not captured by the checklists, including things they can do in their first language.

Making it easier for younger learners to recognize and report their progress

It has often been pointed out that language learners at school may take several years to move from one CEFR level to the next. As a consequence, it may be difficult for them either to recognize or to demonstrate their progress over shorter periods of learning, e.g., a term or a school year, especially in relation to the self-assessment grid. There are two obvious ways of overcoming this difficulty:

1. *Subdivide the levels*

   The CEFR recommends that institutions adopt a branching approach to the subdivision of the common reference levels in order to accommodate whatever levels they already use in their system (Council of Europe 2001, p.32). Though this procedure has been much discussed, it has not often been attempted. Clearly, it is a risky undertaking unless the development of the subdivisions can be empirically validated, as in the IEF Project (see above). Where this has been done, of course, the table for recording summative self-assessment in the language passport can contain whatever subdivisions have been defined.

2. Develop (part of) a curriculum within one level

The Irish benchmarks/ELP project referred to earlier makes no attempt to subdivide levels A1, A2 and B1. However, the primary ELP contains checklists for 13 curriculum themes, and each checklist contains five or six descriptors for each level. In other words, for each activity at each level there are at least 13 descriptors, some of which inevitably overlap. Learners may be assumed to have achieved (say) A2 reading when they have ticked off all relevant descriptors in the checklists; but when they have ticked off half the descriptors, they can colour in half the relevant cell in the self-assessment table and perhaps write the date on the part they have coloured. (This approach can be used in any ELP, of course, provided its checklists contain a sufficient number of descriptors.)

Summary of the argument so far

- Despite its name, the self-assessment grid was never intended to be used as the ELP's primary tool of self-assessment. That function falls to the checklists.

- The self-assessment grid describes communicative proficiency which in important respects does not correspond to the behavioural options available to younger learners. This requires a response.

- The self-assessment grid is a summary of the empirically validated descriptors in the CEFR's illustrative scales. Any attempt to create a version of the grid for younger learners must likewise draw on a bank of more detailed descriptors, as was done in the Swiss and Irish projects described above.

- Ideally the development of age-appropriate checklist descriptors should be supported by empirical validation. Where this is not possible, the relation of new descriptors to the common reference levels may be uncertain.

- The action-oriented approach adopted in the CEFR rests on a distinction between communicative proficiency and linguistic competence. Recognition of this distinction should make it easier to accept that younger learners will rarely progress far beyond B1.

- We can make it easier for younger learners to recognize and demonstrate the progress of their learning by subdividing the relevant levels and/or by ensuring that checklists contain enough descriptors to allow them to report that they have achieved (say) half of a level.

Developing checklists for young learners

When setting out to develop checklists for young learners (primary and lower secondary, below the age of 15) it is probably wise to confine oneself to the first three CEFR levels: A1, A2 and B1. These three levels are concerned with general communication: identifying and presenting oneself; meeting one's immediate survival needs; getting about in the target language; engaging in social interaction. The descriptors are thus mostly age-adaptable. However, because young learners often have many years of education, and thus language learning, still in front of them, much of the target language communication they engage in will be in the classroom rather than in the target language community. It may be important to ensure that at least some descriptors explicitly take account of this fact.

Four sources of checklist descriptors can be drawn on:

- The generic checklists for adolescent and adult learners – all learners, after all, need to master basic greetings and leave-takings, to introduce themselves, and to say that they do not understand.

- The data bank of general descriptors on this website, which is derived from ELPs validated between 2000 and 2003.

- The IEF bank of descriptors referred to above, which is also available on this website.

- Checklist descriptors in other validated ELPs – the Irish ELPs designed for immigrant pupils/students, for example, are freely available (at www.ncca.ie/iilt).

Descriptors should always refer to a communicative task, they should be comprehensible to learners, and it should be easy for teachers and their learners to think of examples to illustrate them.

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