

Introduction to the bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios

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The following text is an enhanced and updated version of chapter 6 in the *Guide for Developers of European Language Portfolios* (Schneider/Lenz 2001) on “Selecting, developing, calibrating, adapting descriptors”. The *Bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios* as a new source for Portfolio developers is presented in the section “Sources that may be used to select and to formulate descriptors” under 6.2b.

6. Selecting, developing, calibrating, adapting descriptors

Within an ELP different kinds of descriptions fulfil important functions. The existing ELP models contain different kinds of descriptions, e.g. descriptions of language proficiency, descriptions of learning objectives, descriptions of learning strategies as well as descriptions of language learning and intercultural experiences.

It is important to distinguish between four fundamentally different types of descriptions:

- 1) scaled descriptions, i.e. descriptors which belong to a common scale. Examples of such descriptors are: the descriptors in the Self-assessment grid, the Global scale, and the *Illustrative scales* contained in chapters 4 and 5 of the *Common European Framework*;
- 2) descriptors of language proficiency and language competence that can clearly be related to scaled descriptors and which allow for comparisons between learner competences, examination levels etc. and the Common reference levels; the descriptors in the *Bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios* belong to this type;
- 3) descriptors of language proficiency and language competence not found in the CEF that may indicate a certain level of competence for a learner belonging to a specific target group learning and acting in a specific context. Such descriptors may be context and target group-specific and possibly also achievement-oriented (depending on things actually learned as part of a syllabus). Being so closely related to actual classroom practice, these descriptors may be tremendously useful in improving learners’ self-assessment skills and, if linked to an ELP in some way, enhance the perceived usefulness of that ELP. It is not surprising that descriptors of this type were produced in large numbers for use within or in combination with ELPs for children; at that stage it is usually more important to develop the learners’ self-assessment skills than to establish reliable links between their language proficiency and the Common reference levels;
- 4) descriptions which are not scaled (or have not yet been scaled) and descriptions that cannot be related to language proficiency and language competence levels because they belong in a different, independent category. Some of these descriptions may not be scalable, or scaling is not important in their case if they are to be used in the ELP; lists of learning strategies or descriptions of cultural or intercultural experiences belong to this group.

When new ELP versions are developed, consideration should be given to:

- what sources of descriptors are available;
- which descriptors or which *types* of descriptors should not be changed;
- under what conditions and how descriptors can be adapted;
- how (using what methods) additional descriptors can be developed;
- what requirements good descriptors should fulfil;
- whether finer or narrower levels should be distinguished within the six-level scale of the *Common reference levels*;
- by what kinds of procedures descriptors can be related to the *Common reference levels*;

- for what purposes descriptions are desirable which are not related to levels or not scalable.

6.1. Instruments containing scaled descriptors that should not be changed

The descriptions of levels that are used in several ELPs are based on the *Common reference levels* in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEF).

The *Common reference levels* of the Council of Europe provide a common standard against which the assessment of modern language attainment in different educational sectors, target languages, linguistic regions and states can be referenced (cf. North 1999, 25).

This common standard is described by

- a) the *Global scale* (CEF: Table 1) and
- b) the *Self-assessment grid* (CEF: Table 2).

The *Global scale* and the *Self-assessment grid* were constructed using the most typical and stable descriptors; these level descriptions are drawn from a bank of "illustrative descriptors" developed and validated for the CEF using a rigorous methodology in the Swiss research project described in Appendix B to the CEF. "The formulations have been mathematically scaled to the levels by analysing the way in which they have been interpreted in the assessment of large numbers of learners." (CEF: Ch. 3.4) Projects by DIALANG and ALTE which used these descriptors confirmed their quality (cf. Appendices C and D to the CEF).

The original descriptors may be changed, if necessary, but the exact status of the descriptors used should be made transparent. The exact wording of the *Reference levels* should only be changed a) if important reasons exist; b) after a thorough analysis; and c) in collaboration with experts. It would make little sense and impair their credibility considerably if ELPs were disseminated in which the *Reference levels* are formulated in different ways as *Reference levels*. At the same time, there *are* good reasons for adaptations since the descriptions of the levels must be comprehensible and accessible for the users of the respective ELPs. For younger learners reformulations are necessary to make the descriptors more easily comprehensible and better adapted to their experience. When an adapted *Grid* or *Global scale* is disseminated, it should be made clear that it is not the original version.

Where additional descriptors are needed, tailored to specific domains, e.g. language use in the vocational sector or in higher education, it is preferable not to change the existing instruments (*Global scale* and *Self-assessment grid*) which represent a common scale for a wide range of learners and thus allow for comparability, but to add level descriptions that take into account the specific objectives and which can be related to the *Common reference levels*. Accordingly, it is recommended to add what is specific but to retain what is common in order to guarantee comparability.

The descriptors used on the checklists of some ELP versions (including the Swiss *ELP for young people and adults*) do not have the same status as the descriptors in the *Global scale* or the *Self-assessment grid*. The individual descriptors in the checklists function as indicators in the sense that they can be used to show the extent to which someone has met the standards described in the standard description of the level (cf. North 1999, 25).

The descriptors on the checklists should be typical and reliable indicators. Therefore, it is advisable also in the case of checklists to use, as a basis, descriptors that have been assigned to a level by the use of more than intuitive methods – unless they are designed for in-house use only. For example, most descriptions in the checklists of the Swiss ELP version and in the *Bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios* are slightly adapted descriptors that were originally scaled for the *Illustrative scales* in the CEF.

Experience has shown that good translations of the *Self-assessment grid* and the *Global Scale* are not easy to achieve. They have to be true to the original and understandable by non-specialist users at the same time. Since it is sometimes not possible to mirror the exact wording of the original text in other

languages, developers should make sure that either the original English, French or German version is taken as a point of departure for translations.

Developers should also ensure that they use the *Self-assessment grid* and the *Global scale* in their latest versions as published in the respective language version(s) of the CEF. If no official translation of the CEF exists, great care should be taken that the translations of these core instruments are acceptable to all relevant parties. The Council of Europe aims to have just one version per language; the Secretariat should be consulted if uncertainties or problems arise.

6.2. Sources that may be used to select and formulate descriptors

Empirically scaled descriptors and descriptors that are *related* to the empirically scaled descriptors are available:

- a) in the *Illustrative scales of descriptors* in the Common European Framework,
- b) in the *Bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios*,
- c) in the Swiss *ELP for young people and adults*,
- d) in the DIALANG scales in Appendix C of the CEF,
- e) in the ALTE '*Can Do*' statements in Appendix D of the CEF,
- f) in Appendices V and VI of the research report on the SNF project (Schneider/North 2000).

In the following paragraphs, these different sources are described, and indications are given on how to use them. More detailed information is provided on the development, content and use of the *Bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios*.

a) Illustrative scales of descriptors

The *Illustrative scales of descriptors* can be found in chapters 4 and 5 of the Common European Framework. The method used for developing each of these scales is noted there. Before adopting or adapting descriptors from the *Illustrative scales* for use in an ELP, the type of descriptor should be clarified, i.e. whether it is *constructor-oriented*, *assessor-oriented* or *user-oriented*. It can then be decided for what purpose a descriptor can be used, and, in particular, whether it is suitable for self-assessment. Descriptors will have to be transformed into *I can* statements for use in learner self-assessment. They may also have to be simplified or split up.

b) Bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios

Checklists are difficult and time-consuming to develop. In order to make validated ELP content available to developers, to speed up the development of new ELPs and to simplify the validation process the Council of Europe decided to establish a bank of descriptors of language proficiency and other aspects of language competence which developers of ELPs can use as they stand for self-assessment checklists in new ELPs. Such descriptors need to be

- related or relatable to descriptors and/or categories and levels found in chapters 3-5 of the Common European Framework (CEF), and
- suitable for self-assessment (e.g. formulated in a way that can be understood by the respective learners).

Descriptors that are concerned with competences which are not language specific and describe competences of a more general kind like intercultural skills or learning strategies are not included in this bank.

In order to establish such a bank, the descriptors in a number of existing ELPs and those developed in the Bergen 'Can-do' project (ECML, Graz) were analysed. In this process, two types of 'good' descriptors were identified and retained:

- a) descriptors that can clearly be related to CEF descriptors;
- b) descriptors which bring new aspects and can also be linked to a CEF category and level.

Considering the large number of already existing descriptors in checklists of ELPs, only a selection of ELPs could be taken into account. However, the procedures applied could be used with descriptors from additional ELPs in the future.

The copyright holders of the descriptors collected in the Bank have made the descriptors freely available to ELP authors. However, the *Bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios* (© Council of Europe, Language Policy Division) should be indicated as a source whenever it is used.

Setting up the bank

In a first step the **descriptors of language proficiency and language competence** from chapters 3-5 of the CEF were listed and coded in an Excel file (§. 3 – the Common reference levels as described in Tables 1-3: *Global scale, Self-assessment grid, Qualitative aspects of spoken language use*; §. 4 – *Communicative language activities and strategies; text processing*; §. 5 – *Communicative language competences*).

Selecting ELPs

The following ELPs were selected for analysis –

- 1.2000 Switzerland – Model for young people and adults
- 4.2000 Germany/North Rhine-Westphalia – Model for learners in lower secondary education
- 5.2000 France – Model for young learners and adults
- 7.2001 Czech Republic – Model for learners in lower secondary education (11-15 year-old learners)
- 10.2001 Ireland – Model for learners in post-primary education
- 19.2001 Sweden – Model for learners in upper secondary and adult education including vocational education
- 20.2001 Portugal – Model for learners aged 10-15 years old
- 22.2001 Czech Republic – Model for learners up to 11 years old
- 29.2002 CERCLES – Model for learners in higher education
- 35.2002 European Language Council – Model for learners in higher education
- 44.2003 France – Model for learners in lower secondary education (Collège)

In addition to these ELPs the self-assessment checklists developed in the Bergen *Can-do* project (ECML, Graz) were also included in our selection.

There are other ELPs that should be taken into consideration in future updates of the descriptor bank.

Several factors influenced the selection of ELPs:

- 1) **Availability** – the authors could only work with ELPs they had at their disposal when the analyses were done.
- 2) **Overall quality** – ELPs that contain generally interesting and well-formulated descriptors were given preference over ELPs that seem to contain many awkward descriptors.
- 3) **Originality** – ELPs using checklists from other ELPs (e.g. from the Swiss model) did not need to be analysed separately (e.g. CZ model for upper secondary students). If they contained interesting additional descriptors, only these parts of the lists were taken into account (e.g. ELPs from Sweden, ELC).
- 4) **Relevance of the target group** – ELPs with descriptors for large target groups (e.g. lower secondary pupils) were given preference over ELPs for special groups (e.g. philologists)
- 5) **Compatibility of the descriptor format** – the descriptor bank is intended to provide a selection of concise stand-alone descriptors which can be combined more or less freely in future ELPs. Most ELPs actually use such stand-alone descriptors in their checklists but there are other approaches. Two alternative approaches are briefly outlined below:
 - The Dutch ELPs take an approach that combines descriptions with examples of situations and explanations.

Example – a descriptor from the Dutch ELP 12+:

B1 - Listening

'I can' description	Example of situation	Explanation
<i>Can follow detailed directions.</i>	<i>During a winter sports holiday you have skiing lessons.</i>	<i>You understand the instructions of the teacher very well. (This is also necessary to be able to learn to ski well.) You can imagine this may also concern surfing lessons or horse riding lessons.</i>

- Other ELPs use hierarchical 'clusters' of descriptors, i.e. sets of descriptors are presented in hierarchic order: a more general descriptor that contains modifiers like 'simple', 'slowly' – as appropriate at a certain level – is followed by a series of more narrowly focused sub-descriptors. These sub-descriptors generally do not contain any modifiers that would give more precise indications of the difficulty level of the task described. In some cases, the sub-descriptors do not describe tasks but task-components, sometimes mixing descriptions of tasks with descriptions of strategies or descriptions of school-type exercises; sometimes even, the sub-descriptors are combined to describe a sequence of exercises.

Example – a 'cluster' of descriptors from the French ELP for upper secondary learners:

<p><i>Lorsque les gens parlent lentement, clairement et avec une prononciation utilisée à l'école, à la radio, à la télévision,</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>je suis capable, dans une conversation, avec l'aide des personnes qui me parlent, de comprendre des mots, phrases et expressions simples sur des choses qui me concernent de près;</i> • <i>je suis capable de comprendre les informations importantes dans de courts enregistrements sur les mêmes sujets;</i> • <i>je suis capable de comprendre ce qui est important dans une annonce ou un message bref, simple et clair et sur un sujet que je connais bien;</i> • <i>je suis capable, dans un récit, de reconnaître s'il s'agit de situations ou de faits présents, passés ou futurs;</i> • <i>je suis capable, dans une histoire courte et illustrée (images, bruitages...) de comprendre ce qui est important. (A2)</i>
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Both approaches can have advantages in the concrete learning context. The 'situations' and 'explanations' approach as well as the 'cluster' approach can easily be tailored to a specific target group. But obviously such descriptor formats are not suitable for inclusion in a descriptor bank because they could not be used side by side with stand-alone descriptors.

- 6) **Comparability and context-independence** – some ELPs for young learners (e.g. French/CIEP, Piedmont) use short, simplified descriptors that often lack modifiers which would indicate what restrictions apply (e.g. "if spoken slowly and clearly"). Such descriptors cannot be taken out of their context (i.e. children's world, primary school). In an adult context, they might be misinterpreted and seem to describe much more demanding tasks (and higher competences). Also, ELPs for children often contain descriptors based on a particular syllabus which can hardly be taken as generally applicable, reliable indicators of a level. For all these reasons, only very few descriptors from ELPs for children were retained for use in the descriptor bank (from ELP 22.2001 / Czech Rep.). A separate descriptor bank for children's ELPs might be set up instead in order to avoid the danger that simplified descriptors lacking modifiers are used in an adult context.

Selecting descriptors

The selection of descriptors from validated ELPs and the assignment of the selected descriptors to CEF descriptors and/or categories are based on expert judgement (Peter Lenz and Günther Schneider, the authors of the *Guide for Developers* of an ELP). The main task consisted in actually relating the descriptors of language proficiency and language competence to corresponding descriptors or elements of descriptors contained in the CEF scales and in identifying and approving new, innovative descriptors.

Since the large majority of the descriptors contained in the CEF have an empirical basis, such a basis may be claimed for the relatable ELP descriptors, as well. Most ELP descriptors that are retained in the descriptor bank can actually be related to existing CEF descriptors in some way or other. However, type and degree of this relationship vary –

- some ELP descriptors are virtually identical with a CEF descriptor (apart from the conversion into the ‘I can’ format);
- some descriptors have a (partly) different wording but fully reproduce the content of the source descriptor;
- some descriptors have a (partly) different wording and reproduce the content of the source descriptor in parts only, sometimes adding new elements;
- some descriptors fully integrate the content of two or more descriptors;
- some descriptors integrate elements from two or more descriptors;
- some descriptors interpret and illustrate a descriptor through (other) examples.

An actually quite small number of other descriptors included in the descriptor bank could not be related to concrete CEF descriptors but it was still felt that they were interesting and could be attributed to a category and level for good reasons.

These descriptors were marked as [new] in the descriptor bank. A series of descriptors for Telephoning were included this way.

All descriptors selected were also submitted to a more general kind of quality check which reflects the general properties of good descriptors (see §. 6.5). It was checked if a descriptor –

- has in fact to do with aspects of language competence and proficiency;
- is likely to be interpreted in a non-ambiguous way;
- is clear and simple (at least to some degree);
- does not combine too many different aspects of language proficiency/competence;
- does not combine aspects of language proficiency/competence that have little or nothing to do with each other or belong to different levels.

The descriptor bank

The descriptor bank is made available as a WORD table. The rows and columns of the table are briefly explained in the following:

The first and second columns serve 'technical' purposes; they can be used to sort the descriptors according to different purposes.

The **first column** ('Row') numbers the rows of the table; it can be used to re-establish the original order after sorting.

The **second column** ('Lev.') indicates the level a descriptor is attributed to. It can be used to sort the descriptor bank according to the levels A1-C2.

In the **third column** ('CEF Nr.')

the descriptors from the subscales of the 2001 Cambridge University Press edition of the Common European Framework are counted in the order in which they occur in the sub-scales. (Each number is preceded by an 'F' for 'Framework'.) If the same descriptor appears twice in different scales of the CEF, it also appears twice in the descriptor bank, carrying two different numbers. New descriptors from ELPs do not have an 'F' number.

The **fourth column** ('Category/Code') contains a code which provides some essential information: It should be read as in the following example:

PS1-B2-1 = Production / Spoken / sub-scale **1** – Level **B2** – **1st** descriptor (in this category at this level).

A listing of the codes used for the various language activities and competences (here 'PS') is provided on pages 2-3 of the descriptor bank. Whenever the levels A2, B1 and B2 are subdivided in the CEF, these narrower levels (e.g. A2.1, A2.2) are also indicated in the code.

In the **fifth column** the descriptors from the CEF are reproduced.

The **sixth column** contains corresponding descriptors from ELPs if there are any. The **source** of each descriptor is coded (validation number + country or organisation) in square brackets at the end of an entry.

The 'new' descriptors that could not be attributed to one specific CEF descriptor (i.e. descriptors combining two or more CEF descriptors, or completely new descriptors) can be found in the descriptor bank *above* the listing of the directly CEF-relatable descriptors within the category (sub-scale) to which they belong.

Overview of the columns of the Bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios

Numbering of the table rows	Level	Numbering of CEF descriptors	Category (here Production / Spoken / sub-scale 1)	Level (here A1)	CEF descriptor	Descriptor(s) for self-assessment from ELPs
7	A1		PS1-A1			I can introduce myself, and say what I do very briefly and simply using set phrases. [19.2001-SWE]
8	C2	F-001	PS1-C2-1		Can produce clear, smoothly flowing well-structured speech with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. [CEF 2001]	I can produce clear, smoothly-flowing well-structured speech with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points [29.2002-CERCLES]
9	C1	F-002	PS1-C1-1		Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on complex subjects, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion. [CEF 2001]	
10	B2.2	F-003	PS1-B2.2-1		Can give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail. [CEF 2001]	I can give a clear, systematically developed presentation on a topic in my field, with highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail [29.2002-CERCLES] Perante uma vasta gama de assuntos, sou capaz de: apresentar um assunto, de forma clara e bem estruturada, com destaque para os seus pontos principais. [20.2001-POR] Je peux développer une présentation ou une description en insistant sur les points et les détails importants. [split] Je peux faire un exposé de manière claire en soulignant les points importants et les éléments significatifs. [(NEW)-FR/Coll.]

This extract from the bank illustrates different features:

Example 1, first row: in the first row there is no CEF descriptor number and no CEF descriptor. The descriptor from the Swedish portfolio in this row is not related to a specific CEF descriptor but fits the category *Spoken Production*. This Swedish ELP descriptor was in fact derived from a CEF descriptor for *Interaction* and reformulated for *Spoken Production* at level A1. All selected ELP descriptors that are only related to a category and not directly linked to a CEF descriptor (i.e. whenever there is no CEF descriptor number in column 3 and no CEF descriptor in column 5) are new in the sense that they are either derived from CEF descriptors for other categories, combined descriptors based on two or more CEF descriptors or, in some cases, CEF-near formulations for new categories (e.g. Telephoning).

Example 2, second row: in this example the ELP descriptor corresponds to the selection criteria and is related to the CEF descriptor listed in the same row. Note: the descriptor from the CERCLES portfolio is quoted in the English version but as the CERCLES ELP also exists in French, developers of French checklists may prefer to use the translation done by CERCLES as a source.

Example 3, third row: a CEF descriptor is available but no related descriptor from an ELP. F-002 is one of the many CEF descriptors that were not used in the ELP checklists which were analysed; possibly, a corresponding self-assessment descriptor exists but could not be included in the bank due to a quality problem.

Example 4, fourth row: here, several variants of self-assessment statements from different ELPs in different languages can be found, all related to the same CEF descriptor.

How to use the descriptor bank

The bank of descriptors is available to all interested parties from the Council of Europe secretariat. The use of descriptors from the bank is recommended but not compulsory. If checklists are established on the basis of the descriptor bank, the main challenge will be to establish a selection of descriptors which covers well the different areas and levels of communicative language proficiency and, at the same time, takes into account the specific needs of the target users. If descriptors from different ELPs are combined, stylistic adaptations may be necessary. The local development of descriptors (general, context-specific, syllabus-specific descriptors) is still recommended because this may serve important pedagogic purposes (goal-setting, self-assessment practice). However, it should be made clear and visible in every ELP (e.g. using graphical means) which of the descriptors establish reliable links towards the Common Reference Levels and which other descriptors were added because they are thought relevant in view of the learning context.

Language versions: Most descriptors in the bank are in English. The English language versions of ELPs were normally chosen if they existed in order to ensure wide accessibility. But French, German and Portuguese descriptors were included, as well. In some cases the language versions used were prepared by non-native speakers so that the descriptors should be checked carefully before they are taken over. The additional languages in which the descriptors of the various ELPs are available are indicated on page 1 of the descriptor bank.

Further development of the bank of descriptors

The bank of descriptors as it stands is incomplete in the sense that descriptors from more existing ELPs should be integrated following the same procedures. Also, new developments should be reflected; in particular, descriptors emerging from future projects that meet scientific standards should be added.

Also, parallel banks should be set up for specific groups of learners from vocational or professional fields, and for younger children.

c) Swiss ELP for young people and adults

The descriptors in the Swiss *ELP for young people and adults* were selected and adapted for self-assessment from a bank of validated descriptors that resulted from a Swiss National Science Foundation

(SNF) research project, and were included in the CEF as *Illustrative scales*. The checklists for Reading and Writing also contain descriptors that were assigned to levels through a series of teacher workshops but without using expensive statistical methods. The Swiss checklists are available in English, French, German, Italian and Romansh. They have been translated into other languages for use in other ELPs (e.g. Russian, Czech).

The Swiss checklists exist in two versions: 1) the version printed in the pilot ELP (1999), which was reproduced or adapted in other ELPs; 2) the revised version contained in the accredited *ELP for young people and adults* (2001). The checklists were changed on the basis of the feedback obtained during the piloting. The following modifications were made:

- the wording of some descriptors was changed in order to make them clearer, simpler, more user-friendly. Some new descriptors were added on the basis of the *Illustrative scales* in the *Common European Framework*;
- the number of descriptors for the different levels and skills was balanced, sometimes through merging or splitting of existing descriptors;
- the German, French and Italian translations were improved;

The descriptors of the Swiss ELP for young people and adults (2001) are included – in their English version – in the *Bank of descriptors for self-assessment in European Language Portfolios*.

d) DIALANG scales in Appendix C of the CEF

The descriptions from DIALANG, contained in Appendix C, are on the whole slightly rephrased, sometimes simplified descriptors from the *Illustrative scales* that were transformed into 'I can' statements for self-assessment. These descriptors have been translated into 14 European languages. The calibration carried out by DIALANG confirmed the results obtained when the *Illustrative scales* were developed.

e) ALTE 'Can Do' statements in Appendix D of the CEF

In Appendix D of the CEF, the ALTE '*Can Do*' statements are described, which serve "to demonstrate equivalences between the examination systems of ALTE members, in meaningful terms relating to the real-world language skills likely to be available to people achieving a pass in these examinations" (CEF, Appendix D). The ALTE scales of 'Can Do' statements have the advantage that they exist in three versions, one for each basic domain of language use stated in the CEF: 1) the personal and public domain; 2) the occupational domain and 3) the educational domain (school, vocational training, study, further education). When the scales were developed these three domains were linked through common "anchor items". The '*Can Do*' statements are also related to the *Common reference levels* of the Council of Europe. When the 'Can do's' were scaled, items from the *Self-assessment grid* were used as anchors together with a number of other descriptors from the CEF which had proven to be particularly consistent and stable in the SNF project. This was the case especially for *fluency* descriptors. The '*Can Do*' statements are available in the twelve languages of the present ALTE members: Catalan, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Irish, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish (for more information see: www.alte.org).

Appendices V and VI of the research report on the SNF project

The Appendices V and VI of the research report on the SNF project (Schneider/North 2000) contain all descriptors that were scaled successfully in that project and then taken over into the CEF. Additional information can be found that may be helpful in the selection and adaptation of descriptors: 1) indications on the quality level of each of the descriptors (i.e. which descriptors were interpreted equally, independent of school sector, language, etc.); 2) information on what sources, what other scales each descriptor is based on; 3) the mathematical difficulty value for each descriptor; 4) further statistical figures concerning the use of the descriptors in two different years. The descriptors are contained in Appendix VI in English, French and German. (See also North 2000.)

6.3. Adapting descriptors

While it may be advisable in the case of some ELP versions to use existing descriptors or checklists in part or as a whole, in other cases adaptations seem desirable.

Reasons for adaptations may relate to the intention to:

- adapt the descriptors better to a specific context (e.g. compatibility with curricula);
- tailor the descriptors to specific domains of use (work, study);
- make the descriptors more easily comprehensible for certain groups of users (e.g. young learners);
- differentiate between finer (narrower) levels;
- rephrase the descriptors for different purposes (e.g. self-assessment, definition of objectives).

For adaptations of existing scaled descriptors the following methods have been used successfully:

- combining two or more descriptors;
- dividing descriptors in which more than one task or aspect is contained into two or more individual descriptors;
- specifying descriptors by indicating a context of use (e.g. "at my workplace ...");
- supplementing a formulation by giving examples ("I can ... e.g. in a restaurant" / "I can ... e.g. through looking up words in a dictionary", etc.);
- linguistic simplification (adaptation to language which is comprehensible for children or persons who have had little schooling);
- combining scaled descriptors with formulations e.g. from curricula or other scales;
- attributing descriptors to narrower levels: for the levels in the region of A2, B1 and B2, the information contained in the *Illustrative scales* can be used. The cut-off points between A.2.1 to A.2.2, between B1.1 to B1.2, and between B2.1 to B2.2 are marked in the *Illustrative scales* with a horizontal line. In addition, North 2000 and Schneider/North 2000 may be used for information on the mathematical difficulty values of the items;
- adding a scale with gradations like "very well"/"well" (as in the German ELP) etc., or "I can do this under normal circumstances" / "I can do this easily" (as in the Swiss version). (Sometimes elements may have to be removed from descriptors that make gradation impossible.);
- rearranging the descriptors and checklists.

Whenever larger-scale adaptations are being made, the difficulty values of the descriptors used should be verified. This should be done using empirical methods.

The ELP Validation Committee requires that the relationship between newly developed descriptors and the *Reference levels* be made transparent. The CIEP in Sèvres, France, did exactly that in its User's Guide to *Mon premier portfolio des langues*. An example is given and commented on below, showing those changes which had to be made to descriptors developed primarily for adults in order to make them accessible for children.

I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.

I can use simple expressions and phrases to describe the place where I live and people I know.

Figure 23: Original descriptors for Spoken interaction on level A1 (first paragraph is taken from the *Self-assessment grid*, second paragraph was taken from a Swiss checklist)

When I speak, I can ...:

- *answer* questions, say who I am, say that I do not understand, ask someone to repeat something.
- *ask questions*, *ask* how to say something, *talk* about the place where I live, people I know.
- *ask* for something or ask to do something, say "thank you".

Figure 24: Final versions of the same descriptors adapted for children (French ELP for children aged 8-11, edited by the CIEP in Sèvres, France)

The central strategy used in simplifying the source descriptors was to reduce the content to concrete communication tasks. Modifying elements were removed. This way of proceeding entails a certain risk that the degree of difficulty is changed.

Example:

I can ... talk about ... people I know

is not necessarily equivalent to

I can use simple expressions and phrases to describe ... people I know

although it is very likely that to young learners this interpretation is self-evident in the context of a foreign language.

This example has the merit that the CIEP made their adaptations on the basis of experience gathered by pilot teachers in the classroom and then made the process of adaptation transparent to those who need to know.

6.4. Developing and calibrating new descriptors

Descriptors of language proficiency can be developed using intuitive methods, qualitative methods or quantitative methods. In the case of an instrument to promote mobility and designed to be used across educational sectors and in various contexts, including trans-nationally, it is important to avoid problems of author subjectivity and the limitation of validity to one context. If descriptors are intended to provide more transparency, they need to take into account aspects of language proficiency which are relevant and typical of the levels described; moreover, they need to be interpreted in the same manner by as many people as possible.

Therefore the descriptors which form the basis of the *Common reference levels* and the core of the original ELP checklists were developed following a rigorous methodology. As described in the CEF a combination of intuitive, qualitative and quantitative approaches was used (CEF 3.4, Appendices A and B).

The development of the descriptors:

- built on international experience concerning the development of such descriptors and standards: collection of proficiency descriptors from existing scales; breaking up complex descriptors; creation of new descriptors as necessary for some categories (e.g. communication strategies); organizing the descriptors in/by categories for interaction (oral/written), production (oral/written), reception (listening comprehension and reading comprehension);
- incorporated the experience and opinions of representative groups of teachers in an extensive series of workshops to pre-test thousands of descriptors. The purpose was to find out which descriptors are easily understood and interpreted similarly; which descriptors are suitable for learner self-assessment, and which types of descriptors are preferred or rejected;
- used a very reliable measurement model to scale the best descriptors mathematically. This scaling is an analysis of the way in which the descriptors were interpreted by almost 300 Swiss teachers from different language regions and educational sectors in an end of school year assessment of 10 representative learners in their classes. The process is described in more detail in North 2000 and Schneider/North 2000.

In the bank of descriptors produced, not all categories and levels were covered completely. In order to fill these gaps for the *Illustrative scales* and the Swiss ELP, more descriptors were developed, but this time with the help of less time-consuming and less expensive methods. Future ELP developers may adapt these alternative approaches for their own purposes.

Example 1

As indicated in Appendix B of the CEF, illustrative scales were added for sociolinguistic competence and for note-taking on the basis of a follow-up project for the University of Basel. The new descriptors were scaled to the CEF levels using the methodology described above. The correlation of the scale values of the CEF descriptors between their original scale values and their values in this study was 0.899 (of a maximum of 1).

Example 2

For the checklists in the first draft of the Swiss ELP version not enough descriptors were available for Writing. Some teachers had also expressed a desire for more descriptors for Reading (especially literature and longer texts in general). In order to develop more descriptors for Writing as well as Reading literary texts and Extended reading, the following procedure was chosen:

- on the basis of existing, as yet non-validated items from the initial pool, a group of experienced teachers formulated items they felt were relevant;
- against the background of their experience, the experts who had conducted the Swiss project selected the most promising items for piloting, other items were rephrased, systematic gaps were filled with new items;
- groups of teachers were given different sets of descriptors including already scaled descriptors. Every item was given to at least two groups; the teachers then sorted the descriptors into levels; they also noted down comments explaining problems that occurred;
- the assignments to levels and the comments made were evaluated. Some descriptors were rephrased on the basis of the comments, others were eliminated;
- in a final round, the experts decided on the suitability of the descriptors and incorporated them in the checklists.

The calibrated descriptors published in the *Framework* itself provide a 'hard core' around which developers of ELPs can add descriptors of their own. It will in fact be necessary to continue the development process also in the context of new ELP versions because:

- for some levels there are gaps in the *Illustrative scales* and in the existing checklists that may need to be filled for the ELP to be used in certain contexts;
- no subscales exist for some categories, e.g. telephoning, socio-cultural competence;
- certain tasks or aspects/components of tasks that are relevant in some curricula or in the view of some teachers should be added;
- more descriptors for narrower levels have been requested so that the learners can assess their progress more often;
- mediation (interpreting, translating), which has not been covered so far in the *Illustrative scales* of the CEF and in the existing ELP models should be taken into consideration, depending on its importance for some groups of learners and practical contexts.

Since intuitive methods are not sufficient when checklists or similar instruments are developed for wider use, a minimum empirical confirmation of the quality of descriptors and their attribution to levels is required. The following is recommended:

- whenever possible a procedure such as that described in Example 1 above should be applied;

- the procedure described in Example 2, which uses limited resources and fulfils *minimum* requirements concerning empirical validation;
- the methods used to develop descriptors should be explained to their users in a transparent way. This information should be made available in the ELP or in the documentation that may accompany an ELP;
- in any event, the methods used should be declared in the application for validation of an ELP. The twelve methods described in the CEF (Appendix B) may serve as a point of reference.

6.5. Requirements for good descriptors

Descriptions of language proficiency which are formulated according to the spirit of the CEF and which fit into an ELP should fulfil the following requirements:

- **Positiveness** - descriptors should be formulated using positive descriptions of what learners are able to do; negatively worded descriptions tend to be de-motivating.
It is more difficult to formulate proficiency at low levels in terms of what the learner can do rather than in terms of what they can't do. But if levels of proficiency are to serve as objectives rather than just as an instrument for screening candidates, then positive formulation is desirable." (CEF: Appendix A).
- **Definiteness** - descriptors should describe concrete tasks and/or concrete degrees of skill in performing tasks:
 - descriptor should contain as little vagueness as possible;
 - distinctions between steps on a scale should not be dependent on replacing a qualifier like "some" or "a few" with "many" or "most". "This may result in gaps where meaningful, concrete distinctions cannot be made." (CEF: Appendix A).
- **Clarity** - descriptors should be transparent - not "jargon-ridden". They should be written in simple syntax; they should be comprehensible without special introductions and usable without previous training.
- **Brevity** - descriptors should be short, i.e. they should not span more than two or three lines.
- **Independence** - the interpretation of descriptors must not be dependent on other descriptors at the same level, or on descriptions of neighbouring levels; they should allow for clear *yes/no* decisions ("Yes, I can do this").

When descriptors are adapted for younger learners, there is a danger that they may be simplified or shortened too much so that they no longer belong to the same level or depend very much on the concrete interpretation that is made by the user. Simplifications of the following type should be avoided.

	Original descriptors in the <i>Self-assessment grid</i> (Listening)	Problematic simplification
Level B2	I can understand <u>most</u> TV news and <u>current affairs</u> programmes. I can understand the <u>majority</u> of films <u>in standard dialect</u>	I can understand films and documentaries
Level C1	I can understand television programmes and films <u>without too much effort</u>	I can understand - TV programmes - films

It becomes quite obvious from this example that stripping descriptors all modifying information that provides indications concerning the degree of task difficulty is a simplification that does not allow for relating concrete learner performances to the reference levels, nor does it help learners to see progress.

6.6. Introduction of narrower levels

There is a need for narrower (or finer) levels in various contexts. In the case of the use of the ELP in class, it seems necessary to provide descriptions of narrower levels. Developers will have to decide whether it is important in their context to have intermediate levels (according to the "branching principle" presented in the CEF) for the complete range of the *Common reference levels* or only for selected levels.

Narrower levels were introduced e.g. in the French ELP edited by the CRDP de Basse-Normandie. The levels A2 and B1 most relevant to learners on the upper secondary level were each divided into three sub-levels for use in the checklists: A2.1, A2.2, A2.3; B1.1, B1.2, B1.3.

Reasons for narrower levels (cf. North 1999):

- they may be relevant to certain groups, institutions or contexts of learning;
- they make it easier to provide appropriate objectives for the end of the different school sectors;
- they can serve as course planning aids for particular school years (or months for intensive courses) as they will be closer to normal progress over that time scale. 'Milestones' within those narrower levels can serve as objectives for semesters or terms (or weeks on intensive courses);
- with narrower levels, learners can use an ELP more often and see progress. Visible progress gives a feeling of success and provides motivation for further learning.

Reasons for a limitation to six broader reference levels:

- it can be quite difficult to relate one set of narrow levels to another set of narrow levels. For example, one local system might divide A2 into two, another into three. The co-existence of ELP versions with a different number of levels may lead to confusion;
- if the checklists are limited to the six reference levels, the relation to the six reference levels (and to compatible examination systems like ALTE) is obvious;
- more levels may obscure the link to the *Common European Framework*;
- the *Self assessment grid* which is the common element in most versions of the ELP would become too complex;
- without the development of a great number of additional relevant descriptors, too many gaps would appear on checklists; descriptors would be lacking for certain categories at certain levels;
- relatively frequent use of the checklists is possible even with six broader levels because the checklists contain 1) a great number of individual objectives or descriptions of competence which may be attained successively; 2) the degree of difficulty is not identical for all tasks described and 3) it is possible to introduce gradation into a level by adding a scale that uses modifiers like "*under normal circumstances*" or "*easily and well*";
- if more checklists are included, the document becomes bulkier.

If narrower levels, or scales using a different number of items and/or a different subdivision of levels are introduced into an ELP, the relationship to the *Common reference levels* should be stated clearly.

6.7. Relating descriptors and alternative scales to the *Common reference levels*

Appendix D of the *Framework*, where the relationship between the ALTE system and the Council of Europe system of levels is discussed, demonstrates how institutions can relate their own scale to the *Common reference levels*. Essentially, descriptors from the *Common reference levels* (e.g. from the *Self-assessment grid*) are chosen as anchor items and then used to relate the two systems of levels to each other.

This procedure is recommended whenever empirical research is possible.

It will not always be possible to apply such rigorous methods. In these cases, careful analysis should be combined with procedures such as those suggested in the Swiss *ELP for young people and adults* (form 1.2) for relating existing examinations to the *Common reference levels*. In any event, the relationship between the levels used by an institution and the *Common reference levels* must be clear to the users of an ELP (and mentioned in the ELP, if possible).

The qualifications mentioned have been calibrated to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages on the following basis:		
Collective judgement by the teaching staff of the institution concerned.	*	
Checking the relationship by comparing examples of learner work with the official performance samples for the Framework Levels.	**	
Comparative studies relating the achievement of learners to their results in examinations already calibrated to the Framework.	***	
Scientific study with statistical analysis of comparative data.	****	

Figure 25: Information about methods used for relating examinations to the *Common reference levels* of the Council of Europe

6.8. Descriptions not related to levels of communicative language proficiency

The instruments using scaled descriptors of language proficiency are important elements of the ELP. However, these kinds of descriptions are not the only way to make language proficiency and language experiences transparent, and they are not the best means for every purpose. For this reason, other possibilities are suggested in the ELP, such as the description of experiences in a language learning biography or the documentation of language proficiency through samples of work done in other languages (*Dossier*).

There are aspects of communicative competence which are not, or not necessarily, related to one specific level of language proficiency. These include learning strategies as well as socio-cultural and intercultural competence.

Descriptions or even checklists relating to such competences should not be omitted from an ELP simply because they cannot be scaled and attributed to levels in the same manner as descriptors of communicative language proficiency. Since they are important for pedagogic reasons, it is desirable that such descriptions and checklists be included in the ELP. The North Rhine-Westphalian ELP project has been greatly concerned with these aspects from the beginning and this ELP can be used as a source of guidance (for details see chapter 5.2, *Language Biography*).

Where such descriptions are included, it should be made clear, especially in ELPs for adults, that these descriptions are not related to the *Common reference levels*.

7. Bibliography

[Note: this list only contains a small selection of titles; a more comprehensive bibliography is contained in the *Guide for Developers*.]

7.1. European Language Portfolio models

An updated list of available European Language Portfolios and accompanying materials can be found on the Council of Europe Website www.coe.int/portfolio

7.2. Council of Europe documents concerning the Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio

Conseil de l'Europe (2001): *Un Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues: apprendre, enseigner, évaluer*. Paris: Didier. Online: <http://culture.coe.int/portfolio> [>Documentation > Un Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues]

Council of Europe (2001): *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: CUP. Online: <http://culture.coe.int/portfolio> [>Documentation > Common European Framework of Reference for Languages]

Council of Europe (2002): *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Case studies (Ed.: Ch. Alderson). Strasbourg: Council of Europe (= Language Policies).

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Schneider, Günther. / Lenz, Peter. (2001): *European Language Portfolio. Guide for Developers*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Online: www.coe.int/portfolio >Documentation

7.3. Other publications on descriptors and portfolios

Babylonia. Special number in collaboration with the Council of Europe: European Language Portfolio - Portfolio européen des langues - Europäisches Sprachenportfolio - Portfolio europeo delle lingue - Portfolio europeic da las linguas. 1999/1.

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Little, D. (2003): The Common European Framework: principles, issues, challenges. In: *Neusprachliche Mitteilungen aus Wissenschaft und Praxis*, 56(3), pp. 130-140.

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Schneider, Günther (1999a): *Wozu ein Sprachenportfolio? Funktionen und Merkmale des Europäischen Sprachenportfolios (Schweizer Version)*. Online: <http://www.languageportfolio.ch> [> Background information].

Schneider, Günther / North, Brian (1999): „In anderen Sprachen kann ich ...“ - Skalen zur Beschreibung, Beurteilung und Selbsteinschätzung der fremdsprachlichen Kommunikationsfähigkeit. *Umsetzungsbericht*. Bern, Aarau: Nationales Forschungsprogramm 33 (NFP33), Schweizerische Koordinationsstelle für Bildungsforschung (SKBF).

Schneider, Günther / North, Brian (2000): „Dans d'autres langues je suis capable de ...“ *Echelles pour la description, l'évaluation et l'auto-évaluation des compétences en langues étrangères. Rapport de valorisation*.

Berne / Aarau: Programme national de recherche 33 (PNR33), Centre suisse de coordination pour la recherche en éducation (CSRE).

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Thürmann, Eike (2001): *Das Portfolio-ABCDarium*.

Online: <http://www.learn-line.nrw.de/angebote/portfolio/index.html>

Tracer. Revue d'innovation et de recherches en enseignement des langues vivantes. Dossier Portfolio 15, 1999.

7.4. Useful Web links

The Council of Europe Language Policy Division maintains a Website with information on the European Language Portfolio, including a list of links to local ELP Websites:

<http://www.coe.int/portfolio>

Fribourg, February 2004