POLICY FORUM

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) and the development of language policies: challenges and responsibilities

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*In honour of John L. M. Trim,
Former Director of Council of Europe Modern Languages Projects*

Contextualising uses of the
Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

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Numerous people were involved in designing and preparing the Framework of Reference. We must not underestimate the contribution made by our colleagues in Switzerland, who did so much to get the project off the ground before, during and after the symposium, held in Rüschlikon in 1991. The first mention must, however, go to the decisive part played by John Trim, Director of the "Modern Language" projects, in making the fundamental, and undeniably political, choices which transformed a project which was, in a sense, technical to start with, into something vastly more ambitious and far-reaching. In fact, at the beginning, the proposed reference instrument's sole focus was to be the comparability of language certificates, the aim being to help various categories of user by bringing a minimum level of transparency and consistency into a complex and sometimes opaque panorama.

- The first change made at John Trim's instigation involved extending the Framework's reach to cover, not just assessment, but also teaching and learning - and cover them in a very open spirit, with no methodological dogmatism.

- The second extension reflected a desire, at a time when the Berlin Wall had recently come down, and new European countries were preparing to join the Council, to make the Framework of Reference an instrument for dialogue and co-operation with those countries, whose different educational and teaching traditions it would also have to allow for.

These were major challenges, on various levels, for a language education policy which was not concerned solely with either languages or education, and which involved acceptance of serious responsibilities.

I am mentioning these three and, as it were, interlocking aims now, as the end of this meeting in Professor Trim's honour approaches, not just because I am anxious to render unto John the things that are John's, and highlight the political considerations which sparked the project, but also because I believe that these three rather disparate aims (comparing certificates, gaining an overall picture of teaching and learning facilities and resources, contributing to dialogue between different teaching cultures) have a bearing on projected in-context uses of this reference instrument, and on the rather varied uses already made of it in practice.

So? Contextual uses of the Framework of Reference? In many ways, this may seem a paradox, when one remembers that, in some of its potential applications, the Framework functions as a clearly defined standard, a stable yardstick, a central and single system for scaling language competences.

A glaring paradox indeed! As a reference instrument, the Framework was intended – not just in its repeated use of such phrases as "Users of the Framework may wish to consider and where appropriate state …" "Les utilisateurs du Cadre de référence envisageront et expliciteront selon le cas …" (and John Trim was the one who insisted on constantly leaving the ball in the user's

court), but in its essence and structure - to be flexible and context-amenable. It is modulable, malleable and multi-referential. It contains numerous adjustable parameters, and it is in context that each of them is assigned a value, that a profile is constructed, and that standards and indicative thresholds may be determined.

What the Framework primarily gives its users is a common language and a common instrument, which they can use to compare different options - national, regional or other. Different these options may be, but comparing them is possible, and one reason for doing so is to give individuals (workers, students, migrants, and also pupils at school) optimum support as they move from one context to another.

However, and this is one of the chief reasons for the present forum, this was not exactly what happened. In many cases, indeed, the reverse: the Framework was seen as a European standard, a kind of prescription or injunction, with contexts being forced, willy-nilly, to fit it - because it came from a European institution, and because other countries, regions, educational establishments, textbook publishers or authors, curriculum planners and test developers took its B2 or C1 as their target and benchmark.

This created (still creates?) a danger of the Framework's becoming a closed instrument - a top-down procedure. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that people should turn to the body which supposedly laid down this single standard, the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division, and ask it to confirm that they are applying it correctly – to give them a certificate of approval and conformity, like that attaching to European technical standards, which are universally binding and leave no room for subsidiarity.

We all know that there are a few problems in practice, particularly with national examinations. But we all must recognise - and hopefully have recognised - that issuing certificates of conformity of this kind is no part of the Council of Europe's job.

One of the things we must now try to do is ascertain the reasons for these aberrations. Several explanations are possible – economic or organisational factors, or practical defects in the Framework itself. I think it likelier that the product (the Framework) has failed to match customer requirements – or that those requirements have themselves shifted ground and changed.

Let us look first at the problems involved in defining levels of proficiency. On the assumption that, as I have said, users originally wanted an instrument they could use to compare and rank existing diplomas and certificates, two things are now happening: firstly, the Framework is doing more than it was asked to do, since its uses extend beyond comparing things as they are; secondly, requirements are expanding very rapidly to include a measuring instrument which can define proficiency levels exactly, calibrating them as precisely as the graduations on a medical thermometer or the bar-setting marks in a pole-vaulting contest. What users want is not a differentiated profile of unevenly developed skills, but a single line running through speaking and writing, reception and production, and interaction - something which embodies objective convergence between the people who devise international tests and certification procedures, the people who determine the aims of education systems, and the people who write textbooks. The result of all this is that A2 or B2 rapidly become global, summary labels, signifying that an A2 or

B2 learner has attained that level, across the board, in all the skills to which descriptors are attached.

However, the Framework's scales and descriptors are designed to serve a diametrically opposite purpose: as Brian North has again reminded us here, the most general descriptors certainly describe progression in levels of general competence, but they cannot determine points on any one scale precisely. It is the most specific descriptors which make fine distinctions and employ several scales, assigning values to a number of parameters and fully exploiting the multi-referentiality which is the Framework's distinctive feature. This indeed is the price of genuine contextualisation, which is "made to measure" and certainly costs more, but provides a better fit than any "off-the-peg" item.

All of this has two problematic effects, which the present forum has considered:

- Firstly, use of the Framework can become approximate and haphazard ("How do I know that your B2 is my B2?"). For example, when people say "In our school system, pupils reach B2 for the first foreign language, and A2 for the second", it is rather hard to know exactly what this means in a given context or contexts. And going into more detail and saying, for example, "B2 for speaking and B1 for writing" does not really give a better picture - though it does mark a move towards a certain profiling of aims.

- Secondly, experts on testing techniques, and the people who devise tests and determine success thresholds, can easily argue, in these circumstances, that the Framework, as yardstick, is too approximate.

Approaching the question from another angle, and coming back to the Framework's intended purpose, it must be emphasised that it can be used in many ways, and embodies a number of strong options.

Firstly, it is, in several respects, multi-functional:

- It does not propose strict levels, but zones or bands, for which parameters must be set locally, if precise standards and thresholds are wanted.
- The descriptors attached to its many scales give considerable scope for variation, depending on how they are combined and on which parameters are used, in determining or assessing differentiated profiles, *inter alia* for various skills, and in using specific selected criteria (socio-linguistic, grammatical, etc.) for each of those skills.
- It offers a broad range of options concerning methods, types of task, and practical approaches to learning.
- Its proposals on curricula (curriculum scenarios, modularity, personalised learning paths and aims, etc.) are very flexible.

Secondly, it embodies a number of strong options, which are themselves ranked:

- Its descriptions of language use and learning are competence based and action-oriented ("Can do …'' in a given domain).

- It affirms and promotes plurilingualism and introduces the concept of plurilingual and pluricultural competence.
- It includes plurilingualism among more general principles and values, relating to democracy, citizenship and intercultural understanding (social cohesion is less explicitly present, as an educational aim, in the Framework than in later instruments, such as the Guide, and indeed the European Language Portfolio).

There is certainly no incompatibility between these various dimensions, but there may be some interplay, and even friction, between the openness which is central to the Framework, and the strong options which it also proposes. It can also be read and used in different ways, depending on the "level" of strong options the user chooses to emphasise.

- Not using the various parameters and profiling possibilities offered by the Framework, and sticking to "A2"-type horizontal macro-definitions (for all skills and without indicating the parameters employed) is tantamount to imposing what seems a single, common standard, without defining it clearly – thus leaving it open to various interpretations.

- Following only the first (competence based and action-oriented) option means interpreting the Framework in a way which may be seen, in many contexts, as technocratic and restricting the aims of education. Unless due care is taken, this may boomerang.

These, however, are precisely the directions in which uses of the Framework have generally been moving, since it was first applied in specific contexts.

In various settings and on various levels of discourse - this may have struck you in some of the things said here – people who talk about the Framework are actually referring only to its scales of proficiency and their descriptors. This is a kind of reverse metonymy: instead of a part's denoting the whole (like the old use of "a sail" to mean "a ship"), the whole designates a part: "the ship" means "the sail", and "the framework" means "the levels of proficiency".

It is worth spending a few moments on this example of everyday metonymy. If people say "sail" when they mean "ship", the reason may be that the sail is the thing they see first from a distance, and the thing which propels the whole by responding to the wind. In the Framework's case, the six levels are clearly the most eye-catching feature, and the part most responsive to the trends of the moment. At the same time (sticking with this simple metaphor), the sail, though it may provide propulsion, is nothing without the hull and its contents: the people it carries, who regulate the course.

The sail and the wind. We know which wind is blowing on the language scene in Europe today: the wind of assessment – a good wind and a healthy one.

- It is actually quite natural that those who use, and benefit from, languages on a European labour market, in a European knowledge society - employers and workers, students and universities – should expect language learning systems, not only to develop certain practical skills, but also to provide reliable, recognised means of measuring those skills, and so making them useable in the various parts of Europe to which individuals' careers and lives

may take them. We know about the recently introduced Europass, which details the holder's qualifications and professional experience – and also his/her levels of language proficiency.

- There is nothing inherently surprising in the fact that, in many European countries, decisions to admit or reject migrants, to award or refuse nationality, are taken on the basis of (among other things, and with great variations in the level of proficiency required) tests of the applicant's ability to function in the language of the country where he/she wishes to work and/or settle down.

- It is reasonable that society should expect education systems to be accountable, and that the national or regional authorities in charge of those systems should today be anxious to set measurable targets and guarantee the acquisition of key competences, including language skills.

- And it is certainly a good thing that the European Union authorities, as part of a deliberate and incentive policy to compare school systems' performance by measuring them against agreed benchmarks, should now have an indicator of this kind for modern languages.

In **all** these contexts, where the stakes are particularly high, we find that the Council of Europe's Framework is tending to become *the* reference point. This is an area where the responsibilities - political (nationality), economic (employment), social, and also cultural, humanitarian and, obviously, educational - are considerable. It also involves language-policy issues, relations between languages being one of them.

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the long and well established language training market should now be joined by a language assessment market, on which major assessment and validation agencies – and also small start-up businesses and freelance consultants - are trying to gain, or are gaining, a foothold.

The importance of the issues is precisely one of the reasons why there are (at least) three clearly perceptible types of tendency and tension.

- 1.: A tendency to simplify, for reasons connected with the cost of processing data relating to vast numbers of people. Operators accordingly work with all, or only some, of the Framework's six levels, but avoid going into too much detail, since covering differentiated profiles, nuances and variants would be too complex and costly (in terms of manpower, time and money). Clearly, however, this tendency to simplify carries some risk of homogenisation. For one thing, it falls far short of exploiting the Framework's scales fully; for another, it limits possibilities for differentiated contextualisation.

- 2.: A questioning of the Framework's scientific rigour, on the ground that it has not been sufficiently validated in empirical and statistical terms, outside the original Swiss groups. Such criticisms are easily understood, since the Framework – given that many of its uses have obvious political and/or economic implications - must offer minimum guarantees of validity and reliability. And, unsurprisingly, this debate involves both moderates, whose

views on what can be measured are realistic, and fundamentalists, who want to quantify everything.

- 3.: A desire for a single, shared validating agency to guarantee conformity – an institution whose special scientific expertise or well-established international authority rule out any possibility of its verdicts' being contested. This gives rise, in turn, to two sub-tendencies: a tendency to use the Manual to defend and illustrate the Framework, and to lay down detailed procedures on linking examinations (present, projected or in process of change) to the Framework's levels and descriptors; and a tendency to argue that the Framework should itself be refashioned, or even replaced with a more strictly graduated measuring instrument.

Let me make one thing clear: I am neither condemning nor promoting any of these tendencies. In their own terms, they are all undoubtedly justified and legitimate. But, if this Forum is genuinely useful and timely, that is because we now need to look squarely at the various demands people make on the Framework, and the many things it has done for them, and accept that its considerable, and largely unexpected success, has now brought us to a point where the various user authorities need co-ordinated, and ideally convergent, policy guidelines.

Before coming a little closer to the central question of contextualisation, I should like to make a brief, parenthetical point, which will not – I hope – seem entirely digressive. We all know (although some of the Framework's users tend to forget this) that its various levels are not equidistant in terms of the effort and time needed to progress from one to the next: a learner has to work longer and harder to advance from B2 to C1, than from B1 to B2. But a more basic question is whether, in terms of learning and using languages, our assumption that the same types of descriptor are valid for all levels is, if not founded, at least adequate as a working hypothesis.

Even without in any way questioning the descriptors' validity and diagnostic value for specific levels of proficiency, we may still consider that their applicability to the skills implied by any given level becomes more limited as the learner's mastery of a language and its uses increases. In principle, there is no incompatibility here with the descriptors' diagnostic value. Without "covering" everything (how could they?), they can still function as adequate and serviceable indicators of the various levels.

This rather summary analysis could also be linked to the fact that the Reference Level Descriptions used to make levels in different languages more detailed are not identical for the same level. Here, it would be interesting, and revealing, to compare Profile B2 for German, Référentiel B2 for French and Vantage B2 for English. But this question of Reference Level Descriptions and their possible variations actually brings us back to one aspect of in-context uses of the Framework.

In his paper, Francis Goullier confronted one of the big issues at this forum: determining who does what, which levels of subsidiarity apply when it is a question, not of deciding whether a given use of the Framework is orthodox and complies with a specific standard (since openness to multiple uses and variations in references to descriptors and levels are basic to the Framework's design and structure), but whether that the use made of reference to the Framework is transparent

and consistent enough to make comparisons possible. The question is not "How do I know that your B2 is my B2?", but "How can I compare my B2 with your B2?"   Or, more directly, "What's your B2 like?"

One of the ambiguities attaching to various uses of the Framework's scales is due to the fact that, although people are happy to continue assuming that C2 means "near-native competence" (implying that there is something higher and better), most of them agree that the overwhelming majority of native speakers – not ideal ones, but real ones – are unlikely to possess uniform C2 skills, i.e. to operate at C2 level across the board on all the Framework's scales. The question is: have the implications of this been fully grasped, particularly with regard to non-native speakers and the other Framework levels?

Taking Francis Goullier's realistic and politically important points a little further, we might thus consider replacing the frequently asked question "What authority validates my B2 and gives me the certainty that it is the right one?", with two basic questions, "How can I compare your B2 and mine?" and "How can I validate differentiated skill profiles?" We can also assume that the answers should not come from the Council of Europe, but emerge from "horizontal" discussion within the European education area. Indeed, this point has been grasped and applied by the major language validation agencies, such as those within ALTE - it being understood that the rule they all follow within the consortium is that their reasons for referring to A2 or B2 must be clearly explained, and that simply citing them is not enough.

It is true that other institutions, and particularly national school systems, are less concerned than the major "testers" with external language policy and commercial viability, but, on the other hand, national, social and identity issues are more sensitive and more context-dependent for schools. Hence the necessarily complex and delicate nature of the harmonisation, comparison and mutual recognition which most of them now want at European level - but which must not be mere window-dressing or clash with education cultures shaped by a specific country's past.

It is in connection with education systems alone, or primarily, that I should now like to say something about contextualisation, referring both to the various types of contextualisation and the agencies and protagonists involved, and assuming that the Framework comes in only when the context in which it is to be used is being considered beforehand or along the way.

For purposes of analysis, I shall distinguish five types of contextualisation which, although different, can combine in various ways. I shall also assume that contextualisation of the Framework, whatever form it takes, is meaningful only when it is part of a plan for change and development, i.e. when it is not a mere re-labelling exercise. No contextualisation without action. Or, putting it in other, only seemingly paradoxical, terms: omitting to contextualise always means accepting an external instrument as it stands, without anything else changing.

First type: taking account of the multi-referentiality of the proficiency scales

In a given context, this involves setting, for different languages, learning objectives which are more detailed (and possibly, for some languages, more diversified) than the "horizontal" levels normally taken as a reference point.   Examples: for one language, a broad range of

communication skills will be the aim while, for another, a particular skill will be emphasised; for one language, socio-linguistic competence will be considered more important than for others, etc. Diversification, not just of the languages offered, but also of the languages actually chosen, in school systems, also depends – assuming that effective diversification always presupposes some differentiation of objectives – on contextual decisions of this kind. There is no pretending that this kind of contextualisation is always problem-free in practice, since it does not accord with the usual approaches. Attention must thus be paid to political sensitivities and education cultures. The main thing is to take the medium-term view and assume, for example, that different objectives, at different levels, can be set for the various language skills at an intermediate stage, depending on needs. Be this as it may, it must be emphasised that this first type of contextualisation involves using the resources offered by the Framework in its present form more effectively than at present and, in that sense, going into it more deeply.

Second type: exploiting methodological and pedagogical avenues and openings

Obviously, the Framework's bridge-building function between cultures does not limit teaching and learning to a communicative-type approach that has not been renewed. Taking just one small example, I might mention mediation, which is fully recognised and covers a broad range of pedagogical practices (including translation between languages) and note that the chapters concerned – again largely due to John Trim, and also Joe Sheils – list numerous teaching approaches and methods, which can be varied and mixed in different ways, depending on contexts, and on the margins for initiative and change available in each. It is also worth recalling that the Framework's approach to curriculum objectives and scenarios is based on flexible modules.

In this type of contextualisation, as in the first, all that is required is to go deeper into the Framework and choose, from among the resources and practices it suggests, those which answer local needs. To borrow a colleague's culinary metaphor, the scales and levels have obviously been the main course for consumers of the Framework so far, and the rest a mere side dish - indeed hors d'oeuvre or appetiser. People may thus have assumed too readily that the action-oriented vision of language use and learning implies exclusive use of teaching methods focused on communication in too narrow a sense of that term.

Third type: supplementing and extending the reference tools in certain directions

Requirements and options in specific contexts can obviously go beyond the things which the Framework offers users. The following are two examples:

- Bilingual education, in which knowledge is conveyed through a non-first language, certainly requires suitable descriptors of existing bilingual systems, covering – among other things - the disciplines where this method is used, and the types of discourse or the communication activities which those disciplines employ.

- The Framework says little about the various aspects of intercultural competence, which also requires, in many contexts, descriptors, or types of descriptor, different from those we have at

present. Specifically, this question has been raised in connection with the European Language Portfolio, and some of the reference level descriptions, such as B2 for French.

Other situations, which call for some extension of the Framework, might be mentioned. Eventually, extension may bring us to a point where we have to ask how far we can go without leaving the present Framework behind or needing a new "framework". This is precisely the kind of question raised by the current emphasis on languages of education, including mother tongue/national language(s)/languages of instruction. This brings us to the fourth type of contextualisation I want to consider.

Fourth type: full commitment to plurilingual education

I said just now that the Framework's strong options included, not just a description of language use and learning based on skills and practice ("Can do …'' in a given domain), but also affirmation and promotion of plurilingualism, and introduction of the concept of plurilingual and pluricultural competence. Contextualising this second opt''ion means asking ourselves how, in a given context, the Framework can serve a language teaching policy which effectively develops plurilingual competence and, as Jean-Claude Beacco and Michael Byram urge in the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*, educates learners for plurilingualism. Plurilingualism can be understood in various ways here, but is usually taken to mean that all teaching of (and through) languages requires a global approach, which covers first, classroom, foreign, regional, minority and immigration languages, and includes the development of individual plurilingualism among the aims of education.

Pursuers of this ambitious goal can find useful material in the Framework's various sections but, first, they will have to reread it through the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*, and, secondly, the contextualisation they effect will be close to the work required by a Language Education Policy Profile. In other words, the Framework itself is reframed (*recadré*) or appropriated within a larger framework (*encadré*) - no longer a multi-purpose toolbox, but an instrument completely focused on one broad objective. The third type of contextualisation involved enlarging and extending the Framework. The fourth essentially involves tying it to a set of options which certainly embody general principles, but can be implemented only in a national, regional or local context, depending on the languages at issue and the methods adopted to promote plurilingualism.

Fifth type: plurilingualism, social cohesion and participatory democracy

The Council of Europe sees promoting plurilingualism as one aspect of promoting more general values, relating to democracy, citizenship, intercultural understanding and social cohesion. As it stands, the Framework has little to say about those values, although - as we have seen – some of its uses have political effects and implications. Human rights, protection of minorities and education for citizenship are not at odds with the Framework but, although action to promote these values is the subject of international appeals and recommendations, and is part of the European institutions' brief, it is usually taken in practice on the ground and in specific contexts.

In terms of these contexts, the issues they raise and their practical details, the Framework is just one small instrument among others, but making it a definite part of this process is important. Not because this is the politically correct thing to do in a European area where domestic and international tensions are not lacking, but because the democratic building of a plural Europe demands a plural language policy too, and because unity based on a single language is not – far from it – the best path to social cohesion in a nation or political cohesion in Europe today. Obviously - and there is nothing wrong with this - the fact remains that the Framework belongs and has meaning in this context only in terms of a far broader set of analyses and strategies, mobilising the responsibilities of numerous players and authorities, in addition to those active in the education system.

The time has now come to highlight a few findings and conclusions, of which some may seem self-evident, others provocative.

- The Framework, with all the ways in which it is presented and used, must recover its true function, and not be treated as sacred (or indeed nefarious!). It is an instrument of reference, not an object of reverence. The six levels must not be confused with the ten commandments. And there is, fortunately, life outside the Framework.
- We should not be surprised that most users of the Framework have so far focused on its levels and scales, with a view to assessment: the demand was strong, the issues were important, and the instances involved were particularly powerful. Moreover, the resultant European process was spectacularly useful and consensual.
- But these widespread uses must be treated with caution: we must be wary of an over-scrupulous attention to psychometric technicity just as much as we must guard against a laxity which invokes the Framework's levels a little too readily.
- The Framework has far more to offer (all of it useful) than most of its users have so far taken from it – even admitting that it is complex, sometimes proliferous and not entirely consistent, in spite of the immense effort which John Trim put into polishing the published version.
- Above all, whenever it is used for purposes of language policy and educational planning, the Framework is just one instrument among others, and should be used with others, taking careful account of the contextual dimensions. Any context in which it is used must be analysed from other angles too, angles which the Framework on its own does not cover: needs analysis, and perceptions of certain languages, must be examined - and non-standard conclusions will inevitably be reached.
- The Framework becomes fully meaningful and useful only when it is accepted as a shared point of reference (not a standard), which can be used to compare contextual choices, including those made in using its levels and scales.
- Even though the concept of plurilingual competence obviously includes the first language (the so-called mother tongue), the Framework remains limited, in most of its conclusions and proposals, to foreign languages, and this is no longer sufficient today – at least for the fourth and fifth types of contextualisation which I have mentioned. This is another reason why the time has now come to start working on new and more ambitious projects, in terms of which we shall certainly have, in due course, to reposition and adjust the Framework.

We must guard against a Europe which would, in our specific area, sacrifice diversity to unity or, conversely, take respect for diversity as a reason for rejecting any move towards unity. With all

its limitations, the Framework is, like the other instruments the Council of Europe has developed in the past, and will elaborate in the future, a fair example of what we need: tools for analysis and catalysis which we all share, but can use in diverse ways by contextualising them carefully.

I lay no claim to breaking new ground, but I have tried to show that these contextual uses, seen as deliberate intervention in a given environment, can take various forms, apply on different levels, have different aims, and involve different types of player. All of these many contextual applications are legitimate and meaningful but, just as the Framework itself offers a range of (as it were) built-in options, so some of the contextual applications exploit it more fully, while others extend or transcend it.

There may be tensions, and even contradictions, between these various levels of use. The only way of resolving them is probably to adopt a position outside and above the Framework, and focus on the fundamental values of democratic citizenship, social cohesion, and intercultural understanding and co-operation – not as a platform for bandying facile slogans and mouthing pious platitudes, but as an inspiration and point of reference for practical action in specific contexts.