Transparency and Coherence[1]

"Transparency and coherence in language learning in Europe: Objectives, evaluation and certification" was the title of the intergovernmental Symposium that recommended the development of the CEFR (Council of Europe 1992). The need for transparency within and between the educational systems of an expanding Europe was very urgent at this time. This need became even stronger during the socio-political developments of the 1990s with greater personal as well as professional mobility, with the ERASMUS programme that grew quickly throughout the decade. With the increased international networking and migration of young people since 2000, it has become more and more important to be able to relate aims and achievements to a set of common reference points. With the increasing concern for learner agency and self-regulation for lifelong learning, namely the involvement of learners in the processes of learning and assessment, it has become increasingly important that such reference points should be defined in a transparent way. In addition, with the growing recognition that language education should produce practical results rather than passive knowledge, it follows that both aims and achievements need to be defined in relation to the continuum of real-world ability in a language – the original and true meaning of the term 'criterion' in the expression 'criterion-referenced assessment.' Finally, a common framework defined in real life 'Can Do' terms facilitates effective networking and communication between, for example, people teaching different languages in a school, and schools in different educational sectors or geographical regions.

But transparency and coherence is equally important within an institution.

One of the main aims of the CEFR is to encourage practitioners to reflect on their practice in relation to identifying learners' needs, the setting of objectives, the effectiveness of teaching and the monitoring and evaluation of learner progress. Tools, like the ECML's *CEFR QualiMatrix* (**www.ecml.at/CEFRqualitymatrix**) have been developed to facilitate/support this process in relation to the CEFR. The CEFR descriptors have become popular because they facilitate a visible, practical linking of the two main CEFR aims (facilitating networking across institutional, geographical and linguistic boundaries; reflection and reform of practice towards real world language use). The descriptors provide a rich source that facilitates transparent, coherent alignment between general curriculum aims, detailed objectives that teachers use to implement the curriculum, and assessment of learner achievement in relation to these objectives. Descriptors can also ensure coherence in terms of aims and approach between courses for different languages.

Before the CEFR, there was seldom a clear alignment between course objectives, teaching and assessment.

Before the CEFR, curriculum aims were often vaguely formulated, with course materials only indirectly linked to them. Curricula often did not give teachers or learners a clear idea of course aims related to real language use, nor a way of monitoring the achievement of those course aims. Assessment tended to be seen at a very micro level (counting mistakes) or very macro level (final tests, public examinations), with little ongoing use of more holistic forms of assessment for learning. The value of the CEFR descriptors is to give rigour and a real world orientation to the development of communicative learning objectives, and the monitoring and assessment of their achievement. At the same time, adopting

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[1] This text is an extract from Piccardo, E. and North, B. (in press), "Enriching the scope of language education: The CEFR Companion Volume", Chapter 1 in North B., Piccardo E., Goodier T., Fasoglio D., Margonis R. and Rüschoff B. (eds.), *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR companion volume, examples from practice*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

'Can Do' objectives proposes that there should be a justification for the teaching of specific grammar at different levels, rather than assuming all of the grammar of a language should be worked through in a linear fashion. This is the function of the 'Reference Level Descriptions,' which each define, for the language concerned, the lingusitic elements needed to accomplish the tasks mentioned in the CEFR descriptors at each level.

Setting transparent objectives with descriptors like those in the CEFR – or adapted from the CEFR illustrative set – is a first step in good language course planning, both at the curriculum level and at the level of the teacher with their class.

CEFR descriptors help language professionals work in a 'backwards design' by defining needs, developing appropriate learning objectives appropriate to the local context and establish coherence between course planning, classroom teaching and evaluation. A*ssessment is made fully* coherent, internally and externally, when it is interactively related to curriculum planning. Planning, classroom teaching, and assessment should all influence each other in a dynamic system, in a cycle of improvement in which results feed-back at the level of individual learners as a form of needs analysis, but also at the level of the teaching approach and of the system itself, in a process of ongoing further development. Using descriptors to link together planning, teaching and assessment in a spirit of continuous development is sometimes called 'constructive alignment.'

In addition to facilitating such alignment, descriptors are also communication tools that help in the awareness-raising, promoting of learner agency and self-regulation that are hallmarks of the action-oriented approach, and in general in treating learners as partners in the learning and teaching process.

A 'Can Do' approach can help learners to realise that language learning is a process of accumulating practical communicative competences, not just ticking off items of grammar. It can help learners to see what to focus on, and provide the transparency and simplicity necessary in order to involve learners in the processes of goal-setting, peer assessment and self-assessment. Descriptors have been documented as providing a kind of 'scaffolding', a form of talk which enables learners to express and develop their own ideas; they have as a result been widely used for teacher, peer and self-assessment.

To summarise,

CEFR descriptors, adapted to context, provide transparency and coherence. They can be helpful to: facilitate discussion between teachers; analyse and profile the needs of a group; list and explain goals and objectives; define linguistic content and help learners to understand why they are learning certain things; select and organise resources; cross-reference those resources to objectives; recommend self-study activities; design or select appropriate communicative tasks; monitor learner performance in communicative tasks; involve learners in monitoring their own and others' performance; give individual or group feedback on performance; discuss progress with individual learners; design communicative tasks for assessment; design assessment criteria and marking schemes; report on-going progress to parents and other stakeholders; document achievement at the end of a course; defining exit levels for particular programs; enhance communication within faculty; and facilitate communication with other departments, other institutions. They can appear on documents such as: curricula; syllabuses; unit/scenario plans; classroom displays; lesson plans; continuous (self-)assessment checklists; performance assessment criteria; report cards; personal profiles; and certificates.

References

CEFR QualiMatrix: www.ecml.at/CEFRqualitymatrix

Council of Europe. (1992), *Transparency and coherence in language learning in Europe: Objectives, assessment and certification. Proceedings from: the Intergovernmental Symposium 10-16 ,November 1991, Rüschlikon (Switzerland).* Council of Europe, Strasbourg. https://rm.coe.int/0900001680707cde