

Making Connections in a Changing World: A European Language Education and Assessment Perspective

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“Questions of language are basically questions of power.”
Noam Chomsky (1979)

Abstract: *The need for improved conditions for learning and better intercultural communication is recognised worldwide. A noteworthy example of responses to the need is the Council of Europe’s longstanding work undertaken in order to promote linguistic diversity and language learning in member states (Council of Europe, 2007). Extensive development work has been conducted in pursuit of this. Examples are the formulation of principles for the description of goals for language learning (van Ek & Trim, 1991), the elaboration of a comprehensive Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR (Council of Europe, 2011a), and the production of a model for a European Language Portfolio (Council of Europe, 2011b). This paper illustrates some of the work done and relate it to the general theme of the Conference “Power to Connect in a Changing World” (University of Jordan, 2014). It concludes by making the point that language study is an endeavour that leads to enhanced learner empowerment and improved intercultural.*

Keywords: language assessment, CEFR, language portfolio, ELP, Dialang, self-assessment, empowerment

1. Introduction

The theme of a conference I attended was *Power to Connect in a Changing World*.⁽¹⁾ What is it that gives you such power? Well, *one* obvious answer is: Command of language. If you have that command, you can make connections. Even if everything else changes. Like the whole world. In this paper I will elaborate on this theme from the foreign language point of view and will also provide support for my arguments by reviewing some illustrative research and development work, primarily in the area of language assessment. Since I am most familiar with what happens in Europe, I will mainly be offering a European language education and assessment perspective. Europe of course is characterised by a wide diversity of languages, cultures, and educational traditions, so the *assessment* of linguistic needs and abilities is crucially important there, as it is in so many other regions of our world. It is a significant factor in the strategic analysis and evolvment of language policy and practice. So my starting points are these:

- We live in a world that changes very rapidly, not least in respect of the growing degree of social and economic interdependence between people and nations.

- Promoting the development of more effective interpersonal and international *communication capabilities* is therefore an urgent necessity. It is a condition for the optimal development of our world and our living conditions.
- The level of attained *linguistic* ability is the most important variable when it comes to establishing effective communication.

The key question then is: How can we take on the challenge of the need for improved contacts and communication in a fast changing world? Various solutions may be contemplated, but the most obvious answer that comes to mind is this: We should, above all, promote and enhance verbal communication skills, i.e. we need to strive for better knowledge of languages. Above all, it is the functional skills and the practical command of both receptive and expressive forms of language that need to be brought into focus.

For the overriding goal of enhanced communication skills to be realised, certain courses of action need to be taken. We should, for example,

- (1) support learners' interest in *language study*, both in and out of formal education contexts
- (2) develop better *strategies* for teaching and learning
- (3) try to find better ways of *determining levels of learning*, both in individual and collective perspectives; that is, we need to put more emphasis on furthering *assessment skills* among teachers and other educators concerned with language learning – and even among the learners themselves
- (4) improve our *language tests* and other formal *methods of assessment*

What I have to say in this paper touches on all of these issues, but it is primarily to do with the role of assessments of FL abilities in empowering people to connect in a changing world. Even though I will present this from a European perspective in the first place, most of what I will be saying has rather wider relevance and applicability.

I should also say that what I can present is a very limited picture. It consists merely of some *examples* of principles and practices that have been discussed, tried out, and put to wider use. I can also offer a hypothesis about their possible significance in relation to the theme of the conference.

2. Council of Europe and European Union work

2.1 Brief general background

The question of cross-national communication and language learning needs has been on the agenda of the Council of Europe for a long time. The key role of languages came into focus in the 1960's when the first of a series of Modern languages projects was started, in association with many CoE member countries.

The key person behind these projects was Dr John Trim, the Project Director, who worked in collaboration with many colleagues in the field (J. van Ek, D. Coste, H. Holec, R. Richterich, D. Wilkins, L.G. Alexander, J. Shiels, B. North, and many others). Some of the guiding principles that the group of experts acted on were:

- Language is first of all a means for communication between people; a functional/notional approach to language learning (Wilkins, 1976; Munby, 1978) is preferable in this perspective.
- Linguistic diversity must be respected; plurilingualism is a desirable goal.
- Support of language learning in adulthood (in a lifelong perspective) is very important.
- Empowerment of the learner should be promoted, for instance through encouragement of autonomous learning and self-assessment of abilities and achievement.

It was stressed that the teaching of languages should be learner-centred, with a view to developing autonomy, and that it should emphasise practical command of the language, in real-life situations. This is a philosophy that has been endorsed in many contexts of language education to this day.

Significant progress has been made in many areas of language policy, language education, and language assessment. Examples include:

- The description of goals for language learning, resulting for instance in the design and development of a Threshold level for English (van Ek 1975; van Ek & Trim, 1991)
- The elaboration of a comprehensive Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001)
- The production of a European Language Portfolio (Little, 2009)
- The organization of a series of workshops for language teachers centred on the principles for language learning developed by the CoE

Initiatives taken have attracted much attention, both in and beyond Europe. Steering documents in the educational sector, such as curricula and syllabuses, as well as principles and standards for testing and assessment (in language programmes and language examinations), have been greatly influenced by ideas and reports coming out of the Council of Europe. This is particularly true of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which is an attempt to provide a tool for communication about language teaching and learning, and for reporting test and assessment results (see below).

2.2 Practical developments and products

So this was a thumb-nail sketch of the general background. I will now turn to commenting more concretely on some of the work that has been undertaken and illustrate what has been achieved. I will start with the CEFR.

2.2.1 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

An aim of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is to “overcome the barriers to communication”, or to help people achieve “the power to connect”, if you like. It does this by discussing language learning and teaching in general, and by defining different stages in language learning, for the benefit of practitioners of all kinds in the language field

(educators, materials producers, testing agencies, the learners themselves). It enables clear communication across different educational systems and educational sectors, much thanks to the fact that it has been translated into as many as some 40 languages, including Arabic ⁽²⁾.

The CEFR is widely adopted in Europe, especially at the policy level and in the context of assessment, as reported by, for instance, the European Union (2013). Among other things, the CEFR defines six levels of foreign language ability for “Common Reference”: from level A1 (also known as the Breakthrough level) through levels A2, B1, B2, C1, and to the highest level, denoted C2 (also known as the Mastery level). In addition it defines three ‘plus’ levels (A2+, B1+, B2+). Each level is determined by a number of descriptors that specify characteristic instances of actual language use. The aim of the development of scales was, among other things, to make it possible to compare tests and examinations, both across different languages and across regional and national boundaries.

While there is much more to it, the system is predominantly thought of in terms of these scales of proficiency and their descriptors. There are, in all, 53 different CEFR scales. They have, in various ways, been used in very practical development work, e.g. the ELP and DIALANG, to which I will return below.

The CEFR’s scales are accompanied by a detailed analysis of communicative contexts, themes, tasks, and purposes that provides a useful principled basis for discussion of language learning issues. This is part of the explanation for why the CEFR concept is increasingly used in teacher education, in the reform of foreign language curricula and syllabuses, and in the development of teaching materials (see for instance Martyniuk & Noijons, 2007, on a survey of its application and use carried out in 2006 among Council of Europe member states). A number of European countries indicate expected minimal exit levels at the end of compulsory and upper secondary school in terms of the CEFR scheme.

Curriculum development has benefitted from the advances that have been made on the basis of CEFR-related discussion and research. More and more national authorities and language testing agencies use it as their frame of reference. It is often treated as an important subject in teacher training.

The success that the CEFR has enjoyed does not mean that it has not also met with some criticism. Fulcher (2004), for instance, talks of a double agenda at work in this enterprise and cautions that language testing may here be made to serve political and social ends (p 263), i.e. in addition to contributing guidelines for professional practice. He also maintains that the descriptor scales are “atheoretical” and insufficiently based on empirical evidence, the assumption being that they are of unproven value.

Still, there is no doubt that the CEFR has had a very great impact on language education, both in national and international perspectives. Particularly in many countries in Europe it is seen as the standard reference document for

teaching and testing languages, corresponding to the role the ACTFL document 'Guidelines' has in the US (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003) ⁽²⁾.

Especially the scales are very much in evidence. Many European school systems have adopted, or have been influenced by, the proposed scheme of objectives and levels. This is reported in, for instance, a recent study investigating its use "in examination, curriculum development, schoolbooks and teacher training" in six countries (European Union, 2013). It was found that the CEFR "is widely used by both private providers that offer modern foreign language courses and language assessment organisations" (p 12).

Readers interested in samples of performance levels in different European languages (Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Polish) may wish to visit www.webcef.eu. Further concrete details about the CEFR and its development and use can also be found at the address <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL33753FF2F7614EC0>. On offer here is an interview with the late Director of Council of Europe language projects, Dr John Trim, talking to Dr Nick Saville on the history of the language education work undertaken by the CoE. An overview of the impact of the CEFR on teaching and assessment as well as the extensive debate surrounding the framework is given in North (2014).

The CEFR is widely adopted in Europe, especially at the policy level and in the context of assessment. We can thus conclude that the CEFR now plays a central role in European language education policy, and to a certain extent in the wider world as well. The CoE goals of fostering multilingualism, mobility across borders, autonomous and lifelong learning, as well as contributing to greater transparency of proficiency levels, have been pursued with considerable success and have no doubt led to enhanced empowerment of the language learner.

2.2.2 The Manual

All over the world there have been cases of test agencies and educational authorities claiming that their tests are linked to the CEFR, the implication being that a given score on the test in question can be directly translated into a CEFR level. But questions are sometimes raised as to how valid such claims are. What is the evidence? And what means and methods exist to link tests and examinations to the CEFR? The CoE *Manual for relating Language Examinations to the CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2009) is a source that can provide answers to these kinds of queries.

Like a number of other publications from the CoE, the Manual seeks to "facilitate cooperation among relevant institutions and experts in member countries" (p 1). Its more precise aim is to clarify what justifies a claim that an examination or test is linked to the CEFR. The intention behind it is not to show how a good language tests should be constructed, or how proficiency should be assessed in relation to the CEFR. It is merely a manual for relating tests and assessments to one another, through the mediation of the CEFR.

Judging by the circulation of this publication, and the frequent referencing to it, the perceived significance of recognized CEFR-related tests and examinations is strong. The fact that testing companies and examination bodies tend to use their alignment data when publicizing their products attests to this. The manual facilitates communication between CEFR users, test developers, and other parties involved in language assessment.

2.2.3 DIALANG

The CEFR has had a particular influence on language assessment. A case in point is DIALANG, an online language testing system developed with the support of the European Communities between the years 1996 and 2004. The aim of the undertaking was to deliver a self-diagnostic instrument for aligning language learners on the CEFR.

DIALANG is based squarely on the CEFR scale. It comprises tests in 14 European languages: Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Icelandic, Irish, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish. It offers in each of them, and free of charge, tests in reading, writing, listening, vocabulary, and grammar. The test system was officially launched in 2004. It is delivered over the Internet, online, and can be downloaded via the project Web site <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchenterprise/dialang/about> hosted at Lancaster University. DIALANG connects with the world “very easily”, as reported by Lancaster.

Let’s have quick look at the test procedure. These are the steps involved in the diagnosis:

- Selection of a language and a skill for diagnostic testing
- A Vocabulary Size Placement Test is administered. > Feedback/Result: One out of six different bands of ability
- Can Do self-assessments (for reading, writing, and listening only)
- Level of testing is decided (on the basis of the results of the VSPT and self-assessments)
- The Diagnostic Test is given (‘Easy’, ‘Medium’ or ‘Difficult’)
- Feedback: Test results in terms of a CEF level, item review, Check your answers, ...
- Self-assessment feedback provides reasons why SA and test result may not match (depends on *how often* you use the language, on *how* you use the language, etc). Advisory feedback is also provided.

Some of these features are not usually found in other language assessment systems, e.g. the principle of complete user self-management, round-the-clock availability, instant reporting of results, a full range of levels of testing, feedback on self-assessments, and – after the testing – advice on how to reach the next level of performance. It may be added that test instructions can be provided in any of the target languages included. It is a truly useful tool in the hands of the under-resourced language learner and many other users of languages.

It should be noted that DIALANG is not an exam and it does not issue certificates. It is specifically intended for personal use on a self-assessment basis. In the spirit of previous work with CoE materials, the express purpose is self-diagnosis of proficiency. DIALANG is a tool for the *learner*, for his or her own information and not, at least not in the first place, for somebody else's information. It is thus a low-stakes test as seen from the "external" point of view, but can be quite an important measurement instrument in the learner's own perspective.

On the DIALANG web-page we are informed that there are, on average, "more than 500 successful test sessions per day, and over 1,000 on some days". This goes to prove that there is a need for a tool of this kind, where anyone can assess his or her verbal proficiency on a perfectly private and independent basis.

All of the 14 languages on offer are diagnosed in the same way and at the same difficulty levels, with scores reported in all of the six CEFR bands of ability encompassed. This provides an opportunity for interlanguage comparisons for users who have an interest in setting their knowledge of a certain language against that of another. The system makes provision for this kind of exercise.

Lately a web-based version the test system, developed at Lancaster, has been made available for beta testing. Anyone interested in trying this out is referred to the website <http://dialangweb.lancaster.ac.uk>. Further information on DIALANG and its use may be obtained at: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchenterprise/dialang/about>

2.2.4 The European Language Portfolio

In education, the concept of portfolio refers to a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits a student's effort, progress, achievements and competencies gained during some course of study. Its physical form may, for instance, be a folder or binder that contains a learner's best pieces of work and the learner's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the pieces. It may also contain samples of work in progress illustrating the creation of a product. In language learning, this product may for example be a story or an essay, evolving through different stages of drafting and revision.

A resource of this kind is the European Language Portfolio, or ELP for short. It is intended to be used both for teaching and assessment purposes, and this too uses the CEFR as its frame of reference (Schneider & Lenz, 2000; Little, 2009). Again, the learners are themselves involved in the estimation of their learning through reflecting on and self-assessing their production and performance. The underlying rationale is that if they become better at this, they will also be better, or more "powerful", learners.

So learner autonomy, in the form of self-reflective learning, is a major focus in ELP philosophy. Another characteristic is the CEFR's action-oriented approach to the description of L2 proficiency, using so-called Can-do statements (descriptors). These request learners to state their perceived ability to master

practical language-use situations specified. For example: "I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know."

The CoE inventory of Can-dos have been translated into many languages, including Arabic. The aims and functions of the ELP are:

- Pedagogical, i.e. with a view to fostering learner autonomy, to enhancing motivation, and to giving learners training in the skill of 'learning to learn'. The aim is also to support their ability to self-assess their progress of learning and their results.
- Reporting, i.e. with a view to creating a record of the skills learners have acquired.

The main parts of the ELP are ...

- a *Language passport* where learners can record their language qualifications, their experience of using different languages, and their assessments of own language proficiency, based usually on the self-evaluation grid in the CEFR,
- a *Language biography* which helps the learner to set learning targets, to record and reflect on language learning and on intercultural experiences, and regularly assess progress; includes checklists of CEFR-related Can-Do statements + a global self-assessment grid
- a *Dossier* where the learner can keep samples of personal work in the form of projects, stories, essays, video/sound tape recordings, IT documentation, learning logs etc.

The ELP is an impressive project, with a plethora of useful products in many languages. It has, however, not been too successful as a pedagogical tool and has not been used as much as expected in schools. One problem that may explain this is the fact that the introduction of it has not been all that well prepared at a central level. There has been too little information about it, and there seems, in particular, to have been inadequate guidance for teachers (while such is provided on the Council of Europe ELP homepage).

On the other hand the Portfolio has been found quite useful in the teaching of certain subjects, as well as in the teaching of certain groups (cf for instance Little, 2002, on the teaching of languages to refugees in Ireland). It may be added that the teaching portfolio has a well-established position in US education.

Therefore, all things considered, it seems safe to say that the portfolio methodology is a worthwhile concept in language education. It really caught on in the CoE language policy context, and the results in terms of an international organization of efforts, and of materials output, were very considerable. Its history also shows the advantage of joining forces: a large proportion of member states were able to demonstrate their ability to unite in the development of an idea of common interest, across linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries. That is, the idea of collectively making provision for better language learning and more enabling language assessment again proved fruitful.

The ELP exists in a range of languages and in most of them in different versions for different age groups (including young learners). In all, there are more than a hundred versions of it. Between 2001 and 2010, a total of 118 ELP

models were validated and accredited by the Council of Europe. The full versions of more than 50 of them can be downloaded from the CoE:
<http://elp.ecml.at/Portfolios/tabid/2370/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

2.2.5 The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)

There is also available a European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL). This builds on insights from the CEFR and the ELP as well as the EU-financed project *European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference (Profile)*. It is intended for students undergoing their initial teacher education. It

- encourages them to reflect on their didactic knowledge and skills
- helps them to assess their own didactic competences
- enables them to monitor their progress and to record their experiences of teaching during the course of their teacher education.

The EPOSTL can be downloaded from the CoE at:

<http://www.ecml.at/tabid/277/PublicationID/16/Default.aspx>

3. Conclusion and discussion

To sum up: In this paper I have illustrated some work undertaken in Europe in the area of education and, in particular, in the assessment of language knowledge. I have tried to relate this work to the general theme of this Conference, i.e. that of “Power to Connect in a Changing World”. What are the conclusions we can draw from the European efforts I have reviewed?

To begin with I think it’s fair to say that the results achieved have facilitated communication between people and nations. This is particularly obvious in the case of language education and the CEFR. The reception of work in this project has been remarkably positive. The main report (Council of Europe, 2001) is now one of the most influential documents in the field of language teaching in Europe. The CEFR concept has also gained considerable interest in many other parts of the world.

The CEFR proficiency scales are widely used as a general reference scheme, in several contexts. For instance:

- In language curricula
- In instructional guidance materials
- In teacher education
- In language education discourse
- In testing and assessment

Designations such as ‘a level B2 course’ or ‘a level C1 examination’ are widely interpretable these days, even in a fairly global sense.

The assessment function of the CEFR has thus given us some extra power to connect in the language education world, across linguistic, cultural and national boundaries, as well as across different educational systems. By means

of this elaborate conceptual and concrete language instruction tool we can situate, discuss, and communicate our educational aims and results in a way that was not possible only a couple of decades ago.

The other language education and language assessment achievements I have referred to, DIALANG and the ELP, which very much build on the CEFR concept, also contribute to improved communication between stakeholders in the field (learners and educators in the first place):

- DIALANG does this as a proved model for self-managed foreign language assessment referenced to a very widely known proficiency scale (i.e. the CEFR), and
- the ELP has the potential to further the same goal as a likewise learner-centered assessment tool, but also when used as a device for storing and communicating evidence of experiences and achievements in language learning.

Both enjoy cross-national recognition and validity and they should, each in their own way, help to enhance the linguistic empowerment of the language user. This is very much in keeping with the declared aims of both the Council of Europe and the European Union.

The reasons for why the results of the European language education initiatives have been so successful seem to be quite variable. A major one is probably the level of concreteness at which the task in hand has been approached in the projects, both in respect of the specification of goals and in the models for monitoring and assessing goal achievement. In both endeavours, very explicit and easily comprehensible concepts and terminology have been used for the purpose of securing clarity of objectives, and also in order to make project work as explicit and transparent as possible. This, in combination with the fact that quite pressing and universally felt learning needs were placed at centre stage, instigated prompt and focused action. Another factor is the happy marriage between theory and practice as represented by the close cooperation between members of different professional orientations in the many project groups. Very practical language education issues were dealt with and solved on the basis of sound theoretical grounds.

A further propitious factor is the truly international character of the undertaking. Representatives of quite a large number of the 47 Council of Europe member states took an active part in various phases of the successively developing language scheme. This implied that the project could benefit from rich conceptual and empirical input for new ideas, which in turn resulted in end products that were often quite innovative and mostly well devised and tested.

Finally, some other research and development activities that reflect a European and international education perspective, for instance assessments undertaken for general evaluation purposes in the school sector, are also worth mentioning. In Europe, as in many other parts of in the world, comparative studies of student achievement, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and IEA (The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), are becoming increasingly important as indicators

of educational standards. Work in this sphere of education holds out a great deal of hope for continued international competence building and cooperation in many subject areas, including languages.

So I will end on much the same note as I started. Language study is an endeavour that leads to enhanced learner empowerment and improved intercultural communication. This is particularly so if it can be pursued within a conceptual system or framework that supports transparent evaluation of results and easy comparison of targets and procedures across organizational structures. There is no doubt that this view has been borne out by recent developments on the European language education and assessment scene.

Endnotes

¹ This is a revised version of a keynote given at the conference *Power to Connect in a Changing World*, organized by the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Jordan, in collaboration with the Association of Professors of English and Translation at Arab Universities, and the *Voices in Asia Journal*, April 22-24, 2014.

² The Arabic version of it is, according to the CoE homepage, available at Adam Bookshop, Maadi Grand Mall - B1, Shops No. 124 & 140, Cairo/Egypt; e-mail: magdy@adambookshop.com / www.adambookshop.com (and probably elsewhere, too; relevant national authorities and/or publishers are responsible for the dissemination)

³ ACTFL: the American Council on The Teaching of Foreign Languages (www.actfl.org)

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