

# Assessing second and additional languages across borders in Europe

---

## Kimberly Safford, Roehampton University

The Council of Europe has been actively developing and promoting the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* since the early 1990s (CEFR,

[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp))

This set of pan-European criteria for describing achievement has been designed to provide a flexible, learner-centred common platform for national or regional language specifications. These 'local' language specifications are known as *Reference Level Descriptions* (RLD); RLD work has commenced for the following languages: Czech, German, English, French, Georgian, Greek, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese (for some of these languages the work is nearing completion). These Council of Europe language initiatives are underpinned by European Union policy which values plurilingualism and views education as the means to promote it:

*The rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed...a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding.*  
(Trim, 2002:5)

Official promotion of the CERF, and its related assessment frameworks and systems, explicitly acknowledges the increasingly high levels of population mobility within the European Union and aims to reflect the achievements of diverse language learners in these contemporary contexts.

### **Pan-European language learning and assessment system**

The CEFR provides a common basis for the development of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, textbooks and examinations across Europe. Three CEFR levels set a yardstick against which proficiency in the different languages of Europe is described. Language activities are broken down into three categories of 'Can Do' statements which cover Understanding (Listening and Reading), Speaking (Interaction and Production) and Writing, for example:

*I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know*  
(Level A1 Speaking)

*I can understand the main points of clear, standard speech regularly on familiar matters regularly encountered in school, work, leisure...*(Level B1 Listening)

*I can understand long and complex factual and literacy texts, appreciating distinctions of style* (Level C1 Reading)

*I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length* (Level C2 Writing)

These statements are mapped onto a common language proficiency scale:

*Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type* (Level A1, Basic User)

*Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics*  
(Level B2, Independent User)

*Can understand a wide range of longer, demanding texts and recognise implicit meaning.*  
(Level C2, Proficient User)

The CEFR describes language learning in an array of contexts, and encourages learners and teachers to reflect on the many domains of language use: personal, public, occupational (work) and educational.

### **Europass Language Passport (ELP)**

(<http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/europass/home/vernav/Europass+Documents/Europass+Language+Passport/navigate.action>)

The ELP is a personal document designed to make the language learning process transparent and to report individuals' achievements at any level and in any languages in an internationally transferable way. The ELP promotes the recognition of all languages and was piloted in 15 countries within the Council of Europe.

The ELP has three components: a language passport which summarises the owner's linguistic identity, records languages learned, qualifications achieved, and the owner's self-assessment (see Appendix 1 for a sample page); a language biography to set learning targets and monitor progress; and a dossier of the learner's work. The ELP is designed to be updated by the learner and is a form of continuous formative self-assessment, using a grid of language competences according to the CEFR descriptors of Basic, Independent and Proficient User. The descriptors are accepted throughout the European Union and are designed to complement other certificates or examination grades which can be recorded in the learner's ELP. The document also encourages learners to reflect on their intercultural experiences, encounters and contacts with speakers of other languages, films books and media, and the history and intellectual life of other cultures (see illustration).

There is a digital adjunct to CEFR and the ELP: DIALANG, a free internet test of reading, writing, listening, grammar and vocabulary in 14 European languages. It is designed to be used by individual learners in order to elicit feedback and set language learning targets, such as:

*Your test result suggests that you are at or above Level C2 in Reading on the Council of Europe Scale. At this Level, people can read, without any problems, almost all forms of text...*  
([http://www.dialang.org/project/english/Profilent/Results\\_EN.htm](http://www.dialang.org/project/english/Profilent/Results_EN.htm))

Although DIALANG, the CEFR and the ELP were primarily designed to meet the needs of adult learners, the Council of Europe is considering how this portfolio of assessment could effectively support young language learners. Assessment specialists have called for further research to investigate ways of rendering the CEFR criteria appropriate for young learner (see Hasselgreen, 2005, and Leung and Lewkowicz, forthcoming).

### **Challenges and questions for mainstream education**

As teachers of pupils from diverse linguistic backgrounds and mobile pupils, it is important for us to be aware of language assessment practices and trends in use beyond our local context. In schools, we have linguistic minority pupils who are acquiring English as an additional language for social and academic purposes. Many of these pupils may also be learning other languages, e.g. Modern Foreign Languages and/or ethnic minority community languages. We should consider how as educators we can build assessment frameworks which effectively represent the considerable achievements of these language learners. As harmonisation of laws within the European Union continues, the Common European Framework of Reference and the European Language Passport present possible ways forward in conceptualising language learning and assessment. How could the ELP portfolio form of assessment benefit children learning English as an Additional Language in schools? How could the CEFR's 'Can Do' statements be extended and adapted for school contexts?

The development and use of appropriate frameworks to assess second/additional language proficiency will continue to be a significant issue in our schools. It would be a good idea to explore this Europe-wide initiative to actively develop and promote approaches to language learning and assessment that advocate multilingualism and reflect the increasing mobility of people across international boundaries.

### **References:**

- Hasselgreen, A. (2005). Assessing the language of young learners. *Language Testing*, 22(3), 337-354.
- Leung, C., & Lewkowicz, J. (Forthcoming). Assessing diverse populations. In N. H. Hornberger (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Trim, J. (ed.) (2002) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment. A Guide for Users* Strasbourg: Council of Europe Language Policy Division

Appendix 1



**Europass Language Passport**  
Part of the European Language Portfolio developed by the Council of Europe



**SURNAME(s) FIRST NAME(s)** Andrew Steve

Date of birth (\*) 03/04/1977

Mother tongue(s) English

Other language(s) French Spanish

FRENCH							
Self-assessment of language skills (**)							
Understanding			Speaking		Writing		
Listening	Reading		Spoken interaction	Spoken production			
C1	Proficient user	A2	Basic User	B2	Independent user	B2	Independent user
C1							
Proficient user							
Diploma(s) or certificate(s) (*)							
Title of diploma(s) or certificate(s)			Awarding body		Year	European level (***)	
DELFL Unités 1-4			Institut Français, London		1996	-	
GCSE-level, Grade B			Alliance française, Birmingham		1998	-	
Linguistic experience(s) (*)							
Description					From	To	
Temporary work as hotel receptionist in London with frequent French-speaking guests					1997	2000	
Holiday jobs as camp leader in French-speaking Switzerland					1995	1997	

SPANISH							
Self-assessment of language skills (**)							
Understanding			Speaking		Writing		
Listening	Reading		Spoken interaction	Spoken production			
B2	Independent user	C1	Proficient user	B1	Independent user	B1	Independent user
B2							
Independent user							
Linguistic experience(s) (*)							
Description					From	To	
School exchange programme in Bilbao: one month living with a Spanish-speaking family					01/06/1990	30/06/1990	

(\*) Headings marked with an asterisk are optional (\*\*) See Self-assessment grid on reverse (\*\*\*) Common European Framework of Reference (CEF) level if specified on the original certificate or diploma.

[http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/img/dynamic/c1349/type.FileContent.file/ELPEexamples\\_en\\_GB.pdf](http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/img/dynamic/c1349/type.FileContent.file/ELPEexamples_en_GB.pdf)  
(retrieved on 25-9-2006)