The relevance of the Common European Framework of Reference in general educational contexts

Frank Heyworth
ECML Programme Consultant

Résumé : *Se référant à son expérience de formateur des formateurs, l'auteur souligne le haut potentiel du cadre conceptuel qui est à la base du CECR (Cadre européen commun de référence). Ce cadre conceptuel pourrait être appliqué dans des contextes et de situations variés bien au-delà du domaine de l'enseignement des langues étrangères et de leur évaluation. En particulier il pourrait favoriser le développement d'aspects interdisciplinaires, cross-curriculaires et d'éducation à la citoyenneté.*

Mots clés : *cadre conceptuel, curriculum, domaine, compétences*

Abstract : *Moving from his experience as trainer developer the author claims the high potential of the conceptual framework of the CEFR (Common European Framework for Languages). This framework could be useful in a variety of contexts and situations far beyond the field of foreign language teaching and assessment. In particular it could support the development of interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and civic education.*

Keywords : *conceptual framework, curriculum, domains, competences*

In a workshop held last year in a state school in England[1] I was presenting the CEFR to a group of teachers coming from different subject areas. Together we were exploring the educational concepts which underpin the Common Scale of Reference and the other 58 descriptor scales in the Framework. These can be summarised – with scant justice to the detailed explanations in the CEFR – as follows:

• An analysis of the *domains* in which language activities are carried out. Table 5 of the CEFR[2] provides descriptive categories for the external context of language use. It distinguishes four main domains – personal public, occupational and educational – and categorises the context into locations, institutions, persons, objects, events, operations and texts.

• This analysis is the context for the different language *activities* presented in the descriptor scales. Some of the 41 scales are general (overall spoken production, for example) and some are more specific (telephoning, obtaining goods and services).

• In order to carry out these activities, language users must apply or develop *competences*. "Competence" is defined simply as "being capable of", with descriptions of the different competences which make up the general notion of *communicative competence*. These are linguistic, pragmatic, socio-linguistic and strategic competences used directly in communication, and two "transversal" competences – existential (savoir-être in French), and the ability to learn.

The teachers in the school are all involved in a curriculum development project related to the British government's emphasis on citizenship as a central strand of education for 14 to 19 year-olds. We wondered whether the conceptual framework of the CEFR might provide a useful basis for looking at citizenship from a more dynamic point of view, considering it as a set of competences rather than a body of information. The analysis of domains could provide a fruitful way of looking at the context so that citizenship could be presented as practical and useful to the learners' daily lives, and finally, the idea of descriptor scales of activities with different levels seemed to offer ways of introducing clear progression into the syllabus, and a more relevant basis for assessment.

As a result of these discussions, in a further seminar[3] a group of teachers from a wide range of different subject areas – languages, maths, science, arts and history – worked on the idea of applying the Framework to the development of cross-curricular teaching modules in the area of citizenship. One group looked at the idea of the citizen as a responsible consumer from a number of different facets – truth and non-truth in advertising, in the presentation of statistical facts; another took "identity" as a focus for a project related to the planned introduction of identity cards in the United Kingdom. In each case, the topic was analysed from the point of view of the relevant personal and public domains, "can do" statements were formulated, and preliminary attempts were made to distinguish levels for the can-do statements and to categorise the different types of competence used – strategic and pragmatic competences were the most obvious ones, but linguistic competence was also seen as a key competence for citizenship. Since the seminar further work has continued at the school to develop and pilot these and other cross-curricular teaching modules.

In another development, a Socrates project of the European Union[4,] is developing a network of schools committed to integrating Europe as a learning environment in the schools. The project plans to implement a competence based approach to European citizenship and will produce descriptors and can do statements as a base for curriculum and syllabus development. Again, the framework of the CEFR seems to provide a clear and systematic methodological approach, with well defined categories, which have relevant applications in many subject areas and stimulate fresh ways at looking at domains where content issues and knowledge usually define the ways in which curricula and syllabi are formulated.

In conclusion, then, it seems as if the CEFR might have a variety of applications beyond the field of language learning and teaching; the Common Scale of Reference and the other descriptor scales are the features which have received the most attention, frequently as assessment tools. It is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that the scales are an operational application of a very coherent and generative theoretical framework which potentially could have a broad, and useful, impact in general education.

Notes

[1] The Sir Bernard Lovell School, Oldland Common, Bristol

[2] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, The Council of Europe, Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 48

[3] Held at the International Learning and Research Centre, which is housed at the Sir Bernard Lovell School

[4] Europe as a learning environment in schools: Elos supported by the European Commission in the framework of the Socrates programme, Action Comenius 3