

FROM CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT TO COURSE DELIVERY

Currently there are two major educational initiatives that have great impact on our work as language teachers in higher education: Modularisation as part of the Bologna process and the CEFR. This paper responds to the demands which these initiatives placed on language teachers and attempts to present ways of implementing modularised programmes geared to the CEFR. Our work was and is characterised by a process that moves between two poles the ideas and theoretical assumptions/concepts of the CEFR on the one hand and the institutional requirements and historically rooted traditions as well as our professional knowledge and experience on the other hand. These are the aspects we covered:

- Modularisation and the CEFR
- Working with the CEFR
- Determining learning outcomes
- Designing courses

What are we teaching?

Encouraging intercultural competence

Promoting the use of strategies

How are we teaching it? Initiating autonomous learning

- Relating course material to the CEFR levels
- Assessment according to the CEFR levels
- Conclusion: Implementing the CEFR in language modules

1. Modularisation and the CEFR

Both the CEFR and modularisation have roughly the same objective: They aim towards international recognition of students' achievements or language ability by introducing a greater measure of comparability across Europe and across Higher Education.

One of the reasons why our study programmes are getting modularised is to achieve compatibility. Another is that modularised study programmes are more transparent, they therefore have to explicitly state their learning outcomes. This marks a turning point in the conception of programmes, since the focus of the programme has shifted from input to output: The question is not any more what do teachers want students to learn but what will learners be able to do. The newly designed study programmes also have to take the employability of their students into account, which means that increasingly professionally relevant skills or competences have to be learned and taught.

In a way this competence oriented approach is reflected in the Can do statements of the CEFR. The can do statements as the word implies describe what a person can do, what language competence he has got. The focus lies on language competencies rather than on knowledge about a language and the CEFR ascribes skill specific levels of competence.

So, the underlying ideas of modularisation and the CEFR are not divergent but point in the same direction. The question of what a student should be able to do is the starting point for designing modules which consequently implies the next question what are students able to do, the question of assessment.

This paper is based on the work which was done over the last year and a half in our working group. I am going to present the questions we asked, the reflections and considerations that moved us when trying to find the answers and ofcourse answers we gave. Our working group started its work by concentrating on the formal criteria that a language module has to fulfil and by familiarising itself with the CEFR. We then moved on to specify the content of the modules, described them both in an overall and more detailed form and then went on to questions concerning teaching and learning and finally assessment.

We started by developing modul descriptors which present a first and overall idea of what modules entail. Apart from stating the learning outcomes other factors have to be mentioned as well:

- a) contact hours per week
- b) student work load calculated on the basis that 1 credit point is equivalent to 30 hours of student's work
- c) share of autonomous learning
- d) initial and target level

finally the input has to be described, which will bring students to reaching the objectives, i.e. the learning outcomes

2. Working with the CEFR

The CEFR determines the level of language competence through the communicative linguistic performance which a learner can achieve. The descriptors for each individual skill, for reading, writing, speaking and listening are associated to specific levels and measured on a 6-point scale. So it is now possible to ascribe a learner a specific level for each skill, which offers the chance to describe the learner's competence with regard to the individual skills in a more differentiated manner. Unlike previously when language levels were considered to be homogenous in skill,

Each step up in the levels of the CEFR represents a considerable increase in competence. Levels differ from one another **qualitatively** and don't simply mean being able to do something a bit more or a bit better. Not all descriptors achieve this goal but the qualitative leap is the underlying idea. The leap from one level to the next is not always equally high, it varies from level to level within a language and also between languages, since e.g. the spectrum of linguistic performance which needs to be covered varies

This means that when using the framework, it may be that certain language levels are so comprehensive that one must pass through several courses on this level before the required breadth of competency is achieved. For learners, this may mean that they have not necessarily reached the next level when they continue onto a subsequent course.

The CEFR has reacted to this problem by suggesting the creation of sublevels, such as B.2.1 and B.2.2. According to the CEFR this sub-categorization could be taken even further, if need be. If, however, institutions pursue this possibility because of internal requirements, the CEFR may, on the other hand, be subverted in its intention of creating comparability - since internal sub-categorizations are only limitedly compatible.

In practice, it has become common, at least in the German-speaking world, to subdivide all levels into two categories, like B.2.1 and B.2.2. However this subdivision conceals two problems. For one, in this way the myth is pursued that all levels are of equal size, which is not the case according to the competence descriptions and the increase in linguistic competence associated with them. For another, it provides no descriptors for these sublevels, so they are difficult to assess and thus not solidly verifiable.

The CEFR scales provide competence descriptions for the end of a level. The question is now how can intermediate steps within levels of various sizes be drawn, and how can they

be described and measured. If a language module aims to have students leap a level, more than one course might be necessary to do this. How many, though? What can a student realistically learn within one semester? These questions have to be answered before breaking down a language module into two or more courses which build upon one another or one needs two or more modules related to one another which allow a jump in level. For individual courses or modules, this might mean that they only cover partial areas of the required language competence. You could either concentrate on only one or two skills, you could cut the modul horizontally. The most likely scenario is that in integrated language courses students meander within that level. We suggest to tone down the descriptors. Example is the CEFR itself. There are descriptors which lie above one level but don't yet represent the subsequent one. So you could do that the other way round as well, descriptors can be below e.g. level B 2 but markedly above B1. We tried the following in our assessment sheet for written production:

Example assessment sheet written production:

- **Differenzierte** Beschreibung des Sachverhalts, Themenpunkte miteinander verbunden, **einzelne Aspekte hervorgehoben**, mit Schlussfolgerung, Fazit, Standpunkt o.ä. abgerundet; gut strukturierter Text durch entsprechende Mittel der inhaltlichen und sprachlichen Verknüpfung (C 1)
- **Angemessene** Beschreibung des Sachverhalts, *thematische Einheiten und Aspekte klar gegliedert*, *konträre Optionen gegeneinander abgewogen*; *inhaltliche Beziehungen deutlich durch sinnvolle Verwendung verschiedener Verknüpfungswörter*
- **Verständliche** Beschreibung des Sachverhalts, **zentrale Aspekte angeführt** und durch Beispiele gestützt, begründeter Standpunkt; Textzusammenhang durch begrenzte Anzahl von Verknüpfungswörtern gewährleistet (B 2)

Among other things, the framework has often been criticised for its vagueness. The descriptors which characterise a level often appear general and imprecise. This is ofcourse partly due to the fact that they claim validity not only for various languages but also for different learning intentions, application areas, institutions and age groups. Additionally, on higher levels where the direct increase in linguistic competence is no longer as evident and concrete, the descriptors are getting more imprecise or are entirely lacking. But for all the criticism the CEFR is the only benchmark we have got and if taken seriously, it offers a chance to look at teaching and learning from a performative and task based perspective and we think there are ways of getting to grips with its vagueness.

The descriptors become more precise if you compare them to those above or below them. For example: one descriptor states “Can summarize a broad spectrum of fiction and non-fiction texts.” The question is now what is meant by fictional texts—novels by Fontane, Michael Ende, or prose by Kleist or Hölderlin? If you compare this descriptor, however, to the descriptor for the subsequent level which states: “Can summarize sophisticated texts” it becomes clear that the latter cannot be meant.

In addition, the descriptors of a level gain meaning when looked at together, because parallel descriptors relate to one another and show what it implies to master a certain level. Thus the descriptors gain significance through difference and comparison within one level.

In order to work with the CEFR within an institution with specific objectives and homogenous addressees, such as an institution of higher education, it is necessary to select appropriate descriptors, because not all of them are of equal significance for possible application in the context of higher education. For our intuition we have therefore compiled the descriptors from the perspective of their relevance to university-specific skills and presented them in an compiled form.

But this overview in no way guarantees that these descriptors are interpreted similarly by the staff at an institution. Therefore it is necessary to find a way at least within one institution to come to a uniform interpretation of a level and ofcourse become familiar with the CEFR levels in general. We suggest a procedure which we have tried internally several times. It is an inter-subjective method based on the method of standard setting.

This method for understanding the levels and descriptors helps familiarize people with the CEFR and provides a more accurate estimation of levels by correlating the competence descriptions of the CEFR with ones’ own experiences. This process should not take place only once, but rather should be repeated in intervals. However, it must be done before the calibration of tests. It is an intersubjective approach and reflects the way we worked looking at the CEFR on the one hand and going back to our professional experience on the other hand and trying to find a link between the two.

3. Determining learning outcomess

Learning outcomes specify what students should be able to do at the end of a module. They are precisely phrased and should convey the focus of a module. They differ according to the target group. Learning outcomes in modules designed for students studying a philology will

very probably be different from those which are designed for exchange students who need to be prepared for a limited study period and partial skills will be supported or students who study a language for employability reasons.

How can learning outcomes in language modules be determined? Referring to the CEFR seems the obvious thing to do and doing that two approaches are conceivable

One approach could be to read the framework as an overview that names a multitude of possible skills, intercultural and strategic ones and linguistic skills. With an idea of the module objective in mind, one can choose from that overview and select from the range of descriptors the relevant ones for the target group and with regard to the application context. The advantage of this approach is that the learning outcomes are directly taken from the framework, so that the competence levels are obvious. Doing that the specification of the module lies just in the selection of the descriptors. This is the disadvantage of such an approach, since copied CAN DO statements make language courses non-specific. which then means that there would be hardly any difference in the learning outcomes between courses at private language schools, further education courses, and university-level language courses. But learning outcomes in higher education should be distinguishable. The distinction would then lie in the next steps, the selection of the domain, the input, the design of the learning environment.

Another approach is also possible. the learning outcomes are already ready formulated as for e.g. in language exam requirements such as the DSH (Deutsche Sprachprüfung für den Hochschulzugang One has to then find the corresponding descriptors in the framework. And for the DSH this has been done. This approach also involves the possibility of formulating specific learning outcomes for the target group and then correlate them to the framework. The advantage is obvious, you have very concise and specific learning outcomes, but the disadvantage is equally obvious, you have to carefully correlate your descriptors with the ones in the framework.

Both approaches allow arriving at different levels for different skills and thus exploiting the strength of the framework, both we think are plausible ways of determining learning outcomes

4. Designing courses

Apart from stating the learning outcomes a detailed description of a language module must also describe how these goals are to be achieved. What is the nature of the teaching and

learning environment that helps students make the leap from one level to the next? This presents us with two issues: the content and the process.

We called these two aspects the **what** and **how** of modules and used them to describe modules in a more detailed form:

First, we must consider what exactly the subject matter of a course is. In considering this **what**, it is necessary to concretely think of topics and content, considering apart from the linguistic skills the aspects of intercultural competence and use of strategies, to concretely think of lexis, communicative objectives and language tasks.

It may be helpful here to look at the category of domain as used in the CEF. The domain "education" influences the choice of topic, the selection of texts and the tasks associated with them. The phrase "familiar topic / his or her area of interest," which recurs in numerous descriptors, would have to be interpreted under the domain "education" for the target group students. You could refer to their individual field of study or you could interpret that texts need to have a certain degree of abstraction if they want to comprise what study relevant texts are made of. This interpretation would then be different from other institutions which favour a different domain and/or a different audience.

Apart from the topical and textinput one also has to specify the descriptors. The question is which linguistic phenomena must be associated with which competence descriptions. Which structural, lexical, morphological phenomenon is needed for what communicative competence, eg. which linguistic phenomena are associated with for the notion of contradiction on what level? Intending to be applicable to all languages the CEFR doesn't help here. As far as we know there is no generally valid answer for any language. In this situation, it is necessary to rely primarily on teachers' experience, who will have to first of all have to decide on the notions which they find relevant with regard to the learning outcomes/descriptors and who will secondly have to decide which linguistic phenomena he assigns to them

4 a) Encouraging intercultural competence

This is not the place for getting into a detailed discussion of the manifold aspects of intercultural learning and the use of strategies. I want to just briefly present you where we put our emphasis with regard to these important aspects of teaching and learning in HE.

The goal of encouraging intercultural competence is to train the learner to be a mediator that can function as a bridge between cultures. A learner must have cultural sensibility and the corresponding/required linguistic repertoire. To us, this means the ability to deal with misunderstandings, to anticipate them and avoid them, to make them a subject of discussion, to recognise them and to clear them up. This in mind we produced and collected examples of what we thought were examples of good practice in this institution and made them available to everybody.

4 b) Promoting the use of strategies

By promoting the use of certain strategies, language educators can help students learn how to learn and promote lifelong learning. They also help build the study skills needed for higher education. The problem with including them into a language learning program is that the use of strategies can be independent from language competence. A learner with limited language ability can have an extensive knowledge of strategies, and vice versa. Therefore, strategies cannot be related to the CEFR scale (a fact that also holds true for intercultural competence).

Because of the significance of strategic knowledge, the working group compiled an overview of strategies taken from the CEFR and based on Profile Deutsch and we supplemented the aspects where we thought it necessary. We took over the distinctions between planning—implementing/repairing/correct. We also provisionally took over their allocation of techniques for strategies, even though we didn't always find them convincing. We differentiated the techniques into productive and receptive skills and we supplemented this with recommendations about how to promote the use of strategies in the classroom.

5. How are we teaching it?

The second issue is **how** topics, content and so on are taught and learned. If competence oriented teaching has to be task based and since the learner is understood as a person negotiating in and with the language he/she must also appear as an independently acting subject in our learning environment, i.e we have to set tasks that support autonomy .

Independent learning is of such importance because the student workload can only be covered to a decreasing extent in teaching or contact hours. That's why every module contains a large percentage of work that has to be done outside of class, i.e. independently. Without a doubt, learning outside the classroom must be more than simply additional homework or an extension of what's done in class.

Initiating this process implies questions such as what kind of classroom activities are suited to developing autonomous learning? How does the role of the language teacher change? What is the intersection between the classroom work and the self-access centre or tandem partnerships.

In response to such questions, the commission has made suggestions that will be expanded and revised in conjunction with the opportunities that the self-access centre offers. e.g. reading groups, research tasks, language-learning journals, working with the portfolio.

6. Relating course material to the CEFR Levels

Language courses at university level are in most cases tailor-made for each course. Course materials should reflect the ideas/ of the CEFR and should correspond to the respective competence level. How does a teacher know that his tailor-made materials correspond with the CEFR?

Usually teachers base their assumptions concerning the difficulty of listening and reading texts on intuition and experience and in comparison to already existing materials in textbooks. Valid as these impressions are, they are not transparent and not verifiable. We have therefore tried to find a more objective/ reliable way to relate teaching materials to the CEFR. The starting point was our textinput and its description. The focus is not the pure, authentic text but the prepared textunit with its tasks, the knowledge that students might already have about the topic and the preparational phases in class. We therefore didn't want to describe the text according to linguistic criteria, but rather with regard to its difficulties concerning development of the theme, vocabulary/ semantics, grammar/ semantics, time limits, use of reference work. The length of the text can't be a central point so it seems to be more useful to concentrate on other criteria, such as the degree of abstraction, logical links, and density of information. These categories which are assembled in the catalogue "Materialbeschreibung" help to relate textmaterials to the CEFR. The catalogue is based on criteria, some of which we selected from the CEFR and some of which we created ourselves.

Our aim was to come to a more precise, intersubjective interpretation of what it implies when we talk about as the CEFR puts it a simple text, a complex text or a more complex text.

Furthermore this catalogue aims to assess whether the course covers everything that the CEFR level stands for/demands. Does the course reflect the essentials of the CEFR level intended? This implies questions regarding the variety and balance of topics and tasks and the appropriate range of communicative performances. The catalogue can be used as a tool to check whether the input accomplishes what it claims to accomplish and it can be used as a tool to reflect on the underlying didactic and methodological approach.

Although it's not necessary to relate every single textunit to the CEFR, it is necessary to sample a few key texts (core texts) which can then function as benchmarks.

Our Colleagues tested the "Materialbeschreibung"/Catalogue. They applied the catalogue to a sample textunit, we compared the results step by step and discussed deviations. At the end of our discussion we agreed on assigning a level to the textmaterial. This catalogue proved to be a practical tool for "calibrating" textmaterial.

We suggest to go through the standard setting process with other colleagues before completing the catalogue. This way making sure that we are sufficiently familiar with the level descriptors before ascribing a level to the textunit.

7. Assessment according to the CEFR levels

We started off by asking what should the students be able to do and now come to the question what are students able to do. The assessment at the end of a module examines to what extent a student can do what the learning outcomes, respectively the descriptors, entail. Therefore tests – and this sounds rather trivial, but isn't all that easy to accomplish- have to reflect the essentials of descriptors or learning outcomes. Tests need to test competencies rather than knowledge and they need to take the qualitative aspect of the CEFR levels into account. How can we make sure that tests accomplish this? Our work so far has primarily focused on productive skills.

An important aspect with regard to the qualitative approach is the question of taskdesign, tasks need to reflect the different communicative aspects which a level is made up of, they need to reflect their essential, i.e. they have to be representative of the intended level

Consequently if a student fails the task intended for level B 2, for example, you could not say what other level he is at, because it is a qualitative leap and not a quantitative one.

For the productive skill we developed sheets that assess **if** a learner has the language competence ascribed to a certain level – to be able to certify that level and **how well** he is mastering that level to be able to give him a mark. These sheets can be used for all languages and thus contribute to a more standardised way of testing and marking within our institution. This is important not least for the students who have a right to transparent assessment criteria and feedback.

In our sheets we have criteria assessing the content and criteria assessing the linguistic realisation of the content. We selected descriptors from the GER, which are on the one hand valid for our students and on the other reflect the idea of the CEFR level aimed at. The main criteria are the same for all levels, but they are “filled” with level specific descriptors. The criteria are: content (....) coherence/cohesion, lexical competence (range and knowledge), sociolinguistic appropriateness, spelling and correctness. This aspect of correctness is, as we know, in a way contrary to the communicative and functional- notional approach of the CEFR. The assessment sheets for speaking and writing differ in their weighting. In the sheets for speaking focus lies on the communicative aspect, involving cooperational strategies, questions reassuring that the other person understood, correcting own mistakes and so on.

For the receptive skills we adapted our “Materialkatalog” and made the questions concerning tasks the central ones. We have developed a first draft of a sheet that helps to describe tests and make their construction, aims and assessment criteria transparent and which can also be used as a tool to check if the test is actually doing what it claims it does. We intend to incorporate aspects such as tasks, intention of the task, tasktypes.

We finally had to decide upon the question, when we consider a test as a pass. For us 67% is the pass/fail mark, the argument being If we want to certify a level 2/3 of the overall possible points should be fulfilled. According to this 67 % is our mark 4. The other marks follow a percentage scale, that’s based on institutional requirements.

Implementing the CEFR in language modules

The steps we suggest to take when implementing the framework into language modules are the following:

- Standard setting
- selecting and determining learning outcomes on the basis of CEFR descriptors

- incorporating strategic and intercultural competence
- enhancing independent and autonomous learning
- relating course materials to the CEFR
- relating assessment to the CEFR

But implementing the framework is not just a question of going through certain steps and the formal process of filling in forms and grids, implementing the framework offers a chance to reflect upon one's didactic and methodological approach from a learner's perspective and from a performative and notional point of view considering intercultural aspects, the use of strategies, the design of the learning environment, and task design. This is why we found it equally important to ask questions as to suggest answers. We see and experienced working with the framework as a starting point for re-considering our work.