

The Common European Framework in teaching writing

Heini-Marja Järvinen

Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku

Abstract

This paper gives an overview of how the Common European Framework can be applied in teaching languages, and in the teaching of writing in particular. The paper describes a sub-project carried out as part of a larger one, the European Language Portfolio project led by Professor Viljo Kohonen. The objectives of the writing portfolio project were to investigate ways to integrate writing with the Common European Framework (henceforth CEF), and the national curricula as reflected in textbook and as adapted to local circumstances during the first year in upper secondary level in Finland. The writing portfolio project was based on the flexible and wide approach to language learning and teaching advocated by the CEF, especially in terms of increasing autonomy in learning with associated development of the learner-writers' metacognitive skills, including self-assessment.

What is the Common European Framework?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) is a result of years of collaboration of Europe's top scholars covering a diversity of fields of expertise. The product of this work, a 250-page volume, embraces the current understanding of the learning, teaching and assessment of languages. It is a work of reference rather than a practical guidebook, and it is clear that the dissemination, adoption and practical application of the ideas it contains is a huge endeavour which takes time and a great deal of effort from all parties involved. It is also obvious that its implementation would be greatly facilitated by sharing the work load among the parties with vested interest in language teaching, such as educational planners, designers of national curricula, city, town and school administrations, publishing houses and textbook writers to name but a few in addition to the key players in the field, i.e. language teachers.

Why the present paper?

This paper reports on a teaching experiment which was conducted as part of the Finnish European Language Portfolio project led by Professor Viljo Kohonen (Kohonen 2003). The project was designed as a first exploration of what the Common European Framework means to an individual practitioner. The paper is an attempt to account for this understanding at the level of practical application. It is hoped that the paper will provide the reader with practical ideas but also that it will invoke questions and spur the reader to learn more about the Common European Framework.

Goal-setting: Common reference levels

At the onset of the writing portfolio project, the learners, i.e. our subjects, were at the beginning of their first year at upper secondary school. Most of the students had graduated from the local comprehensive school the previous spring term, and they just continued their studies at the associated upper secondary school; some came from other comprehensive schools in the city. New study groups were formed, so all the three parallel groups investigated consisted of students of which some but not all had previously been classmates or collaborated with each other for some length of time. We, the three teachers of the groups, each welcomed a new group. Our main concern was to find out the students' previous knowledge of English in order to launch the project on the right level. We had reason to believe that the majority of our subjects were A2 level students, as this is the level that is achieved by the majority of students in their first foreign language by the end of comprehensive school (for national curricula for comprehensive school and upper secondary school visit www.oph.fi). If this was the case we could set our goal on B1–B2 skill levels and focus on B level texts, tasks and strategies. As one of the objectives of the project was to focus on and try to improve the students' self-evaluation skills, we thought it proper to start by administering the CEF self-assessment grid (CEF 2001: 26–27), on which the students assessed themselves. The self-assessment grid descriptions are as follows (CEF 2001: 26–27):

A1

I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.

A2

I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.

B1

I can write simple connected texts on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.

B2

I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or a report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.

C1

I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind.

C2

I can write clear, smoothly flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.

It turned out that the majority of the students estimated that they had indeed reached the levels of A2 and B1 in writing. They seemed to have the necessary skill of self-evaluation, which was fortunate, as with much skill learning, it would have been wiser to learn and teach the skills of self-evaluation step-by-step, progressing at a moderate speed, leaving room for individual variation. Instead, we administered the whole grid at the same time. In retrospect, our implicit objective was to gain an impressionistic understanding of our students' proficiency in writing – and also of their self-evaluation skills. Whether our procedure was unorthodox or not, at this phase we had gained valuable information about the students' level and could go on to the next step in our project. To sum up, our goal was to make it possible for the majority of our subjects to progress to B2 level in writing and to make it possible for some to reach even higher levels, i.e. C1 or C2 by the end of upper secondary school.

The starting point for our goal setting was to define the **target reference level** of desired student performance, which, as noted above, was later confirmed by the national curriculum. At the beginning of the project, however, the national guidelines were under preparation as were the fine-grained sub-scales, which are useful to the teacher for planning the syllabi and rewarding for the learner in measuring subtle changes in proficiency. The branching approach provides the flexibility (see CEF, chapter 3.5.) which is necessary as the scales are used in different circumstances and with varied language learning objectives, such as in LSP courses (CEF 2001, 31 – 33).

The Common European Framework in a nutshell

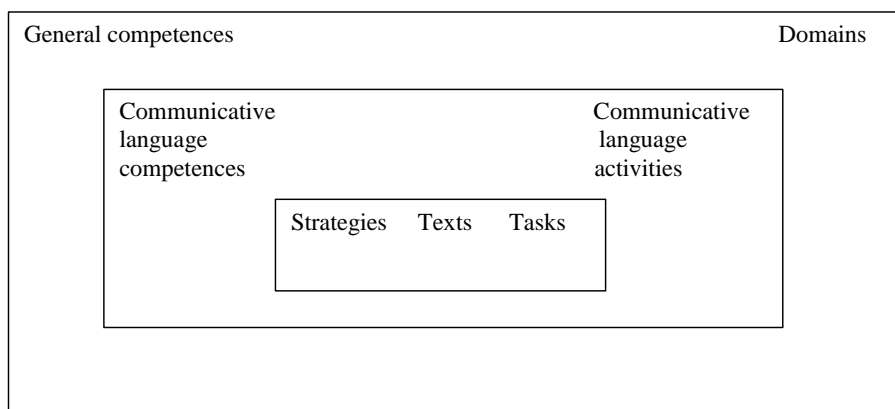


Figure 1. Framework of the project (based on lecture notes and handouts given by Irma Hutunen and Sauli Takala).

In addition to diagnostic assessment of the students' level of language proficiency and goal-setting, the course syllabus should draw on a number of identified components of language proficiency. In considering what components to include in a course syllabus, one has to take into account not only the targeted skill level but also other components of language proficiency. The CEF approach to language use and the competences of the language user is shown in Figure 1. Let us discuss the figure in more detail, starting from the innermost box.

Texts, tasks, and strategies

Texts are defined as samples of spoken or written language. The approach that the CEF adopts is called action-oriented. This means that **tasks** are related to texts in a way that allows the utilisation of the language user's linguistic and general competences (see also Ellis 2003). If tasks are not automatic or routine, they necessitate the use of **strategies** in language use and learning. Tasks, in turn, may be non-linguistic, they may be a mixture of linguistic content and other components, such as action, or they may be purely linguistic.

Language activities

If the tasks have a linguistic component, they involve **language activities** that are necessary in the processing (**reception, production, interaction, or mediation**) of oral or written texts (CEF: 15 – 16). Clearly, the texts in the writing portfolio project were written samples of language; their production involved a host of different strategies ranging from learning strategies to specific strategies necessary for written communication. It must be noted, though, that it is hardly possible to draw a clear line between learning and communication strategies and between linguistic tasks and tasks that involve other than purely linguistic means for completion, such as the ability to use a tool for example. The reciprocal relationship between reading and writing is well-known. It was quite obvious from the

beginning that written tasks can and should by no means be limited to written production only. The natural relationships between the various linguistic skills was utilised in the course of the project (CEF: 99 – 100); it was even possible to transfer a spoken text into a written one (see Table 1. Writing portfolio1, assignment number 3)

Table 1 below describes the writing portfolio project. The column headings are drawn from the CEF in a nutshell (Figure 1 above). The rows in the first column on the left, titled Text/Title refer to the data of the investigation, i.e. they comprise the major writing texts produced in the course of three courses of English during one academic year (August 2001 – May 2002). The table contains the texts, tasks and strategies that were studied and practised. The majority of the essay titles were taken from the textbook in use (Kallela et al. 2000), but other sources were also used. In task and strategy choice and a number of sources proved useful (Dean 1988, Ellis & Sinclair 1989a,b, McKay & Abigail 1993, Perego & Boyle 1993).

Communicative language competences

The last three columns on the right in Table 1 refers to the **communicative language competences** that were drawn on in the course of the writing portfolio project. Chapter 5.2 (CEF: 108 – 130) discusses the different communicative language competences, the **linguistic, sociolinguistic** and **pragmatic** competences.

Table 1. Writing portfolio project.

Text/ Title	Strategy	Task / Objective	Linguistic competences	Pragmatic competences	Sociolinguistic competences
1 My home/ My dream house	Prewriting: Mind mapping	To learn how to describe something or somebody	<i>There is, there are</i> Adjectives	Descriptive	
2 Thank you note	Reproduction	To learn to use the (functional) language of thanking	Use of formal and informal linguistic devices	Text design note/ short letter	To express gratitude formal vs. informal
3 Written summary of a speech given by a native speaker ("Why learning foreign languages is important.")	Note-taking T-list	To locate macro and micro propositions Re-structuring of text	Direct > indirect speech	Text type: narrative/ expository	Spoken > written
4 Then I was really embarrassed...	Compensatory strategies Using imagination	To tell a coherent story	To find suitable individual linguistic means to express one's ideas	Text type: Narrative Anecdote	Informal
5 School – too much work?/ Teachers – do we need them?/ Exams – are they necessary?/ Sports at school – what for?/ School – good preparation for the real world?	Pre-teaching of argumentative text structure (schema)	To write a well developed argument: giving reasons, illustrative examples and summarising	To learn to identify and use the linguistic devices of an argument (introduction, main body, conclusion)	Text type: Argumentative Making a statement	Select and maintain appropriate register: polite persuasion
7 CV	Reproduction	To write an authentic or imaginary CV	To learn to use the linguistic conventions of written CVs	Text design (CV)	Neutral > Formal
8 Application letter Job application	Reproduction Using imagination	To write an (imaginary) application	To learn to use the linguistic conventions of written applications	Text design (application)	

General competences and domains of language use

The language user's general competences include her or his 1. **declarative knowledge** (i.e. the knowledge of the world, sociocultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness), 2. **skills and know-how** (i.e. practical skills and know-how and intercultural skills and know-how), 3. **'existential' competence** (i.e. abilities, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality factors), and finally, 4. **ability to learn** (i.e. language and communication awareness, general phonetic awareness and skills, study skills and heuristic skills). The language user's general competences are probably more indirectly affected by advances in language-related competences. This does not mean, however, that they are less important. To take an example, successful intercultural communication may lead to more understanding and more tolerance and less prejudice, xenophobia and racism. Intercultural awareness, knowledge of 'otherness' and intercultural skills are teachable and learnable. The CEF is flexible and versatile enough to allow any language teacher to use it in order to emphasise general competences in a number of ways.

The **domains** of language use that the CEF finds most useful among the multitude of possible domains are the **personal, public, occupational** and **educational** domain. (CEF 2001: 45 – 50). One of the objectives of the writing portfolio project was to make it possible for the learner-writer to advance from level A2/B1 to B2 level or possibly C1 level. A look at the level descriptions shows that there indeed is a transition from the personal domain (A1 – B1) on to diversified external contexts, the public and the educational domains. Even the occupational domain is touched upon by way of the tasks of writing a CV and a job application.

Concluding remarks

The project described above is part one of a series of at least two writing portfolio projects. The second part still awaits its implementation. If the emphases in this project have been more on language matters and linguistic competence and less on pragmatic, sociolinguistic and general competences, the emphases of the second project will be the opposite. This does not mean that the linguistic competence would be any less important in advanced writing. It means that the linguistic concerns are viewed in terms of stylistic constraints, discourse structure, text design, roles, audiences, functions and themes (cf. C1-2 level descriptions).

To one of the teachers, the principal researcher, and the writer of this paper, the CEF project provided not only a rich, coherent and comprehensive account of language use, but also a very flexible framework; one that allows for individual variation and caters for the versatile needs of a wide range of language users and provides for new angles and emphases to the learning and teaching of languages. During the process, I remained confident of having done 'the right thing' all along - just like many language teachers who on learning about the CEF remark that there is nothing that is new or revolutionary in the document as such. But it is a coherent and principled account of language learning and teaching, and after having 'taken in' the approach, one is free to apply the framework in any contexts and circumstances and do justice to both the framework and one's own integrity as a language user. By doing so, the user may feel more empowered and inde-

pendent as a practitioner. (The process of internalising the ideas of the framework is bound to be remarkably easier for future Finnish users of the document as a Finnish translation (Eurooppalainen viitekehys 2004) will be published in February 2004.)

On the other hand, the Framework is just a framework, another attempt to describe language proficiency, language learning and teaching. As such, it is and should be susceptible to critical evaluation. One criticism that has been raised concerns the role of the proficiency scales and the nature of the scale descriptions. It has been pointed out that it is deceptively easy to view the proficiency scales as representative of the entire Framework. It has further been remarked that the scales and their descriptors have a behaviouristic flavour and that the approach of the whole framework, i.e. action-oriented and task-centred, may trigger a behaviouristic interpretation. There is another, maybe more important, consequence of the primacy of language competences in the scales and the prominence of scales and scale descriptions in the Framework, which is the subsidiary role of the general competences. This is obviously due to the fact that language-related competences lend themselves to measurement and description— at least we believe so — more easily than general competences. However, it may be concluded that one of the major strengths of the current framework is to include the general competences in a description of language proficiency and aim at a holistic account of language learning and teaching.

Literature

- CEF 2001 = Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. 2001. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dean, M. 1988. Write It. Writing skills for intermediate learners of English Learner's Book. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, G & Sinclair, B. 1989 a. Learning to Learn English. A course in learner training. Learner's Book. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, G & Sinclair, B. 1989 b. Learning to Learn English. A course in learner training. Teacher's Book. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. 2003. Task-based Language Learning and Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eurooppalainen viitekehys. 2003. Helsinki: WSOY. (CEF 2001, edited and translated into Finnish by Hanna Jaakkola and Irma Huttunen)
- Kallela, M.-L., Kangaspunta, R., Suurpää, A.-L., Erma, T., Nikkanen, L. & Woods, M. 2000. English Update Highlights, Courses 1—3. Helsinki: WSOY.
- Kohonen, V. 2003. Eurooppalaisen kielisalkun keskeisiä periaatteita. [Key principles of the European Language Portfolio] Tempus 5/2005, 10—11.
- McKay, H, & Abigail, T. 1993. Write After. Group Projects as Pre-Writing Activities. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Regents/Prentice Hall.
- Peregoy, S. F. & Boyle, O. F. 1993. Reading, Writing, & Learning in ESL. A resource book for K-8 teachers. White Plains, N.Y.: Longman.

