

The Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio: involving learners and their judgements in the assessment process

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Learner-centred approaches to language teaching, especially those that seek to develop learner autonomy, require the learner to take decisions concerning the goals, content and methods of learning; they also assign a central role to self-assessment. Although the logic of learner-centredness demands that learner self-assessment should somehow be integrated with other forms of assessment, to date this has been only a minority concern, usually in relation to one or another form of portfolio learning. The recent publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the increasingly widespread adoption of its companion piece, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), renew the challenge to develop a culture of assessment that both facilitates and takes full account of learner self-assessment. This article begins by briefly considering the importance and limitations of self-assessment in second language (L2) learning. It goes on to address issues of principle raised in turn by the CEFR and the ELP, and then reports on a project that:

- has drawn on the CEFR to define an ESL curriculum for non-English-speaking pupils attending Irish primary schools;
- has developed a version of the ELP as the foundation of teaching and learning; and
- is currently elaborating assessment and reporting procedures in which learner self-assessment plays a central role.

I Introduction: learner-centredness and learner self-assessment

There are three reasons for engaging learners in self-assessment and taking account of the results. First, as a matter of principle, a learner-centred curriculum – defined by Nunan (1988: 2) as ‘a collaborative effort between teachers and learners’ – falls short of its definition if

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learners are involved in decisions regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught but excluded from the process of evaluating curriculum outcomes, including their own learning achievement.

Secondly, as Oscarson (1989: 1) has pointed out, making self-assessment an integral part of evaluation procedures not only encourages learners and teachers to regard assessment as a shared responsibility, but it also opens up wider perspectives on the learning process (see also Huttunen, 1986). Thus, in learner-centred pedagogies calculated to promote the development of learner autonomy, self-assessment plays a central role in shaping and directing the reflective processes on which such development depends. If learners are to be fully involved in the setting of learning targets and the selection of learning activities and materials, they must develop a capacity for self-assessment. Unless they know what tasks they can already perform in their target language – and with approximately what linguistic range, fluency and accuracy – their decisions will be random, even worthless.

Thirdly, to the extent that languages learnt in formal contexts are to be used in the world beyond the classroom, a capacity for accurate self-assessment is an essential part of the toolkit that allows learners to turn occasions of target language use into opportunities for further explicit language learning.

Learners whose experience of formal instruction has been largely traditional and teacher-led cannot be expected to assess themselves accurately without further ado. In language learning as in other domains, self-assessment depends on a complex of skills that must be mediated by the teacher, often in very small steps. Moreover, this necessarily involves consideration of the purposes, contents and methods of learning as well as its outcomes. It seems most likely to arise from a sustained interactive process that plays a central role in teaching and learning. Dam (1995), for example, describes a pedagogical approach whose cyclical dynamic is driven by repeatedly asking and answering five questions: What are we learning? Why are we learning it? How are we learning it? With how much success? What are we going to learn next? Note that only one of these questions – With how much success? – entails self-assessment in the technical sense of measurement; but note also that its meaning is greatly reduced if the other four questions are removed.

Attempts to formalize self-assessment have usually taken one of two forms. On the one hand, learners have been provided with – or have been encouraged to develop for themselves – simple instru-

ments that allow them to assess (that is, reflect and report on) their proficiency in one or another communicative domain. For example, they may rate their comprehension of a television show in their target language on a 10-point scale where 1 = 'nothing' and 10 = 'everything'; alternatively they may use checklists to diagnose their reading difficulties or identify communicative tasks they are able to perform (these examples are adapted from Nunan, 1988: 131–32). The limitation of this approach is the subjectivity of its criteria. This week's self-assessment (for example, a score of 7 for understanding a television show) can have meaning only in relation to last month's self-assessment (say, a score of 5 for the same task). Also, the criteria applied in this kind of self-assessment may bear no relation to the criteria that underlie whatever external assessment learners may be required to submit to.

On the other hand, self-assessment has been developed as a central feature of portfolio learning and assessment. Proponents of portfolio assessment claim that it 'enables instruction to be linked to assessment, promotes reflection, helps learners to take responsibility for their own learning, enables learners to see gaps in their learning, and enables learners to take risks' (Ekbatani, 2000: 6–7). In other words, portfolio assessment is seen as a means of promoting learner autonomy. The self-assessment that learners must practise in compiling their portfolio is of the general kind described above as a key constituent of reflective learning. When it comes to the assessment of completed portfolios, learners can be involved in a variety of ways. For instance, they may be required to write an evaluative account of their portfolio experience and submit it together with their portfolio (Hirvela and Pierson, 2000), or to rate their portfolio against a checklist of features that was used to guide the portfolio process from the beginning. This kind of approach is necessarily limited to the immediate context of learning and again may apply criteria that bear little relation to the criteria that shape external assessment.

The remainder of this article explores the potential contribution of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) and European Language Portfolio (ELP) to the development of self-assessment in second and foreign language learning. The ELP supports reflective learning in which goal setting and self-assessment play a central role. But because self-assessment in the ELP is based on the common reference levels of the CEFR, self-assessment, teacher assessment and external assessment can all orient themselves to the same behavioural descriptions. To date there is no published

evidence that test users will accept self-assessment in high-stakes contexts. On the other hand, there is some empirical evidence to suggest that when learners are experienced in self-assessment and use procedures that focus closely on curriculum content, self-assessment can produce accurate results (Ross, 1998). Perhaps between them the CEFR and the ELP can contribute to the development of an assessment culture in which self-assessment can help to bring the learning process into a closer and more productive relation to tests and examinations than has traditionally been the case.

II The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Language Portfolio

In a review of procedures for linking language tests, North (2000a: 566) defines ‘social moderation’ as ‘the process whereby a group of raters establish a common understanding of a set of standards by discussion and training’. One possible role of the CEFR is to assist this process. At its core are scales that define second language (L2) proficiency in three broad bands (in ascending order: A, B, C), each of which is subdivided to yield six levels (A1, A2; B1, B2; C1, C2). A global scale describes overall communicative proficiency at each level (Council of Europe, 2001: 24); overall proficiency is then summarized in relation to five communicative skills – Listening, Reading, Spoken Interaction, Spoken Production, and Writing (pp. 26–27); and, finally, these activity-based summaries are expanded in 34 illustrative scales.

The CEFR does not focus exclusively on the behavioural dimension of L2 proficiency. It also offers a scaled summary of what it calls ‘qualitative aspects of spoken language use’ – range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence (Council of Europe, 2001: 28–29) – and scaled descriptions of general linguistic range, vocabulary range, vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, phonological control, orthographic control, sociolinguistic appropriateness, flexibility, turn-taking, thematic development, coherence and cohesion, spoken fluency, and propositional precision (Council of Europe, 2001: 110–29; for an account of the empirical procedures used in the development of the scales, see North, 2000b).

The CEFR scales do not claim to model progression in second language acquisition, far less to reflect the actual processes of acquisition; rather, they present a hierarchy of communicative tasks whose successful performance depends on underlying linguistic competence.

If one can perform the spoken interaction tasks specified for B1, it follows that one can also perform the spoken interaction tasks specified for A2 and A1. How well one can perform the B1 tasks will depend on one's linguistic competence, key aspects of which are captured in the scales of vocabulary range and control, grammatical accuracy and phonological control. Unless one has achieved B1 in these features, it is unlikely that one will progress far towards mastering the spoken interaction tasks specified for B2.

Besides providing a means of linking language tests, the CEFR is offered as a tool for designing not only L2 curricula but also individual learning programmes. This reflects the Council of Europe's long-standing commitment to learner autonomy as a prerequisite for effective lifelong learning (Holec, 1979). It is very much in keeping with the Council of Europe's ethos that learners too should be drawn into the processes of 'social moderation', and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) is its practical means for achieving this. Developed in parallel with the CEFR (Council for Cultural Cooperation, 1997; Little, 2002), the ELP has three obligatory components:

- a language passport, which summarizes the owner's linguistic identity by briefly recording L2s learnt, formal language qualifications achieved, significant experiences of L2 use, and the owner's assessment of his or her current proficiency in the L2s he or she knows;
- a language biography, which is used to set language learning targets, monitor progress, plot the development of language learning skills, and record and reflect on specially important language learning and intercultural experiences;
- a dossier, which contains a selection of work that in the owner's judgement best represents his or her L2 capacities and achievement.

The ELP serves complementary pedagogical and reporting functions. On one hand it supports the development of learner autonomy via goal setting and self-assessment; on the other the individual ELP owner is responsible for maintaining an up-to-date self-report, hence self-assessment, of his or her L2 learning achievements and intercultural experience. Both functions are supported by the common reference levels of the CEFR.

The ELP requires two kinds of self-assessment: summary and summative in the language passport, of which the so-called self-assessment grid (Council of Europe, 2001: 26–27) is a central component in models designed for adults and adolescents;

formative in the language biography, which uses goal-setting and self-assessment checklists derived from the CEFR's illustrative scales, and in the dossier, which contains the language samples (perhaps in audio and video as well as in writing) that justify the judgements recorded in the biography. The relation between the self-assessment grid and checklists can be illustrated with reference to the Swiss ELP for adolescents and adults (Schneider *et al.*, 2001). The self-assessment grid defines B1 spoken interaction thus:

I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g., family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).

In the Swiss ELP the checklist for B1 spoken interaction is as follows:

- I can start, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversations on topics that are familiar or of personal interest.
- I can maintain a conversation or discussion but may sometimes be difficult to follow when trying to say exactly what I would like to.
- I can deal with most situations likely to arise when making travel arrangements through an agent or when actually travelling.
- I can ask for and follow detailed directions.
- I can express and respond to feelings such as surprise, happiness, sadness, interest and indifference.
- I can give or seek personal views and opinions in an informal discussion with friends.
- I can agree and disagree politely.

How often the individual ELP user updates his or her language passport is a matter of personal circumstance and preference, but it is fundamental to effective ELP use that the checklists are used continually to identify learning goals, select a learning focus, monitor learning progress, and evaluate learning outcomes. Where the ELP is being used to support classroom learning, these activities are typically embedded in interactive processes that explore the meaning and implications of the descriptors (a further instance of 'social moderation'). This is one way of providing learners with feedback on their self-assessment; another is to give them access to external tests based on the CEFR, for example, those offered by DIALANG (Huhta *et al.*, 2002; Huhta and Figueras, 2004; www.dialang.org and described in this issue by Alderson and Huhta).

The strength of the ELP as a tool of self-assessment lies in its use of the CEFR's scaled descriptors of the behavioural dimension of L2

proficiency: from a very early age we are able to say whether or not we can perform particular tasks; and of the tasks we can perform we can say whether we find them difficult or easy. But this strength is also a limitation, for the self-assessment instruments included in the ELP focus only incidentally on the qualitative aspects of language use (e.g., grammatical accuracy, phonological control, sociolinguistic appropriateness). Since these arguably lie at least partly beyond the scope of introspective self-assessment, this may be a limitation not just of self-assessment in the ELP but of self-assessment in language learning generally. A second limitation should also be noted: there is no principled way of determining how many descriptors define a level or how many communicative tasks one must be able to perform in order to achieve a level. This is a potential trap for unwary learners and teachers, who may claim that a level has been achieved on the basis of a developed capacity to perform just one or two tasks at that level.

III A practical example: defining, teaching and assessing an ESL curriculum for Irish primary schools

1 The background

Since the mid 1990s Ireland has received unprecedented numbers of refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers. As a consequence there has been a sudden and substantial influx of non-English-speaking pupils into the Irish school system. Official policy is to assign such pupils to mainstream classes from the outset, but to provide them with English language (ESL) support for one or two hours each day on a withdrawal basis. The immediate purpose of such support is to facilitate access to the mainstream curriculum, which is delivered through English except in a minority of Irish-medium schools. ESL support also plays a key role in drawing non-English-speaking pupils into the school community and preparing them for integration in the larger community outside school. Each non-English-speaking pupil is entitled to two years of ESL support, though the Department of Education and Science is prepared to consider requests for more extended support in individual cases.

The population of newcomer pupils is unevenly distributed. Many primary schools still have no non-English-speaking pupils, many have fewer than 10, and a few have as many as 100. There are no official records of the number of first languages represented in the school system, but surveys of the newcomer population suggest that there must be at least 70; some informed estimates put the figure as

high as 120. In some schools there are large numbers of pupils from two or three first language backgrounds, while in other schools there are fewer non-English-speaking pupils but more first languages. To make the situation even more difficult to manage, newcomer pupils may arrive at any time during the school year.

For the most part ESL support is delivered by qualified primary teachers in full-time or part-time posts. Their formal training includes the teaching of Irish as a second language (though teachers' own proficiency levels are often quite low), but it does not include ESL teaching or the assessment of L2 proficiency. In the early years of ESL support, schools were provided with funding to pay for teachers and buy teaching resources but were otherwise left to their own devices. They had no ESL curriculum, no dedicated teaching materials, and no guidance on how to assess pupils' progress. In 2000 the Refugee Language Support Unit (now Integrate Ireland Language and Training, a not-for-profit campus company of Trinity College Dublin) was given the task of remedying these deficiencies.

2 Developing the ESL curriculum

Our first step in developing the ESL curriculum was to draw a map of the ground to be covered. For this we turned to the CEFR. The majority of newcomer pupils have little or no English when they are admitted to primary school, so levels A1 and A2 were clearly relevant. On the other hand, it is not the purpose of ESL support to turn newcomer pupils into native speakers of English but to bring them to the threshold of full participation in the mainstream. This consideration enabled us to identify B1 as the appropriate exit level.

The CEFR's descriptors focus mostly on L2 communication outside formal educational contexts, and on the whole imply adolescent and adult language learners/users. Clearly, therefore, we could not use the first three common reference levels without adapting them to the age of our learners and their particular learning focus: the language and communication skills they need in order to access the Irish primary curriculum. We did this by identifying 14 recurrent themes in the official curriculum for primary schools – myself; our school; food and clothes; colours, shapes and opposites; people who help us; weather; transport and travel; seasons, holidays and festivals; the local and wider community; time; people and places in other areas; animals and plants; water; caring for my locality – and using these to provide a focus for rewriting CEFR descriptors. We also established two teacher focus groups to serve as a sounding

board. In their original version (Refugee Language Support Unit, 2000) the resultant English Language Proficiency Benchmarks offered a global scale of communicative proficiency and 14 scales ('units of work') related to the curriculum themes. The hierarchy of communicative tasks embodied in the benchmarks corresponded closely to teachers' sense of the stages of learning that their pupils passed through, and it says much for the intuitive appeal of the CEFR approach that the benchmarks were immediately adopted and used.

In 2003 we substantially revised the benchmarks (Integrate Ireland Language and Training, 2003; www.iilt.ie), adding global scales of underlying linguistic competence adapted from the CEFR (vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, phonological control, orthographic control) in order to complement content with performance standards, and omitting 'water' from the thematic scales. Our revision drew on three years of regular discussion of the benchmarks with ESL support teachers at in-service seminars, and we tested our new descriptors against teachers' experience and intuitions at a series of in-service seminars in the autumn of 2003. Working in small groups, teachers sorted descriptors into levels, following the procedure advocated by North *et al.* (2003). The ease with which teachers were able to perform this task provided us with informal validation, which we have not yet been able to confirm formally.

The following example will serve to illustrate the general scope of the benchmarks. In the CEFR, A1 reading is defined thus (Council of Europe, 2001: 26):

I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.

For the same level and skill our global benchmarks carry this definition:

Can recognize the letters of the alphabet. Can recognize and understand basic signs and simple notices in the school and on the way to school. Can recognize and understand basic words on labels or posters in the classroom. Can identify basic words and phrases in a new piece of text.

The two relevant global benchmarks of underlying linguistic competence are defined thus:

Vocabulary control: Can recognize, understand and use a limited range of basic vocabulary which has been used repeatedly in class or has been specifically taught.

Grammatical accuracy: Can use a very limited number of grammatical structures and simple sentence patterns that he/she has learnt by repeated use (e.g., 'My name is ...').

For the unit of work 'food and clothes', A1 reading we have:

Can recognize and understand the names of basic foods. Can recognize and understand the names of the principal items of clothing.

The English Language Proficiency Benchmarks are subject to three limitations. First, although they were developed with as much care as we could muster, and on the basis of detailed knowledge of the CEFR and its descriptors, the extent to which they correspond to the CEFR is uncertain. It is in any case unclear how far proficiency levels designed for adults can be applied to young learners. Secondly, the descriptive apparatus used in the benchmarks falls a long way short of the complexity of the CEFR: we offer only inventories of communicative tasks and summary descriptions of just four dimensions of 'language quality'. This limitation was imposed partly by lack of resources, but partly also by consideration for the audience the benchmarks were designed for: not specialists in curriculum design or language testers, but practising teachers with little or no prior experience of the field. Thirdly, the benchmarks apply to learners who range in age from 4½ to 12 years. This means that they must be interpreted with a degree of flexibility that may sometimes undermine whatever integrity they possess. Despite these limitations, however, the benchmarks have proved highly effective. In particular, their communicative orientation has helped to foster teaching approaches that focus on learning by doing and give meaning priority over linguistic form, and their three levels mark a clear path that leads pupils to full integration in the mainstream.

3 Supporting teaching and learning

Having developed the benchmarks on the basis of the CEFR, it was an obvious next step to devise a version of the ELP to serve both as a basic tool of classroom implementation and as a means of enabling learners and teachers to track the learning process. The ELP's pedagogical functions – helping to make language learning more transparent to the learner, and promoting the development of learner autonomy – were clearly harmonious with the learner-centred ethos of the primary curriculum and its concern with the growth of metacognitive awareness and skills (compare with Gipps, 2002). This made the ELP immediately attractive to teachers. In the early stages of our project we often heard stories of newcomer pupils who rapidly developed proficiency in the spoken language but lagged behind in their acquisition of literacy skills. The fact that the ELP is

a written record of learning gave teachers a new means of focusing on reading and writing skills.

Our ELP for primary ESL learners has a passport section that briefly records the learner's language background and profile and substitutes a simplified version of the global benchmarks of English language proficiency for the self-assessment grid from the CEFR. Progress across each of the three levels is recorded at regular intervals using three criteria, namely: with a lot of help, with some help, without help – which takes account of the gradual nature of language learning.

The language biography section has a goal-setting and self-assessment checklist for each of the theme-related units of work. Within each checklist the descriptors are grouped according to level, but in the interests of user-friendliness we do not distinguish visually between the five communicative skills. The A1 checklist for food and clothes, for example, has the following items:

- I can understand the names of the clothes I wear to school and the food I eat in school.
- I can read the words for the clothes I know and the food I like and don't like.
- I can ask for things in shops and ask how much they cost.
- I can say what food and clothes I like and don't like.
- I can write words for different foods and for the clothes we wear.

Cumulatively the checklists restate the ESL curriculum content as elaborated in the benchmarks. In other words, they largely escape the problem that quantity of descriptors poses for ELPs designed to support general language learning (compare the second limitation stated at the end of Section II above).

The dossier section contains some generic pages for recording different aspects of learning: for example, lists of vocabulary, summaries of books read. Over time we have developed an array of worksheets and support materials for inclusion in the dossier, which also accommodates materials developed by teachers. The revised ELP for primary ESL learners (Integrate Ireland Language and Training, 2004) can be downloaded from Integrate Ireland Language and Training's website (www.iilt.ie).

One especially successful ESL teacher uses the theme-related units of work in the benchmarks to plan a cycle of teaching that as far as possible shadows the thematic progression of teaching in her pupils' mainstream classes. She also includes in her plan projects that focus on significant seasonal events, e.g., Halloween, Christmas,

Easter. She teaches her pupils in groups determined by age and to some extent level of proficiency in English, but all groups follow the same general plan of learning. Writing activities play a central role in her classes, and all her pupils' written work has one of three destinations: their ELP dossier, the classroom wall, or a large scrapbook related to one of the seasonal events. As the school year progresses, the individual learners' ELPs, the classroom walls and the class scrapbooks cumulatively reflect the learning that has taken place. Because pupils of all ages and proficiency levels are working according to the same general plan, they can learn from one another's texts; and because ESL classes are small, the teacher is able to give attention to issues of particular concern to mainstream teachers.

In this approach the checklists in the language biography are used about once a fortnight, when learners spend a few minutes identifying the themes they have covered, new tasks they can perform, and the goals they will pursue in the next phase of learning. Especially with very young learners this process must be guided and supported by the teacher, but it is nevertheless self-assessment. There is, after all, a world of difference between the teacher telling her learners what they have achieved and helping them to recognize their achievement for themselves. The cumulative self-assessment in the language biography is summarized in the language passport every two months or so. In this way pupils gradually develop an awareness not only of their own progress but of the scope and direction of the ESL curriculum.

4 The need for language tests

Thanks to the structure of the ELP itself and the close relation between the ELP and the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks, each learner's ELP shows where he or she stands at any time in relation to the goals of the ESL curriculum. Such evidence is useful to the pupil, the ESL teacher, the class teacher, the school principal, school inspectors, and the pupil's parents. There are nevertheless four reasons why it is now necessary to develop assessment instruments that complement the teacher-supported self-assessment of the ELP. First, in an educational culture in which self-assessment is still a novelty, there is a strong desire to confirm that the individual pupil's ELP is a true reflection of his or her proficiency and not the result of over-optimistic evaluation by pupil or teacher. Secondly, because (as noted above) self-assessment in the ELP focuses on communicative

behaviour rather than underlying linguistic competence, teachers need assessment instruments that will help them to identify what learners have still to achieve in vocabulary, grammar, phonology and orthography. Thirdly, schools need tests in order to measure the English language proficiency (if any) of newly arrived pupils and the level of proficiency achieved at the end of the statutory two years of ESL support. And, fourthly, the design and implementation of communicative language tests are essential to the process of validating our English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and ELP checklists.

In this phase of our project we are committed to developing batteries of placement, progress and achievement tests that can be administered and scored by teachers in the non-threatening context of the ESL support class. Generic test tasks will be based on the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and the ELP checklists. Like the CEFR, these do not provide enough detail to fully specify test content (compare Weir, this issue; Alderson *et al.*, 2004). For this we shall draw on teaching materials widely used in ESL support and developed in accordance with the official primary curriculum. The first batteries of tests are being piloted in two phases: speaking and writing in the autumn of 2004, and listening and reading in the spring of 2005.

For the speaking and writing tests we have devised rating scales that are based on our global scales of underlying linguistic competence (vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, phonological control, orthographic control), but define three sub-levels for each of the levels A1, A2 and B1. For example, in relation to speaking tasks the three sub-levels for A1 vocabulary control are defined thus (in ascending order):

- Uses few items of vocabulary. Tends to nod rather than speak. Appears not to understand some basic vocabulary that has been taught in class.
- Recognizes familiar vocabulary. Cannot always use the correct word and may point or gesture instead.
- Is able to use the basic vocabulary that has been taught in class. Does not display serious difficulties within a basic and limited range.

Preliminary trials suggest that a small amount of training should enable teachers who are thoroughly familiar with the benchmarks and checklists to apply these rating scales with acceptable accuracy and consistency.

At a series of in-service seminars held in different parts of the country in the autumn of 2004, volunteers were recruited to pilot

tests of speaking and writing. This involved administering the tests in the course of language support classes, audio-recording tests of speaking, rating pupils' test performance, and sending us audio recordings, photocopies of written tasks, completed rating grids, and feedback on various aspects of test design, administration and rating. Tests of listening and reading are being piloted in the spring of 2005. The data we gather in this way should provide a general indication of how reliable our assessment procedures are likely to be when used throughout the country.

At the end of this phase of our project we shall be in a position to launch a full empirical investigation into the validity of our benchmarks and checklists and the validity and reliability of our tests. The results of such an investigation would then motivate another cycle of development: further refinement of benchmarks and checklists, further development of teaching procedures and learning materials, further elaboration of tests. At the time of writing it is uncertain whether we shall secure the funding necessary to proceed in this way. But even if we do not, we are confident that our curriculum, pedagogical orientation, learning materials and assessment procedures are infinitely preferable to anything that more traditional approaches could have yielded.

IV Conclusion: towards a new assessment culture

In state education systems public examinations typically stand at some distance from teaching and learning. What is more, they often apply criteria of dubious validity. Thus, when language teachers focus their main pedagogical effort on what they perceive to be exam requirements, the learning that takes place is easily constrained and distorted in ways not envisaged by the curriculum. In particular, it is not unusual for learners to be able to score relatively well on examination tasks without having developed the communicative proficiency that the tasks are alleged to test.

A solution to this problem lies with the CEFR, which provides a basis for specifying a communicative curriculum, planning a programme of learning, selecting learning tasks and materials, and developing assessment procedures. The key phrase here is 'provides a basis'. A consensus is already emerging among language testers that the CEFR's descriptors in themselves contain insufficient information to generate test content; and the example described in this article suggests that the same is true when the CEFR is applied

to curriculum design. Yet the fact remains that the common reference levels allow us to approach curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment from the same communicative perspective.

As my practical example has shown, when the CEFR and the ELP are adapted to a specific domain of language learning, they open up the possibility of developing an assessment culture in which language tests are much more closely related to teaching and learning than has usually been the case. The ELP offers to play a key role in such a culture because it assigns a central role to self-assessment and the development of the individual language learner's reflective capacities. It is not that self-assessment should (or could) replace assessment by teachers and/or external authorities. Rather, by developing their self-assessment skills learners gain 'insider' access to the processes of 'social moderation' that underlie the CEFR's common reference levels and to the interaction between curriculum and assessment that is fundamental to any worthwhile educational enterprise.

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