10 'Assessment recollected in tranquillity': the ECEP project and the key concepts of the CEFR

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Abstract

A decade after the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001), practitioners' relationship with this fundamental tool is still rather ambivalent and certainly not homogeneous. Very often teachers feel hesitant, asking themselves if what they are doing is consistent with the CEFR guidelines. This scenario, with some minor variations, can be observed in several European countries. This contribution discusses some of the major concepts which constitute the new vision introduced by the CEFR, focusing on their impact on teaching practice. In particular, the data collected during the piloting phase of the project entitled *Encouraging the culture of evaluation among practitioners: The case of language teachers* (ECEP) is presented. These were quite homogeneous in various contexts despite differences in teaching/learning cultures. Finally, the article explains how the project builds on these results in order to produce a tool, *Pathways through assessing, learning and teaching in the CEFR* (Piccardo, Berchoud, Cignatta, Mentz and Pamula 2011), to support teacher educators in building a more complex vision of language teaching and learning.

Introduction

The choice of title which paraphrases William Wordsworth which paraphrases his ideal of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' is not just a literary device. On the contrary, it is a way of trying and synthesizing several aspects relating to assessment which need particular attention and reflection.

Exactly 10 years after the publication of the CEFR (in its paper version), it is time to reflect on the vast and deep process of change that this document has started. A decade is a time span big enough to allow for reconsidering both the content and the structure of this document from a distance. It is

also an opportune time for studying its impact so far and its potential for the future in the European context and beyond. This distance is necessary for getting clarity of vision, which is the basis for greater objectivity.

Other reasons justify the choice of title. Reflecting in tranquillity on assessment allows bringing out the numerous concepts implied in and related to this fundamental phase of the teaching/learning process. Assessment is a very complex endeavour, which involves different actors playing different roles, which requires different tools, each with a specific function and which implies choices at every stage (Bachman and Palmer 2010). No single solution – whether right or wrong – is provided to practitioners, but rather an intricate network where they are constantly at a crossroad and every choice they make has different consequences and implies different feedback.

Finally, the choice of this title aims at bringing the reader one step further. Practitioners see the big picture of assessment and perceive its underlying complexity and multitude of elements, in much the same way as the poet insists on the unity of the daffodils, on the fact that they formed altogether something like a living organism, even though he was aware of the fact that this unity was shaped by thousands of individual elements.

In keeping with what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim – that the laws of thought are metaphorical rather than logical – a 'literary' and metaphorical approach to assessment is in reality not odd or misplaced, but rather, it may help practitioners grasp the multidimensionality and complexity of this delicate aspect of their profession and mission.

The idea of building on different aspects to form an ensemble can in fact be better supported by a metaphorical vision than by a logical and strictly Cartesian one, where the focus would be on subdividing everything into discrete elements as much as possible in order to analyze them separately (Damasio 1994, 1999). The metaphorical approach would not deny any of the logical-rational implications of assessment; rather it would, in addition, allow some space for all the implications that somehow resist to complete rationalization, like, for instance, the issue of objectivity or balance between reliability and practicality.
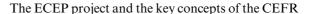
The CEFR in reality: different scenarios

Before dealing with assessment specifically, we need to dedicate some space to the actual situation of the CEFR and to some scholarly discussions about its strengths and weaknesses, as well as to its impact in the contexts where it has been implemented.

Although extensive international studies on the impact of the CEFR on language teaching practices and language proficiency are still missing, an overview of different studies, articles and reports on the actual situation concerning the CEFR shows some common threads that appear to be very

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enlightening (Alderson 2002, Byrnes 2007, Coste 2007, Figueras 2007, Little, 2006, 2007, 2011, Morrow 2004, North 2007, Schärer 2007, Westhoff 2007). Similar concerns can be observed despite the difference of contexts and the variable impact of the CEFR, which depends on several factors relating both to institutional aspects and to the personality and professional vision of each individual practitioner.

We can definitely observe a consensus throughout on the fact that the CEFR has already played, and is still playing, a major role on the language learning and teaching landscape in Europe, and that even though a lot remains to be done, the impact is on the whole pretty encouraging. As Schärer (2007:11) observed:

> Evidence is emerging that the visions and concepts at the heart of the CEFR do have a predominately positive effect on learning and teaching, but also that a sustained effort over a long period of time will be needed to implement the visions and concepts into the daily school routine. Europe and the "state-of-the-art" in language education have changed profoundly since 1991 and 2001. Certainly not all credit can be attributed to the CoE [Council of Europe] and the CEFR. There is evidence, however, that their contributions have been considerable.

Nevertheless, some researchers underline how the CEFR 'is struggling to reach into classroom contexts' (Byrnes 2007:682) and even though 'it can proudly point to having been adopted at the highest policy levels of most of the Council's member states . . . its ability to change the frame of reference of teacher educators and their classroom practices at this point proves elusive' (ibid). Others (Coste 2007, Goullier 2007, Little 2006) point to the fact that the general knowledge of the CEFR is limited, thus resulting in a very partial implementation. Coste (2007, 2011) underlines how the CEFR has undergone a curious process he defines as 'reversed metonymy' (the whole – the CEFR – indicating a part, i.e. scales of descriptors of language proficiency, instead of the part indicating the whole as in a usual metonymy). Little stresses the fact that 'to date, its impact on language testing far outweighs its impact on curriculum design and pedagogy' (2007:648), thus pointing at a reduced implementation of the CEFR potential.

Moreover, several researchers (Alderson 2007, Hulstijn 2007, Little 2007) – sometimes coming from opposite perspectives – call for specific research that would integrate and refine the CEFR and introduce further developments. The increasing interest for – and use of – the CEFR beyond the European borders is also presently contributing to highlight strengths and weaknesses of the tool and to point at possible developments (Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford and Clément 2011). This quest for new reflection and research is the natural consequence of the process started by the CEFR, which implies innovation in language education and assessment at all levels,

and is certainly welcome and timely. What should be stressed though is the need for the 'philosophy' of the CEFR to be understood by practitioners so that both dimensions of this tool, the testing and the pedagogic one – what Little (2007) calls respectively the vertical and the horizontal dimensions – are seen as more interdependent and mutually beneficial. As Byrnes explains:

> although both policy trajectories [top down from policy makers and bottom up from educators' level, editor's note] can realize noteworthy successes, their long-term ability to affect how countries enact multilingualism or plurilingualism and cultural identity in educational contexts now and into the future depends on a jointly constructed symbolic space whose creation, to the extent possible and as early as possible, involves all players (2007: 682).

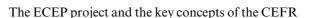This process is not seen as an easy one but ultimately as the most apt to realize the potential of the tool.

This very synthetic overview points to some of the concerns researchers expressed about the CEFR and its impact on the practice of language teaching and assessing in the different contexts. These concerns, together with shared observations deriving from the team members' professional experience in the field of teacher education, backed up the starting hypotheses of the four-year European project *Encouraging the Culture of Evaluation Among Practitioners: the case of language teachers (ECEP)* (http://ecep. ecml.at). They also helped us, the team members, decide if the material we intended to produce was potentially suitable to respond to some of the teachers' needs. All of us had been involved in teacher education for several years in four European countries (France, Italy, Poland and Germany) and had operated both within and outside our respective countries. What we had observed was very consistent beyond the differences of contexts and of teaching and assessing cultures: the CEFR remained only partially known and its different components were not seen as forming a synergy able to foster and scaffold an innovative vision of the teaching/learning process to be implemented into the class in an effective and relatively straightforward manner.
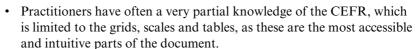
Our hypotheses

What has just been presented only reports the main trends of the situation we are faced with in the contexts where the CEFR has been officially introduced. It serves to somehow situate the investigation we had intended to conduct at the beginning of our project. Among those mentioned above, the studies published before 2008, the year in which the project began, also supported, among others, our hypotheses, which were essentially the following:

- Practitioners have often a very partial knowledge of the CEFR, which is limited to the grids, scales and tables, as these are the most accessible and intuitive parts of the document.
- There is a difficulty in integrating the CEFR into everyday practice. This could be due to its universal character together with the lack of targeted examples of how to bridge the gap between universality of theoretical assumptions and contextualized practice. Besides, we thought that the CEFR might be seen as an extra burden by practitioners.
- There is fundamentally a lack of targeted training with regard to the CEFR. For economic reasons mainly, training is usually limited to presentation of the document, often to multipliers, who in turn are called to present to other groups of teachers, the principles cascading from one level to the other and being homeopathically diluted.
- The fourth hypothesis is strictly linked to the previous one and completes it: not only is the economic reason detrimental to the quality of training but also, the lack of support and resources for training plays a major role.

These were the starting hypotheses and they were consistent with what can be seen as 'the general situation' concerning the CEFR. However, the aim of the ECEP project was to focus on assessment, mainly because one of the strengths of the CEFR is the idea of linking assessment to the entire teaching and learning process and to make practitioners aware of its complexity and of the need to make targeted choices at all steps (Tudor 2001). In our opinion, practitioners need a great deal of support in this delicate process, which appears to be crucial for introducing real innovation into language teaching and learning.

The largest part of our data therefore focused on assessment, as we wanted to study specifically the impact of the CEFR on the culture of evaluation in different contexts.

Data collection

Data was collected in four different countries (France, Italy, Germany and Poland) in the period between February and November 2008. The data collection was subdivided into two phases:

1. A piloting phase where a sample of teachers were asked to participate in a survey by completing a questionnaire followed by a 45-minute discussion on the answers and comments they had provided in the questionnaire. Participants' selection was done on the basis of the following criteria:

- type of school: junior secondary needed to be represented together with senior secondary
- profile of the school: a more innovative and a more traditional one

- experience in the profession: we deliberately chose some teachers who were not newly recruited and some others who were novice and were theoretically supposed to have undergone training for the CEFR or at least have been presented it

- gender of the practitioners: women being usually more numerous in the teaching profession, we tried to have more women than men (even though this was not possible in all contexts).

These samples were supposed to provide an initial, general, picture and to help us facilitate the focus groups.

2. A second phase where each member of the ECEP group conducted a series of focus groups specifically targeting the assessment dimension and the integration of the everyday practice of the CEFR.

Nearly 100 teachers in total participated in the research. A minimum of two focus groups was planned in each country (double in France as two members of the team were in that country and as the institutional representatives, principals and inspectors, were particularly interested in the study and encouraged participation) and this was not only honoured but also surpassed in most cases. Ten focus groups were conducted in Italy and France altogether with a fair number of participants each (six to 10 participants depending on the size of the school and the interest in the topic). Participation was a bit lower in the other two countries (Poland and Germany), either in terms of number of participants in each focus group or in terms of the difficulty in organizing focus groups in general, as often teachers seemed to perceive the exchange as an extra burden.

The questioning and discussion were guided by the five basic Wh-questions (who, what, when, where, how). To each of these guiding questions, the fundamental reflection on what impact the CEFR had had and how things had changed was systematically added.

Each focus group was recorded and transcribed. Recurrences and significant points in relation to the hypotheses were coded, sorted out, and later summarized. The summaries were used as a basis for devizing the first draft of the 'guide' and a first sample of draft worksheets of the 'training kit'. These two components (guide and kit) would constitute the core of the future final publication of the ECEP project.

These drafts were submitted to a panel of 29 experts who each came from a different country of the Council of Europe, plus two project consultants. They all gathered in Graz in March 2009 to discuss the findings of the study. These experts also reported to the group about the impact of the CEFR in their contexts and on the issues and challenges practitioners were faced with. The input of the experts was highly important for finalizing the ECEP publication in terms of content as well as organization.

Impact of the CEFR on assessment

The results of the data allowed us to focus on the impact that the CEFR has had (and continues to have) on the assessment dimension of the teaching/learning process. In particular, in line with the title of the project (*Encouraging the Culture of Evaluation Among Professionals*), we wanted to investigate if the CEFR had modified the vision teachers had of the nature and role of assessment, if there was in this respect a 'before the CEFR' and an 'after the CEFR' and what exactly it consisted of. The most significant aspects that emerged from the data will be summarized hereafter.

The first big difference refers to the complexity of assessment in general and to the different components and implications of this phase of the teaching/learning process.

Teachers reported that they have become aware of the fact that assessing is a very complex process and that many aspects need to be taken into consideration; at the same time they said that they had realized how, before integrating the CEFR, the different components were hidden and how the whole process was somehow 'unconscious' to them.

The second form of awareness reported was the difference between assessing and grading. Teachers consistently stressed how intermingled these two processes had been beforehand. For some teachers, this distinction appeared to be very positive and relieving; for some others it was rather worrying and they felt pretty insecure about how to deal with it in practical terms.

Linked to this point was another important one. After the integration of the CEFR the possibility of giving specific grading to specific competences or to communicative activities related to task accomplishment instead of a global grade was seen by the vast majority of teachers as a very positive aspect.

Some of them pointed to the fact that a global scale was frustrating whereas specific, differentiated grades contributed to a sense of achievement. Only a minority of the teachers expressed a sense of insecurity, saying that differentiated grades would make the picture confusing and would not be really effective.

Another important aspect that had been greatly influenced by the introduction of the CEFR was the new vision of the oral component. Teachers recognized that the new stress on oral interaction as a communicative activity distinct from oral production was a real turning point in their practice and obliged them to reconsider not only the way they assessed communicative activities of production and interaction but also the methodology of teaching oral communication.

With respect to their relationship with institutional constraints and specifically the curriculum, teachers expressed a sense of freedom. The possibility of organizing contents and skills around tasks to be performed in a second

language (L2) gave a sense of empowerment to a considerable number of practitioners who saw it as a way to set their creativity free and to plan and to really implement contextualized learning activities. On the other hand some other practitioners were puzzled by such a shift and felt not completely at ease, as they found it difficult to see how they would be able to follow the CEFR and the curriculum at the same time.

This diversified attitude of teachers, who were either excited or afraid, could also be observed in the two final important aspects on which the CEFR had had a great impact, i.e. the way errors should be considered and the responsibility of different stakeholders.

In spite of the different contexts and traditions where we collected our data, errors seemed to have a rather negative connotation everywhere. In some contexts more than in others certainly – for instance, in France errors seemed more stigmatized than in Italy – but on the whole, errors tended not to be seen in a constructive way (i.e. as part of the learning process). Teachers were unanimous in recognizing that the CEFR had fostered a change in this respect. Errors were seen as a sign of the ability – and willingness – to take risks. In this respect, a French teacher used a very interesting expression: 'erreur constructible', which stressed the new dynamic vision of the language learning process. The other aspect mentioned, the responsibility of the different stakeholders, was also generally recognized as an asset of the CEFR and a form of freedom for the teacher. By making the process more transparent and sharing the responsibility with the learners along a continuum which extends all the way to self-assessment, teachers felt themselves liberated from the weight of exclusive responsibility and therefore also from the fear of making mistakes.

Between new perspectives and doubts: the need for empowerment

The data presented above and the different reactions and reflections of practitioners provided a solid base for the project as it not only validated the hypotheses of the team members, but went well beyond that, by providing important insights into the paradigm shift that the CEFR was about to provoke in the assessment process and more generally in the language teaching process.

It is important to point out that during a later observation the results of the ECEP study were consistent with data provided by other studies. A Dutch study presented at the 4th ALTE conference (Krakow, 2011) by Moonen and de Graff (Utrecht University) and Corda (Leiden University), *Implementing the CEFR in Dutch secondary education: impact on FL teachers' educational and assessment practice* has particular relevance here. The reported increased awareness in different domains related to assessment, as

well as the need for more targeted professional development, are only two examples of such consistency.

Using the same data presented above, I will try and summarize below the fundamental points that constitute the new perspectives and ideas the teachers whom we interviewed seemed to have gained from the CEFR and also to present the main challenges they were – and still are – faced with.
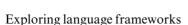
- *Assessment is complex and multidimensional.* There is not just one assessment but many assessments, i.e. different forms of assessment targeting many goals and justified by different reasons. Assessment involves many actors using different tools at different moments. It is a complex process with different implications.
- *Assessment can support and foster learning.* Assessment is no longer seen as the final moment of a process but rather as a fundamental pillar of the learning (and teaching) process able to play a steering role in the process itself.
- *Responsibility can be shared.* Teachers are no longer the only ones in charge of assessing, nor are they the only ones who bear the responsibility of the whole process. Learners share this responsibility to a greater or lesser extent. This involves an increase in transparency and awareness on both sides.
- *Making errors is a natural process.* In a dynamic perspective, the process of language learning becomes a trial-and-error one, where learners are encouraged to take risks and to reflect upon their own errors and mistakes. This awareness-raising journey is able to scaffold effective learning.
- *Profiles are dynamic.* In the process of learning languages nothing is static, learners construct their own profiles by increasing different competences in different languages and by acquiring targeted strategies.
- *Learning the language is not only about the language.* The action-oriented approach proposed by the CEFR stresses the need to learn languages to perform tasks that are more and more real-life tasks, where the language is a means rather than a goal in itself.
- *Freedom of adapting.* Practitioners are given great freedom of adapting, customizing and also creating according to their own needs, objectives and contexts. This freedom comes with a much higher level of awareness and responsibility for operating the most effective choices possible.

Nevertheless, teachers do not live in a utopian world but rather in a real one where constraints and obligations still play an important role. Therefore, they are still torn by several doubts and insecurities.

The first, and maybe major one, is the disconnect teachers feel between

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the institutional constraints and the freedom and flexibility advocated by the CEFR. One French teacher used the term 'schizophrénie' to better explain this feeling. They also feel a disconnect between the types of testing, i.e. the ideal ones and the required ones, which they exemplified with the need for testing oral activities, this being often in conflict with the institutional demand focusing on written tests. The second important problem teachers pointed out, was the time management issue. Teachers felt particularly worried by the time oral testing requires and also by the time they need to prepare targeted grids and to implement them adequately.

Finally, teachers expressed a certain need for training even though they were not specific. Moreover, they had a very unclear picture of what this training should look like, how it should be conducted, but also at a deeper level, what goals such training should pursue in the end.

On a more general level, beyond and above the specific domain of assessing, teachers testified that, overall, the CEFR has had great impact on teaching (and learning) practice at all levels, but also that this impact was not at all homogeneous from neither a quantitative nor a qualitative point of view. Practitioners seemed to perceive the great potential of this tool and, at a more or less conscious level, the force of innovation that is intrinsic to it. In general, they showed considerable interest in the CEFR but at the same time they acted very carefully when it was time to implement it. Some critical voices were also to be heard during the study. In particular, especially in more centralized contexts such as the French one, the CEFR was perceived as a new institutional constraint rather than an asset by some practitioners and in general this was the feeling that some of them expressed, especially when they felt they were 'left alone' with the CEFR. We noticed that some teachers, particularly the more experienced ones, feared the risk of the CEFR being just the last trend in language pedagogy, thus having to implement something that would be out of fashion pretty soon.

Finally, the complexity of the tool proved an obstacle everywhere, beyond the differences of context and of pedagogical tradition.
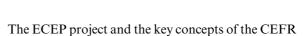
All that paved the way to our project, which was included in the four-year plan of the European Centre for Modern Languages called *Empowering language professionals*.

The ECEP project

The data presented above indicated that practitioners who have been in contact with the CEFR and have tried to implement it, have started a process: not only are they reflecting and asking themselves more and more questions but they have also started connecting different aspects of their reflection and trying (and sometimes struggling) to make sense of all these links and conceptual density and, above all, to really integrate it into their practice.

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Bearing all this in mind, we set three main aims for the ECEP project:

1. Building self-confidence.
2. Developing a free and autonomous attitude.
3. Fostering professionalism.

Teachers' image and mission often suffer from social, technological and also political changes (Cachet 2009, Perrenoud 1996, 1999). This can be observed in many contexts, even if with slightly different connotations and characteristics. Education is not something neutral; on the contrary, it is often at the centre of political and ideological debates and practitioners may feel under pressure, as they need to adjust very quickly to deep and significant socio-political modifications such as the effect of new immigration policies or investment and budget changes. They may also feel anxiety with regard to their ability to effectively integrate new technological devices into their everyday practice. Faced with these expectations, practitioners may feel puzzled or overwhelmed. Building a sense of self-confidence appears therefore as the main and most urgent objective, if we share the idea that research in education needs to have an impact on practice.

A more self-confident practitioner is able to develop an autonomous attitude towards their own practice and also when it comes to dealing with external tools, institutional guidelines and constraints, suggested policies and innovations (Bandura 1995). In the case of the CEFR, for instance, an autonomous attitude would allow practitioners to avoid a 'for or against' position and to consider the proposed concepts – and contents – through the lens of their own context and vision of the teaching profession. Finally, professionalism is a fundamental aspect in the different domains but particularly in the teaching domain as quite a lot is expected from teachers, who are supposed to construct autonomously – and sometimes, unfortunately, without real support from their community – their own professional competences. The aim of the ECEP project was to help practitioners build their own professionalism, and therefore reinforce their status. In the case of the CEFR, which represents a major tool of innovation at an international level, such a process would in our opinion pass through four phases:

• awareness
• understanding
• appropriation
• implementation.

All four phases needed to be considered during the project, so that practitioners would feel supported in this delicate process, by the final product of the project itself.

The product resulting from the project would therefore be a practical and theoretical tool that aimed to facilitate observation of, and feedback on,

practice. Its aim would be to provide training on the reflective approach, on the principles and backgrounds of the CEFR and the freedom it allows as well as on an integrated and contextualized approach to assessment.

The final product

The title chosen for the publication resulting from the ECEP project was *Pathways through assessing, learning and teaching in the CEFR* (Piccardo, Berchoud, Cignatta, Mentz and Pamula 2011). The choice of this title was justified by, and coherent with, the whole philosophy of the project, which, as previously mentioned, constantly stressed the need for practitioners to find their own way. The double publication consists of a guide and a kit and is integrated by more functional tools such as various indices, grids, schemes and examples of scenarios. Already, by observing the titles of the main chapters in the guide (*Reflexivity: an attitude leading to autonomy*, *Living (with) languages*, *Becoming more competent*, *Assessment*) it is evident that there is a tentative aim to focus on the main categories of the CEFR, which in turn represent a means for embedding the fundamental concepts addressed by this document. The guide proposes itself as a kind of Ariadne's thread to find a way through the labyrinth represented by the CEFR for some practitioners. In fact, as we all know, not only is there a lot behind a learner and teacher's performance, but, as the data revealed, there is also a lot beyond the present knowledge of the CEFR.

From the point of view of its function, the guide has a triple one, i.e. to be a mind map, a support for reflection and a resource to the training kit. The guide can be seen as a kind of mind map as it aims at helping readers grasp the links between the different concepts of the CEFR. It presents internal links as well as consistent links to the CEFR; every concept helps clarify, situate and contextualize the others. Finally, practical applications of the concepts presented and explained in the guide can be found in the kit where all worksheets include links to the guide itself and to the CEFR, so as to stress the circular approach adopted.

The guide is a support for reflection not only because of its link to the kit but also for the structure of the text itself. A reflective practitioner follows a non-linear approach: the CEFR is built in a non-linear way despite the graphical presentation, and so is the guide.

Concepts are explained, contextualized and linked to each other and this is organized in a recursive way, which helps readers explore things from different angles. Within *Pathways* several movements are made possible, both forwards and backwards (*CEFR–Guide–Kit–Own practice*). This helps to foster awareness as it supports the process of reconsidering both practice and theory at different moments and from different perspectives.

The guide constitutes a resource to the kit. By providing a first, easily

accessible, explanation of the key concepts of the CEFR, the guide makes it easier to link theory to practice. It scaffolds reflective processes and fosters applied research and, in the long run, it provides practitioners with evidence of their ability (and of the feasibility) to implement the CEFR philosophy.

On the other side of the guide, and complementary to it, the kit provides a practical, customizable tool for grasping key concepts of the CEFR through clear understanding and reflection on these concepts and to practically consider their application, and applicability, to the different teaching and learning contexts and situations. It consists of over a hundred double worksheets (type A are more conceptual and type B are more practice oriented), in the same format in order to facilitate usage. They include links to the guide, the CEFR and other resources. Teacher educators, and through them teachers both in their pre-service and in-service teacher education, who are willing to share knowledge, reflection and know-how with colleagues, constitute the target group.

Scaffolding reflection and fostering professionalism: an example

As we could see from the analysis of the data, one of the main results of the implementation of the CEFR was a new awareness among practitioners of the complexity of the teaching/learning process. Even though they had not all the answers to their questions, they felt that they were dealing with something very rich in implications and consequences, which required a high degree of awareness to enable them to make targeted and effective choices.

The most emblematic for this new awareness is of course assessment as this is at the core of the CEFR, but potentially other key concepts can disclose a depth of implications for the practice of second language teaching. As a matter of fact this is precisely one of the aims of *Pathways* and of its implementation. Let us take assessment as the epitomizing key area for explaining the way *Pathways* was conceived and meant to help and scaffold reflection and awareness among practitioners.

Multidimensionality of assessment is an expression which may be appropriate to describe the way the CEFR considers – and deals with – this important aspect of the teaching/learning process. For the purpose of this paper I will briefly explain hereafter what this term exactly refers to. For a more detailed and complete explanation of this concept I refer the reader to Piccardo (in press 2012).

The three fundamental concepts of validity, reliability and feasibility constitute a sort of underlying foundation of every discourse in this area and they are necessarily evoked. But above these three fundamental categories, the CEFR emphasizes the two key questions it is concerned with:

'what is assessed?' and 'how is performance interpreted?' (Council of Europe 2001:178), thus providing a second layer, the possible uses of the CEFR, i.e. specifying the content of tests (what is assessed), formulating criteria capable of discriminating (how to interpret the performance) and consequently describing levels allowing comparison (how to compare). Both these layers – underlying principles and possible uses of the CEFR – encompass and go beyond the test itself and the performance during a test. In fact, chapter 4 of the CEFR (2001:43–100) focuses on descriptors of communicative activities, i.e. on what the learner can do at a precise moment, and descriptors of competences included in chapter 5 (2001:101–130) provide practitioners with a good basis for describing and categorizing what can be inferred through the performance, i.e. the competences, which the CEFR categorizes not only as linguistic competences but also as general competences. Moreover, the CEFR stresses a vertical dimension of language proficiency in general, and therefore also of assessment, by 'an ascending series of common reference levels for describing learner proficiency' (2001:16).

Finally, the use of strategies serves as a link to both the vertical and the horizontal dimension as learners use strategies to perform tasks and at the same time understand through their performance which strategies contribute most to the enhancement of their different competences and how they can progress more effectively in their language proficiency.

As the assessment process needs to be as accurate and as targeted as possible in order to be effective, several assessment tools and resources are necessary. Descriptors, grids, checklists, tables and scales all constitute possible ways of organizing data which are functional to the goal and target group of the assessment action. The format of presentation along with the type of tool chosen plays a big role not only because it increases effectiveness of assessment, but also because a targeted choice is necessary to answer the question 'how to present?', thus adding another layer to the process of assessing.

The CEFR does not only discuss principles, provide descriptors, care for both the horizontal and the vertical dimension of the learning process and present the different layers implied in the assessment, but it also multiplies the types of assessment by classifying them into 13 pairs, each pair being along a continuum. It is clear at this point that practitioners feel rather puzzled or overwhelmed by the wealth of perspectives and layers that the CEFR associates with assessment. The classification into 13 pairs may seem to add insult to injury, resulting in a feeling of discouragement and inadequacy, or in a tendency to refuse to question further and return to old habits.

The consideration of all these factors drove some of the choices made for *Pathways*. In the specific case of assessment, worksheets and passages of the guide were prepared for helping teachers differentiate between different types of grids, checklists and other assessment tools, between types of competences

or of communicative activities, but above all to grasp the different layers and perspectives as well as the major implications of assessment. For this reason, the 13 assessment pairs were regrouped into four macro categories and practitioners were invited to compare pairs which dealt more with the distinction between, for example, competence and action or with the issue of objectivity, or with the question of timing and its influence on the assessment process.

At the same time, and in coherence with the fact that quite a lot of overlapping can be observed between these macro categories and also between the pairs and certain implications and layers I mentioned above, teachers are constantly invited to compare and contrast concepts but also to recognize overlapping and to see possible synergies.

Worksheets and guide chapters and paragraphs together with other parts of the publication should serve as signposts for helping teachers devize their own, targeted, path.

Recollection in tranquillity: towards a new vision

The introduction of the CEFR has already had a considerable impact on foreign/second language teaching all over the European continent and beyond. A process of transparency, coherence and quality assurance in language curricula and testing is being (or has already been) introduced. Nevertheless, the CEFR remains a rather obscure document *per se*, as the rich material it presents is not always easy to access without support and guidance. Practitioners are faced with many different tools and a wealth of concepts, which are not necessarily transparent or easy to access. The necessary mediation process between conceptual density and practical application is a very delicate one, which requires time, dedication and the availability of targeted tools. Supporting practitioners in their self-development process can do a lot.

The CEFR focuses on assessment as a driving force for introducing a paradigm shift into language pedagogy. In a similar way, reflection on assessment and its multidimensionality can start a process of change among practitioners if they have the possibility of grasping all the implications of their choices (Piccardo 2010a).

The CEFR is a complex document, which does not provide ready-made solutions but a wealth of options and resources and also some hints for possible usage. Such wealth runs the risks of remaining unexploited though, unless practitioners are encouraged to adopt a new perspective, a new complex vision of their profession.

According to complexity theory all elements are linked and interdependent. A change in one element of the system has consequences on all other elements. Starting to see the language teaching/learning process as a system allows practitioners to step away from a right or wrong perspective, from the quest of an impossible perfect solution. On the contrary, it allows

them to enter into a new paradigm, where there are choices and a thorough reflection on the consequences of these choices. The process of reflection is potentially able to improve the whole system as it raises awareness among practitioners. Moreover, choices being necessarily context related, this awareness-building process is also able to focus on specific aspects related to each context.

The data collected for the ECEP project clearly showed that the CEFR is potentially able to set such a virtuous circle into motion provided that practitioners are supported in their journey towards accepting complexity, openness to risk-taking and a sense of freedom in approaching and implementing the CEFR in their practice. Practitioners need to work hard to construct their assessment building and they need help to see the single elements that form the big picture of assessment.

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