

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared by the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers

Intended for Canadian policy-makers and curriculum designers, this document addresses the CEFR in the Canadian context, how to work with the CEFR in that context, and considerations in using the CEFR reference levels and the European language portfolio in Canada. In the first section of the document, the European and Canadian contexts are compared in terms of language status, language policies, mobility, curriculum, learning design, learning content and assessment. The authors recognize Canadian expertise in language teaching and learning, reviewing some guiding principles for language program implementation (e.g., the importance of learning languages at an early age, the importance of recognizing and celebrating diverse language and cultural backgrounds in our schools). The section concludes with a reminder of the inherent flexibility of the CEFR as a reference tool:

The CEFR is a reference tool that presents what needs to be considered in the teaching, learning, and assessment process, and raises a series of questions to help educators determine what learners need to know and do with the language. (p. 7)

Section 2 of the document presents a summary of the CEFR chapters. The table below is an attempt to capture the key elements of each chapter of the CEFR. Appendices (not summarized here) include A: developing proficiency descriptors, B: the illustrative scales of descriptors, C: the DIALANG scales, and D: The ALTE “can do” statements.

Table 1: CEFR chapters and summary

Chapter number	Chapter title	Summary
1	The CEFR in its political and educational context	The authors advocate European plurilingualism in which “languages interrelate and interact” (p. 10) in order to enhance cultural understanding and tolerance among societies. In Canada, we recognize two official languages and Aboriginal languages and value “a mosaic of languages and cultures.”
2	Approach adopted	The authors promote an action-oriented approach, viewing “language users and learners as social agents who must accomplish tasks relevant to their life experiences” (p. 10). In Canada, we also value citizenship education based on respect for linguistic and cultural diversity.
3	Common reference levels	The Framework breaks levels of proficiency in a language into three broad categories: basic, independent, and proficient. Each of these has two sublevels. In Canada, we need to tailor these descriptors to young learners in a school setting and subsequently validate them.
4	Language use and the language user/learner	The focus here is on the context for language use. Planned communicative activities are introduced in terms of ‘tasks’ and are applicable, with adaptation for school-aged learners, to Canada as well.
5	The user/learner’s competencies	The learner must acquire include general competencies (e.g., <i>savoir-faire</i> , <i>savoir-être</i> , <i>savoir-apprendre</i>), communicative language competencies (linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic), and cultural and intercultural messages.
6	Language learning and teaching	This chapter deals with the nuts and bolts of language teaching and learning, including the methods and strategies employed. Language awareness is also addressed. In Canada, the characteristics and needs of immigrant students need to be accommodated in an inquiry-based model of instruction. Key descriptors include intercultural, global, integrative and situational.
7	Tasks and their role in language teaching	Tasks are described in terms of degree of difficulty and their cognitive, linguistic and affective demands. In Canada, task-based language learning has co-existed with other approaches such as project-based learning.
8	Linguistic diversification and the curriculum	In this chapter, options for curricular design, along with concepts of assessment and the portfolio are introduced. Stern’s multidimensional curriculum “is presented as a model to support the action-oriented approach adopted for language learning” (p. 15).
9	Assessment	Learning assessment is “based on the fundamental concepts of validity, reliability, and feasibility, and must meet the requirements and standard set out by COE in terms of common levels of reference” (p. 15)

Section 3 of the document is divided into two: the first part defines six common reference levels: Basic user (breakthrough level (A1); way-stage level (A2), Independent user (Breakthrough level (B1), way-stage level (B2), and Proficient user (Effective operational proficiency (C1), mastery level (C2). The authors refer to the multiple scales available in the CEFR (e.g., self-assessment grid, communication strategies) and explain that the Framework is constantly evolving:

...a very important issue is discussing scales of language proficiency is the accurate identification of the purpose the scale is to serve, and an appropriate matching of the formulation of scale descriptors to that purpose” (cited from the CEFR on page 18 of the CMEC document)

In Canada, we must refer to the Kindergarten through grade 12 continuum and validate adapted scales to our context. It is important to transcend the curricula of individual provinces/territories. The development and validation procedure involves six main steps (pp. 19-22):

1. Determine the theoretical framework;
2. Select the validation methodology;
3. Analyze the content of existing scales and develop descriptors for the sub-levels in the Canadian school context;
4. Administer the questionnaire in the schools of participating jurisdictions to identify reference levels for the descriptors it contains;
5. Analyze and validate the data collected;
6. Validate the descriptor formulations.

The second part of section 3 of the document deals with the language portfolio. The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is learner-centred, flexible and transparent. Using the common reference level and descriptors, it is “an organized collection of documents that individual learners can assemble over a period of time” (p. 23) to present tangible evidence of their achievement and experiences in learning the target language. It promotes learner autonomy and accountability. It has three parts: the passport, the biography, and the dossier. Swiss users have provided some useful feedback on the ELP that might inform Canadian efforts to implement it.

In the Canadian context, the target user group is school-aged learners in Kindergarten through grade 12, where the portfolio should “contribute to the development of an awareness of identity, society, language and culture” (p. 25). The portfolio has a pedagogical function (learners reflect on their learning progress) and a reporting function (the passport contains a report card on linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and cultural competencies. The portfolio is useful not only to its primary users, students, but also to teachers (who can negotiate learning

objectives with their students), to parents (a tool for communication about their children), and to other stakeholders.

The CEFR has been endorsed by the CMEC “to occupy a central place in the Canadian context” (p. 27). The document ends with a series of 13 frequently asked questions and responses and two appendices: the first presents examples of innovative programs in Canada and the second lists additional resources.