

REFLECTIONS ON WORKING FOR THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Michael Byram

Guest Research Professor, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Abstract. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) is one of the best known publications from the Council of Europe throughout the world (Byram and Parmenter 2012). It is known to the many kinds of readership for which it was designed: language teachers, assessment specialists, policy makers, inspectors, teacher educators and others including, not least, language learners. The latter are perhaps not aware of the publication but they do know about different levels and can describe their competence as A1 or B2 etc.

The evolution of the work of the Council of Europe to produce this and associated publications was chronicled by the person who led the teams over several decades, John Trim. I do not pretend to continue that account as I do not have the same overview and experience, but it is important to provide some further information and hope that at some point in the future, someone will write a full history and analysis of the Council of Europe work on language and language teaching¹. This is therefore a personal view and will refer much to my own publications as a consequence; it does not claim to be a comprehensive account with full academic references².

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Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)

As Trim explains (2004, p.47), it was at a conference in Switzerland in the early 1990s that it was decided to create a framework for ‘the description of objectives and methods for language learning and teaching, curriculum and course design, materials production and language testing and assessment.’ This was to be accompanied by a ‘European Language Portfolio’ in which learners could record all aspects of their language learning within and beyond educational institutions. An authoring group (John Trim, Daniel Coste, Brian North, together with Joseph Sheils (Secretariat)) produced a draft in 1993 which was sent out for consultation to many people and institutions throughout Europe. It was then amended, but the draft document was thus already widely known from the mid-1990s.

It was soon after this that I was asked to write a paper which would help the authoring team to add to their text, suggesting how ‘socio-cultural competence’ might be assessed. This invitation came, I suspect, as a consequence of my writings in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Byram 1989) and my involvement in Council of Europe workshops in the 1990s. During that period, I had admired the work of Genevieve Zarate (e.g. 1986) and made her acquaintance. I therefore invited her to collaborate on the paper, and the first decision we made was that it would be necessary to define and describe socio-cultural competence - which we later termed ‘intercultural competence’ – before any work on assessment could proceed.

Our approach was to think of the language learner as an ethnographer, since we had both drawn on this notion in our previous work, and to describe the competences which would be teachable, learnable and, we hoped, assessable.

We worked and wrote in both English and French, and in French used the key word ‘savoir’, which encompasses both knowledge and skill. I continued this approach in my later development of a model of intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997) and continued to use the French term when writing in English. We also found ourselves challenging the notion of the native speaker which dominated, and still dominates, much teaching of language competence, and we introduced the term ‘intercultural speaker’. We considered the possibility of using the word ‘mediator’³ rather than ‘speaker’ but it was important to have a direct contrast with the phrase ‘native speaker’. Furthermore, we made clear that it is important to emphasise the difference between intercultural competence and socio-cultural competence, which was an element of the model of competences proposed by van Ek (1986) and used by the authoring team. Socio-cultural competence was essentially modelled on what a native speaker knows about a country and its culture associated with a language. Intercultural competence included the idea that knowledge about a country and culture might be useful for language learners, but that it is far more important for them to have appropriate skills and attitudes such as those of an ethnographer.

In fact we became very doubtful about the possibility of a system of assessment like the one which the authoring team were proposing for language competence, and which became the well-known levels A1 to C2. Instead of this, the authoring team, accepting our view, included in the CEFR part of a chapter (Chapter 5) which described ‘general competences’ and then ‘communicative language competences’. The section on general competences was based upon and used some of the terminology and content of our paper, but diverged from it in substantial ways. Our paper was initially internal to the Council of Europe but was subsequently published (Byram and Zarate 1996).

It is important to note, too, that in the early chapters of the CEFR it is clearly stated that plurilingual competence is part of a more embracing notion of pluricultural competence.

Plurilingualism has itself to be seen in the context of pluriculturalism. Language is not only a major aspect of culture, but also a means of access to cultural manifestations. Much of what is said above applies equally in the more general field: in a person's cultural competence, the various cultures (national, regional, social) to which that person has gained access do not simply co-exist side by side; they are compared, contrasted and actively interact to produce an enriched, integrated pluricultural competence, of which plurilingual competence is one component, again interacting with other components. (p.6)

Furthermore, in the *Companion Volume* to the *CEFR*, published some 20 years later, there is a substantial attempt to fill the gap, and to provide descriptors and levels of pluricultural competence. The authors refer to 'intercultural competence' but do not address the concept in detail. They introduce the notion of a 'pluricultural repertoire' and say: 'Many notions that appear in the literature and descriptors for intercultural competence are included' (Council of Europe 2018, p. 158).

Soon after writing the paper for the Council of Europe, I was invited to hold a fellowship at the National Centre for Foreign Languages in Washington DC and began to develop and deepen the theory and developed a model of intercultural communicative competence during that three month period, eventually publishing a book-length analysis of intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997) which has been widely cited ever since. Without the invitation from the Council of Europe, I doubt if I would have worked in the direction I did although I had already been attempting to clarify 'cultural studies' in foreign language education (Byram 1989).

A new role at the Council of Europe

After many years of leading the work of the Council of Europe, John Trim retired and Jean-Claude Beacco and I were asked to become advisers to the department which had produced the Framework, now led by Joe Sheils after Antonietta de Vigili too had retired.

New developments were envisaged and, since the Council of Europe is an organisation of member states which, with respect to educational matters, makes policy recommendations, the department dealing with languages began to consider how it could provide help with language education policy. One significant outcome was a 'service' offered to member states in which Council of Europe experts would analyse and critique- and when asked make recommendations about language education policy. The focus was not only on foreign/modern languages but included all the languages present in educational institutions, especially in schools. This was a reflection of the turn towards an integrated approach to work on all languages in education described below. The 'Language Education Policy Profiles' were carried out in 18 countries between 2002 and 2017 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy/profiles>. It also led to my writing a comparative analysis although, as was often the policy, it remained unsigned (Council of Europe 2009).

Autobiography of intercultural encounters

In our discussions in the early 2000s about what should follow the publication of the CEFR and the European Language Portfolio, we decided that the gap in the Framework with respect to developing an approach to the assessment of intercultural competence should be addressed.

It is important to know that the CEFR was produced within a programme of work called ‘Language Learning for European Citizenship’ and as John Trim says:

The Framework and the Portfolio were thus not separate projects, but aspects of a coherent, integrated programme. ELP aimed to contribute to democratic European citizenship and the vocational and educational mobility of citizens by creating an instrument to motivate, record and give value to lifelong, diversified language learning, giving information in an internationally transparent manner (2004, p. 58) .

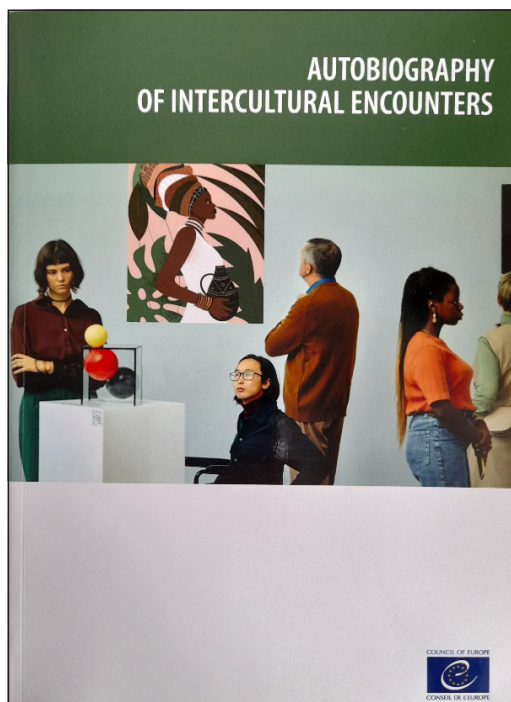
This coincided very much with my own slowly developing thinking about how language teaching and education for citizenship can and should be related, and we decided that a working group on intercultural competence should comprise experts from citizenship education, history education, religious education, psychology, and language education.

In order to bring together people of different disciplines, the group decided at one of its early meetings that each should prepare a text which would help others to understand their disciplinary perspective. This eventually became a document which presented the theory and concepts, and the social and educational context, on which the work of the group would be based <https://rm.coe.int/context-concepts-and-theories-autobiography-of-intercultural-encounter/168089eb76> .

Rather than attempting to pursue the question of descriptors and levels of competence seen in the CEFR, we decided to focus more on the idea of recording experience, as in the European Language Portfolio. Ultimately this led to the creation of *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* which is essentially a series of questions which guide users in the analysis of an intercultural encounter, an encounter which they have chosen for its significance in their experience of other cultures. It is important to note that ‘culture’ is not used as a synonym for country but as the shared world of cultural groups of any kind, in one's own country or another. The introduction and examples given included therefore a range of possible experiences and foci for the autobiography:

An intercultural encounter can be an experience you had with someone from a different country, but it can also be an experience with someone from another cultural background in your country. It might be, for example, someone you met from another region, someone who speaks a different language, someone from a different religion or from a different ethnic group. (...) The event could be a visit to that person's house. It could be a meeting with someone from a foreign country or another region of your own country. It could be something that happened whilst on a trip abroad, and so on.

Two variants of the autobiography were created, one for young learners, meaning children of primary and early lower secondary age, and one for all other users. As usual, the texts were piloted and revised over a number of years, since all such work is done by Council of Europe ‘experts’ who attend meetings in Strasbourg in their ‘spare time’ from their full time duties in universities and other institutions.



At a later date, it was decided that a second version of the autobiography would be produced, which would focus upon how people have intercultural encounters through all kinds of visual media. Indeed, it might be the case that most people encounter others through visual media, rather than face to face. It also occurred to us that another, rapidly growing experience of others happens through the Internet, and a third version of the autobiography was created with the help of new experts knowledgeable about uses of the Internet and how appropriate questions could be included in the autobiography to ensure that such uses are critically analysed.

The autobiographies were published in the late 2000s and were complemented by an online training course. They were renewed after a decade to fit with the theory and practice of the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* which is described below.

Language(s) of schooling

The completion of the CEFR and the European language portfolio, opened up new possibilities for Council of Europe experts. It occurred to me that, despite its title which refers to ‘languages’, the CEFR is of course concerned only with foreign/modern languages or ‘*langues vivantes*’, to use the phrase from the other official language of the Council of Europe, French.

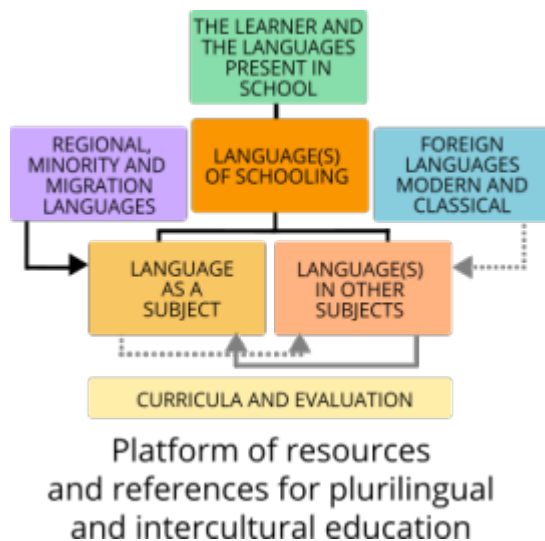
There are many other types of language present in schools and later education, and in the daily experience of young people and adults. I suggested that we consider the possibility of producing a framework similar to the CEFR for other languages, in particular for the main language in which students learn. This is often called the ‘national language’ but we soon realised that this phrase does not reflect the complexity of the language and languages of learning in many countries in Europe, let alone the rest of the world. It was decided to focus on ‘schooling’, in other words the period of obligatory education, whatever specific age range this might comprise in different countries. We therefore avoided the term ‘national language’ whenever possible and referred to the ‘language(s) of schooling’.

Rather than a ‘framework’ of reference for the language of learning and for other languages present in schools and the lives of young people, we decided that a more flexible approach would be to create an internet platform where documents can be constantly modified and new documents added.

Ultimately, this meant the development of many reference documents dealing with different aspects of all languages of schooling. Notably this includes documents on the teaching of the main language ‘as a subject’, and on the use of the main language in other subjects in the curriculum. Furthermore it was important to recognise that there are many languages present in many schools simply through the fact that they are spoken by plurilingual students who, in some contexts, form the majority of the school population. We referred to these as ‘regional and minority languages’ to follow Council of Europe terminology.

Eventually all of these documents were placed, little by little, on a ‘Platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education’

However, it is also important to note that such developments are not a result of decisions made by experts or even by administrative staff at the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe is an organisation of member states and decisions are made by representatives of those states. The significance of new work on the languages of schooling was presented to such representatives in the context of the Council of Europe’s emphasis on the need for quality education and for the inclusion of all learners, not least the children of migration for whom the main language or languages of schooling might be an obstacle rather than an aid to learning across the curriculum. That there was a need for greater inclusion and social cohesion in Europe was widely recognised and had led to a call for greater efforts on the part of member states at a summit meeting in 2005. The new programme was launched



<https://www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy/languages-of-schooling>

and called ‘Languages in Education, Languages for Education.’

In 2010, I withdrew from work on the language(s) of schooling since it seemed to me that there were better experts than I in the group, with wider knowledge of language other than foreign languages. I decided I would like to engage with new fields of research, including some historical work on internationalism in education (Byram 2021a and 2021b) but continued with follow-up work on the autobiography⁴.

Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture

A White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living together as equals in dignity” (Council of Europe, 2008) on potential developments at the Council of Europe had been published in 2008 with an emphasis on the need – in a Europe which was becoming increasingly multicultural – for ‘intercultural dialogue’ in democratic societies. The work on the autobiography had taken place under the aegis of this document.

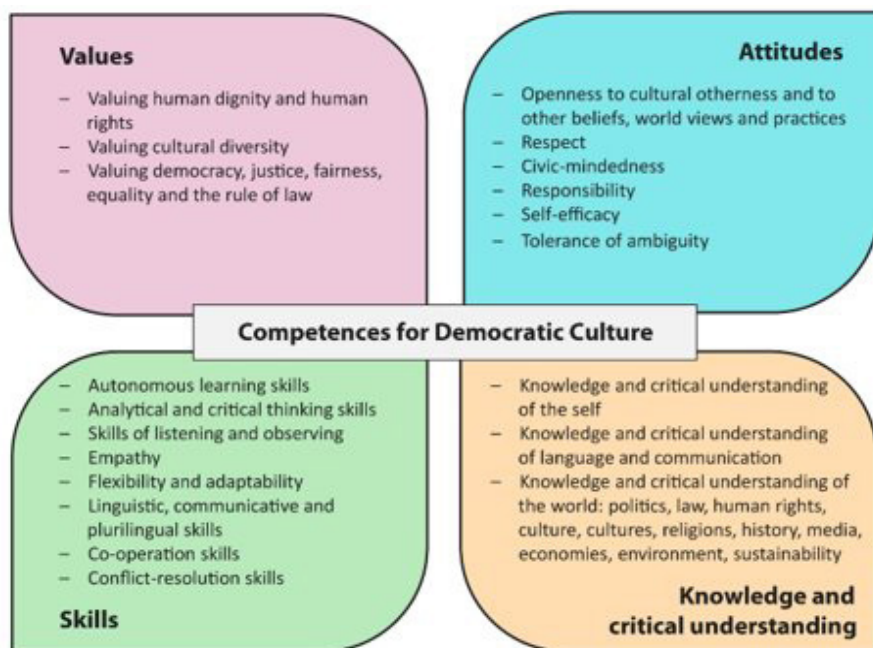
The success of the CEFR was widely recognized in the Council of Europe beyond the confines of the language education field. Following in the spirit of the White Paper, it was decided that a similar document was needed that would address ‘competences for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue’, and this was put to an *ad hoc* working group in 2013.

This group was, like the group which developed the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*, interdisciplinary and I was invited in my capacity as

Council of Europe ‘expert’ in language education. I thus continued my connections but without the major commitment which had been required as adviser.



The work of this group was proceeding at the usual pace when, in January 2015, terrorist attacks in France created a new situation in Europe, and the Council of Europe saw a need to respond in practical ways. One response – which became the major so-called ‘flagship’ response – was to invite the *ad hoc* group to produce their ‘framework’ as quickly as possible, in months rather than years. This was very demanding and indeed too demanding, but it meant that priority was given to the work of the group and within a relatively short time the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* was published in 2018 and became the basis for much further work in workshops and policy development throughout the member states of the Council of Europe, all of which accepted the Framework and the recommendations made in connection with it. The title of the Framework does not include the notion of intercultural competences but in fact most of the competences in the model it proposes are intercultural competences.



The *Framework* consists of three volumes. The first explains the theory and the model. The second presents descriptors for the assessment of intercultural and democratic competence. The third comprises a number of articles explaining how the Framework can be used by different people – teachers, policy-makers, assessors etc.

Once the new *Framework* was completed, Martyn Barrett and I revised the documents of the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* to link it to the theory of the *Framework*, and my work at the Council of Europe was, I thought, over. However, at a conference on the CEFR, Joe Sheils and I began to talk about the importance of making the CEFR more accessible and even more widely known. It had always been said that the CEFR is difficult to understand especially for teachers who may not have the technical knowledge required. This idea developed further until we decided to produce a book which would present not the CEFR but the guiding values of the Council of Europe which underpin its policies and ideas with respect to quality and equity in education, the CEFR being just one of the publications which contributes to this. The book was produced with the help of many friends with whom we had worked over many years at the Council of Europe, together with experts from younger generations: *Quality and Equity in Education. A Practical Guide to the Council of Europe Vision of Education for Plurilingual, Intercultural and Democratic Citizenship* (2023).

With that my Council of Europe work was definitively over, and the book was for me a satisfying end as well as, I hope, a useful beginning for new readers and users of the wealth of publications, projects and programmes produced over several decades.

A personal conclusion

A full chronicle – and even more so a full history – of the work of the Council of Europe on language education and related matters is yet to be written. I have written here from a personal perspective in the hope that it may serve future chroniclers and historians, and also interest contemporary readers. For it is a privilege to work for an organization such as the Council of Europe. At a mundane level, I always enjoyed entering the two buildings, first the main *Palais* building and later the *Agora* building where the department dealing with languages was housed. They are architecturally exceptional places to work, and Strasbourg is an impressive city. More importantly, it is evident that the work of the Council of Europe is of major international significance and being able to contribute to this is a privilege not to be underestimated. The personal significance for me was in the privilege – and I use the word again – of working with some of the best experts in Europe – especially John Trim – in an atmosphere of cooperation and modesty. The opportunity came at a moment when I needed new academic experience and new colleagues, and I am grateful for that good fortune.

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NOTES

1. For some further detail, see Valax 2011.
2. As this is a personal view, I may add here that John Trim was the head of the Department of Linguistics when I was a student at the University of Cambridge in the late 1960s. I remember his lectures as extremely precise and informative. He also allowed me to attend his phonetics course for graduate students. I met him again when he was head of the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research in London in the 1980s where I was a member of a working group on Awareness of Language which also allowed me to meet and work with Eric Hawkins. John and I met again in the 1990s when I was an ‘animateur’ in Council of Europe workshops for teachers and teacher educators. I owe a great deal to his teaching and guidance.

3. The concept of ‘mediation’ was eventually introduced into the CEFR but described only in terms of translation and interpretation. It was only in the appearance of the *Companion Volume* to the CEFR twenty years later, that mediation became a major concept and was described in more differentiated ways and given descriptors.
4. I remember that when I first agreed to be an adviser, with Jean-Claude Beacco, Johanna Panthier, one of the administrators in the language section, warned me that if I put a little finger into the machine I would be drawn ever further into it. She was right, and it took another decade, including work on the *Reference Framework of Competence for Democratic Culture*, before I stopped working in some capacity for the Council of Europe, in total a period of about 25 years.

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✉ **Michael Byram**

Guest Research Professor
Sofia University “St Kliment Ohridski”