

# Insights from the Common European Framework

KEITH MORROW (EDITOR)

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As Keith Morrow points out in his Introduction to *Insights from the Common European Framework*, the Framework or CEF as it is referred to throughout the resource, is “much talked about at the moment but little understood” (p. 1).

The CEF was developed to provide ‘a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks etc across Europe’ (Council of Europe, p.1). At the core of the CEF is a set of six global levels, describing users as Basic (A1, A2), Independent (B1, B2) or Proficient (C1, C2). The levels describe competency in a wide range of communicative activities in the areas of spoken and written reception, interaction and production. The CEF also outlines scales of performance in areas including lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and pragmatic competence.

It is a rather forbiddingly large and complex document. Morrow, however, as editor of this collection of reflections on and responses to the Framework, attempts to familiarise people with its background and content. This volume looks at some of the implications of the CEF and includes examples of how it has been applied practically in a number of different contexts.

I need to be upfront with my perspective: I’m a fan of the CEF. The descriptors reflect views of language and language learning that I am comfortable with and I found it to be a flexible and wide-ranging framework that could be easily adapted for a recent curriculum project, a General English syllabus developed for a national ELT provider. I believe it has significant potential for application in Australia as well as in Europe, where it is widely used. I wish I’d had *Insights* a little earlier in my project as it would have helped me make more efficient use of the CEF.

*Insights from the CEF* covers five main content areas starting with a background to the CEF, then outlining how the CEF can help learners to learn; how the CEF can be used in course design and teacher education; assessment issues; and finishing with three case studies on designing syllabus and materials in different contexts. Contributors to the resource are practitioners from a range of contexts and language backgrounds and include Brian North, Head of Academic Development at Eurocentres, who had a significant involvement in the development of the CEF.

In the Background section, Morrow gives an overview of the CEF outlining the reasons for and aims of its development since the late 1950s. He also gives a useful outline of the structure of the Framework, with its six global levels covering a number of different aspects of language development. He closes with a discussion of whether the CEF actually works. Perhaps not surprisingly he thinks it does, but he gives us the core of many of its criticisms and responds to these. In the next chapter Frank Heyworth sets out reasons why he thinks the CEF is important.

The next section describes how the CEF relates to learner autonomy and self assessment. The first chapter deals with a description of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), a document developed concurrently with the CEF. Peter Lenz outlines how the ELP provides “a learning companion, a reporting and a documentation tool” for learners. In particular it aims to help learners develop skills in self-assessment. One of the underlying assumptions of the CEF is that the ability to learn is an important competency of the language learner/user, and the following chapter by Luciano Mariani contains a useful discussion of how effectively learning skills and strategies have been incorporated into the CEF.

Julia Starr Keddle begins the next section which is on curriculum design and teacher education. She describes her experiences of the CEF in her context as a materials developer for 11 – 16 year olds. She noted a problem in that the CEF did not allow for description of progress in terms of grammar knowledge, which was the system used by secondary schools in Italy where she worked. However she was able to integrate the CEF into her new syllabuses and outlined several advantages as well as disadvantages of working with the CEF. In the other chapter in this section Hanna Komorowska describes how she used the CEF in pre- and in-service teacher education to highlight learners’ perspectives. She, too, identified problems with the CEF, highlighting the difficulty teachers from language backgrounds other than English had with accessing the document.

Assessment, always problematic, is covered in the following section, with a chapter by Ari Huhta and Neus Figueras on how the CEF can be used to promote language through diagnostic assessment, and Brian North’s chapter on how existing assessment events, examinations and courses can be related to the CEF, including a sample table outlining how institutions can demonstrate their assessment outcomes are consistent with CEF descriptors.

The final section describes three different uses of the CEF to design syllabus and materials: an ESL curriculum for new arrivals in an Irish primary school; English courses for teenagers at the British Council in Milan and English courses for adults in the UK. Certainly the most immediately relevant unit for me was Piers Wall’s

description of how he developed English courses for adults at the University of Gloucestershire English Language Centre. He provided a useful framework for approaching the curriculum renewal process through consulting and collaborating with teachers.

The Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) recently commissioned an investigation into the feasibility of setting standardised English language levels within English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) in Australia, with one of the possible options being adoption of the CEF. The researchers found a general lack of knowledge about the CEF among research participants, and concluded that although there was some support for a common language levels framework, it was not feasible in Australia for a number of reasons (Elder & O’Loughlin, 2007). The researchers recommended that a program of familiarisation with the CEF be initiated so that the framework could be used to “complement existing frameworks, tests and curricula already in use in the ELICOS sector” (p. 5).

Not all of the book will be relevant to everyone. However *Insights from the Common European Framework* will certainly add to the general understanding of anyone wanting to become more familiar with the CEF. It certainly meets Morrow’s goal of ‘encouraging more practitioners to engage in a principled way with the Framework’ (p.1).

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#### *References:*

Elder, C. and O’Loughlin, K. 2007. *ELICOS Language Levels Feasibility Study Final Report*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science & Training

Council of Europe. 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press also available at [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf)