

# A Human Touch to Language Testing

A collection of essays in honour of  
**Reidun Oanaes Andersen**  
on the occasion of her retirement June 2007

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## International co-operation in language education: before and after the CEFR

### 1. Aspects of my own international journey

In this article I will mix personal observations with more general viewpoints. My main point is that international contacts in education are not only interesting but they provide a unique opportunity to see what is common in the great variety of how education (and language education) can be arranged. In my own career there have been two main sources of international influence: the IEA and the Council of Europe. The Nordic context has also been both useful and rewarding.

In the IEA (The International Association for the Assessment of Educational Achievement) organization, the world is seen as a natural, living laboratory to study how various factors are related to educational performance. I became involved in the IEA studies in the late 1960s and I can testify to its slogan: international co-operation provides an "invisible college", which provides such learning opportunities that no formal educational system can offer. The IEA also taught me a way of seeing education as a highly complex system with many levels, from system inputs and constraints to the individual learners, and with many stakeholders with their specific concerns and interests. The two-week truly international IEA curriculum seminar in Gränna, Sweden, in the summer of 1971, chaired by Benjamin S. Bloom and Torsten Husén, was a memorable experience in international sharing and learning. This was also the occasion when the trinity concept of diagnostic, formative and summative evaluation was disseminated to a wide audience with the Bloom, Hastings and Madaus book that the participants got hot from the press.

The Nordic context has provided me an opportunity to see how the concept of educational equality, in particular, provides a solid value foundation for educational developments. An interesting project in the 1970s dealt with the idea of harmonizing L2 curricula in the Nordic countries. It did not materialize but we learned a great deal from this comparative endeavour. A couple of decades later my Nordic links

were reformed mainly through the Nordic ALTE (Association of Language Testing in Europe) activities.

My first brush with the Council of Europe was in the mid-1960s when I got involved in the assessment of language education in the experimental comprehensive schools in Finland. I learned from a colleague at the National Board of Education that the definition of goals in the preliminary (and subsequently very similar official) language curriculum (1970) was based on the recommendations of the two CoE seminars in 1966 (Osia and Ankara). My second and more personal contact was in the December of 1968, when I attended a CoE seminar on language assessment in Skepparholmen, Sweden. I continued to read with interest and benefit the documents produced in the early 1970s by John Trim, Jan van Ek and David Wilkins, in particular. Some years passed and in 1976 I participated in a CoE symposium in Holte, Denmark. It discussed the issue of modern languages in primary education (in the aftermath of Clare Burstall's critical report of the questionable usefulness of primary French in the UK) and Jan van Ek presented the early work of the unit-credit system, which led to the Threshold definition of objectives. In 1976 we produced in Finland a draft for the comprehensive school language education, which followed the principles of the CoE functional-notional syllabus. I was a member of the Finnish team at the Council of Europe Conference on modern languages, Rüşchlikon, 1991, which launched the systematic work on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the Portfolio. Our work in Finland applying the CoE ideas in language education was probably the reason for me being invited in 1993 to become a member of the CoE Working Party concerning the elaboration of the CEFR. While interaction with many outstanding international colleagues has been highly stimulating and useful, John Trim's clear vision, depth, breadth of learning and stylistic mastery has had a most profound impact on the development of my own thinking. The Council of Europe has been for me another "invisible college".

In recent years, ALTE has actively promoted several ideas espoused by CoE, especially in the field of language testing and assessment and provided useful input for testing Norwegian as a second language and Finnish as a second language, which I am most familiar with. Lately, the most interesting form of international co-operation for me has been involvement in the setting up of the European Association for Language Assessment and Testing. EALTA's mission is broader than that of other similar associations and it also recognises all parties that are engaged in assessment. This provides grounds for expecting that EALTA will have an important and constructive role to play in promoting professionalism in language assessment and testing in Europe.

This international journey has also brought me in contact with Reidun Oasnes Andersen. I value greatly our many professional discussions and other forms of fruitful

co-operation. I was impressed by the quality of the material her team produced for the EU-sponsored DIALANG project, which I helped to co-ordinate in its first phase.

## 2. Comparative education: developments in language education in Europe

The great American psychologist and pragmatist philosopher William James (1842-1910) had this to say about comparison in his classical "Principles of Psychology" (1891):

*We go through the world, carrying on the two functions abstrast, discovering differences in the like, and likenesses in the different. (p. 529)*

*We saw above (p. 492) that some persons consider that the difference between two objects is constituted of two things, viz., their absolute identity in certain respects, plus their absolute non-identity in others. We saw that this theory would not apply to all cases (p. 493). So here any theory which would base likeness on identity, and not rather identity on likeness, must fail. (p. 532)*

*Likeness and difference are ultimate relations perceived. As a matter of fact, no two sensations, no two objects of all those we know, are in scientific rigor identical. We call those of them identical whose difference is unperceived. Over and above this we have a conception of absolute sameness, it is true, but this, like so many of our conceptions (cf. p. 508), is an ideal construction got by following a certain direction of serial increase to its maximum supposable extreme. It plays an important part, among other permanent meanings possessed by us, in our ideal intellectual constructions. But it plays no part whatever in explaining psychologically how we perceive likenesses between simple things. (p. 533)*

William James's view is very perceptive and it is as valid now as when it was expressed more than a hundred of years ago. Comparison is not a simple thing. Comparisons are often approximate. Their reliability and validity are open to challenge but there is no escape: we make and need to make comparisons all the time in all possible domains.

There is a long tradition of comparative education, which consists of comparing the educational philosophies, curricula and educational structures and presenting subjective impressions of how much learning has been achieved. Educationalists visited other countries and wrote reports. While this was and is clearly useful, its unsys-

tematic nature sometimes drew critical remarks, which labelled it "educational tourism". (Finland's success in the OECD PISA-projects has fostered a lot of such "tourism". Schools would prefer to have an opportunity to do their daily work without so frequent visitors!) One "learned" that some particular country was doing particularly well in some subject. For instance, in America about one hundred years ago Brown (1915) reported to interested readers "how the French boy learns to write". Pedagogic approaches were copied (Pestalozzi, Herbart, Montessori, Waldorf...). Of course comparative education did show progress and developed as a discipline (eg. Noah 1973) and it has special journals, the flagship of which *Comparative Education Review* started in 1957. To its credit, the Council of Europe promoted quite early a more systematic comparative approach by publishing curriculum studies, including the mother tongue and foreign languages (Marshal 1972; Modern languages in schools 1973) and other surveys.

The Council of Europe, which recognised the importance of modern languages in the 1950s, got seriously engaged in promoting co-operation in language education from the early 1960s. It was a far-sighted decision to adopt a systematic and more scientific approach. It helped to set up the International Association of Applied Linguistics (1962) and arranged the first intergovernmental symposium under its Convention for Cultural Cooperation with the support of France in 1961, to launch France's pioneering work in *Le Français Fondamental* and the associated audio-visual course *Voix et Images de la France*. These projects are probably little known now but they had a strong impact. This symposium launched the series of very influential medium-term projects (1962-72, 1971-77, 1977-81, 1982-88, 1989-97) and large conferences, which both gave commendable coherence and continuity for promoting the development of modern language learning and teaching. Throughout the 1960's a series of pioneering symposia was held, promoting international co-operation across the complete educational spectrum and leading to the Council of Ministers' first pronouncement on modern languages, Resolution (69)2. In 1971, the Rüsschlikon Symposium on languages in adult education initiated the process which is embodied in the Framework and the Portfolio. A small Expert Group was set up, with René Richterich, Jan van Ek, David Wilkins and John Trim as members. That group first elaborated the basic principles on which a language teaching policy should be based so as to serve the fundamental political objectives of the Council of Europe. The resulting *Threshold Level* and *Un Niveau-Seuil*, and a framework for a European unit-credit system were presented to an Intergovernmental Symposium in Ludwigshaven, 1977, which recommended their application in pilot experimentation across the spectrum. The results were presented to the First Strasbourg Conference in 1982, approved and incorporated into the influential Recommendation

(82)18 of the Committee of Ministers. Project 12, *Learning and teaching modern languages for communication*, was then devoted throughout the 1980's to support member states in the implementation of the Recommendation, concentrating on an extensive programme of workshops for teacher trainers and the operation of a Schools Interaction Network to support innovation through intensive personal visits. The Second Strasbourg Conference in 1988 recommended a broader application of the approach. The Third Strasbourg Conference in 1997 approved the Framework proposal.

The unique contribution of the Council of Europe to language education is the development of approaches and tools, based on a systematic utilisation of innovations in education and applied linguistics. The approaches and tools have been subject to widespread international review and experimentation. Concepts promoted by the CoE are, for instance, recognition of learner needs, learner autonomy, learner reflection, life-long language learning, action orientation, functional-notional-communicative syllabus, self-assessment, portfolio, plurilingualism, pluriculturalism and partial competences. Tools include the set of objectives definitions (Breakthrough, Waystage, Threshold, Vantage), the CEFR, the Portfolio, The Manual for Relating Examinations to the CEFR and its accompanying Reference Supplement and illustrative CDs.

### 3. Where are we now and where should we go from here?

However rewarding frequent international contacts have been, they has also presupposed some, and occasionally considerable, patience and perseverance. I recall the many occasions when I and the other participants were treated to long and more or less coherent accounts of how things are "in my country". After a few of such presentations the mind started wandering and also wondering whether there was a better way.

Indeed, the situation is radically changed with the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It is a vast achievement. It is not perfect and it never pretended to be so. The more I have worked on it and with it, the more points of revision I seem to find. This is not to be marveled at or regretted. It is inevitable with any conceptual system: all knowledge is corrigible, all constructions need revision as feedback becomes available from their implementation. It is, however, vital to insist that the key CEFR principles of openness, dynamism and non-dogmatism are observed in the application of the CEFR. This also means that the CEFR's thoughtful revision is undertaken only when there is a sufficient basis

for it and once the principles of revision have been thoroughly discussed. Also, it is obvious that the maintenance and revision of the CEFR requires a long-term commitment and adequate resources.

In spite of its inevitable limitations, whose sources and implications need to be thoroughly explored, the CEFR has ushered in a qualitatively new era in language education. Professionals, educational decision makers, learners, examination providers, course developers, producers of learning materials etc. can use the Framework's horizontal dimension (the descriptive categories) and the vertical dimension (the common reference scales) to specify concisely and quite explicitly what they are referring to. The reference scales, in particular, provide a very useful shorthand for a description. This is a great boon for international communication and transparency and also a big relief. No more need for long, boring and vague "in my country"-narratives! Essential contextual information can be provided concisely and effectively, which is much appreciated by all, but especially by someone who comes from a laconic communication culture! Unlike several advertisements, whose claims of a big difference before using X and after having used it may lack any substantive evidence, there is ample evidence that the quality of life of language education professionals is much improved with the launching of the CEFR. There is a new sense of excitement in the air.

However, the positive side has also a flip side. Like in questionable advertisements, the CEFR quality label may be used without any publicly available evidence. The language education profession needs to be watchful and take whatever steps are needed to prevent the valuable reference tool from becoming a debased currency. EALTA has, in fact, taken this need on board in its guidelines for good practice in language assessment and testing. Similar measures are needed.

As I said in the above, nothing is perfect. The Framework needs interpretation and this requires thoughtful practice. Even if evidence is adduced that thoughtful application has been carried out, the reader of descriptions or claims of CEFR-linkage needs to be a critical reader.

The CEFR and the related valuable tools have been produced through very extensive and thorough co-operation. They have made international co-operation and comparisons in language education much more effective and transparent than before. I hope that all parties in language education in Europe will promote their maintenance and improvement. It is not only their right but also their duty. The guarding of openness, dynamism and non-dogmatism in developing language education in Europe cannot be delegated but needs active support from all.

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