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The Impact of the CEFR in Catalonia

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1. The CEFR in Use – Some observations of three Nordic Countries

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This article will attempt to provide a brief account of how the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been used in three Nordic countries: Finland, Norway and Sweden. The focus will be on Finland as I know that situation best. I will provide several links to where more information is available.

I will also draw on my personal "history" as I have been an active "consumer" of the Council of Europe´s (CoE) contributions to the modernization of the teaching of modern languages since the mid-1960s and since 1993 a more active contributor as a member of the CoE Working Party concerning the elaboration of the CEFR. I hope this more personal approach will give a glimpse into how interaction with the CoE takes place.

Shortly after the launch of the CEFR in 2001 in Barcelona, Finland arranged in Helsinki – in cooperation with the CoE - a workshop on the potential need of guidance in how tests and examinations might be linked to the CEFR. This led to the setting up by CoE of a working group to produce a manual to provide guidance. The group was chaired by Brian North with Neus Figueras, Piet van Avermaet, Norman Verhelst and myself as members.

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 profound impact on the development of my own thinking. The Council of Europe has been for me another "invisible college".

Sweden

Sweden had a very active role in the CoE modern language project, especially in the earlier stages (Trim, 2007). Sven Nord, Max Gorosch, Svante Hjelmström, Mats Oscarson and Rune Bergentoft, to mention a few names, contributed to the project with their active participation.

However, participation in and exploitation of the CoE work became less active in the 1980s, for reasons not known to this author. This is reflected in the fact that the CEFR was translated as late as 2009 (abbreviated GERS – Gemensam europeisk referensram för språk). After that there has been several attempts to disseminate information and knowledge of the document through

lectures, seminars and so on. These have been organized by Skolverket (The National Agency for Education; http://www. skolverket.se /) and, specially by the continuing education department of the University of Uppsala (http://www.fba.uu.se/). This department is financed by the Ministry of Education and conducts a broad range of courses.

Sweden followed the development of the modern language closely. Per Malmberg, the doyen of language education in Sweden, wrote a detailed report of CoE´s modern language project in 1989 entitled "För en bättre språkundervisning – presentation av Europarådets språkprojekt" (Towards better language education – presentation of the Council of Europe´s language project) , and Bror Andered (who worked both in Skolverket and at the Uppsala unit) wrote another informative chapter about ten years later in Språkboken (""The Language Book" in 2001), entitled "Europarådets Framework – en inspitationskälla för de nya läroplanerna" (Coe`s Framework – a stimulus for the new syllabuses). Malmberg discussed i Språkboken the view of language in the new syllabuses and noted the influence of CoE on them. Gudrun Erickson, the current – fourth - President of EALTA, has recently provided and updated reflective review entitled "*Handle with care* – Om referensramen och bedömning av språklig kompetens", which - as the title indicates - advocates a thoughtful application of the CEFR in the assessment of language profiency. Her article was published by the Uppsala unit in an anthology with a catching title "Språkläraren stora blåa" (approximate translation: The Language Teacher´s Big Blue).

In addition to such national dissemination, there has been local activity, which obviously has varied quite a lot. Student teachers also get introduced to the CEFR.

Sweden also has three validated ELPs (European Language Portfolios). One is for the upper secondary level accessible at the Uppsala unit http://www.fba.uu.se/verksamhet/sprakportfolio/) and two are for the comprehensive school (for ages 6-11 and for ages 12-16) managed by Skolverket, the National Agency of Education, (http://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/amnesutveckling/sprak/europeisk-sprakportfolio-1.83490). It appears that they have not been widely adopted, probably mainly because they were not fully compatible with the current syllabuses, as a degree of certain linkage to the CEFR was established formally only in 2010. In any case, the National Agency of Education works in close cooperation with Swedish universities and has contracts with them to develop and administer the national school test programme. The University of Gothenburg has specialized in foreign languages and over a period of more than thirty years its has built up a centre of excellence in language testing (www.nafs.gu.se).

I hope that Sweden will "reclaim" more of its former visible role in the European language education forum as undoubtedly it has a lot to contribute. Its system of language education is being developed systematically and its language testing and assessment offers a model which many countries would do well to get acquainted with and adapt to their own circumstances. It is hardly by chance that Sweden ranked first in the first EU survey of language competence concerning the students´ first foreign language (http://ec.europa.eu/languages/languages-of-europe/language-competence_en.htm).

Norway

Norway has also actively followed the Council of Europe´s modern language project. It appears that Norway´s leading experts in language education have also taken a lead in disseminating information about the project.

Gundem (1992) presents an excellent review of how the teaching of English in Norway was strongly influenced after World War II by the tradition of British orientation to language education in general and in concrete terms by the close contacts with British Council experts. Gudem noted that CoE drew also on American developments in applied linguistics in its modern languages projects. Gundem shows that the project brought together outstanding professionals and refers to the key role of "three wise men" – Max Gorosch from Sweden, Bernard Pottier from France and Donald C. Riddy from Great Britain. She illustrates how the CEFR is actually an outcome of decades of European interaction:

> The strength of the Council of Europe as policy maker and influencing factor was due to the extraordinary groupings of people who attended the different meetings and conferences. It was through them that proposals were prepared and put forward, and it was the same peoploe who recommended proposals and passed resolutions, and who in the end were responsible for the adoption of them at the national level.

Gundem states that in Norway these influences were discernible in the general pedagogical climate, in language teaching policies, in curricula and textbooks, but what happened in the classrooms is less clear.

First-hand experience from my long-term interaction with Norwegian educationists, especially language teaching experts, suggests that there has been an unusually active interest in investigating the development of national curricula in different subjects. Over several decades, Professor Aud-Marit Simensen, at the Department of Teacher Education and School Development of the University of Oslo, has worked on this topic and her work provides an in-depth analysis of developments.

In relation to the CEFR, she has recently written about the European institutions´ impact on the development of English as a subject in the Norwegian school (Europeiske intitusjoners rolle i utviklingen av engelskfaget i norsk skole» . *Didaktisk Tidskrift,* 20, 3, 157-18). In a very informative article she focuses, in particular, on the early "reform movement" to break the grammar-translation hegemony, on British Council and the Council of Europe. As a seafaring nation, Norway has a long tradition of lively contacts with English-speaking nations and this has been reflected also in language education.

The CEFR was translated into Norwegian in 2007 *(Det felles europeiske rammeverket for språk. Læring, undervisning, vurdering*. Oslo: Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2007; see http://www.udir.no/Utvikling/Artikler-utvikling/Felles-europeisk-rammeverk). In 1998-2000 two adapted versions of the ELP ("Den europeisk språkpermen") produced in two version: one for pupils aged 6-12 and another for an age group between 13 and 18 (http://www.fremmedspraksenteret.no/index-php?ID=13318).

The impact of the CEFR is evident in the 2006 curriculum ("Kunnskapsløftet" – Knowledge Promotion), in which goals are indicated for grades 2, 4, 7, 10 and 11 using the CEFR approach – "the goal is that the learner can ...". The CEFR has also influenced language testing and assessment and the University of Bergen has been trusted to develop on line tests for English in primary and secondary after first having developed testing and assessment competence managing a test of Norwegian as a second language . The University of Bergen has coordinated the AYLLIT project in which the Departament d'Ensenyament of the Generalitat de Catalunya and Catalan teachers have also participated (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

Simensen´s influential textbook on language education, which appeared first in 1998 and last revised in 2007, devotes a lot of space to the Threshold and the CEFR in the first part of the book, which deals with "Theoretical Bases". Her above-mentioned article is also part of required reading in teacher education.

Simensen has also published (2008) an interesting comparative analysis of the influence of English in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. She takes up the important role of the British Council in all three countries noting that all university libraries in the three coubntries have subscribed the ELT Journal since 1946 and gives an account of the influence of the Council of Europe, which was seen – among other things – in how the view of error changed.

It is common that MA theses in language education (analysis of textbooks, forms of evaluation etc) refer to the CEFR. Some research at the PhD level related to the CEFR is underway.

Finland

As I indicated in the beginning, I will focus most on Finland. It will also be a rather personal report as I have had quite a close contact with the CoE language projects. My colleagues, professors Viljo Kohonen and Irma Huttunen have made active contribution to the the ELP and the development of learner autonomy, respectvely. All three of us have been involved in syllabus development and made the work of CoE known in this context.

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. Indubitably one of the greatest challenges was to provide for an obligatory study of one or more in addition to the mother tongue, which many considered a hopelessly optimistic idea. 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 (Ostia and Ankara). Thus the first modern L2 curriculum (1970) was strongly influenced by the CoE. 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 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 syllabus for the comprehensive school language education, which drew quite extensively on the principles of the CoE functional-notional Threshold syllabus.

I was a member of the Finnish team at the Council of Europe Conference on modern languages, Rüschlikon, 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. Shortly after the launch of the CEFR in 2001 in Barcelona, we arranged – in cooperation with the CoE - in Helsinki a workshop on the potential need of guidance in how tests and examinations might be linked to the CEFR. This led to the setting up by CoE of a working group to produce a manual to provide guidance. The group was

chaired by Brian North with Nesu Figueras, Piet van der Aevermat, Norman Verhelst and myself as members.

After this personal odyssey, I will attempt to sketch what I see as the main forms of implementing the CEFR approach in Finland. This will be selective and rather general as it would take quite a lot of space to present an exhaustive account.

The Use of the CEFR in Syllabuses

I will begin with the curriculum. Since 1970, all curriculum reforms in the 9-year comprehensive school and in the academic and secondary schools (usually with intervals of 10 years and occasionally more frequent reforms) have actively utilized the developments in the the CoE modern language projects. After the publication of the CEFR, which was translated into Finnish as early as in 2003, the CEFR proficiency level descriptors were adapted and validated to school use.

In Finland, children start school at the age of 7, they usually start learning a L2 (mainly English) in grade 3 when they are 9, they are 13 at the end of the lower stage of the comprehensive school (grade 6) when they move from smaller schools to consolidated bigger schools, and about 16 when they graduate from the comprehensive school from grade 9. The senior secondary school takes 3 years and the Matriculation Exam is taken at the age of 18/19. University studies usually take 5-6 years,

In the new syllabuses (2003-2004) target levels were indicated for grades 6, 9 in the comprehensive school and end of the upper secondary school. Three levels were used for the A1-level. For the subsequent levels up to B2, two levels were defined (A2.1, A2,2, B1.2 etc), thus the Finnish school scale came to have 11 levels. This was considered necessary in order to be able to indicate also smaller qualitative advance and to avoid possible motivation problems, which might occur if a pupil is assigned the same level over a long period of time in spite of pupils feeling that they have made progress. However, it is unlikely that the levels have had any major impact in teaching in schools as the traditional grading system (4-10) is still used.

In the construction of the new school-adapted proficiency scales, the starting point was the CEFR scales. The descriptors developed in the Finnish portfolio project were also consulted as well as the Canadian benchmarks. These provided a useful complement to the CEFR scales.

The scales underwent several revisions during the curriculum construction when 15-20 representatives of all languages from both the comprehensive and upper secondary school commented them. The wordings were also tried out in some ten training seminars across the country (with 30-50 participants in each of them). The feedback was used in the cycle of revisions. Finally, a small-scale empirical validation was also carried out with 16 experienced teachers sorting descriptors. The data were analysed and the results indicated good agreement with the original scale values. A few descriptors were further revised on the basis of the results (for a report, see Hilden & Takala, 2003).

Target levels in the current comprehensive school and the upper secondary school are shown in the chart below for English (Grade 6, Grade 9 and Grade 12), for Swedish (Grades 9 and 12)

and for a third foreign language (Grade 12 only). It can be seen in the table that different level targets are set for the different skills, LC (Listening comprehension), S (Speaking), RC (Reading comprehension) and W (Writing).

	Grade 6/targets	Grade 9/targets	Grade 12/targets
A- English (starts usually in grade 3)	LC – A1.3 S – A1.2 RC – A1.3 W – A1.2	LC – B1.1 S – A2.2 RC – B1.1 W - A2.2	LC – B2.1 S – B2.1 RC – B2.1 W – B2.1
B1- Swedish (starts in grade 7)		LC – A2.1 S – A1.3 RC – A2.1 W – A1.3	LC - B1.2 S – B1.1 RC – B1.2 W – B1.1
B2/3- language, starts in Grade 8/10			LC – A2.2 S – A2.1 – A2.2 RC – A2.2 – B1.1 W – A2-1 – A2.2

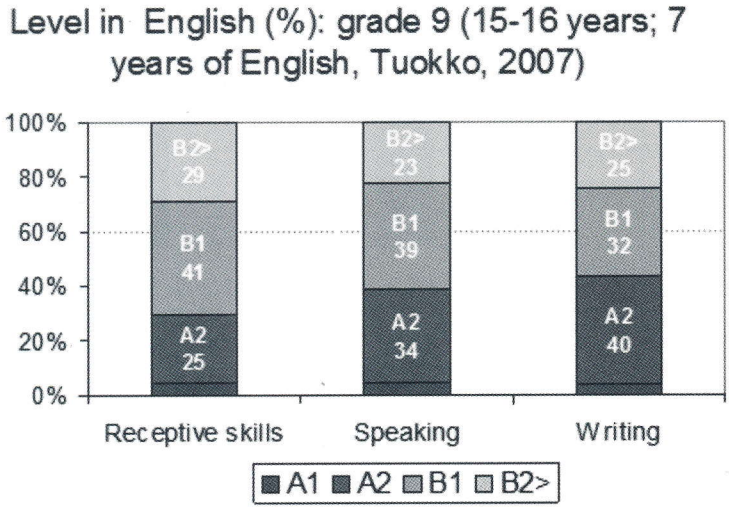
The CEFR levels have also been introduced in higher education. In Finland, all students in higher education have to pass an LSP-oriented test in the other official language of the country (Swedish or Finnish) and the pass level is set at B1. Another test is usually taken in English. All polytechnics and universities arrange LSP-oriented language teaching and in most cases this is provided by language centres, which have been in operation for about thirty years. Universities and polytechnics have cooperated to establish criteria for the tests. These criteria are related to the CEFR levels but have some LSP-oriented adaptation. It is likely that, in fact, the language teachers at the language centres have the best familiarity with the CEFR.

The impact of the CEFR in testing and assessment

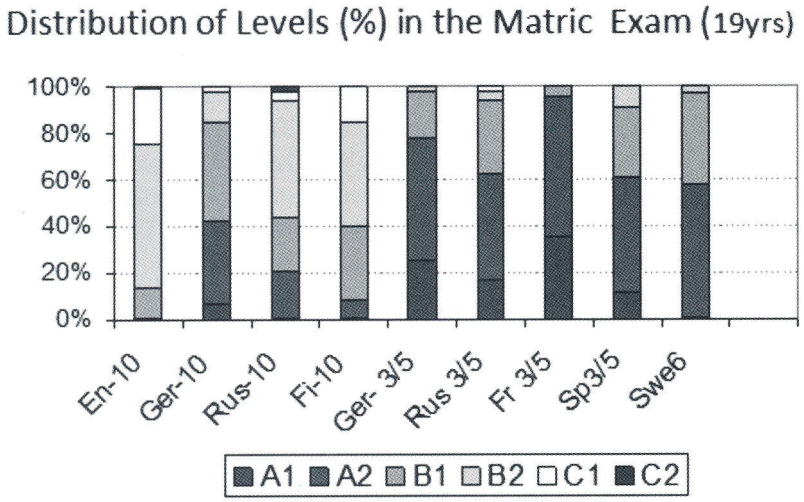
As far as language tests/examinations are concerned, it is important to know that there are no external tests in the comprehensive school. All grading is done by teachers. Educational progress is monitored through periodic national assessments (only in the comprehensive school), which in recent years have reported the results also in in terms of the CEFR levels (eg. Tuokko, 2007). These surveys have shown that while teachers´ marks correlate well with the test results there is also considerable difference in marking strictness/leniency between schools and teachers. Further training in marking/grading has accordingly been called for.

National assessments have been conducted twice in Swedish/Finnish and once in English. Five languages are currently being assessed (Swedish, English, German, French and Russian) and the results are expected at the end of the year. Linkage to CEFR levels is likely to be more explicit than before in the new syllabuses to be published by the end of 2013.

The National Assessment of English (Tuokko 2007) showed that most common level in receptive skills (listening and reading comprehension) and in speaking was B1 and in writing A2. The result corresponds quite well with the targets and it can be considered quite good in absolute terms. It is worth noting that Finnish is not related to English but it is a popular subject and English is widely accessible. Sometimes this out-of-school learning of English is characterized as "English sticks to the clothes".



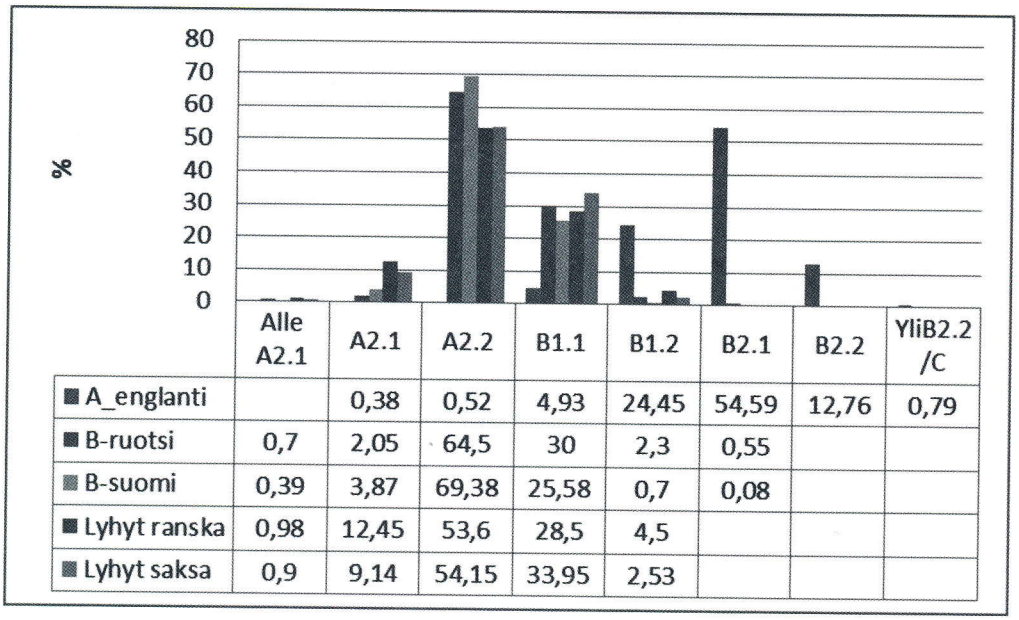
There have been three rounds of standard setting of the results of the Matriculation Examination (since 2002) in order to be able to relate students' results to CEFR levels. The outcome of the first two rounds, carried out before 2010, is presented in the following figure.



10: 10 years of study; 3/5: 3-5 years of study; 6 - 6 years of study

English, Finnish and Russian show the best results. The most common level in all three is B2. The fact that Finnish and Russian results are good is explained by many Swedish-speaking students being bilingual and many students who took the test in Russian have an immigrant background. The difference to Swedish, German, French and Spanish is very clear.

The results of the standard setting of the Spring 2012 examination will be published at the end of 2013 and show a similar picture to the preceding one. The following figure summarizes the results for English (10 years), Swedish (6 years), Finnish 6 years), French (usually 3 years) and German (usually 3 years) of students who took the matriculation exam in June 2012.



	Alle A2.1	A2.1	A2.2	B1.1	B1.2	B2.1	B2.2	YliB2.2 /C
A_englanti		0,38	0,52	4,93	24,45	54,59	12,76	0,79
B-ruotsi	0,7	2,05	64,5	30	2,3	0,55		
B-suomi	0,39	3,87	69,38	25,58	0,7	0,08		
Lyhyt ranska	0,98	12,45	53,6	28,5	4,5			
Lyhyt saksa	0,9	9,14	54,15	33,95	2,53			

Legend: A-English (10 years), B-Swedish (6 years), B-Finnish (6 years), short course in French and German (usually 3 years). The scale: Below A2.1, A2.1... Above B2.2/C.

The results confirm the good level of English attainment. The fact that the results in Swedish, Finnish, French and German are close to each other is probably explained by the fact (a) Finnish-speaking students have studied Swedish only for 6 years, (b) the B-Swedish test was taken mainly by A-Finnish students who might have found the A-level test too demanding, and (c) the tests in French and German have been taken as optional tests by the most motivated and probably also verbally gifted students(French: about 1050 students, German: about 1350 students; cf. English; about 21500 students).

Teacher education

Student teachers have been familiarized with the CEFR for a number of years. The Finnish version of the Portfolio was developed several years ago but the Ministry of Education did not set up a validation group. When the CoE validation procedure was relaxed recently, the Finnish version was finalized and was made accessible on the web this year.

The familiarity with the CEFR varies greatly in schools –some schools ands teachers have considerable experience using it while most schools and teachers have done little hands-on work on and with it.One of the main reasons is probably the fact that the current grading/marking system is not linked to the CEFR.

However, the situation is likely to change in the near future. The on-going reform of the comprehensive school and upper secondary school syllabuses will try to make a more explicit link with the CEFR and there are plans to make the language tests high-stakes Matriculation Examination (with a very powerful washback) compatible with European standards (ie. the CEFR) and with the computerization of the examination by the end of the decade the possibility of oral testing will be explored.

Conclusion

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 impressively 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.

Interaction an cooperation in language educaion in Europe changed dramatically with the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It is a vast achievement. It is, of course, not perfect and it never pretended to be so.

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 to listen to long –and truth to tell - quite 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! Thus 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.

Acknowledgment

I wish to thank Dr. Gudrun Erickson for help in obtaining information for Sweden and Professor Aud Marit Simensen and Dr. Glenn Ole Hellekjaer for information for Norway.

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