

BLOCK 5.

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

(a brief introduction to the CEFR (2001, 2018))

Outline

1. Objectives of this unit
2. Origins of the *CEFR*
3. What is the *CEFR* and what are its aims?
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 - 5.1. The six foreign language proficiency levels distinguished by the *CEFR*: Descriptors and scales
 - 5.2. The action-oriented approach of the *CEFR*
 - 5.3. Competences pursued in the *CEFR*
 - 5.4. The stance of the *CEFR* in relation to language, language learning and language teaching
6. Criticisms
7. Conclusions

For *CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors (2018)* including Sign Languages, see <https://www.coe.int/EN/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/>

1. Objectives of this unit

1. Describe the origins of the *CEFR*.
2. Analyse the linguistic, psychological and pedagogical ideas underlying the *CEFR*.
3. Understand the flexible approach of the *CEFR* in terms of language learning and teaching.
4. Become aware of one of the most important contributions of the *CEFR*: A new description of language levels and scales for measuring such levels.



Unit 4.3.1. 2. Origins of the *CEFR*

Council of Europe

- ❑ 1957 First intergovernmental conference on European co-operation in language teaching
- ❑ 1971 Beginning of the Modern Languages Project, or the “Threshold Level”
- ❑ **1975 Publication of first ‘Threshold Level’ specification**
- ❑ 1990 Publication of ‘Waystage’ specification
- ❑ 1994 European Centre for Modern Languages established
- ❑ 1997 Publication of ‘Vantage Level’ specification
- ❑ **2001 European Year of Languages**
 - ***Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment***
(available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>)
 - European Language Portfolio
- ❑ **2018 *CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors (2018)* including Sign Languages**
(available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>)



2. Origins of the *CEFR*

- ✓ The general rationale for the *CEFR* complies with the three basic principles set down in the preamble to Recommendation R (82) 18 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe:
- *that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding;*
 - *that it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination;*
 - *that member states, when adopting or developing national policies in the field of modern language learning and teaching, may achieve greater convergence at the European level by means of appropriate arrangements for ongoing co-operation and co-ordination of policies.*

(CEFR, 2001: 2)

3. What is the *CEFR* and what are its aims?

✓ The aims of the *CEFR* are:

- *to promote and facilitate cooperation and mutual information among educational institutions in different countries;*
- *to provide a sound basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications;*
- *to assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to reflect on their current practice and to situate and co-ordinate their efforts.*

(*CEFR*, 2001: 5-6)

3. What is the *CEFR* and what are its aims?

- ✓ A fourth essential aim can also be distinguished: making educational bodies and teachers aware of the need that students develop **plurilingual and pluricultural competence.**



Block 6

- ✓ *Plurilingualism is not the same as multilingualism.*

In multilingualism, students are encouraged to learn more than one language in their schools; plurilingualism promotes the belief that languages and their accompanying cultures are not to be kept in isolation. The knowledge and experience gained from these languages will not exist separately; on the contrary, they will interact and assist each other.

*The provision of a common descriptive scheme, common reference levels, and illustrative descriptors defining aspects of the scheme at the different levels, is intended to **provide a common metalanguage for the language education profession in order to facilitate communication, networking, mobility and the recognition of courses taken and examinations passed.***

(CEFR, 2018: 26)

1.2. What is the CEFR and what are its aims?

- ✓ *The result of over twenty years of research, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) is exactly what its title says it is: a framework of reference. It was designed to provide a **transparent, coherent and comprehensive** basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. It is used in Europe but also in other continents.*

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>

(My highlighting)

- ✓ *The CEFR is available in 40 languages:*

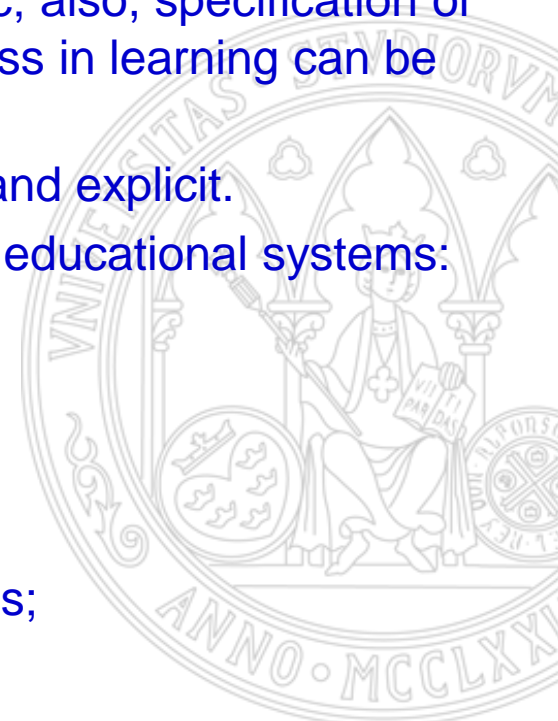
Arabic, Albanian, Armenian, Basque, Bulgarian, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Esperanto, Estonian, Finnish, French, Friulian, Galician, Georgian, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lithuanian, Macedonian Language, Moldovan, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian (Iekavian version), Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish and Ukrainian

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/?desktop=true>

(As of 20th January 2020. My highlighting)

3. What is the *CEFR* and what are its aims?

- ✓ What is it meant by the *comprehensive*, *transparent* and *coherent* labels attached to the *CEFR*?
 - ❑ ‘Comprehensive’: Specification as detailed as possible of the range of language knowledge, skills, use and dimensions of language proficiency involving other dimensions beyond the strictly linguistic; also, specification of a series of references points or levels by which progress in learning can be measured.
 - ❑ ‘Transparent’: information must be clearly formulated and explicit.
 - ❑ ‘Coherent’ –in relation to the following components of educational systems:
 - the identification of needs;
 - the determination of objectives;
 - the definition of content;
 - the selection or creation of material;
 - the establishment of teaching/learning programmes;
 - the teaching and learning methods employed
 - evaluation, testing and assessment



3. What is the *CEFR* and what are its aims?

- ✓ *The construction of a comprehensive, transparent and coherent framework for language learning and teaching does not imply the imposition of one single uniform system. On the contrary, the framework should be open and flexible, so that it can be applied, with such adaptations as prove necessary, to particular situations. CEF should be multi-purpose, flexible, open, dynamic, user-friendly, non-dogmatic.*

(*CEFR*, 2001: 7-8. My highlighting)

3. What is the **CEFR** and what are its aims?

CEFR 2018 Companion Volume

This companion volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) represents another step in a process that has been pursued by the Council of Europe since 1971 and owes much to the contributions of members of the language teaching profession across Europe and beyond (CEFR, 2018: 11).

The Companion Volume is the product of a project of the Education Policy Division (Language Policy Programme) of the Council of Europe. The focus in that project was to update the CEFR illustrative descriptors by:

- **highlighting** certain innovative areas of the CEFR for which no descriptor scales had been provided in the 2001 set of descriptors, but which have become increasingly relevant over the past twenty years, **especially mediation and plurilingual / pluricultural competence;**
- **building on the successful implementation and further development of the CEFR, for example by more fully defining ‘plus levels’ and a new ‘Pre-A1’ level;**
- **responding to demands for more elaborate description of listening and reading in existing scales, and for descriptors for other communicative activities such as online interaction, using telecommunications, expressing reactions to creative text and literature;**
- **enriching the description at A1, and at the C levels, particularly C2.**

(CEFR, 2018: 23. My highlighting)

3. What is the *CEFR* and what are its aims?

There are many ways in which modern languages are currently learnt and taught. For many years the Council of Europe has promoted an approach based on the communicative needs of learners and the use of materials and methods that will enable learners to satisfy these needs and which are appropriate to their characteristics as learners. However [...] it is not the function of the Framework to promote one particular language teaching methodology, but instead to present options. A full exchange of information on these options and of experience with them must come from the field. At this stage it is possible only to indicate some of the options derived from existing practice and to ask users of the Framework to fill in gaps from their own knowledge and experience. [...]

The approach to the methodology of learning and teaching has to be comprehensive, presenting all options in an explicit and transparent way and avoiding advocacy or dogmatism. It has been a fundamental methodological principle of the Council of Europe that the methods to be employed in language learning, teaching and research are those considered to be most effective in reaching the objectives agreed in the light of the needs of the individual learners in their social context.

(CEFR, 2001: 142. My highlighting)

4. Overview of the chapters of the *CEFR* (2001)

Chapter 1. The Common European Framework in its political and educational context

Chapter 2. Approach adopted

Chapter 3. Common Reference Levels

Chapter 4. Language use and the language user/learner

Chapter 5. The user/learner's competences

Chapter 6. Language learning and teaching

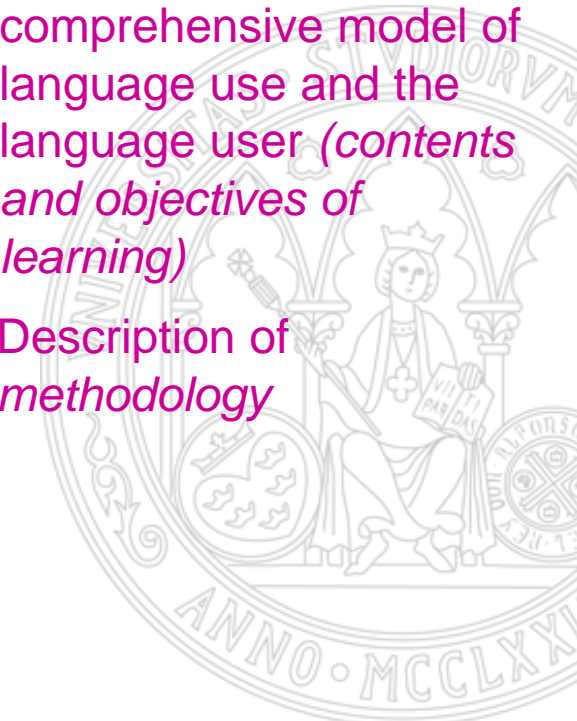
Chapter 7. Tasks and their role in language teaching

Chapter 8. Linguistic diversification and the curriculum

Chapter 9. Assessment

Description of a comprehensive model of language use and the language user (*contents and objectives of learning*)

Description of *methodology*

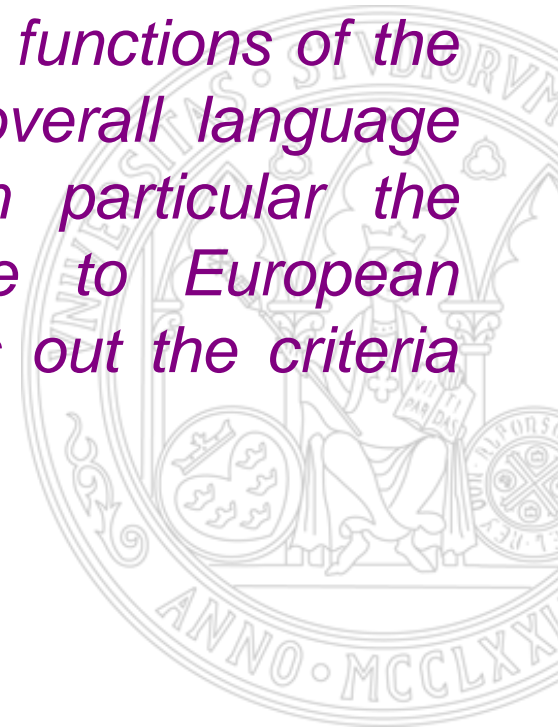


4. Overview of the chapters of the *CEFR* (2001)

Synopsis of chapters in the *CEFR*

<https://rm.coe.int/16802fc1bf#page=8>

Chapter 1 defines the aims, objectives and functions of the proposed Framework in the light of the overall language policy of the Council of Europe and in particular the promotion of plurilingualism in response to European linguistic and cultural diversity. It then sets out the criteria which the Framework should satisfy.



4. Overview of the chapters of the **CEFR (2001)**

Chapter 2 explains the approach adopted. The descriptive scheme is based on an analysis of language use in terms of the strategies used by learners to activate general and communicative competences in order to carry out the activities and processes involved in the production and reception of texts and the construction of discourse dealing with particular themes, which enable them to fulfill the tasks facing them under the given conditions and constraints in the situations which arise in the various domains of social existence. The words underlined designate the parameters for the description of language use and the user/learner's ability to use language.

4. Overview of the chapters of the *CEFR* (2001)

Chapter 3 introduces the common reference levels. Progress in language learning with regard to the parameters of the descriptive scheme can be calibrated in terms of a flexible series of levels of attainment defined by appropriate descriptors. This apparatus should be rich enough to accommodate the full range of learner needs and thus the objectives pursued by different providers, or required of candidates for language qualifications.

Chapter 4 establishes in some (but not exhaustive or definitive) detail the categories (scaled where possible) needed for the description of language use and the language user/learner according to the parameters identified, covering in turn: the domains and situations providing the context for language use; the themes, tasks and purposes of communication; communicative activities, strategies and processes; and text; especially in relation to activities and media.

4. Overview of the chapters of the **CEFR (2001)**

Chapter 5 categorises in detail the user/learner's general and communicative competences, scaled where possible.

Chapter 6 considers the processes of language learning and teaching, dealing with the relation between acquisition and learning and with the nature and development of plurilingual competence, as well as with methodological options of a general or more specific kind, in relation to the categories set out in Chapters 3 & 4.

Chapter 7 examines in greater detail the role of tasks in language learning and teaching.

Chapter 8 is concerned with the implications of linguistic diversification for curriculum design and considers such issues as: plurilingualism and pluriculturalism; differentiated learning objectives; principles of curriculum design; curricular scenarios; life-long language learning; modularity and partial competences.

4. Overview of the chapters of the **CEFR (2001)**

Chapter 9 discusses the various purposes of assessment and corresponding assessment types, in the light of the need to reconcile the competing criteria of comprehensiveness, precision and operational feasibility. The General Bibliography contains a selection of books and articles which users of the Framework may wish to consult in order to go into greater depth with regard to the issues raised. The bibliography contains relevant Council of Europe documents as well as works published elsewhere.

4. Overview of the chapters of the *CEFR* (2001)

- **Appendix A** discusses development of descriptors of language proficiency. Methods of and criteria for, scaling and the requirements for formulating descriptors for the parameters and categories presented elsewhere. are explained.
- **Appendix B** gives an overview of the project in Switzerland which developed and scaled the illustrative descriptors. The illustrative scales in the text are listed with page references.
- **Appendix C** contains the descriptors for self-assessment at series of levels adopted by the DIALANG Project of the European Commission for use on the Internet.
- **Appendix D** contains the "Can Do" descriptors at the series of levels developed by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE).

5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.1. The six foreign language proficiency levels: Descriptors and scales

Developed through a process of scientific research and wide consultation, this document provides a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. The Framework provides a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility. It is increasingly used in the reform of national curricula and by international consortia for the comparison of language certificates. A recent European Union Council Resolution (November 2001) recommended the use of this Council of Europe instrument in setting up systems of validation of language competences.

<https://unevoc.unesco.org/yem/YEM%20-%20Publications/lang=en/akt=detail/qs=4559>

Last accessed 2020/03/27)

- ✓ Accordingly, the *CEFR* proposes three broad ascending levels of language proficiency (A, B and C):

A: Basic User

B: Independent User

C: Proficient User

5. Key issues of the **CEFR** for the purposes of this course

5.1. The six foreign language proficiency levels: Descriptors and scales

- ✓ These three broad levels are in turn subdivided in three broad levels:

A: Basic User

A1: *Breakthrough* (beginner)

A2: *Waystage* (elementary)

B: Independent User

B1: *Threshold* (intermediate)

B2: *Vantage* (upper-intermediate)

C: Proficient User

C1: *Effective Operational Proficiency* (advanced)

C2: *Mastery* (very advanced level)

CEFR (2018: 46): “Pre-A1 represents a ‘milestone’ half way towards Level A1, a band of proficiency at which the learner has not yet acquired a generative capacity, but relies upon a repertoire of words and formulaic expressions”.

5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.1. The six foreign language proficiency levels: Descriptors and scales

- ✓ The *CEFR* offers global scales of “can-do” descriptors for each of the six levels on page 24.
- ✓ Specific scales for each level in relation to **understanding (listening and reading), speaking (spoken interaction and spoken production) and writing** are included on pages 26 and 27 of the *CEFR* (*Table 2. Common Reference levels: self-assessment grid*).



Note that one of the main purposes of the CEFR is the learner's self-assessment.

- ✓ Chapter 4 of the *CEFR* includes specific scales for each level concerning all the language activities and strategies described in this chapter (e.g., “Understanding conversation between native speakers”, page 66).

5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.1. The six foreign language proficiency levels: Descriptors and scales

CEFR (2018: 167-170)

- Reception (Listening and Reading)
- Production (spoken and written production)
- Interaction (spoken interaction, written and online interaction)
- Mediation

*The acquisition of proficiency is in fact seen as a circular process: **by performing activities, the user/learner develops competences and acquires strategies.** This approach embraces a view of competence as only existing when enacted in **language use**, reflecting both (a) the broader view of competence as action from applied psychology, particularly in relation to the **world of work and professional training** and (b) the view taken nowadays in the sociocultural approach to learning. The CEFR ‘Can do’ descriptors epitomise this philosophy (CEFR, 2018: 33. My highlighting).*

5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.2. The action-oriented approach of the *CEFR*

*Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of **competences**, both **general** and in particular **communicative language competences**. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in **language activities** involving **language processes** to produce and/or receive **texts** in relation to **themes** in specific **domains**, activating those **strategies** which seem most appropriate for carrying out the **tasks** to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences.*

(*CEFR*, 2001: 9. Emphasis in the original)



*Which language theory and language teaching approach/method do you think that the *CEFR* seems to support?*

5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.2. The action-oriented approach of the *CEFR*

- *At the classroom level, there are several implications of the implementation of the action-oriented approach. Seeing learners as social agents implies involving them in the learning process possibly with descriptors as a means of communication.*
- *It also implies recognising **the social nature of language learning and language use**, the interaction between the social and the individual in the process of learning.*
- *Seeing learners as language users implies extensive use of the target language in the classroom – **learning to use the language rather than just learning about the language (as a subject)**.*
- *Seeing learners as plurilingual, pluricultural beings means allowing them to use all their linguistic resources when necessary, encouraging them to see similarities and regularities as well as differences between languages and cultures.*
- *Above all, **the action-oriented approach implies purposeful, collaborative tasks in the classroom, whose primary focus is not language**. If the primary focus of a task is not language, then there must be some other product or outcome (e.g. planning an outing, making a poster, creating a blog, designing a festival, choosing a candidate, etc.).*

(CEFR, 2018: 27. My highlighting)

5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.3. Competences pursued in the *CEFR*

Chapter 5 of the *CEFR*:

5.1 General competences

5.1.1 Declarative knowledge (*savoir*)

5.1.1.1 knowledge of the world

5.1.1.2 sociocultural knowledge

5.1.1.3 intercultural awareness



Section 6.3 in Block 6

5.1.2 Skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*)

5.1.2.1 practical skills and know-how

5.1.2.2 intercultural skills and know-how

5.1.3 Existential competence (*savoir-être*)

5.1.4 Ability to learn (*savoir-apprendre*)

5.1.4.1 language and communication awareness

5.1.4.2 general phonetic skills

5.1.4.3 study skills

5.1.4.3 heuristic skills



5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.4. The stance of the *CEFR* in relation to language, language learning and language teaching

1) Language theory. The “what” of learning:

The *CEFR* does not explicitly advocate any language theory.

For example, in the case of grammatical competence,

There are a number of competing theories and models for the organisation of words into sentences [...] Here we limit ourselves to identifying some parameters and categories which have been widely used in grammatical description.

(*CEFR*, 2001: 113)



Section 5.2!

5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.3. Competences pursued in the *CEFR*

Chapter 5 of the *CEFR*

5.2 Communicative language competences

5.2.1 Linguistic competences

- 5.2.1.1 lexical competence
- 5.2.1.2 grammatical competence
- 5.2.1.3 semantic competence
- 5.2.1.4 phonological competence
- 5.2.1.5 orthographic competence
- 5.2.1.6 orthoepic competence

5.2.2 Sociolinguistic competence

- 5.2.2.1 markers of social relations
- 5.2.2.2 politeness conventions
- 5.2.2.3 expressions of folk-wisdom
- 5.2.2.4 register differences
- 5.2.2.5 dialect and accent

5.2.3 Pragmatic competences

- 5.2.3.1 discourse competence
- 5.2.3.2 functional competence
- 5.2.3.3 schematic design competence



5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.4. The stance of the *CEFR* in relation to language, language learning and language teaching

2) Language learning and teaching: the “how” of pedagogy

*Up to this point, the Framework has been concerned with the construction of a **comprehensive model of language use and the language user**, drawing attention along the way to the relevance of the different components of the model to language learning, teaching and assessment. That relevance has been seen predominantly in terms of the **content and objectives of language learning**. [...]* However, a framework of reference for language learning, teaching and assessment must also deal with **methodology**, since its users will undoubtedly wish to reflect on and communicate their methodological decisions within a general framework. Chapter 6 sets out to provide such a framework.

(*CEFR*, 2001: 142. Our highlighting)



1, 2

5. Key issues of the *CEFR* for the purposes of this course

5.4. The stance of the *CEFR* in relation to language, language learning and language teaching

2) Language learning and teaching: the “how” of pedagogy

Methodology is explicitly and intentionally left to teachers and textbook designers to decide, a fact which has received some criticisms but also support, because methodology varies with pedagogic culture.

*[...] **considering methodological issues, the CEF is not a new approach for teaching languages**, so we should not ask for explicit guidelines. We can find those in (post) communicative approaches, which involve a theory of language and, in parallel, a theory of language learning.*

(López Rama & Luque Agulló, 2012: 189, 190)

6. Criticisms

Hulstijn (2007) argues that there is an imperative need to implement longitudinal studies that empirically test the implications of the *CEFR* (2001) in terms of the proficiency levels and scales, by using real L2 learners rather than L1 parameters or researchers' and teachers' intuitions.

In particular, Hulstijn is wary about the fact that there are no empirical studies showing:

- a) That learners progressively go through all the preceding levels prior to their current state level;
- b) that learners can perform all tasks associated with lower levels than that where they currently stand;
- c) that a learner in a given scale (e.g. B2 Overall Oral Production) masters the linguistic scales at the same level (e.g. B2 Vocabulary Range, B2 Grammatical Accuracy, and B2 Phonological Control).

The CEFR 2018 version (issued in February 2018) has attempted to address some of Hulstijn's criticisms.

7. Conclusions

Despite criticisms,

1. The *CEFR* has promoted a lot of research and debate in FLT.
2. It has undoubtedly contributed to homogenize language standards in qualifications across countries and thus it has facilitated students' and workers' mobility in Europe.
3. The CEFR has an enormous influence on European educational policies and it is a crucial, recurrently quoted source in non-European countries too.