5 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the Austrian curriculum

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Key words

CEFR language levels and scales

CEFR and the Austrian curriculum for modern foreign languages

Washback effect of the CEFR

CEFR and the standardised *Matura*

In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

Where does the CEFR originate and what does it mean for language teachers in Europe?

How is the CEFR integrated into the Austrian curriculum?

How does the CEFR influence assessment and tests in Austria and the standardised *Matura* in particular?

What is the washback effect of the CEFR on language teaching approaches in Austria?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), a detailed description of language learner levels according to different skills, is commonly found in descriptions of teaching materials and language tests today. Not only does the CEFR aim to provide a common understanding of language learning for teachers, but it also addresses different partners in the field of language learning. Thus, apart from supporting teachers and educators, it is an invaluable document for examination boards and textbook authors, and it is the basis of curricula and syllabuses across the member states of the Council of Europe (CoE).

The CEFR was developed by the CoE between 1989 and 1996. Its main aims are:

- promoting plurilingualism and diversification in the choice of languages in the curriculum
- supporting the development and demonstration of the plurilingual profile of individual learners
- developing and reviewing the content of language curricula and defining positive 'can do' descriptors adapted to the age, interests and needs of learners

- designing and developing textbooks and teaching materials
- supporting teacher education and cooperation among teachers of different languages
- enhancing quality and success in learning, teaching and assessment
- facilitating transparency in testing and the comparability of certification (Council of Europe, 2001a)

Work on the CEFR began in the 1970s at a time in which there was a shift in language teaching methodology away from the grammar and translation approach towards a communication skills approach. The heart of the framework has since been a communicative approach to language teaching, learning and assessment, which is action-oriented. It aims to create learning that leads to action, i.e., being able to do things.

While the CEFR has remained true to this original goal, it is by no means static. Two recent changes to the CEFR show that it is dynamic and evolving. The first innovation was the introduction of the concept of mediation in the CEFR Companion Volume of 2018. Mediation (which combines reception, production and interaction) is an umbrella term for language activities that make communication possible between people who are unable to communicate directly, e.g., paraphrasing a text in a different language so that it can be understood by somebody who does not speak the original language of the text. The inclusion of mediation in the CEFR recognizes the importance of such skills in pluricultural and plurilingual societies. Even though the authors of the CEFR companion volume state clearly that they have not developed mediation to its full potential yet, they emphasize the importance of mediation in today's increasingly diverse classrooms and in the teaching of other subjects in English (see chapter 17 in this volume). Thus, mediation should be seen as a part of all learning, but especially of all language learning.

The second innovation was replacing the term 'native speaker' with more inclusive terms such as 'speaker of the target language', 'other participants [in a conversation]' or 'proficient speakers' because the term 'native speaker' is increasingly seen as controversial. The highest level of attainment is now defined by the degree of precision, appropriateness and ease with which highly successful learners use the L2.

In this context, it should also be stressed that the CEFR was never intended to be prescriptive. It was originally designed with the intention of creating a tool to facilitate educational reform projects and not, as is commonly assumed, as a standardisation tool. In addition, there is nobody monitoring its use. It was written with the

purpose of raising questions rather than telling practitioners what to do and it does not attempt to impose a specific methodology.

In November 2001, a European Council Resolution recommended using the CEFR to set up systems of validation of language ability. Since then, the CEFR has formed the basis for various language assessment tools and has become the foundation of numerous language courses and international exams (e.g., the Cambridge English Qualifications).

In Austria, like in many other countries, the curriculum for modern foreign languages is aligned with the CEFR. For example, the current curriculum in *Sekundarstufe I*, lower secondary level, consists of ten descriptors per year for all four skills, whereas the curriculum for *Sekundarstufe II*, upper secondary level, has been divided into modules, each of which states clear descriptors for individual skills with the explicit aim of reaching B2 level at the standardised *Matura*. In addition, the IKM[plus] test (a test of educational attainment taken by 13-year-olds and 14-year-olds) and the standardised *Matura* also reference the CEFR.

For Austrian foreign language teachers of all school forms, it is therefore vital to have a sound understanding of the CEFR in order to comprehend and to execute the requirements and demands of the Austrian curriculum.

CEFR levels and scales

The CEFR could be said to provide a 'learning ladder' on which a learner's progression can be visualised and measured. Instead of aiming at perfect language production, the CEFR gives language learners an overview of the stages they have reached thus far. More specifically, it describes smaller targets appropriate to the abilities at a certain stage of a learner's language acquisition.

At its core, the CEFR provides a series of six reference levels, which allow users to describe a learner's progression in detail. These levels, according to the 2018 CEFR companion, must be seen as a necessary simplification in order to organise learning and track and describe progress (Council of Europe, 2018). On the one hand, they help educators to decide which language activities are relevant for a particular group of learners, and on the other hand, they give learners a clear idea of what needs to be achieved in those activities in order to reach a certain language goal. It should be noted that the reference levels represent substantial chunks of learning. Potentially, language instructors need to specify much smaller baby steps for their learners.

In the CEFR, the language learner starts at level A1 and the highest level to be reached is C2. Rather than providing information on what the learner 'must learn' or taking a deficiency approach (i.e., focussing on what the learner does wrong or is not able to do, which was common in language assessment in the past) the learner's progression is described with 'can-do' statements. For each level, the CEFR describes in depth the language knowledge, skills and competences needed for effective communication. This approach is particularly apparent in the self-assessment grid, which is specifically designed for learners' own use.

Many language learners are familiar with the global scale of the CEFR (see Figure 1 below), which provides a general idea of what is required at each level in the form of 'can-do' statements. The descriptors are phrased in the first person, which makes them more direct and personal. In this way, learners' own responsibility for their progress is stressed: instead of 'the teacher wants me to learn', they are encouraged to frame their learning in terms of 'I need to learn this in order to get to, e.g., B2 level'.

PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
INDEPENDENT USER	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
BASIC USER	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Figure 1 – CEFR Global Scale

This global scale gives the learner an idea of where they are heading when developing their language skills. Not only does it tell the learner what needs to be mastered

at a certain level, it also includes topics (e.g., for level B1, talking about dreams and hopes) and, by implication, language functions and structures that are needed in order to fulfil these requirements (e.g., when talking or writing about hopes and dreams, the language learner needs to be able to use the future and certain modal verbs correctly). So rather than listing grammar items or word fields to acquire, the scale very cleverly gives the language learner an idea of what they need to be able to express in the foreign language at a specific level. The progression starts at a very personal level (personal details, personal lives, surroundings), moves on to events, dreams, hopes, giving viewpoints, and finally to utterly flexible and precise use of language in every domain and in every given situation.

In addition to the global scale, the CEFR includes more than 80 illustrative scales. They are grouped into three main categories. LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES cover the four main skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking) in the main areas of Reception, Production, Interaction and Mediation. LANGUAGE STRATEGIES are needed to achieve the language activities in all the skills listed above. LANGUAGE COMPETENCES cover the linguistic and socio-linguistic, pragmatic and plurilingual and pluricultural knowledge needed to communicate successfully. These subscales cover different areas, but are all applied to the same six levels of A1 – C2.

The main function of the illustrative scales in the CEFR is to help align curriculum, teaching and assessment. When creating a curriculum or a syllabus for a course, descriptors can be selected according to their relevance to the particular context. Descriptors can also be adapted if necessary. In this way, the descriptors provide a detailed, flexible resource for:

- relating learning aims to real world language use, thus giving a framework to action-oriented learning;
- providing transparent 'signposting' to learners, parents, sponsors;
- offering a 'menu' to negotiate priorities with adult learners in a process of ongoing needs analysis;
- suggesting classroom tasks to teachers, usually tasks that will involve activities described in several descriptors;
- introducing criterion-referenced assessment with the criteria relating to an external framework (here the CEFR). (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 42)

These illustrative scales form the basis of many assessment scales, for example, the ones developed by a group of experts for the Austrian standardised *Matura*.

Washback effect of the CEFR

Since the CEFR has been the template for the Austrian curriculum (and before that for the *Bildungsstandards* - educational standards set for schools), it has changed the attitude and approach to foreign language teaching in Austria considerably. It has caused a great ripple effect in ELT professionals' understanding of sustainably teaching language and also assessing it, and its impact can be seen, for example, in the changes to coursebooks, professional development seminars for teachers and initial teacher training courses.

The effect of the CEFR is most notable in the Austrian curriculum. Before the CEFR became the foundation of our curriculum, the curriculum provided teachers with lists of *Lehrinhalte* (teaching contents). In other words, the focus was on what must be taught, rather than on what learners reliably ought to be able to do. Today, the explicit goal of foreign language acquisition is the development of sustainable communicative language competence, from which ensues the ability to successfully communicate in private and professional everyday situations in a socio-linguistically appropriate way. It stipulates which situations the learners should be able to successfully deal with in the foreign language without specific preparation at *Matura* level and clarifies the linguistic, strategic and pragmatic complexity of the language level allocated to each year of learning, based on descriptors adapted from the CEFR descriptors.

Another aspect of the CEFR is that it has also strongly influenced teaching approaches and assessment, namely the requirement that all four language skills, i.e., listening, reading, speaking (monologue, dialogue) and writing must be taught with equal emphasis. By teaching grammar without any connection to its meaningful use in real life communication, the new requirements of the CEFR and the curriculum cannot be met. This means that the exclusive use of 'traditional' teaching approaches, for example, grammar-based teaching with a strong focus on structure and form and translation, cannot be reconciled with the CEFR and hence the current curriculum (see chapter 11 in this volume). The methods and approaches of communicative language teaching (see chapter 1 in this volume) are better suited not only to train the four skills with equal emphasis, but also to link teaching to real life language use as much as possible.

The CEFR and the standardised *Matura*

The Austrian curriculum is based on the CEFR. The curriculum for *Unterstufe* and *Oberstufe* describes the levels that need to be reached at a certain year of learning as based on the CEFR. The target level is B2 after eight years of language learning and

B1 after six years of learning. As a result, the standardised *Matura* in modern foreign languages is based on the descriptors at level B2 and B1 respectively, depending on how long a learner has studied a language.

The test construct for the exam was originally developed at the University of Innsbruck and is now continuously provided by a team of skilled experts at the Ministry of Education. Each exam item is piloted on Austrian students. The exams consist of two parts: the written exam and the oral exam.

The written exam is standardised and the four skills are tested independently. The task types are the following:

- Reading: four tasks of the following task types: true/false with justification (first four words of the sentence the information was taken from), multiple choice (four options), matching, short (four word) answers
- Listening: four tasks of the following task types: multiple choice (four options), matching and short answers (four words)
- Language in Use: four tasks of the following task types: multiple choice, word formation, banked gap filling, open gap filling
- Writing: two writing tasks, a short one (250 words) and a long one (400 words) such as essay, article, report, e-mails (formal/informal), blog and blog comment

The correction of the receptive skills and Language in Use tasks is done by teachers with a key sent out by the ministry. The correction of the written texts must be carried out by teachers using the assessment scales for the levels B1 or B2, provided by the ministry. These scales were developed using the illustrative CEFR descriptors for Communicative Language Competence (Council of Europe, 2001). Instructions on how to use the assessment scale correctly in order to grade learner texts are provided by the Ministry of Education (see suggestions for further reading at the end of this chapter).

The oral exam in the subject English, the first modern language that learners learn, is not standardised, but must be drawn up by the teachers, who are also the examiners, themselves. In order to do this, a high level of expertise is expected from Austrian *AHS* and *BHS* teachers. The oral exam is also based on the descriptors of the CEFR.

A research team of the University of Innsbruck led by Carol Spöttl determined the design of the Austrian oral *Matura* (see Spöttl et al., 2016 for more detailed information). A major shift was made from a mainly fact-based exam in the past, where

candidates were asked factual questions on topics covered in class, to a communicative exam that consists of two separate tasks, namely a monologue (presentation) which is allocated a time slot of five minutes and a dialogue, either conducted with another pupil or with the teacher as the dialogue partner, with an allocated time slot of 10 minutes. Different skills are needed for these two performances. A versatile, spontaneous command of the language is required to master the dialogue task. By contrast, uninterrupted, coherent speech is expected from the learners in the monologue. They have to cover a topic drawn from the *Themenkorb* (the given pool of topics). This consists of a number of topics (the exact number depends on the number of lessons per year the subject was taught in all four years of upper secondary school). The pool of topics is compiled by the class teacher and must be approved by the team of English teachers of the school the learner attends.

The descriptors listed below are stated as the target descriptors that need to be present in the learner performances in the oral *Matura* (see, for example, BMBF, 2013). The correlating CEFR descriptors are quoted in brackets.

- Kann Sachverhalte klar und systematisch beschreiben und darstellen und dabei wichtige Punkte und relevante stützende Details angemessen hervorheben. (CEFR: Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field of interest, expanding and supporting ideas with subsidiary points and relevant examples.)
- Kann zu einer großen Bandbreite von Themen aus ihren/seinen Interessensgebieten klare und detaillierte Beschreibungen und Darstellungen geben, Ideen ausführen und durch untergeordnete Punkte und relevante Beispiele abstützen. (CEFR: Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field of interest, expanding and supporting ideas with subsidiary points and relevant examples.)
- Kann die Sprache gebrauchen, um flüssig, korrekt und wirkungsvoll über ein breites Spektrum allgemeiner Themen oder über Freizeitthemen zu sprechen und dabei Zusammenhänge zwischen Ideen deutlich machen. (CEFR: Overall Spoken Interaction: Can use the language fluently, accurately and effectively on a wide range of general, academic, vocational or leisure topics, marking clearly the relationships between ideas.)
- Kann sich spontan und mit guter Beherrschung der Grammatik verständigen, praktisch ohne den Eindruck zu erwecken, sich mit dem, was sie/er sagen möchte, einschränken zu müssen; der Grad an Formalität ist den Umständen angemessen. (CEFR: Overall Spoken Interaction: Can communicate spontaneously with good grammatical control without much sign

of having to restrict what he/she wants to say, adopting a level of formality appropriate to the circumstances.)

▪ Kann sich so spontan und fließend verständigen, sodass ein normales Gespräch und anhaltende Beziehungen zu Muttersprachlerinnen und Muttersprachlern ohne größere Anstrengung auf beiden Seiten gut möglich sind. (CEFR: Overall Spoken Interaction: Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction, and sustained relationships with speakers of the target language quite possible without imposing strain on either party.)

▪ Kann die Bedeutung von Ereignissen und Erfahrungen für sich selbst hervorheben und Standpunkte durch relevante Erklärungen und Argumente klar begründen und verteidigen. (CEFR: Can highlight the personal significance of events and experiences, account for and sustain views clearly by providing relevant explanations and arguments.)

Activities and questions for reflection

1. Study the CEFR global scale and the self-assessment grid and make a list of adjectives and descriptive phrases that are used in the descriptors of the different levels / topics for the different levels. Consult your list to determine at which level the learners must be able to do what. What topics do they have to be able to communicate about?

2. How can you apply the knowledge from question 1 in your lesson planning?

3. Descriptors from the *AHS Oberstufe* curriculum indicate what a teacher needs to teach and on what level. Think of what tasks you could set to practice the descriptors listed below.

▪ Unkomplizierte Sachinformationen über gewöhnliche alltags-, berufs- und ausbildungsbezogene Themen verstehen und dabei die Hauptaussagen und Einzelinformationen erkennen können, sofern klar artikuliert und mit vertrautem Akzent gesprochen wird. (*Hören*, 6. Klasse, Kompetenzmodul 3+4)

▪ Flüssig, korrekt und wirkungsvoll über ein breites Spektrum allgemeiner Themen sprechen und dabei Zusammenhänge zwischen Ideen deutlich machen können. (*An Gesprächen teilnehmen und zusammenhängend Sprechen*, 8. Klasse, Kompetenzmodul 7+8)

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Suggestions for further reading

The 'Praxisreihe' series of publications by the ÖSZ (Österreichisches Sprachenkompetenz Zentrum) offers a wide range of excellent materials for teachers. For example, this publication from 2020 provides valuable materials in preparation for the oral *Matura:*

Mündliche Reifeprüfung Englisch: Modellaufgaben und Videoperformanzen auf dem Niveau B2 http://www.oesz.at/OESZNEU/document2.php?Submit=&pub_ID=229

These publications from 2018 provide valuable materials in preparation for the written *Matura*:

Modellbewertungen zu Englisch-Schreibperformanzen mit dem Beurteilungsraster B1 http://www.oesz.at/download/publikationen/praxisreihe33_web.pdf
Modellbewertungen zu Englisch-Schreibperformanzen mit dem Beurteilungsraster B2 https://www.oesz.at/download/publikationen/praxisreihe_29_web.pdf

More information on the *Matura* can be found on the webpage of the Ministry of Education: https://www.matura.gv.at/srdp/lebende-fremdsprachen

Teachers need to check the above link regularly, since the structures demanded at the *Matura* each year are adapted and changed rather frequently. Thus, a regular information update for teachers is a prerequisite.

Commentary on reflection questions:

1. Level A

simple, basic, routine phrases, familiar everyday expressions, concrete needs, slow, clear, immediate environment, frequently used expressions, repeat, rephrase, etc.

Topic: me and my immediate concrete surroundings (for learners in school: my family, that's me, my school, my house, my clothes, etc.)

Level B

Familiar topics, understand main points, complex, fluency, spontaneity, without strain, clear detailed, viewpoints, offer various options, state advantages and disadvantages, coherent, contemporary literary prose, essay and report, etc.

Topics: concrete and abstract – wide range of current topics (for learners in school from the *Themenkörbe*)

Level C

No difficulty, fast, abstract, linguistically complex, specialized article, literary works, idiomatic, fluent, shades of meaning, colloquialisms, clear, coherent, complex, appropriate to style, logical, smooth, effective

Topics: all topics and genres

2. Your answer to this reflection question will depend on your learners' language level.

3. On the following page is a sample task from: Österreichisches Sprachenkompetenz Zentrum. (2020). *Mündliche Reifeprüfung Englisch: Modellaufgaben und Videoperformanzen auf dem Niveau B2*. (p. 28). http://www.oesz.at/OESZ-NEU/document2.php?Submit=&pub_ID=229

Rules and laws

Aspect: smoking

❽ Individual long turn

Give a five-minute talk on the topic of smoking in which you

- use these pictures to **speculate** about reasons why people smoke,
- **discuss** the legal situation in regard to smoking in Austria,
- **analyze** whether regulations benefit people's health.

Figure 2: Oral *Matura* sample task