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# The assessment of speaking and the Common European Framework for languages (CEFR), ten years later

## *1. Introduction*

Despite the obvious impact of the CEFR on language policies after its publication in 2001, the changes in the teaching, learning and assessment of spoken language have yet to be documented. In the past 10 years, the widespread movement to establish educational standards linked to the CEFR levels has led to a remarkable increase in efforts to evaluate learner performance through various types of objective testing procedures. The need to respond to the social demands for accreditation across Europe, and hence the need to develop valid and reliable procedures for the assessment and testing of speaking, has challenged the profession to revise and finally tackle issues that have been the subject of discussion for some time.

This article is organized into three sections. First the nature of speaking in a second language is (re)visited in relation to the work done in the past 50 years and in relation to the contents and proposals of the Common European Framework for languages of the Council of Europe (CEFR). Following that, the difficulties in teaching and assessing speaking are outlined, and a performance assessment model for task development is presented. The last part of the article focuses on the challenges presented by the need to set cutscores in any assessment endeavour and the growing social demand to have cutscores linked to the CEFR levels. Finally the toolkit that the Council of Europe has put together in order to facilitate a common understanding of the CEFR levels for speaking, and to foster good practice in language assessment, is briefly presented, following which some future perspectives are outlined.

### 1. *Speaking in the CEFR*

Researchers, teachers, and government officials have tried for decades to find a way to teach languages so that they can normally be used in real life, and so that they can be assessed in a way which guarantees that assessment purpose, assessment characteristics, and assessment results correspond to teaching and learning purposes. The CEFR, in trying to help in this respect, was written with two aims in mind (Notes for the User 2001: xi)

1. To encourage practitioners of all kinds in the language field, including language learners themselves, to reflect on such questions as:
  - What do we actually do when we speak (or write) to each other?
  - What enables us to act in this way?
  - How much of this do we need to learn when we try to use a new language?
  - How do we set our objectives and mark our progress along the path from total ignorance to effective mastery?
  - How does language learning take place?
  - What can we do to help ourselves and other people to learn a language better?
2. To make it easier for practitioners to tell each other and their clientèle what they wish to help learners achieve, and how they attempt to do so.

The CEFR itself addresses these aims in its 9 chapters and makes proposals and recommendations for action – always to be followed in relation to the context of use in case, as stated in the framed reminders at the end of each chapter. The proposals and recommendations in the CEFR take account of the research and the literature available at the time, and the action-oriented approach to language use proposed in the CEFR (2001: 9).

„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.“

founded in 2006 ([www.ealta.eu.org](http://www.ealta.eu.org)) or of exam providers such as ALTE, the Association of Language Testers ([www.alte.org](http://www.alte.org)) which are committed to the dissemination of good practice in language testing and assessment and to the promotion of an understanding of theoretical principles of language testing and assessment, and the improvement and sharing of testing and assessment practices throughout Europe, have done a lot to facilitate networking. EALTA in particular has a policy of free membership, runs extremely affordable summer schools, pre-conference workshops and conferences, and offers on its web-page a considerable amount of resources and presentations which can be downloaded by those interested. In relation to standard setting, Figueras and Noijons (2009) put together the presentations of researchers at a symposium on the topic which took place in Athens in 2008.

The above initiatives, however, need to serve for awareness raising and for making sure that government officials and testing organizations value quality and fairness in testing and assessment (see, for example, EALTA's Guidelines for Good Practice) and attach sufficient importance to the need to achieve a holistic perspective on teaching and assessment.

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