

**Helge Bonset, Theun Meestringa**

**SLO (National Institute for Curriculum Development),**

**Enschede, the Netherlands**

## **Some Steps Taken towards a Framework for Languages of School Education**

### **Introduction**

In 2002, the 'European Language Portfolio for adult learners of a second language' was published in the Netherlands. This Language Portfolio has been validated and accredited by the Council of Europe under number 36.2002. Its existence and its use in education create a rather unique situation in Europe that reinforces the need for the development of a Common European Framework for Languages of School Education (LEF) that is closely related to the Common European Framework of Reference for (foreign) Languages (hence CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001).

Most of the 65 Language Portfolios that have been validated and accredited by the Council of Europe so far (April 2006) were made for students who learn a 'foreign' language i.e. a language rarely used in their own environment, for example learning English in France or in Poland. Generally, the 'foreign language' would be different to the language used when instructions are given in the regular school classroom. Language Portfolio 36.2002 is the only Language Portfolio that is called<sup>1</sup> a 'model for *second* language learners'. To begin with, this Language Portfolio was meant for students who take Dutch courses as a Second Language (DSL) in vocational and adult education. Successful completion of these courses, with for example a DSL 1 or DSL 2 certificate, opened up access to the labour market or to higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> As seen at <http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio>, on 20 April 2006

Last year, an adapted version of this Language Portfolio for students of 12 years and older who learn Dutch as a second language was completed (SLO, 2005)<sup>2</sup>. Following an introductory course these students and also adult second language learners begin regular education together with native Dutch speakers. Therefore, the Language Portfolio Dutch as a Second Language has gained access to the Dutch classroom, to Dutch taught as a school subject. This raises the question as to what extent the European Language Portfolio can be used for non-DSL-students.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch council for vocational education and training and adult education (BVE)<sup>3</sup> has advised students and other interested parties to refer to the DSL framework in the new qualification profiles (competence profiles) of all courses in vocational education. In the so-called language profiles, they advise to describe at which level a student should be able to listen, read, write and speak (interaction and production) in Dutch and – if appropriate – in one or more foreign languages.

Research shows that, according to teachers and experts (Leenders et al. 2005)<sup>4</sup>, using the CEFR for describing competences for the Dutch language causes a number of problems:

- Most of the 12 interviewed teachers said they did not use it, because they have few or no NT2 students;
- Almost all teachers doubted its usability, because it's descriptions were too rough and too general;
- Some of the interviewed experts said that the NT2 framework is not suitable for Dutch (L1 learners), because the language acquisition process differs from learning a language as a second language. However, it could be used in order to indicate the learner's level of proficiency and his/her production abilities.

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<sup>2</sup> SLO (2005). *Taalportfolio NT2 voor leerlingen van 12 jaar en ouder (Language Portfolio DSL 12+)*. Enschede. Published at [www.slo.nl/isk](http://www.slo.nl/isk)

<sup>3</sup> The organisation represents all institutes for secondary vocational education and training and adult education in the Netherlands.

<sup>4</sup> Leenders, E., P. Poelmans & H. den Exter (2005). *Nederlands en het Raamwerk NT2 in het mbo. (Dutch and the Framework DSL in vocational training)* 's-Hertogenbosch: CINOP/SLO

Nevertheless, the research showed that all respondents were positive about the many uses of a Framework of Reference for language education.

In 2004, SLO was given the task of developing a learning programme for the Frisian language with the aim of aiding transition from primary to secondary education. Frisian is an acknowledged, regional minority language that is integrated in the curriculum of primary and secondary education in the Dutch province Friesland. Roughly 50 per cent of the students are native Frisian speakers. Due to a limited amount of time, we chose, in consultation with our client, to adapt the European Language Portfolio based on the CEFR for pupils in Friesland, without worrying too much about the fundamental question of whether the CEFR is appropriate for L1 learners. The idea was to test the outcome in real classroom practice.<sup>5</sup>

In this report we give a theoretical analysis of the usefulness of CEFR-levels for native language instruction (paragraph 2), and try to identify which aspects of the Framework of Reference need to be adapted (paragraph 3). Paragraph 4 concludes this paper with some proposals.

## **2. Usefulness of the CEFR for LEF/MTE**

Trying to find out to what extent the scales of the CEFR can be applied to languages of school education, or 'mother tongue education', we looked closely into the scales of chapter 4 and 5 of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001: 43-130) and the examples of the descriptors given in the European Language Portfolio, as they are gathered in Liemberg and Meijer (2004)<sup>6</sup>. In short, in that publication the descriptors are congruent with the descriptors in chapter 4 of the CEFR and the scales of chapter 5 of the CEFR are summed up as 'features of the text'. We were particularly interested in the lower

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<sup>5</sup> Students can hold track of their language development for Dutch as a second language (12+) and for Frisian on the website <http://www.europeestaalportfolio.nl>, along with that of other languages.

<sup>6</sup> Liemberg, E. & D. Meijer (eds) (2004) *Taalprofielen. Leerlijnen voor competentiegericht vreemdetalenonderwijs*. Enschede: NabMVT

scales of the CEFR (levels A1, A2 en B1), because we had the impression that the higher levels are more appropriate for L1 development than the lower levels.

In the tentative assessment below, the responses of consulted experts are incorporated. In due course, our evaluation will need to be based on further research.

## **2.1 Listening**

### *Descriptors*

In the CEFR and *Taalprofielen*, A1 descriptors of only one sub-skill have been selected, namely listening to announcements and instructions. Regarding the other sub-skills (understanding conversations between native speakers, listening as a member of a live audience and listening to TV, video- and sound recordings), pupils will usually have achieved a higher level than A1 when entering primary education (group 1, in the Netherlands at the age of 4, formerly nursery school).

With regards to listening to announcements and instruction, pupils will probably still have more to learn, e.g. listening to instructions that include more than one step.

At a rough estimate, children of approximately 7 years old will be able to deal well with level A2. Only the instructions on how to operate a machine may demand a more advanced cognitive development. It probably depends on the machine itself as to whether pupils of this age can handle it.

### *Features of a text*

From a mother tongue perspective, it can be said that there are features at A-level such as ‘the complexity of texts’; ‘speak slowly’, ‘noise on the line’ and ‘use of dialect/non-standard language’, which are unlikely to be relevant.

## **2.2 Reading**

### *Descriptors*

It is significant that technical reading, which in education precedes the first level of reading for understanding, is not mentioned or described. If pupils learn the basics of technical reading, pupils in group 3 will probably be able to cope with the sub-skills of reading correspondence, reading for orientation and reading instructions. Reading for information also requires the ability to relate concise information to real situations. As long as concrete, familiar and everyday situations are concerned, this will probably be no problem.

A2 level seems to match the 8 to 9-year-old age group. B1 level can possibly be placed at the end of primary education, although most pupils will not have reached this level by then. The following step to B2 seems to be quite large and for many pupils, this could well be as far as they get. Some may not even get to this stage. Further research is needed to provide more answers.

### *Features of a text*

Apart from some references to foreign language aspects (familiar from one's L1 language, etc.), these features seem to be useful for mother tongue speakers.

## **2.3 Speaking, interaction or production**

### *Descriptors*

In general, when children enter primary education (in the Netherlands at the age of 4), the can-do-statements at A-level are doable in their native language and perhaps A2 as well although here the role of education becomes more important. Regarding their linguistic development, these children seem to be more advanced than it is described at A2-level; however, cognitively, they have not developed that far.

'Arranging business matters' is an example of a sub-skill that cannot be done by 7-year-olds as set out in the descriptors. In order to achieve A2, there needs to be a development in socio-cultural skills i.e. understanding the appropriateness of language and there also has to be an increased knowledge of relevant subject areas. Primary education can play an important role with regard to the development of skills up to B1-level: 'the world becomes larger for children, among other things by education itself.' B2-level could be placed at the end of secondary education.

### *Features of a text*

Up to level B1, several features are hardly relevant for mother tongue speakers. Pupils are competent technically at the lower levels. Features such as speed of speech, articulation and fluency are, from a mother tongue's perspective, less relevant than from an L2 or foreign language perspective. Subject and coherence are approached and structured cognitively rather than linguistically.

## **2.4 Writing**

### *Descriptors*

From a native language instruction point of view, it is significant that there is no attention paid to technical writing (see also reading). Several A1 and A2 descriptors and examples, such as 'fill in personal information at a hotel' or 'confirm appointments in writing', are not appropriate to 7 to 10 year olds. However, in general, it seems that the levels of writing can be used to describe the development of written texts.

### *Features of a text*

Subject knowledge and grammatical accuracy are described and structured from a foreign language learning point of view e.g. 'expressions learnt by heart'. Up to B1-level, these are not relevant for L1-speakers. The vocabulary is not that limited for L1 writers, often the range of subjects is wider (A1 and A2 for example also include

events) and there is more grammatical accuracy. Regarding coherence, spelling and punctuation, it seems that the process of learning is transferable.

## **2.5 Expressive language use**

The descriptors and features pay insufficient attention to expressive language use.

Only writing has a subskill termed creative writing. In all other cases, it mainly concerns transactional and to a lesser extent conceptual language use. From learning a modern foreign language perspective, this is not surprising; however, from learning a standard language (as an L2) it is a deficiency.

Expressive language use would be needed in relation to such things as fiction, literature and drama. Also, when getting involved in other subject areas, using formal language in an expressive and conceptualizing manner can support language acquisition.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In this paragraph, we looked at the possibilities of using the CEFR (2001) for the language of school education. In our opinion, the Common European Framework for Languages offers a useful basis for a set of scales for language proficiency, even if it is the native language of children, pupils, learners or students. As a result, it seems worthwhile to develop general level descriptions, along the lines of the CEFR, and in keeping with its six scales.

Based on the discussion above, we would like to recommend maintaining its subdivision of levels (A1 - C2), which, amongst other things, would provide a comparison with other languages. The fact is, that level A1 in speaking cannot be used in education for children whose mother tongue is the same as the language of instruction because they will have reached a level higher than A1. However, this level is important to second language learners.

A framework of Reference for languages of instruction will need to be able to accommodate all students including those who do not speak the language of instruction as L1. Levels above A1, particularly higher levels are useful for all skills.

Our conclusion is that the CEFR as such cannot be applied to L1 language learning and that a careful procedure is necessary to adapt the existing scales and to add new scales, e.g.:

- Regarding the sub-skills (chapter 4 of the CEFR), expressive language use should be mentioned (fiction/literature for reading, drama for speaking).
- Regarding 'features' (primarily chapter 5 of the CEFR), strategic and pragmatic competences should be further developed than has been done in *Taalprofielen*.

### **3. Adapting the CEF to Frisian as a first and second language**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Friesland is a Northern province in the Netherlands where Frisian is an officially acknowledged language integrated into all domains of Frisian society. At Frisian schools, about half of the students speak Frisian as a mother tongue; the other students speak Dutch at home, or Frisian or a Saxon dialect or another language.

Education in Frisian forms part of the curriculum of schools in primary education and the first years of secondary education. The interpretation schools have of this part of the curriculum varies enormously. This fact, apart from a great variety in local speech, results in a situation in which teachers who teach Frisian as a subject in secondary education, teach students with a great variety of proficiency in the Frisian language. Using the Language Portfolio for Frisian Language may be helpful to form a picture of this variety.

### 3.2 Working method

Language specialists from primary and secondary education with expertise in bilingual primary education and education in Friesland evaluated all the descriptors, sub-skills, detailed descriptors and features (see paragraph 2) for usefulness and appropriateness for pupils who learn Frisian from an early age in Friesland. The publication *Taalprofielen* (Liemberg & Meijer 2004), and the Dutch text of the European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe 2001), forms the basis. Furthermore, the original publication of the Council of Europe was used as reference. During the evaluation several adjustments were implemented, an overview of which is given below. As a result, all examples were removed from *Taalprofielen*. This resulted in a document for each skill (reading, listening, speaking production, writing, speaking interaction) with partly adapted sub-skills, descriptors and features.

Then, at a two-day conference involving the input of twelve experienced teachers from primary and secondary education in Friesland, new relevant examples for each descriptor were formulated and discussed. Afterwards, these examples were compared by three experts to the examples at the same level of *Taalprofielen* and if necessary, they were adapted. This resulted in five checklists that together form the Language Portfolio for learning, teaching and assessing the Frisian language in Friesland (Bonset, Oosterloo & Meestringa 2005)<sup>7</sup>.

### 3.3 Examples of alterations that are considered inevitable

While developing the Language Portfolio for pupils in Friesland, we consciously applied some alterations regarding the CEFR and *Taalprofielen*.

First, we deleted or replaced elements which specifically referred to foreign language learning. Two examples may illustrate this:

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<sup>7</sup> Please contact the authors if you want to have a look at the checklists (for reading and speaking)<sup>7</sup> of the Language Portfolio Frisian Language (in development)

- Text features at level A2 described: ‘The pronunciation is clear enough to be able to understand the speaker, despite a clear accent. Sometimes listeners will ask for a repetition’. These features do not apply to native speakers, which is why they were deleted;
- The clause ‘practice beforehand’, also at level A2 of speaking, is replaced by ‘prepared’, which corresponds more accurately with the terminology used in mother tongue education.

The second alteration was to make it more relevant to young learners, younger than is the case in CEF and *Taalprofielen*. Two examples may be given here:

- At level A2 of reading, the descriptor ‘Can understand a simple standard letter or circular’ is removed. In mother tongue education, these kinds of texts do not match the age group that corresponds with level A2;
- At level B1 of speaking, in one of the descriptors the term ‘field of work’ is replaced by ‘field of interest’, because not all pupils at that age have a job.

The third alteration is the addition of a sub-skill at the level of global descriptors, namely ‘read fiction’. In the opinion of the group of experts, this important element in L1 education is not described explicitly enough in CEFR and *Taalprofielen*. Two examples:

- At reading level A1 the descriptor: ‘Can understand short and simple stories and simple poems’ is added. In the explanation there is a reference to illustrations (picture books);
- At reading level B1, the descriptor: ‘Can understand long stories and poems’ is added. In the explanation there is a reference to novels for young people.

The fourth alteration involved adding elements that provide room for expressive language use. So for example:

- At listening level A2, this descriptor has been added: ‘Can understand the story line of a simple story.’;

- At speaking level B1 (production), the following descriptor has been added: 'I can describe the plot of a book or film and say what I think about it.'

Apart from these four changes regarding the CEFR and *Taalprofielen*, in the Language Portfolio for Frisian Language we have clarified some issues, simplified the language use for the benefit of the young target group and on some points geared sub-skills to one another.

#### **4. In the short-term perspective**

The Dutch government is now convinced of the need to develop a 'possibly digital Language Portfolio' for Dutch as an L1. The minister writes: 'The Language Portfolio is an instrument for individual planning and progress. It also stimulates students to reflect on their own language proficiency level and to consider the steps needed to achieve the target level of language proficiency.'<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Centre of Innovation and Training (CINOP) has been given the task of initiating and coordinating this development. The experiences described above show that the CEFR of the Council of Europe can be endorsed here and that previous experience with its use can be built upon.

In our opinion, the following activities are of high priority:

1. Standardising research. The Language Portfolio NT2 for students of 12 years and older and the Language Portfolio for pupils and students in Friesland contain numerous examples of actual linguistic performance situations at levels A1 to C1. For further development and the testing of practical techniques, it is necessary to examine these examples for usefulness and appropriateness.
2. Closer analysis of the similarities and differences between language acquisition processes as described in the CEFR of the Council of Europe and greater scientific knowledge of mother tongue language acquisition from the age of four.

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<sup>8</sup> Ministerie van OC&W, (2005) *'Van A tot Z betrokken'. Een aanvalsplan laaggeletterdheid*. Den Haag: Ministerie van OC&W

This analysis should take into account that:

- a. the framework is meant for learning, teaching and assessing language(s) of school education (LEF), and pre-school development is less relevant in this regard;
  - b. the framework attempts to describe the successive levels of language proficiency, and does not attempt to incorporate other areas, such as identity development, or civic or other educational responsibilities.
3. Critical reflection on and if necessary further adaptation and an increase in the sub-skills and descriptors/can-do-statements of the CEFR we have selected and formulated for the Frisian language. Regarding this, a start has been made although, it will probably only be a beginning.

As far as we are concerned, these three activities can be started simultaneously and we hope that the Netherlands and other European countries will drive this initiative forward.

## References

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