Perspectives on alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and its companion volume (CEFR CV) in the context of Leaving Certificate Irish

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Summary

This discussion paper is divided into three parts. The first introduces the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, 2001) and its *Companion Volume* (CEFR CV, 2020). It explains where the CEFR comes from and what it was designed to achieve; summarizes its implications for language teaching; explains key features of its six proficiency levels; and considers the extent to which its proficiency levels and scaled descriptors can legitimately be applied to Irish as a first language.

The second part of the paper relates the history of CEFR alignment so far, with reference to high-stakes exams and curricula; summarizes the current international interest in using the CEFR to build Comprehensive Learning Systems in which curriculum, teaching/learning and assessment are aligned with the CEFR but also with one another; and describes how, twenty-five years ago, the CEFR was used to develop a comprehensive support system for teachers and learners of English as an additional language in Irish primary schools.

The third part of the paper considers the potential benefits of redeveloping the specifications for Leaving Certificate Irish in alignment with the CEFR. It argues that the benefits are significantly different for Irish L1 and Irish L2 and uses the specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic to show how key features of the specification template can be linked to the CEFR.

The paper concludes by recognizing that redeveloping the specifications for Leaving Certificate Irish in alignment with the CEFR, though eminently achievable, would have significant resource implications. The creation of an integrated system comprising curriculum, pedagogy and assessment would require sustained collaboration between actors who traditionally work independently of one another – specialists in curriculum, specialists in assessment, educational and linguistic researchers, teacher educators and teachers. And successful implementation would depend crucially on the continuation of this collaboration in teacher education and in monitoring and reporting on the performance of each component of the system.

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1 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

1.1 What is the CEFR?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) comprises two documents:

i. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, published in 2001 – hereafter 2001 CEFR;

ii. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume*, published in 2020 – hereafter CEFR CV.[2]

Both documents

- describe language proficiency in terms of language use – the communicative tasks learners can perform – at six levels: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, C1 and C2;
- divide language use into four modes: reception (listening and reading), production (speaking and writing), interaction (spoken and written), and mediation;
- provide illustrative scales (A1–C2) that use
  - "can do" descriptors to define the communicative activities that language users and learners perform
  - scaled descriptors to define the communicative language competences on which the successful performance of communicative activities depends;
- facilitate a focus on partial or uneven proficiency profiles;
- are non-language-specific: when applied to a particular language the scaled descriptors of communicative language activities and communicative language competences must be explored and elaborated with reference to that language.[3]

The 2001 CEFR presented its description of communicative proficiency as part of a larger undertaking that rests on the concept of plurilingualism, defined as "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact".[4] According to the 2001 CEFR, the aim of language education is "no longer seen as simply to achieve 'mastery' of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation" but "to develop a linguistic repertory in which all linguistic abilities have a place".[5] The Council of Europe's commitment to this conception of language education was reaffirmed three years ago in Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1 of the Committee of Ministers, on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture.

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[2] Page references to the 2001 CEFR and the CEFR CV are to the editions accessible via the embedded links.

[3] Such elaborations, known as Reference Level Descriptions, are available for a number of languages; by far the most substantial is English Profile, which is informed by a large body of empirical research.

[4] 2001 CEFR, p. 4.

[5] 2001 CEFR, p. 5. For a detailed study of plurilingual education as implemented by an Irish primary school, see D. Little & D. Kirwan, *Engaging with Linguistic Diversity: A Study of Educational Inclusion in an Irish Primary School*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019. A plurilingual approach also underpins *Language and Languages in the Primary School: Some Guidelines for Teachers*, by D. Little & D. Kirwan, revised edition, Post-primary Languages Ireland, 2024.

		A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
UNDERSTANDING	*Listening*	I can understand familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.
	Reading	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.
SPEAKING	**Spoken Interaction**	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g., family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.
	Spoken Production	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can present a clear, smoothly-flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.
WRITING	**Writing**	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select a style appropriate to the reader in mind.	I can write clear, smoothly-flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.

Table 1: 2001 CEFR, Self-assessment grid

The CEFR CV likewise advocates plurilingual and intercultural education. It updates some of the descriptors in the 2001 scales and adds a new level (pre-A1) and scales for mediation, plurilingual and pluricultural competences, phonology, and sign languages. Its scales and descriptors supersede those of the 2001 CEFR, though the text of the 2001 CEFR remains foundational.

A summary overview of the CEFR's proficiency levels is provided by the so-called self-assessment grid from the 2001 CEFR (Table 1, p. 3), which focuses on communicative language activities. The equivalent summary in the CEFR CV[6] is more complex because it includes written interaction and three categories of mediation; it is thus less helpful for present purposes. It should be noted, however, that the self-assessment grid tends to conceal the CEFR's "four modes" view of language use; it has often misled readers into supposing that the CEFR promotes a "five skills" model.[7]

1.2 Where did the CEFR come from?

The CEFR has a double inheritance:

- Because the Council of Europe's political and cultural purpose is to facilitate cooperation among its member states, the CEFR "provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe".[8] This function explains the significant impact of the CEFR over the past two decades, especially in the domain of international language testing.
- Because the Council of Europe's activities are underpinned by the European Convention on Human Rights, the CEFR views language users and learners "primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish".[9] This understanding has its roots in the organization's adult education project of the 1970s, which provided the umbrella under which the first work in modern languages was undertaken. The project emphasized the importance of learner participation, empowerment and autonomy. In this connection it is important to note that the "can do" descriptors of the CEFR portray an autonomous language user/learner at successive levels of proficiency. The 2001 CEFR identifies "learning how to learn", acquiring the capacity for autonomous language learning across the lifespan, as a key goal of language education.[10]

1.3 What does the CEFR imply for language teaching?

In the "Notes for the user" at the beginning of the 2001 CEFR, the authors state: "We have NOT set out to tell practitioners what to do, or how to do it. We are raising questions, not answering them. It is not the function of the Common European Framework to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they

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6 CEFR CV, pp. 177–181.
7 This misunderstanding occurs, for example, in the Junior Cycle specifications for Irish L1 and L2.
8 2001 CEFR, p. 1.
9 2001 CEFR, p. 9.
10 2001 CEFR, p. 141.

should employ."[11] These words reflect the fact that the Council of Europe can only ever play an advisory role regarding educational policy and practice in its member states.

At the same time, however, the 2001 CEFR points out that "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".[12] And while the authors again insist that "it is not the function of the Framework to promote one particular language teaching methodology", they offer their readers this challenge:

> If there are practitioners who upon reflection are convinced that the objectives appropriate to the learners towards whom they have responsibilities are most effectively pursued by methods other than those advocated elsewhere by the Council of Europe, then we should like them to say so, to tell us and others of the methods they use and the objectives they pursue.[13]

I am not aware of any attempt to respond to this challenge.

The 2001 CEFR adopted what it calls an "action-oriented" approach, describing language proficiency in terms of language use, because the Council of Europe has always been committed to the principle that language teaching should seek to extend learners' communicative capacity. Accordingly, the action-oriented approach has powerful pedagogical implications. This is how the approach is summarized at the beginning of Chapter 2 of the 2001 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.[14]

This summary is intentionally dense. The words and phrases printed in boldface, to which "contexts" in the second sentence should be added, refer to the principal components of the CEFR's descriptive scheme. The summary can be interpreted as follows:

- When we use language we draw on our competences – knowledge, skills, experience and characteristics.
- Language learning is a variety of language use in the sense that communicative proficiency develops from sustained interaction between the learner's gradually

[11] 2001 CEFR, p. xi.
[12] 2001 CEFR, p. 142.
[13] 2001 CEFR, p. 142.
[14] 2001 CEFR, p. 9.

developing competences and the communicative tasks whose performance requires him or her to use the target language.

- Accordingly, if learners are to develop a proficiency that allows them to act as "individuals and social agents",
    i. the target language should be the principal medium of their learning;
    ii. learning should be organized in ways that give them unlimited access to the widest possible range of communicative roles.
- The monitoring that reinforces or modifies the learner's competences is in part an involuntary, unconscious feature of language use, but it is also essential to effective teaching and learning.

Whereas the 2001 CEFR applies the term "action-oriented" only to its description of proficiency, the CEFR CV extends it to teaching and learning:

> The methodological message of the CEFR is that language learning should be directed towards enabling learners to act in real-life situations, expressing themselves and accomplishing tasks of different natures. … [The 2001 CEFR] is not educationally neutral. It implies that the teaching and learning process is driven by action, that it is action-oriented.[15]

1.4 Understanding the CEFR's six proficiency levels

The CEFR's six proficiency levels should not be thought of as six equal intervals on a linear scale. The relation between them is captured in Figure 1: each level above A1 incorporates the level(s) below it; the levels become more substantial, and thus require more learning time, as learners progress through them; and the growth of proficiency is "horizontal" (outwards) as well as "vertical" (upwards). It is important to emphasize this last point. At each successive level the learners' communicative language competences expand, but so too does their behavioural range. Learners who have fully mastered level A2, for example, can live much of their daily lives through the target language.

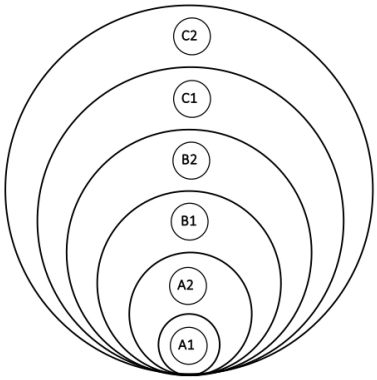

Figure 1

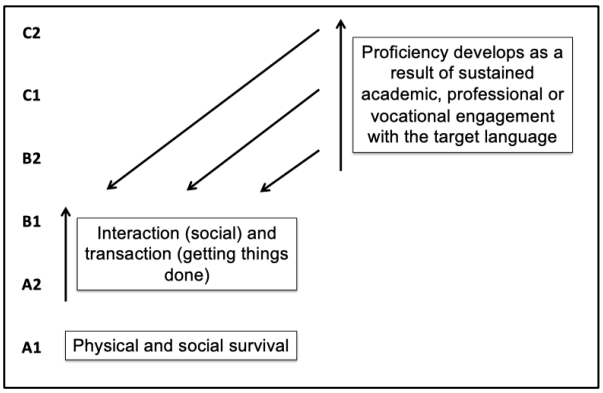

Figure 2

[15] CEFR CV, p. 29.

Figure 2 draws attention to the fact that there is a shift in the focus of language use as learners move into the higher levels. Communicative language activities at level A1 are concerned, broadly speaking, with physical and social survival; levels A2 and B1 focus mostly on social interaction and getting things done; and at levels B2, C1 and C2 proficiency develops as a result of sustained academic, professional or vocational engagement with the target language. The downward-pointing arrows indicate that the extended communicative language competences acquired at these higher levels allow the learner to apply a greater range of linguistic resources to the performance of the tasks that define the lower levels.

These considerations have two important implications: language learning for general communicative purposes ends at level B1; and the advanced levels of educational achievement or professional/vocational engagement associated with levels B2, C1 and C2 mean that in most contexts they have limited relevance to second/foreign language learning at school.

1.5 The CEFR's proficiency levels and the L1 Irish speaker

The CEFR is concerned with the learning, teaching and assessment of second or foreign languages. In principle therefore it is relevant to the teaching of Irish to the majority of the school-going population for whom Irish is a second language (L2). But what about the minority who have Irish as their first language (L1) or who come from English-speaking homes but by attending Irish-medium schools aspire to native proficiency in the language? Is the CEFR also relevant to their situation?

As I explained in 1.1, the CEFR's descriptive scheme has two essential components, the communicative activities that language users and learners perform and the communicative language competences on which successful performance depends. In the 2001 CEFR, Chapter 4 embeds the illustrative scales for communicative language activities – production (speaking and writing), reception (listening and reading), and interaction (spoken and written) – in a comprehensive taxonomic description of language use, the principal elements of which are referred to in the summary of the CEFR's action-oriented approach quoted in 1.3 above. These elements define, support and constrain all language use, regardless of the proficiency level of the language user; they apply, in other words, to the use of first as well as second/foreign languages.

Chapter 5 of the 2001 CEFR argues that when user/learners engage in communicative language activities, they draw not only on their communicative language competences but also on four general, language-independent competences: declarative knowledge, skills and know-how, "existential" competence (attitudes, motivations, etc.), and the ability to learn. Communicative language competences are divided into three kinds: linguistic competences (subdivided into lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic[16] competences), sociolinguistic competence ("the knowledge and skills required to deal with the social dimension of language use"),[17] and pragmatic competences (the user/learner's knowledge of the principles according to which messages are structured, used to perform communicative functions, and

[16] Pronunciation.
[17] 2001 CEFR, p. 118.

sequenced according to interactional and transactional schemata).[18] The communicative use of first as well as second/foreign languages depends on all these competences.

It is thus legitimate to argue that the CEFR's twofold descriptive scheme is no less applicable to Irish L1 than it is to Irish L2. What about the proficiency levels and illustrative scales? The specification for Junior Cycle Irish L1 states that the learning outcomes are "broadly aligned" with level B2.[19] This seems appropriate. The descriptor for overall oral interaction, for example, reads as follows:

> *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*.[20]

This is what one would expect of students whose education has been conducted in Irish. The same is true of the B2 descriptor for overall written production:

> *Can produce clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to their field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources*.[21]

The extent to which the descriptors for communicative language competences apply to students following the L1 Irish programme is less certain. The B2 descriptor for grammatical accuracy, for example, reads as follows:

> *Good grammatical control; occasional "slips" or non-systematic errors and minor flaws in sentence structure may still occur, but they are rare and can often be corrected in retrospect*.[22]

No doubt the texts students write in Irish contain slips, errors and minor flaws, but only empirical investigation can determine whether students whose first language is Irish make the same errors as their peers from English-speaking families.

1.6 Summary

The CEFR

- comprises two documents, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001 CEFR) and its *Companion Volume* (CEFR CV);
- advocates a plurilingual and intercultural approach to language education, which the Council of Europe reinforced three years ago in Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1 of the Committee of Ministers, on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture;

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18 2001 CEFR, p. 123
19 Junior Cycle Irish, Irish-medium schools (L1), p. 4.
20 CEFR CV, p. 72.
21 CEFR CV, p. 66.
22 CEFR CV, p. 132.

- describes language proficiency in terms of language use: the communicative activities that language user/learners perform and the competences on which they draw;
- divides language use into four modes: reception (listening and reading), production (speaking and writing), interaction (spoken and written), and mediation;
- views language learning as a variety of language use, which has important implications for language teaching;
- articulates levels of proficiency which move from general to increasingly academic, vocational and professional language use;
- is concerned with L2 learning, though its descriptive scheme is also relevant to L1 proficiency development in formal educational contexts.

2 Aligning language education with the CEFR: the story so far

The CEFR was designed to provide "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe".[23] Accordingly, when it was first published in 2001, language education professionals were keen to know what their syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations and textbooks looked like from the perspective of the CEFR: to what extent could they be aligned with this new instrument? This section of the paper considers the very different ways in which this question has been answered in the domains of language testing and curriculum development, brings the alignment story up to date by summarizing recent international developments, and describes how, 25 years ago, the CEFR was used to design a comprehensive system of support for EAL pupils in Irish primary schools.

2.1 Examinations

The publication of the 2001 CEFR was welcomed by international language testing agencies because it provided a means of comparing high-stakes examinations across languages and between countries. There is, however, no simple answer to the question: "How do I know that your B1 is the same as my B1?" It was suggested in some quarters that the Council of Europe should validate language examinations, certifying that they measure proficiency at one or another CEFR level. The organization's constitution and resources did not permit this, however, so instead it commissioned the development of two manuals, one for relating language examinations to the CEFR (2009) and the other for CEFR-related language test development and examining (2011).

The alignment of high-stakes language exams to the CEFR is not a trivial matter. Universities in the English-speaking world, for example, routinely require international students to demonstrate their English language proficiency by passing a recognized test. It is thus essential that when students are awarded a certificate stating (say) that they can perform speaking and writing tasks at level B2, they really can do so. The 2009

[23] 2001 CEFR, p. 1.

manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR guides users through the following five steps:

- *Familiarization*: ensuring that all participants in the alignment process have a sufficient knowledge of the CEFR, its levels and descriptors.
- *Specification*: describing the content of a language examination in relation to the categories of the CEFR.
- *Standardization*: ensuring through training a common understanding of the CEFR levels and the accurate benchmarking of local performance samples to relevant CEFR levels.
- *Standard setting*: determining valid cut scores or decision judgments for assessment purposes.
- *Validation*: collecting and presenting appropriate evidence in support of alignment claims.

To help users with the complex empirical procedures involved, the Council of Europe developed a highly technical Reference Supplement. By now, most international language exams claim alignment with the CEFR, but the extent to which that alignment has been carried out in accordance with the Council of Europe's manual is unclear: for very good reasons, the research-and-development work undertaken by testing agencies remains highly confidential.

It is important to recognize an essential difference between the exams offered by international language testing agencies and national school-leaving exams like the Leaving Certificate: whereas the latter are linked to a curriculum, the former are not. When a language curriculum states that learning outcomes correspond to (say) level B1, it seems natural to use the descriptors (for communicative language competences as well as activities) to design appropriate examination tasks. But if the task is explicitly limited in its range of possible topics, teaching for the exam may very well enable students to achieve high grades without at the same time developing their proficiency such that they can communicate spontaneously at level B1 across the board.

2.2 Curriculum

When the 2001 CEFR was first published, its six proficiency levels were quickly accepted as a systematic elaboration of a well-established reality: A1 and A2 ("basic user") referred to beginners and post-beginners, B1 and B2 ("independent user") to intermediate learners, and C1 and C2 ("proficient user")[24] to advanced learners. This helps to explain the speed with which some ministries of education attached the CEFR's proficiency labels to their foreign language curricula. It was widely supposed that A1 and A2 applied to primary, B1 to lower secondary, B2 and in some cases C1 to upper secondary, and C1 and C2 to third level. According to the 2023 edition of the European Union's *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*, for the first foreign language, most countries require students to reach B1 at the end of lower

[24] The adjective "proficient" is ill chosen and has led many readers and users of the CEFR to undervalue the lower levels. A learner who has achieved level A1 is by definition proficient in performing A1 activities, just as a learner at level C2 is by definition proficient in performing C2 activities.

secondary education and B2 at the end of general upper secondary education, while for the second foreign language the minimum requirements are A2 at the end of lower secondary education and B1 at the end of general upper secondary education.[25] The extent to which learners in many countries fall short was revealed by the European Commission's *First European Survey on Language Competences* (2012), which used tests of listening, reading and writing based on the CEFR's first four proficiency levels. Only 42% of the 15-year-old students tested attained "independent user" level (B1/B2) in the first foreign language learnt, while 25% reached the same level in a second foreign language. At the same time and more worryingly, a significant number of students failed to reach "basic user" level (A1/A2), 14% for the first and 20% for the second foreign language.

Like other countries, Ireland associates its language curricula with CEFR proficiency levels in very general terms. I noted in section 1.5 that the specification for Junior Cycle Irish L1 states that the learning outcomes are "broadly aligned" with B2. Similarly, the specification for Junior Cycle Irish L2 tells us that the learning outcomes are "broadly aligned" with the descriptors in bands A2–B1. In both specifications, the global scale from the 2001 CEFR and the descriptors from the 2001 self-assessment grid (section 1.1 of this document) are printed in appendices. But the only evidence that the CEFR was consulted in the creation of the specifications is their erroneous adoption of a five-skills model of language use. There is certainly no explicit attempt to link the statements of learning, the key skills or assessment to the CEFR levels and descriptors.

Unsurprisingly, there is no evidence that claiming curricular alignment with one or more levels of the CEFR promotes greater learning achievement.

2.3 Using the CEFR to build Comprehensive Learning Systems

In February 2020 an international conference organized by EALTA,[26] co-sponsored by UKALTA[27] and hosted by the British Council, explored some of the implications of the CEFR CV for language education, with a focus on curriculum and teaching/learning as well as assessment.[28] In response to a need expressed by many conference participants, EALTA, UKALTA, the British Council and ALTE[29] subsequently collaborated on the production of a new handbook, *Aligning Language Education with the CEFR*, which was published online in 2022. Like the 2020 conference, this handbook is concerned with curriculum and teaching/learning as well as assessment. It recognizes that the CEFR is an instrument of "constructive alignment":[30] each of its "can do" descriptors can be used to specify a curriculum goal, teaching/learning tasks and an

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[25] *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*, p. 24. The published text states that the usual requirement for first foreign language at the end of lower secondary is A2, but this is a misprint.

[26] European Association for Language Testing and Assessment.

[27] UK Association for Language Testing and Assessment.

[28] The conference papers were subsequently published in D. Little and N. Figueras (eds), *Reflecting on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and its Companion Volume*, Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2022.

[29] Association of Language Testers in Europe.

[30] The term "constructive alignment" was coined by the Australian educational researcher John Biggs, who summarizes the concept and its implementation here.

assessment focus. This makes it possible to align the components of language education not only with the CEFR but also with one another.

Aligning Language Education with the CEFR adopts Barry O'Sullivan's Comprehensive Learning System (2020; Figure 3), which proposes that

> for learning programmes to function efficiently they should be seen as a system. Within the system the three core elements (curriculum, delivery, assessment) must be based on a single philosophy of learning supported by clearly defined models of language ability and progression and underpinned by a measurement model. Failure to ensure that all three are fully in harmony is likely to lead to the failure of the system.[31]

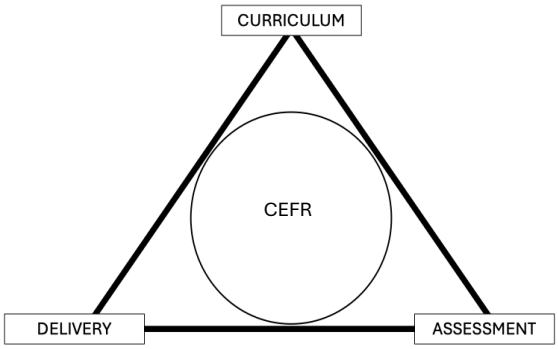

Figure 3

The CEFR levels with their scaled descriptors provide a "clearly defined model of language ability and progression", while the CEFR's view of language learning as a variety of language use and its conception of the language user/learner as an autonomous social agent constitute the "single philosophy of learning". The handbook argues that effective alignment with the CEFR entails that the same set of scaled descriptors is used to (i) specify the communicative learning outcomes of the curriculum, (ii) determine the content and structure of teaching/learning materials, and (iii) guide the development of assessment procedures. It says nothing in detail, however, about the philosophy of learning and (more especially) what it means for classroom practice. I addressed this lack in the opening plenary address that I gave in dialogue with Professor Constant Leung (King's College London) at a CEFR alignment conference hosted by Universidad Ramon Llull, Barcelona, in October 2024. The argument I made[32] is, I believe, highly relevant to the present context. It can be summarized as follows:

The CEFR's division of language use into four modes – reception, production, interaction and mediation – distinguishes clearly between non-reciprocal and reciprocal communication. Reception and production are non-reciprocal: listening and reading, spoken production (making an announcement, giving an address) and written production are all performed solo. These modes are the focus of written exams and tests of listening comprehension and spoken production. Consider the following descriptors:

> **B1 Reading** – *I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language*
>
> **B1 Written production –** *I can produce straightforward connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest*

[31] https://www.britishcouncil.org/comprehensive-learning-system

[32] I expect the argument to be taken up in a supplement to the handbook that the Barcelona conference was designed to inform.

It is not difficult to flesh out these descriptors so that they can be used simultaneously to describe a learning outcome, imply appropriate teaching materials and procedures, and provide an assessment task.

The reciprocal modes of interaction and mediation are more problematic because they involve two or more persons, which means that they are unpredictable. Even when you have a shared communicative goal, you can never know with certainty what your interlocutor(s) will say next. Consider the following descriptors:

> **B1 Oral interaction** – *I can deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken*
>
> **B1 Mediating communication** – *I can support a shared communication culture by introducing people, exchanging information about priorities, and making simple requests for confirmation and/or clarification*

These descriptors may be adopted as curriculum goals and the skills they entail may be included in assessment. But the abilities they capture cannot be directly taught; students can only acquire them gradually by interacting and mediating in their target language. And this will happen only if every lesson is conducted in the target language and structured in ways that draw students into the teaching/learning conversation as equal partners. Arguably the best way of developing students' autonomy as learners and users of the target language, this teaching/learning dynamic implies a central role for project work and portfolio learning.

This interpretation of what the CEFR means when it describes language learning as a variety of language use and the language user/learner as an autonomous social agent, seems to me to arise naturally from the CEFR's action-oriented approach to the description of language use. It also responds to the greatly expanded role that the CEFR CV assigns to mediation, the scaled descriptors for which capture the essentials of the teaching/learning dynamic I am advocating.[33]

2.4 Using the CEFR to support the educational inclusion of immigrants: the work of Integrate Ireland Language and Training[34]

From 2000 to 2008, I was non-stipendiary director of Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), a not-for-profit campus company of Trinity College Dublin. IILT was funded by the Department of Education to support the teaching of English as an additional language (EAL) in primary and post-primary schools. IILT's terms of reference were:

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[33] The following publications describe and document versions of this dynamic: D. Little, L. Dam and L. Legehausen, *Language Learner Autonomy: Theory, Practice and Research*, Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2017; D. Little and D. Kirwan, *Engaging with Linguistic Diversity: A Study of Educational Inclusion in a Primary School*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019; D. Little and D. Kirwan, *Language and Languages in the Primary School: Some Guidelines for Teachers*, revised edition, Dublin: PPLI, 2024.

[34] For more on the work described here, see D. Little, "The Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio: involving learners and their judgements in the assessment process", *Language Testing* 22.3, 2005, pp. 321–36; D. Little & B. Lazenby Simpson, "Teaching immigrants the language of the host community: two object lessons in the need for continuous policy development", *The Politics of Language Education: Individuals and Institutions*, ed. J. C. Alderson, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2009, pp.104–124.

i. to analyse the linguistic demands of the primary and post-primary curricula and describe the proficiency EAL pupils/students needed to develop in order to participate fully in the educational process;

ii. to create teaching materials and other resources for use in the two years of language support that the government funded for each EAL pupil/student;

iii. to provide ongoing in-service days for language support teachers.

In response to these terms of reference, IILT used the CEFR to create a comprehensive support system for EAL two decades before international discussion of CEFR alignment adopted the concept of a Comprehensive Learning System. For the sake of brevity and clarity I focus here on the primary sector.

As a first step, IILT used the second draft of the CEFR[35] to analyse the linguistic demands of the primary curriculum and develop *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks*. We reasoned that in an immersion situation, EAL pupils who began with zero English should be able to achieve an age-appropriate version of B1 by the end of their two years of language support, which meant that their learning trajectory would be from A1 through A2 to B1.[36] Adopting the model of the self-assessment grid (section 1.1 above), we reformulated the descriptors to make them age-appropriate and classroom-specific; this yielded global benchmarks of communicative proficiency (listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing). Drawing on the scales for communicative language competences, we followed the same process to create global scales of underlying linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar, phonology, orthography). Then, working with focus groups of teachers and maintaining our classroom-specific focus, we identified thirteen recurrent curriculum themes (myself; our school; food and clothes; colours, shapes and opposites; people who help us; weather; transport and travel; seasons, holidays and festivals; the local and wider community; time; people and places in other areas; animals and plants; caring for my locality) and reformulated the global benchmarks for each of the themes. A brief introduction associated the *Benchmarks* with the CEFR and explained how they were intended to be used; the self-assessment grid from the CEFR was included in an appendix. Altogether the *Benchmarks* amounted to 15 grids and 24 pages. As soon as they were published teachers began to use them to locate their EAL pupils on the A1–B1 continuum and plan their language support lessons accordingly. Not knowing their pupils' home languages, teachers could not help but enact the kind of pedagogy I sketched in 2.3, encouraging their EAL pupils to embrace the contingency of reciprocal communication.

The first support that IILT developed in fulfilment of its second term of reference was a version of the CEFR's companion piece, the European Language Portfolio. The ELP has three obligatory components: a language passport, which summarizes the owner's experience of learning and using second/foreign languages; a language biography, which provides a reflective accompaniment to learning; and a free-form dossier in

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[35] Council of Europe, *Modern Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment: A Common European Framework of Reference*. Draft 2 of a Framework proposal. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1997.

[36] This was subsequently confirmed by empirical research; see B. Ćatibušić & D. Little, *Immigrant Pupils Learn English: A CEFR-related empirical study of L2 development*, English Profile Studies 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

which the owner collects work in progress and evidence of learning achievement. An explicit link with the CEFR is provided by checklists of "I can" descriptors, organized by activity and level, which are used to identify learning goals, monitor progress and evaluate achievement; in the version for EAL pupils, the "I can" descriptors were derived from the *Benchmarks*. Between 2000 and 2011 the Council of Europe validated and accredited 118 ELPs from all educational sectors. To the best of my knowledge, the ELP for EAL learners in Irish primary schools was the only one to be used widely and to have a significant impact on classroom learning; IILT distributed 5,000 copies in each of the last two years of its existence.

IILT fulfilled the third of its terms of reference by organizing an in-service day in the first and second terms of each school year; each day was given in five locations and each round involved up to a thousand teachers. Many language support teachers attended all the in-service days, which meant that IILT could involve them in piloting and providing feedback on the wide range of teaching and learning materials that it developed to facilitate implementation of the *Benchmarks* and the ELP. These materials were published as a book, *Up and Away*, in 2006.

Finally, IILT developed an assessment kit based on the *Benchmarks* to help schools monitor the progress of their EAL pupils.[37] The kit had four sections – listening, reading, speaking and writing; the *Benchmarks* descriptors were used to design assessment tasks; listening and reading tests had in-built scoring schemes; and rating grids were provided for the tests of speaking and writing. The various sections of the kits were developed, presented at in-service days and piloted in fifty schools. Analysis of a significant body of data showed that teachers achieved a high level of accuracy and consistency in rating their own pupils.

Any attempt to align the redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Irish with the CEFR has much to learn from this example, not least from the extent to which teachers contributed to the informal validation of the *Benchmarks* and the assessment kit and to the development of teaching/learning materials and activities.[38]

3 Using the CEFR to redevelop Senior Cycle Irish

3.1 One specification or two?

I am aware that the NCCA has not yet decided whether the redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Irish will result in a single specification or separate specifications for L1 and L2. My own view on this matter has been clear for more than twenty years. In a discussion paper I wrote for the NCCA in 2003 I argued that "the continued insistence on a single syllabus for native and non-native speakers of the language, Irish-medium and English-medium students, achieves the worst of both worlds, offering the minority of native speakers and Irish-medium students what is effectively a foreign language

[37] D. Little, B. Lazenby Simpson and B. Ćatibušić, *Primary School Assessment Kit*, Dublin: Department of Education and Science, 2007.

[38] The *Programme for Government 2025* (p. 67) promises to "[w]ork towards aligning Irish language curriculums with the Common European Framework of Reference to enhance spoken Irish at primary, post-primary and third levels". This goal will not be achieved by merely asserting alignment with the CEFR. Progress could be made, however, by developing support systems for primary and post-primary Irish similar to the support system IILT developed for EAL.

syllabus while placing unrealistic demands on the majority of non-native speakers".[39] Any attempt to develop a single specification in alignment with the CEFR is likely to founder on this reality because it will inevitably bring into sharp relief the essential difference between Irish-medium and English-medium schooling. In the former, because Irish is the language of instruction, it should be possible to take for granted students' basic capacity to understand and produce spoken and written Irish and to treat Irish as curriculum subject in much the same way as English is treated in the programme for English-medium schools. In such circumstances it would be appropriate to expect the best students to perform at level C1 in spoken and written production:

> ***C1 spoken production*** *– I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion*
>
> ***C1 written production*** *– I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select a style appropriate to the reader in mind.*

By contrast, in the English-medium sector the chief function of Irish as a curriculum subject is to enable students to develop a proficiency in the language that they would not otherwise possess; in that respect, Irish is not significantly different from the foreign languages students learn. However well they are taught, students in English-medium schools cannot be expected to achieve the same levels of proficiency in Irish as their Irish-medium peers. For this reason and also for purposes of clarity, this section of the paper assumes separate L1 and L2 specifications.

3.2 If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well

The claim that the specifications for Junior Cycle Irish are "broadly aligned" with the CEFR indicates in very general terms the level of proficiency the specifications attach to learning outcomes, though the claim is limited to communicative language activities: no mention is made of communicative language competences in the sense that the CEFR attaches to "competences" (section 1.5 above). It is unclear what analytical processes lie behind this alignment claim, which in any case can mean little to anyone unfamiliar with the CEFR. It is nevertheless worth repeating here a point that I made in section 2.1: the ability to perform an examination task that has been developed using descriptors for (say) level B1 is not evidence of an ability to perform at that level across the board.

As I explained in section 2.3, the international research community has come to recognize that aligning language education with the CEFR should entail building a Comprehensive Learning System in which curriculum, teaching/learning and assessment are each aligned with the CEFR and therefore with one another. Only in this way is it possible to generate a set of interdependent CEFR-related claims that can be empirically evaluated and validated. In section 2.3 I also argued that the building and especially the implementation of a comprehensive learning system requires the

[39] D. Little, *Languages in the Post-primary Curriculum: A Discussion Paper*, Dublin: NCCA, 2003, p. 9.

elaboration of a teaching/learning dynamic that is fully informed by and relatable to the CEFR's view of language learning as a variety of language use and its conception of the learner as an autonomous social agent. I believe that an alignment process of this kind has the potential to open up important channels of exploratory research as regards Leaving Certificate Irish L1 and to have a transformative impact on Leaving Certificate Irish L2. Commitment to such a process would be without precedent in our system and would require substantial long-term support. It would also be of very great interest internationally.

3.3 Potential benefits for Leaving Certificate Irish L1

By definition, Irish-medium schooling embodies the CEFR's principle that language learning is a variety of language use. This fact suggests three ways in which aligning a redeveloped specification for Leaving Certificate Irish L1 with the CEFR could benefit not just the Irish-medium sector but the teaching and learning of Irish generally:

i. The process could be used to explore the pedagogical dynamics typical of Irish-medium schools from the perspective of the CEFR's view of the learner as an autonomous social agent. Work in progress on the redevelopment of Senior Cycle attaches great importance to the autonomy of the individual student. But the capacity for autonomous behaviour develops because autonomy itself is enacted in the day-to-day activities and discourse of the classroom. In the Irish-medium sector, what pedagogical practices are used to promote the development of student autonomy, and what modes of classroom discourse do those practices entail? The scaled descriptors for interaction and mediation in the CEFR CV offer one way of approaching these questions, the answers to which would have important implications for learners of Irish L2 as well as Irish L1.

ii. The illustrative scales of the CEFR CV could also be used to analyse recorded samples of students' spoken and written Irish with a view to gauging the CEFR level achieved by (a) outstanding, (b) average and (c) weaker students. I would expect such an exercise to yield a range of profiles from B1+ to C1 – results that would strengthen the argument for separate L1 and L2 Leaving Certificate specifications.

iii. The process could also be used to develop a Reference Level Description[40] for the relevant CEFR levels, bringing communicative language activities and communicative language competences into interaction with one another. This would be a major undertaking, but one that could only benefit the teaching and learning of Irish generally. It would be necessary first to assemble an inventory of relevant descriptors for the communicative activities of reception, production, interaction and mediation, probably at levels B1, B2 and C1. Each descriptor would need to be interpreted with reference to the range of texts students are exposed to, the activities they are required to perform, and the texts they are expected to produce. Then the corresponding descriptors for communicative language competences – especially general linguistic range, vocabulary range,

[40] See p. 2, fn. 3 above.

grammatical accuracy, vocabulary control, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence – could be used to guide the compilation of an inventory of linguistic exponents. The results of such an exercise would constitute a major support for the implementation of the redeveloped Leaving Certificate specifications for students of Irish L2 as well as Irish L1.

3.4 Potential benefits for Leaving Certificate Irish L2

The tests used in the *First European Survey on Language Competences* (section 2.2 above) were designed to measure students' capacity for spontaneous use of their L2 listening, reading and writing skills. If Irish-language versions of these tests were administered to students instead of the existing Leaving Certificate examination, one would not expect the results to be encouraging. It is common knowledge that the overwhelming majority of school leavers in the English-medium sector are unable to communicate spontaneously in Irish; even a high grade in the current Leaving Certificate exam is not necessarily evidence of communicative ability. This is not surprising, because in many English-medium schools Irish lessons are conducted in English, and spontaneous communication in Irish is not part of students' daily experience.[41] There is no evidence that the current syllabus and examination were developed in interaction with one another, and the third element of a Comprehensive Learning System, teaching/learning, is nowhere to be seen: constructive alignment between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment is completely lacking. The ministerial decision to allocate 40% of the examination marks to the oral component was no doubt intended to improve proficiency levels in spoken Irish. But most students seem to prepare themselves for the exam by rote-learning interactive routines and versions of the non-reciprocal tasks they are required to perform.[42] What should be a test of students' ability to interact spontaneously and flexibly in Irish is instead a demanding memory test. Whereas aligning the L1 Leaving Certificate specification with the CEFR affords an opportunity to develop important supports for Irish-medium education, doing the same for the L2 specification would necessarily shine a spotlight on the dominant approach to teaching and learning. It is a major failing that existing curricula describe in detail the skills and competencies of the successful learner but say nothing about the pedagogical means by which those skills and competencies should be developed. The redevelopment of Senior Cycle provides an opportunity to address this deficiency.

3.5 What would an alignment process entail?

Like the Council of Europe's 2009 handbook for aligning language exams with the CEFR, *Aligning Language Education with the CEFR* defines alignment as a five-step process: *familiarization*, *specification*, *standard setting*, *standardization* and *validation*. It recognizes that few institutions are in a position to carry out the time-consuming and

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[41] "[T]he need to significantly increase and develop student opportunities to speak, work and to interact and express their learning through Irish was a frequent recommendation in subject inspection reports", *Chief Inspector's Report, September 2016–December 2020*, Dublin: Department of Education, p. 145.

[42] See M. Ó Laoire*, Ceisteanna faoi Theagasc agus Mheasúnú na Gaeilge sa tSraith Shinsearach: Plécháipéis freagartha do dhá thuarascáil taighde de chuid an CNCM*, Dublin: NCCA, 2018, p. 23.

resource-intensive procedures designed with international testing agencies in mind, but it insists that every alignment process requires (i) serious engagement with all dimensions of the 2001 CEFR and the CEFR CV, (ii) a systematic and disciplined approach, and (iii) detailed documentation. At the end of the process an alignment report (*validation*) should be published so that the accuracy of the alignment claims can be independently scrutinized. In the case of Irish, this means that curriculum specifications and alignment reports should be published in English as well as Irish. What follows in this section applies equally to Irish L1 and Irish L2, though I have the specification for Irish L2 especially in mind.

As the first part of this discussion paper should have made clear, the CEFR is not a straightforward document; it is conceptually complex and heavily freighted with content. This means that the *familiarization* process should entail engagement both with its core discursive elements, above all Chapters 4 and 5 of the 2001 CEFR (respectively "Language use and the language user/learner" and "The user/learner's competences") and with its proficiency levels and illustrative scales. The Council of Europe's calibrated examples of spoken proficiency in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish help to make the descriptors for the oral dimensions of communication more concrete. After familiarization, *specification* would be a matter of defining the target communicative repertoire, which might involve more than one CEFR level – for example, B1 for receptive and productive activities, A2 for interactive/mediational activities. The CEFR CV describes several ways of doing this.[43]

When these preliminaries had been completed, it would be necessary to decide how to explain to users of the specifications what the CEFR is, where it came from, and what measures are being taken to align the specifications with it. My own recommendation would be a brief introductory text that is further elaborated in an appendix or as support material available elsewhere. The introductory text should explain that the CEFR views language learning as a variety of language use and the language user/learner as an autonomous social agent, briefly spelling out the pedagogical implications of this view.

It should be relatively straightforward to complete the redevelopment of the specifications, addressing the curricular equivalents of *standardization* and *standard setting* and making explicit reference to the CEFR, its levels and descriptors. This can be demonstrated with reference to the Leaving Certificate Specification for Arabic, which uses the approved Senior Cycle specification template. The Arabic specification was "informed by the educational aims" of the CEFR;[44] it refers to the CEFR's four modes of language use; "plurilingual and intercultural competence" is one of its two strands of study;[45] and Appendix 2 contains the CEFR CV version of the self-assessment grid. In three places the specification claims to be aligned with the CEFR,[46] though there is no evidence of an alignment process of the kind that I am concerned with here. It is nevertheless clear that the specification template can easily accommodate detailed alignment with the CEFR:

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43 CEFR CV, pp. 38–40.

44 Leaving Certificate Specification for Arabic, p. 6.

45 Leaving Certificate Specification for Arabic, pp. 19–20.

46 "broadly aligned" on pp. 6 and 21; "notionally aligned" on p. 35.

- The *key competencies* – knowledge, skills and values/dispositions – correspond broadly to the CEFR's general competences (knowledge, skills and know-how, "existential competence", and ability to learn). The specification for Arabic relates the learning of Arabic to students' development of key competencies, but without making the obvious point that effective language learning should mean that the competencies can be exercised in and through the language learnt. If teachers ensure that language learning is a variety of language use by adopting a pedagogical dynamic similar to the one I sketched in section 2.3, *communicating*, *being creative*, *working with others*, and *thinking and solving problems* are a feature of every lesson. If, as I would argue it should, the teaching/learning dynamic helps students to develop as autonomous social agents, it will help them to *manage learning and themselves* in Irish. And all of this should make it easy for them to *participate in* (especially Irish-speaking) *society*.
- In its description of *learning outcomes*, the specification for Arabic adopts the CEFR's four modes of communicative language use,[47] though its apparent distinction between Communicative Language Competence and Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence[48] is potentially misleading, and it pays no more than lip service to communicative language competences as they are described in the CEFR. However, learning outcomes could easily be linked directly to the activities, levels and descriptors of the CEFR by adding a column for relevant CEFR descriptors. Supporting materials could then include a bank of exponents for communicative language competences linked to the learning outcomes and the preferred teaching/learning dynamic.
- In the specification for Arabic, the student's *language portfolio* plays a central role: it "places the student at the centre of learning, teaching and assessment and facilitates autonomous learning"; it also gives students an opportunity "to set personal learning goals across the four modes of communication".[49] But how are these things to happen? What role should the language portfolio play in day-to-day teaching and learning? I assume that detailed support will be provided in supplementary materials, but the specification should surely include a brief pedagogically oriented explanation. The Council of Europe devised the European Language Portfolio as a means of mediating the CEFR's ethos, descriptive scheme and proficiency levels to learners, and there is a wealth of potentially useful material on its ELP website. The example I gave in section 2.4 of the ELP model developed to support the English language development of EAL pupils in primary schools is also relevant here.

As I explained in 2.3, *Aligning Language Education with the CEFR* proposes that effective alignment is achieved by using the same set of scaled descriptors to (i) specify the communicative learning outcomes of the curriculum, (ii) determine the content and structure of teaching/learning materials, and (iii) guide the development of assessment procedures. If carried out with due rigour, this process would entail:

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47 Specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic, p. 18.
48 In both formulations the CEFR refers to "competences" in the plural.
49 Specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic, p. 25.

- identifying relevant scales and descriptors;
- expanding them with appropriate Irish language exponents;
- determining the body of input materials that students would be expected to engage with;
- using the scales for interaction and mediation to decribe and explore a pedagogical dynamic apt to develop students' capacity for autonomous language use and autonomous language learning;
- involving the State Examinations Commission in every step of this process to ensure the development of examinations that would accurately gauge students' overall proficiency in Irish.

The Leaving Certificate Specification for Arabic contains no evidence of this kind of alignment between curriculum and assessment. Unless this were addressed in the specifications for Leaving Certificate Irish 1 and 2, their alignment with the CEFR would be partial and of doubtful value.

4 Conclusion

I began this discussion paper by introducing the CEFR, explaining what it contains, where it came from, what purposes it is meant to serve, what it implies for language teaching and learning, and the extent to which it is relevant to first languages. I then described the very different approaches that have been adopted to aligning high-stakes language tests and school curricula with the CEFR, summarized current international developments in aligning language education with the CEFR, and described how the CEFR was used to develop a comprehensive support system for primary and post-primary EAL in Ireland. I concluded by considering what in my view the redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Irish L1 and L2 in alignment with the CEFR would entail.

Redeveloping Leaving Certificate Irish in alignment with the CEFR in ways that meet emerging international standards and expectations would be an eminently achievable but demanding task whose success would depend on the willing collaboration of all stakeholders: NCCA curriculum specialists, Department of Education inspectors, the State Examinations Commission, departments of Irish and Education in the universities, teachers and parents. Such collaboration would require significant financial and administrative support; and it would need to accompany the implementation of the specifications, potentially in a never-ending process. I have no doubt, however, that a successful alignment process would greatly benefit the teaching and learning of Irish in Senior Cycle and promote more widespread and confident use of the language in Irish society.