



## Educational Standards for higher-level technical and vocational upper secondary schools: A Help for Teachers and Learners?

By Claudia Zekl

Nowadays educational standards are hotly debated in Austria. Some teachers, parents, and students see them as a great help, others simply reject them. So let's see what educational standards are, and which advantages and disadvantages they may bring for teachers and learners.

Everything started with the publication of the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" <http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/documents/Common%20European%20Framework%20hyper-linked.pdf> some years ago. The idea behind this work was to create an instrument that helps teachers, students, learners, parents, and employers to compare language skills across European borders. We all know how difficult it was to have one's qualifications recognised in another country in the past. If you presented your certificates to a future employer he/she often expected you to have them translated into another language and then a long process started, during which some official institutions decided what your qualifications were really worth in another country.

With the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages this process became a lot easier. Drawing on their experience a group of language experts got together and designed descriptions of languages skills.

What they came up with was six levels of competence called A – "Basic User" (A1 and A2) B – "Independent User" (B1 and B2) and C – "Proficient User" (C1 and C2). That means that A1 refers to the language skills of beginners and C2 describes "near-native". With the help of numerous descriptors any of these levels were then further described in so-called "can do-statements" that refer to the language skills of listening, reading, speaking ("spoken interaction")

and "spoken production"), and writing.

This was the first step in a series of developments that quickly followed.

Almost at the same time so-called "European Language Portfolios" (ELPs) were created. These European Language Portfolios are instruments aimed at the language learner in order to enable him/her to engage in the process of life-long learning. They consist of a

- language passport
- language biography and
- dossier.

The language passport is used to summarize language skills which may be important when applying for a job, whereas the language biography is a collection of checklists consisting of the above-mentioned "can do-statements" with which students can evaluate and define their individual learning aims. The dossier is the "treasure trove" where students can collect their personal "masterpieces".

Many countries in Europe have been developing their own individual European Language Portfolios based on the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" in order to reflect the educational system of the country in question.

In Austria there are various ELP versions for different groups of people:

- The European Language Portfolio developed by teachers at Viennese Handelsakademien and Handelsschulen ("Krieger Portfolio") <http://www.pib-wien.ac.at/content/more/topnavstart/index.htm>
- The European Language Portfolio for the VHS (Thomas Fritz)
- The European Language Portfolio for the Central European Region developed by the SSR in Vienna <http://www.edq.eu.com/>
- The European Language Portfolio for the AHS-Oberstufe developed by the PI Vienna and the SSR Vienna <http://www.pi-wien.at/ewl/pf/elp.html>
- The National European Language Portfolios for



Grundschule, Mittelstufe and Oberstufe developed by the ÖSZ in Graz [www.sprachen.ac.at/esp](http://www.sprachen.ac.at/esp)

As a next step VHS, language schools etc. started to rename their courses: What was “English for Beginners” in the past, is now “English A1”.

Then references to the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” were included in the new curricula for upper secondary schools, and the L2 Matura level was defined in terms of B2 (and in some parts C1).

In 2005, a group of teachers was asked by the Ministry of Education to define “educational standards” for higher-level technical and vocational upper secondary schools in Austria. Again, these standards are based on the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages”.

These educational standards are intended as guidelines for teachers, students, parents and future employers to define which levels students have to reach when they are finishing a certain education. Whereas students who finish their 8th year of foreign language education are expected to be approximately at level A2 (in parts B1) as far as their English skills are concerned; and students who finish their 13th year of foreign language education ought to perform at B2 (in parts C1).

Again descriptors (“can do-statements”) related to the CEFR define which skills, for example an A2-learner of English must have.

Educational standards for foreign languages are meant to help in various respects:

In general they are an instrument to ensure a certain quality of education, to bring about more transparency and objectivity, to detect weaknesses in our educational system and introduce measures to assist and help students, to enable students and their parents to see where they are in their learning process.

For teachers and students they can be a big help as far as learning and teaching are concerned. The overall aim is clear: Teachers as well as students know what the outcome after 8 or 13 years of education should be. Together they can work out ways and strategies how to get there. Thus students can take on a lot of responsibility for their educational success. They are no longer at the receiving end waiting for the material from the teacher, who then expects this to be learned. They can take a much more active part in the learning process.

The role of the teacher is changing from the person in charge who has to know everything, to the coach, the counsellor, the guide to help the student on his/her way.

So, teachers and learners have the opportunity to work together as a team. The students want to learn something, they have their own learning strategies, their own interests, their own talents and skills. The teacher knows how things work, has the necessary background knowledge, can provide students with explanations, tasks, and tips. Students know where they are up to, can define their own learning aims, can evaluate their own progress on the way, and can rely on the teacher for help. In turn, the teachers are much more flexible in what they offer different students, according to their needs.

Core elements in the learning process are clearly defined and can be tested and additional elements can be trained according to students’ interests and wishes.

The learning process itself moves much more into the foreground, whereas testing moves into the background. Students do not learn for tests but for life, and teachers no longer prepare their students just for exams but help them achieve their personal aims.

In general we can say that educational standards bring about more transparency, and also help students become competent learners who know



how to go about learning something new, to evaluate their knowledge and to improve their skills.

**Professional Profile:**



**Claudia Zekl** was born in Vienna. After finishing a Handelsakademie she studied English and French at the university of Vienna. She has been a teacher of English at the Schulen des *bfi Wien* since 1996 where she works at the day and evening school and is the head of the project “HAK/HAS *bfi* meets Haupt- and Mittelschule”. She is also a trainer of English in the courses of *bfi Wien* preparing students for the Berufsreifprüfung as well as a teacher trainer at the PI des Bundes and the PI der Stadt Wien, and other PIs in Austria, author of English teaching materials, head of the ARGE of English teachers at Handelsakademien and Handelsschulen in Vienna and vice-chair of the **TEA** committee.



## Interview with Brian North: Brian North talks about the CEF, the ELP and EAQUALS By Anastasia Spyropoulou

(The interview was first published in ELT News, Greece, February 2006, No 202)

Brian North is Head of Academic Development at Eurocentres, the Swiss-based foundation offering language stays where languages are spoken. He is co-author of the Common European Framework and Chair of EAQUALS, the European Association for Quality in Language Services. He is British - half Irish- and has lived in Switzerland since 1990. He studied History at Cambridge University; after a DELTA (1976) he did an MA in Applied Linguistics at the University of Birmingham (1986) and a PhD on the development of the scale of illustrative descriptors of language proficiency for the Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio (1996).



The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (CEF) seeks to make it easier for teachers, learners, publishers and testers to communicate across languages, educational sectors and national boundaries. It aims to encourage those involved in language teaching to reflect on and, where appropriate, question their current aims and methods.

The CEF draws on theories of communica-

tive competence and language use in order to describe what a language user has to know and do in order to communicate effectively and what learners can typically be expected to do at different levels of proficiency.

Brian North was in Athens last November, for the EAQUALS annual autumn conference. Though on a tight schedule, he found the time to talk to ELT NEWS about the Common European Framework, the European Language Portfolio and EAQUALS.

How much has the introduction of the Common European Framework changed the way languages are learnt and taught across Europe?

“It’s still a little bit too early to talk about the effect on learning but I think we’ve already begun to see a very strong effect in teacher education and in teaching. The Common European Framework gives a theoretical but also a practical basis for a communicative teaching approach. It encourages the learners to think in terms of “can do” statements, that is what they can do with the language; at the same time it emphasizes the fact that language consists of competences.”

So, first we start with the teachers. Teachers should be aware of what the CEF is about, familiarize themselves with the levels, the descriptors and the ‘can do’ statements. Have we done enough to train teachers or there is still a lot to be done?

“I think it’s an ongoing process. We’ve made a lot of progress. Ten years ago teachers had great difficulty in defining a level from the descriptors. The situation is changing however. People seem to have a pretty good overview of the levels now. That is a lot of progress. The use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) has contributed to a certain extent to the familiarization of the concept of the levels and the ‘can do statements’. The CEF and the ELP have had a tremendous effect on teacher education throughout Europe. In all teacher training courses the ELP and the Framework are used to give teachers a structure to think