The CEFR illustrative descriptors: past, present and future

Brian North
The illustrative descriptors

- Origin of the levels and development of the descriptors
- Categories offered
- Systematicity

Follow up projects

- Portfolios
- Calibrated descriptors

Current work

- 2015 Extended set of descriptors - Main Set
- 2015 Additional text
- 2015 Descriptors for Mediation
Common Reference Levels

20 year process of convergence
• 1976 “The Threshold Level” - “Waystage”
• 1978 Ludwighafen (Wilkins proposal for levels)
• 1991 Rüschlikon (Hargreaves “natural levels“)
• 1993-6 Swiss research project (North & Schneider)

Levels and descriptors validated
• Qualitative validation (32 workshops)
• Mathematically scaled (2500 learners, 250 teachers)
• Post-validation projects (ALTE, Finland, DIALANG, Pearson, English Profile, CEFR-J)
## Origin of the Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wilkins 1978</th>
<th>CoE 1992-6</th>
<th>CEFR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ambilingual Proficiency</td>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Operational Proficiency</td>
<td>Effective Operational Proficiency</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate Operational Proficiency</td>
<td>Vantage</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Operational Proficiency</td>
<td>Threshold</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Operational Proficiency (Threshold)</td>
<td>Waystage</td>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival Proficiency</td>
<td>Breakthrough</td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulaic Proficiency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CEFR**

- **A1**: Breakthrough
- **A2**: Waystage
- **B1**: Threshold
- **B2**: Vantage
- **C1**: Effective Operational Proficiency
- **C2**: Mastery
Descriptor Development

Intuitive Phase:
• Creating a pool of classified, edited descriptors

Qualitative Phase:
• Analysis of teachers discussing proficiency
• 32 teacher workshops sorting descriptors into categories

Quantitative Phase:
• Teacher assessment of their learners at end year assessment point on descriptor-checklists (circa 300 teachers, 2800 learners)
• Teacher assessment of videos of some of the same learners to further link the data set

Interpretative Phase:
• Setting “cut-points” between the common reference levels
Validity Claim

Developed scientifically:
- comprehensive documentation of existing descriptions
- relation to theory through descriptive scheme
- positive, independent criterion-descriptors
- checking teachers could use categories & descriptors
- data from real, end-of-year assessment
- four educational sectors in a multi-lingual environment
- three foreign languages (English, French, German)
- values replicated in follow-up studies:
  Basel self-assessment 0.99: ALTE 0.97; DIALANG: 0.92 / 0.96; Pearson 0.97; CEFR-J.
## Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>&quot;Four Skills&quot; Lado 1961</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Grammatical Accuracy Vocabulary Pronunciation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Categories

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
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<th>CEFR 2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing</td>
<td>Reception: List &amp; Read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interaction: Sp &amp; Wr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Production: Sp &amp; Wr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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</tr>
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<td>Grammatical Accuracy, Vocabulary range, Pronunciation</td>
<td>Grammar &amp; Syntax: Range &amp; Accuracy Vocabulary &amp; Chunks: Range, Accuracy, Appropriacy Phonology (Sounds, Patterns)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pragmatic</strong></td>
<td>(Spoken <em>Fluency</em>)</td>
<td>Speaker meaning (Precision), Functional competence, fluency, Discourse competence, Textual &amp; Interactional</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-cultural</td>
<td>Culture as subject</td>
<td>Domains; Politeness conventions Intercultural competences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reception, Interaction, Production</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communicative Activities

- Overall Language Proficiency
  - Communicative Strategies
  - Communicative Language Competencies
  - Communicative Activities
    - Reception
    - Production
    - Interaction
    - Mediation
      - Spoken
      - Written
        - Understanding a native speaker
        - Conversation
        - Informal Discussion
        - Formal Discussion
        - Obtaining Goods and Services
        - Interviewing & being interviewed
Aspects of Competence

Overall language Proficiency

Communicative Strategies

Communicative Language Competencies

Communicative Activities

Linguistic

Sociolinguistic

Pragmatic

Range

Control

Vocabulary Range

General Linguistic

Grammatical Accuracy

Phonological Control

Vocabulary Control

Orthographic Control

Linguistic

Range

Control

Vocabulary Range

General Linguistic

Grammatical Accuracy

Phonological Control

Vocabulary Control

Orthographic Control
Profiling
not
Levelling
### Profiling - Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPANISH</th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A1+</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>A2+</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B1+</th>
<th>B2</th>
<th>B2+</th>
<th>C1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoken Interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B1+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spoken Production</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Production</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Profiling - Prof. needs

- Understanding discussions at formal meetings
- Following a training course
- Listening to conference speeches, lectures, etc.
- Taking notes at meetings, conferences
- Shorthand in the language(s)
- Writing letters
- Writing telegrams, telex etc.
- Writing reports and minutes
- Writing sales leaflets, instruction brochures
- Reading reports and correspondence
- Reading technical journals and newspapers
- Reading instruction manuals and brochures
Descriptors

**Informal Discussion**

- Can take an active part in informal discussion in familiar contexts.
- Can with some effort catch much of what is said around him/her in discussion, but may find it difficult to participate effectively in discussion with several native speakers who do not modify their language in any way.
- Can account for and sustain his/her opinions in discussion by providing relevant explanations, arguments and comments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Proviso</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- take an active part</td>
<td>- informal discussion</td>
<td>- the context is familiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- comment,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- put point of view clearly,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- evaluate alternative proposals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- make/respond to hypotheses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- catch much of what is said around him/her</td>
<td>- informal discussion</td>
<td>- with effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- find it difficult to participate effectively in discussion with several native speakers who do not modify their language in any way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Listening in Discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Speech</th>
<th>Proviso</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2+</strong> animated conversation between native speakers</td>
<td>-standard spoken language</td>
<td>-some recognition in discussion between natives that not a native speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2</strong> even noisy environments</td>
<td>-standard spoken language</td>
<td>-some recognition in discussion between natives that not a native speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B1+</strong> (topics which are familiar)</td>
<td>-clearly articulated standard speech</td>
<td>-ask for repetition &amp; reformulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B1</strong> extended everyday conversation</td>
<td>-clearly articulated standard speech</td>
<td>-ask for repetition &amp; reformulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A2+</strong> simple, routine exchanges</td>
<td>-clearly articulated standard speech</td>
<td>-ask for repetition &amp; reformulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A2</strong> simple everyday conversation</td>
<td>-clear, slow, standard, directed at him</td>
<td>-if partner will take the trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1</strong> everyday expressions aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type</td>
<td>-very clear, slow, carefully articulated repeated speech directed at him</td>
<td>-sympathetic partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Listening in Discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>A2+</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
<th>C1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition not a native-speaker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low background noise</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar everyday topics</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear articulation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance to get repetition</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non standard, simplified</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directly to the user</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overtly helpful interlocutor</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>What is understood</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Proviso</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar topics regularly encountered in a school, work or leisure context</td>
<td>Follow, though not necessarily in detail</td>
<td>Significant points</td>
<td>Extended discussion around him/her Many films in which visuals and action carry much of the story line TV programmes: interviews, short lectures, news reports Straightforward newspaper articles</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics in his field of (personal) interest</td>
<td>Find and understand</td>
<td>Relevant information</td>
<td>Straightforward factual texts Short narratives Descriptions of events, feelings, wishes Detailed directions Short talks Radio news bulletins and simpler recorded materials Everyday written materials: letters, brochures, short official documents Simple technical information e.g. operating instructions</td>
<td>Standard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under-stand with satisfactory comprehension</td>
<td>Main points Significant points</td>
<td></td>
<td>Relatively slow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Microskills in Reception

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recognise</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>which part(s) of the text(s) is relevant to the purpose</td>
<td>useful information</td>
<td>which part(s) of the text(s) is relevant to the purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a change of direction, style or emphasis</td>
<td>relevant facts and information</td>
<td>a change of direction, style or emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different formulation of the same ideas</td>
<td>which part(s) of the text(s) is relevant to the purpose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process with accompanying text</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>diagrams (object, machine, organism)</td>
<td>diagrams (object, machine, organism)</td>
<td>charts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tables</td>
<td>charts</td>
<td>graphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pie charts etc.</td>
<td>diagrams (flow charts, classifications, contrasts)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distinguish</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>main point / relevant facts and information from specific details</td>
<td>main point / relevant facts and information from specific details</td>
<td>main points from relevant supporting detail/arguments/examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>such supporting arguments and more precise information from a digression</td>
<td>such supporting arguments and more precise information from a digression</td>
<td>aspects reported as facts from those reported as opinion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>main points / most important information</td>
<td>main points / most important information</td>
<td>main ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant factual info</td>
<td>main points / most important information</td>
<td>essentials/essential meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an explicitly signalled line of argument</td>
<td>main points / most important information</td>
<td>explicitly stated points of view, opinions and complex lines of argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>main conclusions</td>
<td>main points / most important information</td>
<td>expressed, specific attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>specific details</td>
<td>main points / most important information</td>
<td>specific details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mood and tone explicitly expressed in the text</td>
<td>main points / most important information</td>
<td>mood and tone explicitly expressed in the text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The CEFR in Practice

This volume combines an overview of the background and practical impact of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) with a discussion of the contentious and varied debate the framework has provoked.

The book covers the four main areas with which the CEFR is concerned: its role as a common framework, the Common Reference Levels, what the CEFR implies for planning and teaching, and assessment of CEFR levels. Each chapter summarises the many aims of the CEFR with examples of its implementation, and outlines the theoretical issues it has raised since its inception in 2001. The volume concludes with a discussion of the extent to which the CEFR is generating change, the priorities for curriculum development in the future and how the framework can be further exploited and developed.

This book provides:
- detailed background information on the CEFR and its practical impact
- an overview of the wide range of theoretical debate and interpretations surrounding the framework
- discussion of how this framework may change and develop, based on current theories and empirical evidence.

With its knowledgeable insight into the CEFR's inception, development and potential future, this should be a valuable resource for researchers, educational planners, teachers and policy-makers throughout the language learning profession.
The illustrative descriptors

- Origin of the levels and development of the descriptors
- Categories offered
- Systematicity

Follow up projects

- Portfolios
- Calibrated descriptors

Current work

- 2015 Extended set of descriptors - Main Set
- 2015 Additional text
- 2015 Descriptors for Mediation
**CEFR**

Can with some effort catch much of what is said around him/her in discussion, but may find it difficult to participate effectively in discussion with several native speakers who do not modify their language in any way.

**Portfolios etc.**

I can with some effort catch much of what is said around me, but may find it difficult to understand a discussion between several native speakers who do not modify their language in any way. (CERCLES: university)

I can follow lively conversations with several fast speakers, although I may have a problem joining in.

(BERGEN project: 11-12 year olds)
Follow up projects

Non-calibrated
• Portfolios and Bergen ‘Can Do’ Project
• Irish Eng Lang Benchmarks (Primary / Post-primary
• Swiss IEP/Lingualevel (semi-calibrated)
• EAQUALS
• Profile Deutsch

Calibrated
• ALTE ‘Can Dos’ 1991
• Finnish AMMKIA 2009 (?)
• CEFR-J 2010
• English Profile - C levels 2011
• Pearson GSE 2012
Pearson 2012: 100 new descriptors.

20 CEFR anchors show a high level of agreement with the original calibrations.

After removing the two outliers correlation is 0.97
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## Phonological Control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>C2</strong></td>
<td>As C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C1</strong></td>
<td>Can vary intonation and place sentence stress correctly in order to express finer shades of meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2+</strong></td>
<td>Has a clear, natural, pronunciation and intonation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2</strong></td>
<td>As B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B1</strong></td>
<td>Pronunciation is clearly intelligible even if a foreign accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A2</strong></td>
<td>Pronunciation is generally clear enough to be understood despite a noticeable foreign accent, but conversational partners will need to ask for repetition from time to time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1</strong></td>
<td>Pronunciation of a very limited repertoire of learnt words and phrases can be understood with some effort by native speakers used to dealing with speakers of his/her language group.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2</strong></td>
<td>His/her pronunciation is readily comprehensible to those familiar with relevant standard forms of the language concerned.</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>B1</strong></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>C2</strong></td>
<td>Pronunciation is easily understood and prosodic features are used effectively; many features, including pausing and hesitation, appear completely natural. Can use phonological features effectively to convey and enhance meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C1</strong></td>
<td>Can vary intonation and place sentence stress correctly in order to express finer shades of meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2+</strong></td>
<td>Has a clear, natural, pronunciation and intonation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2</strong></td>
<td>His/her pronunciation is readily comprehensible to those familiar with relevant standard forms of the language concerned. Can generally use appropriate intonation, place stress correctly and articulate individual sounds clearly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B1</strong></td>
<td>Pronunciation is clearly intelligible even if a foreign accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A2</strong></td>
<td>Pronunciation is generally clear enough to be understood despite a noticeable foreign accent, but conversational partners will need to ask for repetition from time to time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1</strong></td>
<td>Pronunciation of a very limited repertoire of learnt words and phrases can be understood with some effort by native speakers used to dealing with speakers of his/her language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
New scales (Main Set)

- Written Reception/Reading for pleasure
- Spoken Interaction/Using telecommunications
- Written Interaction/Written online interaction (discussion forums).
- Spoken Production/Sustained Monologue: Conveying information.
- Pragmatic Competence: Communicative confidence

Note: Written online interaction scale + circa 60 other descriptors will need calibrating
The illustrative descriptors

- Origin of the levels and development of the descriptors
- Categories offered
- Systematicity

Follow up projects

- Portfolios
- Calibrated descriptors

Current work

- 2015 Extended set of descriptors - Main Set
- 2015 Additional text
- 2015 Descriptors for Mediation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Focus of Council of Europe’s Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s-70s</td>
<td>Language skills: adult immigrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lifelong learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language skills: adult education sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s-90s</td>
<td>Language skills: secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crossover points in educational system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic minorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s-10s</td>
<td>Plurilingual and intercultural education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language skills: language of <strong>schooling</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integration of adult migrants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“In both the receptive and productive modes, the written and/or oral activities of mediation make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason to communicate with each other directly.

Translation or interpretation, a paraphrase, summary or record, provides for a third party a (re)formulation of a source text to which this third party does not have direct access.

Mediation language activities, (re)processing an existing text, occupy an important place in the normal linguistic functioning of our societies.”
Textual Mediation (Médiation textuelle)
(Transmitting information and argument: clarifying, summarising, translating etc.)

- Mediating text in one language
- Mediation between languages
Mediation (draft scheme)

Cognitive Mediation (Médiation cognitive)

Interpersonal Mediation (Médiation relationnelle)

Institutional Mediation (Médiation institutionnelle)

Textual Mediation (Médiation textuelle)
(Transmitting information and argument: clarifying, summarising, translating etc.)
- Mediating text in one language
- Mediation between languages
Cognitive Mediation (Médiation cognitive)  
(Facilitating access to knowledge, awareness and skills)  

- Mediating knowledge  
  1. Establishing connections  
  2. Making learning accessible  
  3. Modelling genres and language  
  4. Interacting & Monitoring (with a class, group or individual)  
  5. Strategy training (metacognitive training)  

- Appropriating knowledge  
  6. Note-taking (lectures, seminars etc.)  
  7. Constructing meaning in small groups  
  8. Personal interpretation of works (literature, film, art, etc.)  
  9. Critical appreciation of works (literature, film, art, etc.)  
  10. Exploitation of reference works
Validation Contexts

We need volunteers to run validation workshops around New Year 2015

Per context:
Contact person/workshop leader
6-20 teachers/developers/testers/teacher trainers

• Very familiar with the CEFR levels & descriptors
• Plus, preferably engaged in
  - CLIL / Academic language teaching
  - Secondary school
  - Intercultural training (adult, business)
We need volunteers to run validation workshops around New Year 2015

Please contact me on:

bjnorth@Eurocentres.com

Thank you