**Evaluation and self-assessment:
key concepts, descriptors and examples from the European Language
Portfolio
A cura di Gisella Langé**

3.1 Key concepts

Objectives of plurilingual and intercultural education in a curriculum should help learners in building individual *repertoires* and competences that can be assessed in different ways. *The Guide for the Development and Implementation of Curricula for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education* published in 2010 by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe focuses on the importance of **careful curriculum planning**, suggesting that "crossover links between languages as subjects" should guide teachers on identifying similar categories or comparable activities (e.g. strategies for producing oral texts or understanding written texts, reflection on language systems, transferable intercultural competences, etc.). The *Guide* also stresses the importance of focusing on "**competence profiles**" which offer a more accurate picture of a learner. In an ideal situation a single document should describe a learner's profile for all languages.

It is true that it is quite uncommon to find schools where language teachers succeed in developing and monitoring coordinated *curricula*, syllabuses, activities, and assessment practice, yet more teachers are using the CEFR as the starting point for defining competences and assessing learners' achievements. In most cases teachers have converged on summative or certification assessment: thanks to *Progetto Lingue 2000* familiarity with levels and description of competences has improved quality in language learning over the past ten years. Yet formative assessment should highlight an integrated approach to teaching: for example, transversal competences could be at the basis of similar tests in different languages. Self-evaluation is an integral part of both summative and formative assessment: it is fundamental for developing learner's autonomy and lifelong learning.

An assessment culture has developed in the Italian school system mainly because legislators, administrators, headteachers, and teachers share the principle that educational systems benefit from setting standards and measuring them. In *Language Assessment in Practice* published in 2010 Bachman and Palmer state that " the primary purpose of all assessments is to collect information to help people make decisions that will lead to beneficial consequences". We could add that transversal competences and curriculum coherence make teaching more effective.

Which tools can help teachers in understanding basic principles and materials for assessments?

3.1.1 Assessment and the CEFR

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR): *Learning, teaching, assessment* is an important source for analysis of key concepts on assessment and evaluation. Chapter 9 focuses on the **assessment of the proficiency of learners**: evaluation, defined as "a broader term than assessment", is not taken into consideration since "… in a language programme a number of things are evaluated other than learner proficiency. These may include the effectiveness of particular methods or materials, the kind and quality of discourse actually produced in the programme, learner/teacher satisfaction, teaching effectiveness, etc."(CEFR, p. 177). **Evaluation** is defined as a complex undertaking that requires careful analysis of the results achieved and of the different factors contributing to these results: for example, it could focus on the retrospective analysis of an educational process or of a stage therein, in order to determine how well it has achieved stated aims and objectives. It often includes non-quantifiable information from questionnaires and consultations. The results of evaluation will become the basis of future course planning. Assessment of learners' achievements is part, but not the whole, of evaluation.

In Chapter 9 suggestions are offered on how to specify the content of tests and examinations and on how to compare levels of proficiency; indications are given on the criteria for the attainment of a learning objective, on descriptors of communicative activities and of aspects of proficiency related to particular competences. Table 7 on page 183 offers an overview of the distinctions that can be made in relation to **assessment**:

Table 7. *Types of assessment*

1	Achievement assessment	Proficiency assessment
2	Norm-referencing (NR)	Criterion-referencing (CR)
3	Mastery learning CR	Continuum CR
4	Continuous	Fixed assessment points

	assessment	
5	Formative assessment	Summative assessment
6	Direct assessment	Indirect assessment
7	Performance assessment	Knowledge assessment
8	Subjective assessment	Objective assessment
9	Checklist rating	Performance rating
10	Impression	Guided judgement
11	Holistic assessment	Analytic assessment
12	Series assessment	Category assessment
13	Assessment by others	Self-assessment

All types are carefully described and can help teachers in identifying either specific or general, internal or external, individual or global objectives to be assessed and in deciding which types are more relevant, feasible and appropriate to the context in which they are operating. Assessors are invited to consider with particular care the types that are "more rewarding in terms of teacher development through *washback effect*" (CEFR p. 192) and to focus on qualitative criteria such as the ones mentioned in Table 3 *Common Reference Levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use* (CEFR p. 28-29).

The CEFR defines levels of language proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning: teachers can **set clear standards** to be attained at successive stages of learning using the six-level Global Scale, can measure progress and evaluate students' achievements.

3.1.2 Support tools

The Council of Europe website has developed different support that facilitate CEFR users' work: the materials suggested in the following list can be used by language teachers jointly in order to create common criteria to harmonise learners' competence profiles and their assessments:

a) *Bank of CEFR-related descriptors* illustrate descriptors of competences and sub-competences graded on the six-level scale A *Structured overview of all CEFR scales* gathers in a booklet reference descriptions graded on the six-level scale. When using scales, it should not be forgotten that the CEFR is based on an action-oriented approach and that tasks are not exclusively language-related. Scales are described considering two broad dimensions: "the **quantity dimension** (the number of tasks

persons can perform successfully by language use, in what number of contexts, in relation to what number of themes, domains etc.) and a **quality dimension** (how effectively and efficiently the persons can achieve their goals through language use)". Hierarchy, connections and interactions are visualised in two diagrams.

The **quantity dimension** in Diagram 1 considers four main types of activities (Reception, Production, Interaction, and Mediation) but works out the Interaction branch more in detail: for each of the boxes in the diagram descriptive scales are available in the CEFR.

Diagram 1: The quantity dimension
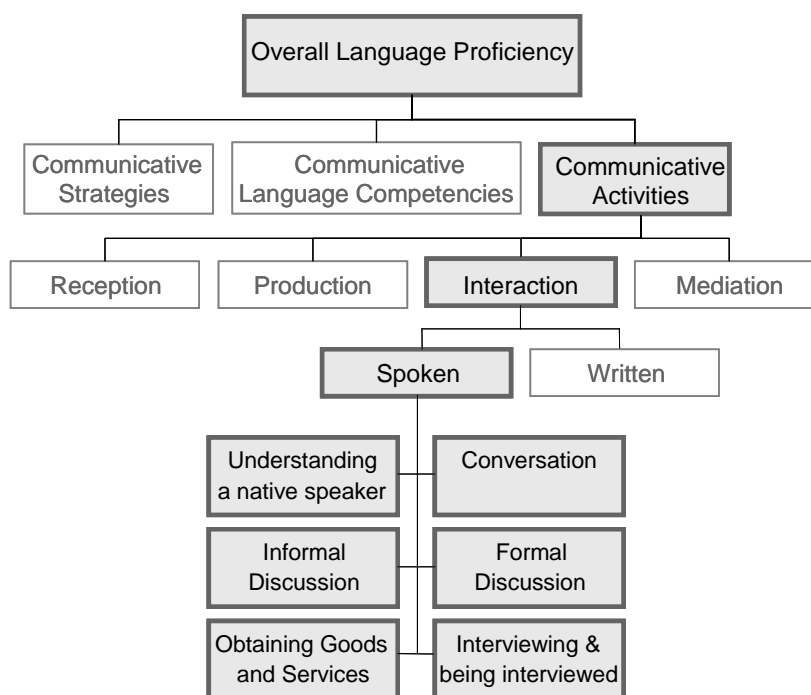
The **quality dimension** in Diagram 2 branches out into the three main Communicative language competences (Linguistic, Sociolinguistic and Pragmatic) for achieving efficiency and effectiveness in language use. For Linguistic competence two factors are distinguished: range and control; within each of these two factors several aspects are analysed. Also for each of the boxes in the diagram descriptive scales are available in the CEFR.

Diagram 2: The quality dimension
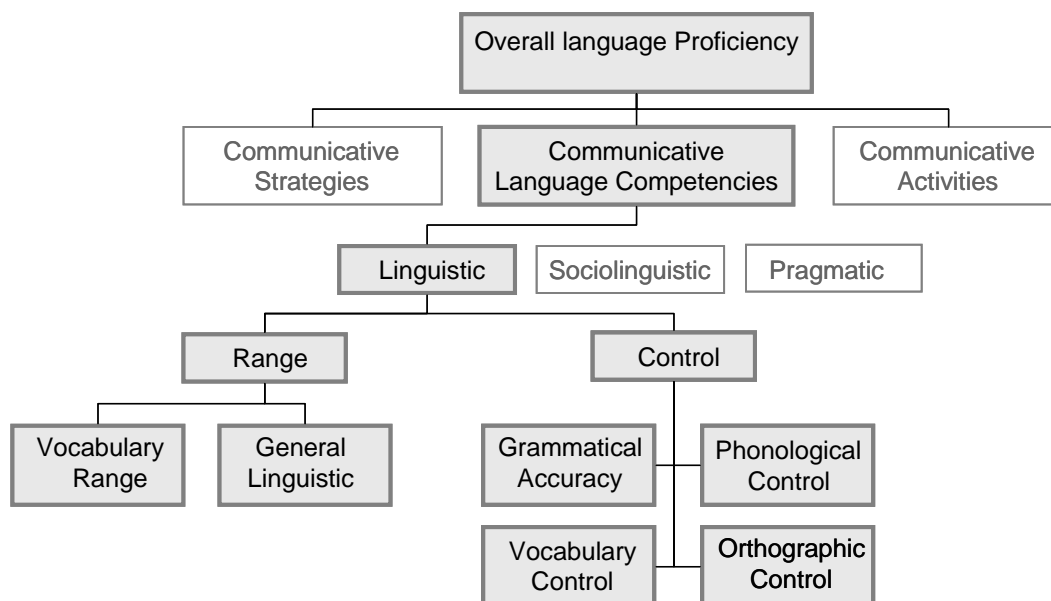
b) *Illustrations of levels of language proficiency* are available on line and offer samples of oral and written production in different languages, whilst items and tasks for testing reading and listening comprehension skills are available on CD-ROM. A number of DVDs showing oral performances illustrating the six levels in various languages are also available. The CoE Policy Division has developed these materials for a number of languages with the help of different assessment bodies: the aim is to ensure that the reference levels are interpreted in the same way in different contexts.

c) *Relating Language Examinations to CEFR: a Manual*, published in 2009, targets those responsible for examinations and aims at defining transparent procedures in order to situate examinations in relation to the CEFR. Different institutions (Universities, Examination boards, Certification agencies, Association of Language Testers, etc.) and individual experts have contributed to the development of this *Manual* that offers an overall frame for test and examination construction. Appendices of this document on "Forms and Scales for Description and Specification - Section A1: Salient Characteristics of CEFR Levels" summarize main characteristics of descriptors for interaction, production and reception and can be used as guidelines for defining

settings, actions and sources when developing tests and exams or setting learners' profiles.

3.2 Self-assessment and the European Language Portfolio

3.2.1 New assessment and portfolios

In the United States and Canada the growth in pedagogy of "new assessment" trends in the '80s deeply modified traditional ways of measuring students' achievements. In that context researchers and experts highlighted the importance of focusing on the learning process, on the development of a learner-centered approach, on the need for reflection and self-directed learning.   Thanks to these new concepts different typologies of *Portfolios* were developed in North American countries, often drawing inspiration from other fields, particularly from creative artists (painters, photographers, graphic designers, etc.) who collect their best works in a "sample book/portfolio" to be shown to their possible customers.

In the field of education the *Porfolio* is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas of the curriculum. According to the emphasis given either to *product* or *process*, to *personal* or *social* use, different typologies can be found: **showcase portfolio** (a collection of the best works/performances chosen by students themselves)*,* **documentation portfolio** (documentation of the learning progress including students' reflections), **class portfolio** (a document on the results of a group of students addressed to parents and headteachers), **evaluation portfolio** (addressed to general public)*.* It is not difficult to understand that Portfolios can be conceived and implemented in different ways.

In most cases portfolios aim at enhancing the assessment process by revealing a range of skills; support instructional goals; reflect change and growth over a period of time; encourage student, teacher, and parent reflection; and provide for continuity in education from one year to the next. Educators can use them for a variety of specific purposes such as: creating an intersection for instruction and assessment, fostering learning about learning, demonstrating progress toward identified outcomes, offering opportunities for peer-supported growth, providing a way for students to value

themselves as learners¸ and as evidence of a student's self-reflection. It should offer a collection of students' best work or best efforts, student-selected samples of work experiences related to outcomes being assessed, and documents displaying growth and development toward mastering identified outcomes.

3.2.2 Background to the European Language Portfolio

In November 1991 an Intergovernmental Symposium held in Rüschlikon, Switzerland considered the idea of developing the proposal of a Common European Framework for language learning, teaching and assessment. In its final Report, *Transparency and coherence in language learning in Europe: objectives, evaluation, certification*, the Symposium recommended that, once the Framework had been elaborated, a document should be devised allowing individuals to keep a record of their formal and informal language learning experiences which would offer evidence of achievement in a transparent manner across national boundaries. This document, a European Language Portfolio, would promote plurilingualism and intercultural understanding among Europeans by guiding young people and adults in building the skills, knowledge and attitudes they need to respond to the challenges of citizenship in the new Europe. The Portfolio would enhance and sustain motivation in language learning in a life-long perspective and help learners to plan, manage and assess their learning. It would facilitate the recognition of language learning achievement within and among educational sectors and facilitate educational and occupational mobility in Europe.

In the mid-nineties the first European Language Portfolios (ELP) were developed in Switzerland, Germany and France and piloted by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, from 1998 until 2000. The potential, feasibility and effects of the European Language Portfolio were explored during this pilot phase. In October 2000 the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe adopted a **Resolution** recommending the implementation and wide use of the ELP, which was launched in 2001 on a pan-European level during the *European Year of Languages* as a tool to support the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism.

3.2.3 The European Language Portfolio: principles, aims and functions

When analysing assessment types, the CEFR gives the following definitions (Chapter 9, p. 191):

"Assessment by others: judgements by the teacher or examiner"

"Self-assessment: judgements about your own proficiency".

Focusing on the importance of clear descriptors of standards of proficiency, considerations are made on the potential of the use of self-assessment: making learners aware of their strengths and weaknesses, thus enhancing their motivation and favouring reflection on the process.

The tool offered by the CEFR for self-assessment is Table 2. *Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid*.

On the basis of illustrative scaled descriptors offering a complete overview of language competence, "can do" descriptors are provided for reception, interaction and production. This grid, as well as the Global Scale, was constructed using the descriptions from the bank of "illustrative descriptors" developed and validated for the CEFR using a rigorous methodology in the Swiss research project described in Appendix B to the CEFR. "The formulations have been mathematically scaled to the levels by analysing the way in which they have been interpreted in the assessment of large numbers of learners." (CEF, Ch. 3.4)

The inclusion of this assessment grid is obligatory in any ELP.

The Resolution adopted by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe in October 2000 focuses on the two main aims of the European Language Portfolio (ELP): a) to motivate learners by acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language skills at all levels; b) to provide a record of the linguistic and cultural skills they have acquired (to be consulted, for example, when they are moving to a higher learning level or seeking employment at home or abroad). The ELP is defined as **"a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language - whether at school or outside school - can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences**". Two **functions** are therefore at the basis of an ELP:

- the **pedagogical function**, which aims at enhancing learners' motivation to improve their ability in different languages and to learn additional languages, at helping them on reflecting on their objectives, ways of learning and success in language learning, and at encouraging learners to develop plurilingual and intercultural experiences.
- the **documentation and reporting function**, which aims at collecting in a comprehensive, informative, transparent and reliable way levels of competences and all experiences learners have reached in one or more foreign languages.

The focus can shift from one function of the ELP to another and this can lead to a different use. The following table conceived by Günther Schneider and Peter Lenz in their *ELP Guide for Developers* clearly explains possible kinds of uses:

Central concerns from a pedagogic and methodological perspective	Central concerns from the point of view of documentation and reporting
learning processes	results and products of learning
formative assessment	summative assessment
learning incentives	transparency
learning occasions	comparability

Portfolio versions for different target groups may put more emphasis on one function and provide more instruments to implement it than another ELP version for a different target group. A learner may need to present his/her Language Portfolio in different occasions: when transferring from one school to another, when entering University, when applying for a new post... People receiving a portfolio may consider it useful to find evidence of the results of summative evaluation, of the owner's self-assessment information and selected oral or written production... Evidence of this kind is important because successful language learning cannot always be documented by means of examinations or diplomas. In order to be reliable, all information must be documented in a transparent manner, i.e. it should be clearly possible to verify who (person/institution) is responsible for a statement and would confirm its truthfulness. The ELP is based on the following **principles**:

1) it is the learner's property
2) it evaluates linguistic and intercultural competences in a positive way
3) it promotes in and out-of-school learning
4) it develops lifelong learning
5) it is based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*

As for **structure**, the ELP is composed of **three parts**: 1) a Language **Passport** which its owner regularly updates; 2) a Language **Biography** where the owner can describe his/her language competences in each language according to common criteria accepted throughout Europe and which is designed to guide the learner in planning and assessing progress; 3) a **Dossier** where examples of personal work can be kept to illustrate one's language competences.

1. Language Passport	2. Language Biography	3. Dossier

The **Passport** section provides an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time. General contents include languages used by family and friends, languages courses at school, heritage languages, languages acquired outside school: profiles of language competencies (general, specific or partial) are defined in terms of skills and significant language and intercultural learning experiences are described. Formal qualifications, certificates, stays abroad, and

international project work are recorded in the Passport. Self -assessment, teacher assessment and assessment by educational institutions and examinations boards are explained on the basis of what, when and by whom the assessment was carried out.

A **Passport standard model** has been promoted by the Council of Europe for ELPs for adults to facilitate pan-European recognition and mobility.

Example of Summary of language learning and intercultural experiences.

Example of self-assessment profile in different languages:

Selbsteinschätzung der sprachlichen Fähigkeiten

Sprache	Rezeption	Produktion	Interaktion	Mediation
Englisch	C1	B1	B2	B2
Französisch	B2	A2	A2	A1
Türkisch	C2	B2	C1	C1

Datum: 15.03.2000

Example of grid to record certificates and diplomas:

Certificats et diplômes
Certificates and diplomas

Nom
Name _____

Langue / Language	Niveau / Level						Intitulé / Title	Délivré par / Awarded by	Année / Year
	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2			

The **Europass Language Passport**, an electronic version of the standard Language Passport for adults jointly developed by the Council of Europe and the European Union, can be completed on line or downloaded from the Europass website.

The **Language Biography** is a *manual* for pupils: it acts as a language learning diary, offering the basis for regular work to evaluate and monitor progress, and encouraging the learner to state what he/she can do in each language. Focusing on the languages used both in and outside formal educational contexts (for ex. Languages learnt on holiday, trips, with relatives...), it facilitates the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress. It is organized to promote plurilingualism, i.e. the development of competencies in a number of languages.

Example from the Language Biography of the ELP Lombardy:

How I learn section

Ex. If the learner comes from a different country…

reflection on different teaching styles

Portfolio Europeo delle Lingue   Biografia linguistica

Come imparo
How I learn   Comment j apprends   Wie ich lerne   Cómo aprendo

Riesco a esprimermi meglio se

☐ conosco bene le parole e le frasi che mi servono

☐ conosco almeno alcune delle parole e delle frasi che mi servono

☐ posso aiutarmi con gesti, oggetti, immagini che mi servono

☐ altro ....

Imparo meglio se lavoro

☐ da solo

☐ in coppia

☐ in gruppo

☐ altro ....

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Progetto Lingue Lombardia

15

The **Dossier** offers the learner the opportunity to select materials to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Biography or Passport: sample sections of successful language work are documented (texts, videos, CD-ROM), but also summaries of systematic work in the Biography section.

Example from the Dossier of the Lombardy ELP:

Almost all ELPs have been published in paper format, but three of them have been developed and accredited by the European Validation Committee in electronic format: 1) the EAQUALS-ALTE e-ELP that can be downloaded from their website http://www.eelp.org/eportfolio/index.html ; the Dutch National Bureau for Modern Languages that can be accessed via the following link: http://www.europeestaalportfolio.nl, and the ELP published by Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi, Italy:

http://scienzedellavita.unimarconi.it/uni/v20/indexa7.php?id=43

Ten years after its launch in 2001, more than one hundred European Language Portfolios have been validated after undergoing a complex procedure governed by a Validation Committee. Eleven of these portfolios were conceived in Italy. The impact of this tool of the Council of Europe has been analyzed in **reports written by Rolf Schaerer** that are available on line. Key aspects of ELP implementation and examples of evidence are included in the 2008 report, that examines experience in a variety of contexts by individual, collective, local, regional, national and international stakeholders.

At the end of December 2010 the ELP Validation Committee ceased to exist and the process of validating ELPs came to an end. From April 2011 validation will be replaced by online registration based on the principle of self-declaration. A new website is to implement this procedure and to support the development of new ELP models. It will provide step-by-step instructions on how to assemble an ELP using generic elements and templates and informed by good practice in ELP design over the past ten years.

The following "tentative conclusions" drawn by Rolf Schaerer and based on reported activities, developments and outcomes summarize its great value:

a) the ELP contributes significantly to the dissemination of European goals, values, concepts and principles
b) the ELP makes a difference in educational practice
c) the ELP is an effective catalyst for change at European, national and local levels.

3.3 Autobiography for Intercultural Encounters

The publication of the *Autobiography for Intercultural Encounters* by the Council of Europe in 2008 is a response to the recommendations of the Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living together as equals in dignity"*, Section 5.3 "Learning and teaching intercultural competences", paragraph 152:

> "Complementary tools should be developed to encourage students to exercise independent critical faculties including to reflect critically on their own responses and attitudes to experiences of other cultures."
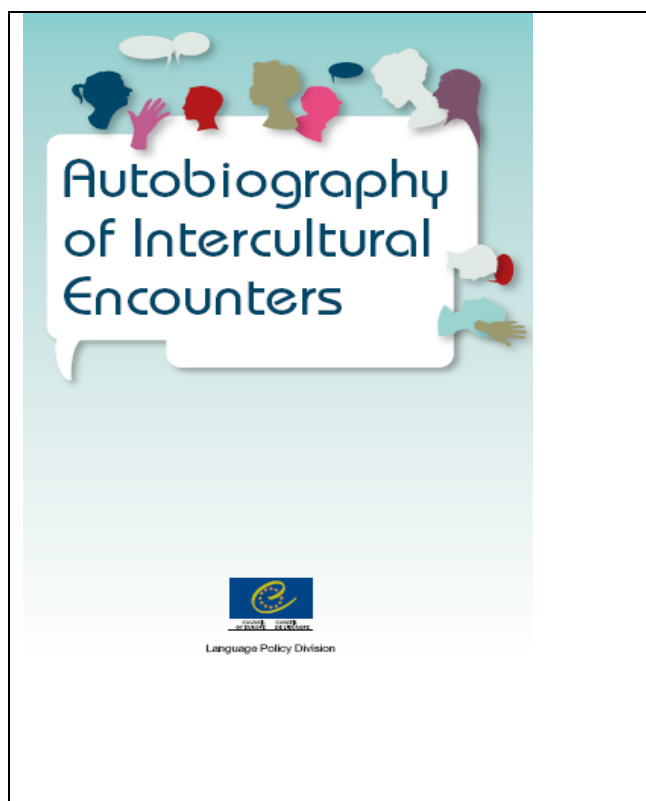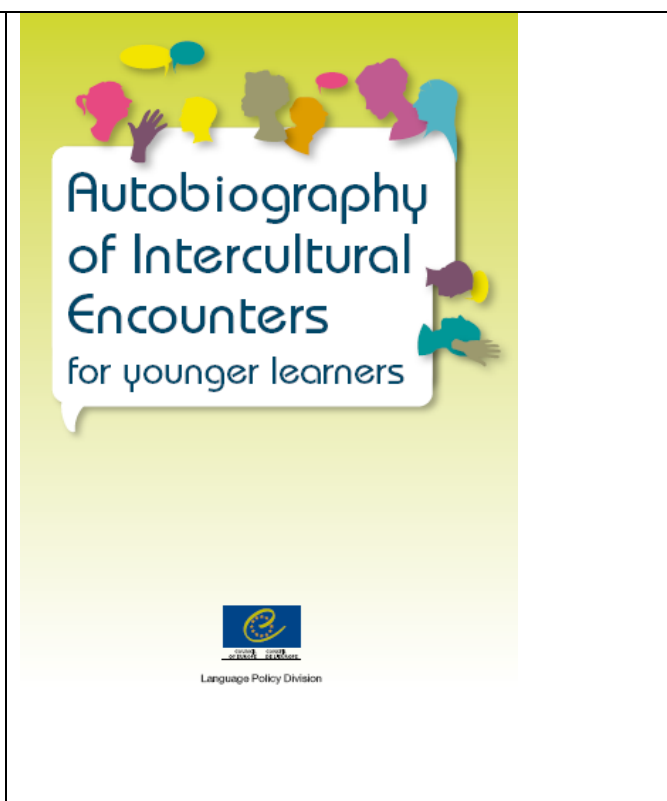
This new document is the result of a teamwork led by Michael Byram and its piloting was conducted in two phases: preliminary piloting from January to April 2007 followed

by a main phase from January to May 2008. In Italy the following teachers and inspectors provided valuable feedback in the piloting process: Rita Bertone, Janine Fournier, Isolde Maria Künig Strauß, Rita Gelmi, Gisella Langé, Virgilio Marrone Andrea Mennella, Lorena Parretti, Claudia Perlini, Maura Properzi.

The Autobiography is a document for learners aimed at facilitating critical thinking about an intercultural experience, i.e. an encounter with people from another social group. The group can be of any kind: people from another country, from another ethnic group, from another religion, from another region of the same country, from another level or class or stratum of the same society. The Autobiography is to be completed in connection with one specific encounter.

There are two versions of the Autobiography:

- A version for younger learners, where the language has been simplified and some of the more complex issues have been omitted
- A standard version, which is intended for use by older learners.

STANDARD VERSION	YOUNGER LEARNERS

The Autobiography consists of a series of questions which learners answer about the specific encounter, but they only answer the questions they choose to answer. *There is no obligation to answer them all.*

There are two related purposes for the Autobiography:

- Self evaluation: it guides learners to evaluate their own responses to a specific encounter; over time they can look back at different encounters and how they evaluated them and thus learn about themselves;

- Teaching and learning: teachers can use the Autobiography as a means of stimulating reflection and analysis, and can thus facilitate learning in deliberate ways.

The AIE is essentially a series of questions about a special experience which has been particularly important. The questions take us back over the encounter, over how we responded, how we think others in the encounter responded, how we thought and felt about it then and now, and what conclusions we can draw from it for the future. The questions follow a careful sequence which is based on scientific research, but are written in a way which makes it easy for anyone to follow. In the 'Standard' version, those who use the AIE can do it alone or with others – with the help of a friend or teacher for example – whereas the version of the AIE for younger learners is intended for children who need help from an adult in reading and writing and in thinking back over their encounter.

The AIE is accompanied by: a) *Notes for Facilitators* in both versions, where suggestions as to how and when the Autobiography could be used and a more detailed explanation of its purpose and origins are given; b) a *feedback form* which will help the team which designed and produced the AIE to improve it in the future; c) a text (*Context, Concepts and Theories*) which deals in some depth with the concepts which underlie the AIE, such as what we mean by 'culture' and many other concepts which help to clarify a complex area for 'facilitators'. Historical, theoretical and conceptual background to the Autobiography is suggested for further study; d) a shorter and simplified version of this explanatory text, entitled *Concepts for Discussion*, which can be used with people who complete the Standard version of the AIE and who themselves might want to understand more about how disciplines such as psychology and sociology help us to analyse intercultural encounters in a scientific way.

The *Authobiography for Intercultural Encounters* is available in English, French and Italian, thus usable not only by teachers of foreign languages but also by teachers of all subjects.