

## Identity matters in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and its *Companion Volume*

Michael Byram

To cite this article: Michael Byram (2021): Identity matters in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and its *Companion Volume*, The Language Learning Journal, DOI: [10.1080/09571736.2021.1996622](https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2021.1996622)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2021.1996622>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 30 Nov 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Identity matters in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and its *Companion Volume*

Michael Byram 

School of Education, University of Durham, Durham, UK

## ABSTRACT

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* has been a major influence on language teaching in Europe and beyond and its *Companion Volume* will probably have the same significance. It is important therefore that education professionals understand the underlying concepts, including the conceptualisation of the language user/learner. This article analyses the concept of learners' identities against the background of the Council of Europe's policy of social inclusion, which became significant between the dates of publication of the two documents. It demonstrates that the CEFR has a more nuanced and detailed concept of identity than the *Companion Volume*, and that the suggestion in the *Companion Volume* that teachers do not need to know the CEFR itself is problematic. The CEFR works with a concept of social and personal identity. The *Companion Volume* lacks such a concept, and an analysis of pluricultural competence in search of clarification of how a 'pluricultural person' is conceptualised proves unsuccessful. The relationship between 'pluricultural' and 'plurilingual' is not fully addressed in the CEFR, nor developed further in the *Companion Volume*. There is still a need for a rich description of the identities of learners and of the notion of pluricultural competence.

## KEYWORDS

Identity; social inclusion;  
Common European  
Framework of Reference;  
Companion Volume;  
pluricultural competence

## Introduction

My title is deliberately ambiguous, depending on whether 'matters' is read as a noun or a verb, and my purpose here is to be both descriptive, as suggested by 'matters' as a noun, and prescriptive when 'matters' is read as a verb. Furthermore the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) and its *Companion Volume* (CV) (Council of Europe 2020) 'matter' – are important – because of the influence the CEFR has had and the *Companion Volume* may have. I shall in particular examine what both documents have to say about 'identity' and argue that identity matters/issues need more attention, especially in the *Companion Volume*. I shall do this by reflecting on the key concept: the 'language user/learner'.

The evolution of the CEFR is described and analysed by Trim (2012) who says of the group of people who began the project leading to the CEFR that:

[the group's] aim was to promote language learning not as an end in itself – though for many learners, especially perhaps the more gifted ones, that might be sufficient motivation – but rather as a contribution to the over-arching political aims of the Council. It should serve to improve international understanding and cooperation,

**CONTACT** Michael Byram  m.s.byram@dur.ac.uk

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

promote methods that strengthen democratic practices and develop the learner's independence of thought and action combined with social responsibility.

The CEFR was circulated to a wide network of Council of Europe contacts during the 1990s and had already begun to be influential. After its publication it was influential not only in Europe but world-wide (Byram and Parmenter 2012).

The description of levels of language competence was one of the most influential elements even though the Council of Europe made efforts to ensure other aspects were taken seriously too. For example, the current website on the CEFR (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages> – accessed 27 August 2021) has a prominent statement that 'The CEFR is much more than proficiency scales'. However some scales were not complete at the time of publication and further descriptors were created during the 2010s and published in the Companion Volume because, as the acknowledgments section of the Companion Volume states: 'the Council of Europe frequently received requests to continue to develop aspects of the CEFR, particularly the illustrative descriptors of second/foreign language proficiency' (Council of Europe 2020: 13). Despite this renewed focus on descriptors and levels, there is much more in the CEFR which still needs to be attended to, and this article is an attempt to draw attention to some of what is often overlooked.

## Why identity matters

The Companion Volume (2020: 27) introduces the recommendation by the Council of Europe in 2008 ([https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result\\_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805d2fb1](https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805d2fb1)) that the CEFR be used to promote 'democratic citizenship, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue', a recommendation which is based on the Third Summit of Heads of State and Government in Warsaw in 2005. These same sentiments appeared in 2008 in the Council of Europe's White Paper where the word 'dialogue' is in the title: *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue - 'Living Together As Equals in Dignity'* (Council of Europe 2008). Models of intercultural dialogue, many of which are reviewed by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), identify both the competences individuals need in interaction and communication and also the characteristics of interaction itself, how communication proceeds. One important dimension of much communication is the mutual perceptions interlocutors have of each other, of their identities salient in a particular communicative event.

Research tells us that in communication and social interaction, social identities play a significant role. People categorise each other in terms of the social identities they perceive and this can lead to stereotyping and prejudice (Hughes 2017). This is acknowledged in the CEFR where socio-cultural knowledge of other communities is deemed important but 'may well be distorted by stereotypes' (Council of Europe 2001: 102), and where 'intercultural awareness' is significant and 'covers an awareness of how each community appears from the perspective of the other, often in the form of national stereotypes' (Council of Europe 2001: 103). Intercultural competence should include knowledge about how communication can be marred by mis-categorisation and inflexibility leading to stereotyping and prejudice (Byram 2021: 46–48).

The notion of social identity was developed by Tajfel (1974). Ellemers refers to the 'group self' which involves 'a (temporary) transformation of the conception of self from an individual to the group level' and may explain societal issues such as religious or ethnic tensions (Ellemers 2012: 848–852). The conceptualisation of identity is thus important in analysing the social inclusion and dialogue which the Council of Europe wishes to promote.

Identity matters therefore because it is present in and impacts on all dialogue, and intercultural dialogue is fundamental to the policy of the Council of Europe, being characterised in the White Paper as 'a key to Europe's future' (Council of Europe 2008: 4). The White Paper asserts that 'The learning and teaching of intercultural competence is essential for democratic culture and social cohesion'. This is a principle which can be transferred to many other situations in the

world, although the Council of Europe deliberately confines its statements to Europe. The White Paper recommends that intercultural competence should be taught as part of citizenship and human rights education (Council of Europe 2008: 43). This is without doubt important but misses the significant role which language education should play too since citizenship is a matter of collaboration and dialogue, and this brings us back to questions of identity. It is therefore all the more urgent to understand the ways in which the CEFR and the Companion Volume present the identities of 'the language user/learner' – or occasionally 'learner/user' – to cite the term introduced by the CEFR.

## People and identities in the CEFR

The word 'user' appears many times in the CEFR and the Companion Volume, in two different ways. It refers, first, to users of the two documents, for example teachers, education policy makers, assessors, teacher educators. The Companion Volume puts much emphasis on its being 'user-friendly' (Council of Europe 2020: blurb, 14, 21). The CEFR emphasises that users have to make decisions; the CEFR cannot and does not presume to do this for them (Council of Europe 2001: Notes for the user, 44, and *passim*).

The second way in which 'user' appears is in reference to the 'language user/learner', a term which ensures that it is clear that a learner does not have to wait until they have reached a specific level of competence before they use a language for their own purposes, and not only for the process of learning. Both texts are addressed to the first kind of user but are about the user/learner. However the latter is also a user of the first kind. This is stated in the first 'aim' of the CEFR formulated in the Notes for the User:

'(the CEFR) has been written with two main aims in mind':

- 1 To encourage practitioners of all kinds in the language field, *including language learners themselves*, to reflect on such questions as:
  - what do we actually do when we speak (or write) to each other?
  - what enables us to act in this way? [...]
- 2 To make it easier for practitioners to tell each other and their clientèle what they wish to help learners to achieve, and how they attempt to do so. (Council of Europe 2001: Notes for the user, n.p. – emphasis added)

It is important then to ask what we know about how the authors of the CEFR envisaged the user/learner. First we know that the user/learner is a social agent, who does things and acts, enabled by their competences for communication:

The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. (Council of Europe 2001: 9)

Language is then used in all kinds of social actions and interactions and the examples given (*ibid.*: 10) range from the simple to the complex: from moving a wardrobe to writing a book, from ordering a meal in a restaurant to preparing a class newspaper through group work.

Second, we know that the user/learner is seen as a social actor, with social relationships which, in the socio-psychological perspective introduced above are social identities or group selves. The CEFR however emphasises that it is important to see identity as a unitary concept:

As a social agent, each individual forms relationships with a widening cluster of overlapping *social groups*, which together define identity. In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote

the favourable development of the learner's *whole personality and sense of identity* in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture. It must be left to teachers and the learners themselves to *reintegrate the many parts into a healthily developing whole*. (Council of Europe 2001: 16 – emphasis added)

However, since the CEFR is a taxonomic breakdown of language competence into many competences which are useful for analysis, its approach needs to be counterbalanced by the 'reintegration' into 'a healthily developing whole', and this is the responsibility of teachers, and of learners themselves.

It is in Chapter 5 that the analysis of identity is pursued in depth. The section dealing with "'existential"<sup>1</sup> competence (*savoir être*)' is crucial. The taxonomy developed here comprises attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality factors. Attitudes and personality factors are said to influence both the user/learner's communication and their learning, and it is suggested that the development of an 'intercultural personality' may be 'an educational goal in its own right'.

It is then stated that the pursuit of this educational goal raises 'important ethical and pedagogical issues'. One of these is 'how cultural relativism is to be reconciled with ethical and moral integrity' which, I infer, is a consequence of developing in user/learners, *inter alia*, a 'willingness to relativise one's own cultural viewpoint and cultural value-system'. This ethical dimension of teaching languages is extremely challenging, and leads to a first suggestion for users of the first kind (e.g. teachers) that they 'may wish to consider and where appropriate state':

- whether, and if so which, personality features learners will need/be encouraged/equipped/required to develop/display;

Language teachers, like all teachers, need to think about whether they want to change their learners' personality, and this presumably implies developing features which are in some sense desirable. The other side of the coin is not mentioned: whether teachers want to discourage undesirable personality features.

This is followed by a second suggestion, that users 'may wish to consider and where appropriate state':

- whether, and if so in what ways, learner characteristics are taken into account in provisions for language learning, teaching and assessment. (Council of Europe 2001: 106)

Here the focus is on how and to what extent learners' personality features or characteristics, whether desirable or undesirable, are in potential conflict or harmony with for example the conditions for learning provided by an institution, whether for example learners are allowed to learn languages at their own pace and in individualised learning, or even to refuse to learn a language at all.

This relatively brief section of chapter 5 gives language teaching a significance in education which few users of the CEFR have, I suspect, noticed. Statements, in curricula or elsewhere, concerning 'personality features' which learners will 'need/be encouraged/ equipped/required to develop/display', and how this might be done are, I think, rare. None of this is taken up in the Companion Volume which has cut its 'pedagogical users' off from the CEFR and these important issues, as we shall see below.

Third, we know that the user/learner has the potential to become a democratic citizen who is always freely mobile and has direct contact with others, and that this 'in turn leads to a better understanding and closer cooperation' (Council of Europe 2001: Notes for the user n.p.). Although the literature shows that mere contact does not automatically lead to understanding as is implied here,<sup>2</sup> the CEFR authors' belief that the methods of teaching and learning they support will develop people, young and old, to become 'more independent in thought and action, and also more responsible and cooperative in relation to other people' (*ibid.*) is well-founded.<sup>3</sup> This, it is argued, 'contributes to the promotion of democratic citizenship' (*ibid.*), and is explicitly part of the Council of Europe's language policy. It is why the CEFR must be understood as having 'political importance', as Trim hinted in the quotation in the introduction to this article. It is part of the diversification and intensification of

language learning ‘in order to promote plurilingualism in a pan-European context’ (Council of Europe 2001: Notes for the user n.p.).

In sum, the user/learner of the CEFR is an ‘educated’ individual with numerous social affiliations, relations and identities, who should – usually with the help of teachers – integrate their experience and competences as a social actor into a whole personality, who acts in a democratic world.

## People in the *Companion Volume*

The Companion Volume presents, in Chapter 2, ‘key aspects of the CEFR for teaching and learning’. It does so by referring to the CEFR’s ‘promotion of the positive formulation of educational aims and outcomes’ and quotes a recommendation from 2008 that the CEFR be used ‘as a tool for coherent, transparent and effective plurilingual education in such a way as to promote *democratic citizenship*, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue’ (Council of Europe 2020: 27 – emphasis added). This is a further formulation of the statement in the CEFR concerning its ‘political importance’.

Who is the user/learner who becomes a democratic citizen engaged in intercultural dialogue? How are they envisaged in the Companion Volume? It is difficult to know. Unlike the CEFR, there is no reference to ‘identity’ in the Companion Volume and no explanation of the Companion Volume’s basis in taxonomic analysis and the need for integration of the social actor’s competences into ‘a healthily developing whole’, as explained in the CEFR. The user of the Companion Volume is furnished only with a further taxonomic break-down of language competence. On the other hand, the Companion Volume takes up the vision in the CEFR of the user/learner as a ‘social agent’. In particular it links this notion to the concept of mediation and ‘the mediator’. It does so by interpreting the CEFR in a particular way, for it suggests that mediation has ‘a key position’ in the CEFR:

Although the CEFR 2001 does not develop the concept of mediation to its full potential, it emphasises the two key notions of co-construction of meaning in interaction and constant movement between the individual and social level in language learning, mainly through its vision of the user/learner as a social agent. In addition, an *emphasis on the mediator as an intermediary between interlocutors underlines the social vision of the CEFR*. In this way, although it is not stated explicitly in the 2001 text, the CEFR descriptive scheme de facto gives mediation a key position in the action-oriented approach, similar to the role that a number of scholars now give it when they discuss the language learning process. (Council of Europe 2020: 36 – emphasis added)

A close reading of this passage reveals that there is a hiatus between the first and second sentences, between a statement about what is explicit in the CEFR in the first sentence and an interpretation of what is implicit, in the second sentence. The phrase ‘in addition’ carries a lot of weight in overcoming that hiatus. By adding that there is an emphasis on the mediator, the social vision of the CEFR is ‘underlined’, the meaning of the latter word remaining unspecified. Setting aside the lack of precision in the phrase ‘social vision’, in the sentence emphasised in this quotation, it is asserted that the postulated key position of ‘mediation’ in the CEFR is reinforced in the Companion Volume. The word is present about 20 times in the CEFR and dozens of times in the Companion Volume, where it is connected as above with the concept of the learner as social agent.<sup>4</sup> In short, the interpretation and assertion that mediation had, or should have, a key position in an action-oriented approach is not well supported, irrespective of whether one agrees with it or not.

Since the Companion Volume, unlike the CEFR, does not offer a vision of the user/learner as someone with social affiliations, relations and identities, the analysis of who and what the ‘mediator’ is, might provide some insight. The mediator is described primarily in terms of the competences they have, rather than their characteristics, but it is possible to discern some characteristics in the descriptors of competences. The mediator ‘needs to have a well-developed emotional intelligence’ (Council of Europe 2020: 91) in order to have ‘empathy for the viewpoints and emotional states of other participants in the communicative situation’ (ibid.). At the highest level of competence, the mediator can take on ‘different roles, according to the needs of the people and the situation involved’ (ibid.). They can at lower levels ‘establish a supportive environment’, ‘work collaboratively’ and ‘show interest and empathy’. These competences may imply certain personal characteristics

which not all user/learners necessarily have, but it might be argued that, rather than relatively fixed personal characteristics, these competences can be (taught and) learnt.

Whatever characteristics or competences a mediator needs, we can also gain some insight into who or what they are by examining what they can do. Crucially, they can 'facilitate cultural space', which involves creating a shared space 'between linguistically and culturally different locutors' (Council of Europe 2020: 114), and this space should allow for positive interactions, the role of the user/learner being to help others to gain deeper understanding of each other and avoid communication difficulties 'arising from contrasting cultural viewpoints' (ibid.). This competence is glossed as 'the capacity to deal with "otherness"', and is different from using pluricultural competences to 'gain acceptance and to enhance their own mission or message' (ibid.) which, it is said, is dealt with under 'Building on pluricultural repertoire'. The phrase 'gain acceptance' is a clue to how the authors understand the identity of the user/learner, since there is perhaps an implication that a user/learner would want to gain entrance to another social group, be accepted by the group, and acquire a new social identity. This is however speculation since there is no explanation in the later chapter on 'Building on pluricultural repertoire' of what might have been meant by 'gain acceptance'. Progression up the scale of Building on Pluricultural Repertoire (an unusual phrase without a definite or indefinite article before 'pluricultural') is a matter of an increasing capacity for explanation.

Mediation is clearly one important aspect of being a social actor but it is only one aspect. The social actor as defined in the CEFR and quoted above is someone who is involved in many kinds of task, often with a co-operative dimension. One of the examples given in the CEFR and quoted above refers explicitly to 'group work'. The strong emphasis on mediation occludes this more complex meaning of 'social actor'.

In sum, the language user/learner in the Companion Volume is a social agent with many and varied skills, including in particular those of a mediator. They are someone living within a democracy with a commitment to dialogue. Compared to the user/learner of the CEFR, this is a somewhat reduced vision, and this is problematic for 'users' because the Companion Volume echoes the CEFR in distinguishing between the 'users' of the document and 'user/learners', but it also further separates the first kind of user into those interested in 'pedagogical use' and those who are 'researchers' (Council of Europe 2020: preliminaries n.p.). The Companion Volume is then presented to teachers and teacher educators, for pedagogical use, as 'the updated framework' (ibid.). Researchers on the other hand 'wishing to interrogate the underlying concepts and guidance in CEFR chapters about specific areas' should consult the CEFR of 2001. In arguing that pedagogical users need not consult the CEFR, the Companion Volume cuts off teachers and educators from essential aspects of the CEFR, some of which I have analysed here. The Companion Volume presumes that they do not need a deeper understanding of concepts and guidance, and seems to imply a reductive vision of their professionalism.

### **Pluricultural competence and the learner's 'whole personality and sense of identity'**

In the crucial passage of the CEFR cited above, I emphasised the significance of the integration of experience of social relations into a 'whole personality and sense of identity'. It is also stated that this is 'in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture' (Council of Europe 2001: 16). Precisely what that experience is and should be is found in the concept of pluricultural competence.<sup>5</sup>

The notion of pluricultural competence, it is clearly stated at the beginning of the CEFR, is the context within which plurilingual competence must be understood, and throughout the text there is a rich description of what pluricultural competence is, especially in chapter 6. However, because of the attraction of scales and scaling, pluricultural competence has scarcely been noticed or used in language teaching influenced by the CEFR. The inclusion of skills of pluricultural



competence in the Companion Volume is likely to lead to more attention to it, but perhaps not with a full understanding on the part of ‘pedagogical users’ who do not read the CEFR.

In the CEFR, the concept is presented above all as a matter of knowledge of cultures and as comparable in nature to – though acting as the context for – plurilingual competence:

Plurilingualism has itself to be seen in the context of pluriculturalism. Language is not only a major aspect of culture, but also a means of access to cultural manifestations. (...) in a person’s cultural competence, the various cultures (national, regional, social) *to which that person has gained access* do not simply co-exist side by side; they are compared, contrasted and actively interact to produce an enriched, integrated pluricultural competence, of which plurilingual competence is one component, again interacting with other components. (Council of Europe 2001: 6 – emphasis added)

The examples of cultures given – ‘national’, ‘regional’, ‘social’ – are limited and might have been improved by reference to ethnicity, profession, leisure, gender and other social groups. The use of ‘social’ in the list is too vague and, implying that it is of the same nature as ‘national’ and ‘regional’, it is misleading since ‘social’ is an over-arching concept under which national, regional and other identities exist.

The first main point to make however is that a pluricultural person is envisaged as having gained access to – and by implication become a member of – certain social groups and their cultures; this is a sociological perspective. The second point to note brings in the psychological perspective – with a deliberate echo of the description of plurilingualism – and emphasises how comparison, contrast and interaction produce an ‘integrated’ pluricultural competence.

The relationship between plurilingual and pluricultural competences is crucial. Language – and by implication plurilingual competence – is the means of ‘access’ to ‘cultural manifestations’, a difficult phrase to interpret but, with further reference to ‘access to cultures’, seems to be a synonym for ‘cultures’. Furthermore plurilingual competence is not just located within the ‘context’ of pluricultural competence but is one ‘component’ of it, among others; the others are not specified. This can be seen as an aspect of the long debated relationship between language and culture and language and thought since the first formulation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Risager calls this the ‘language-culture nexus’, and analyses it from the sociological and psychological perspectives (Risager 2006: 185–192). From a sociological perspective, a language can be used in different societies – often as a recognised ‘national language’ – and therefore articulate more than one (national) culture. From a psychological perspective, language is for each individual person the access to experience and, for the individual, the two are integrated as ‘languaculture’. The CEFR statement that language is one component of an integrated pluricultural competence is perhaps a similar understanding that individuals experience language and culture as inseparable, as languaculture.

On the other hand, in Chapter 6, there is a suggestion that language and culture can be separable for the user/learner at the psychological level, because they may have ‘a good knowledge of the culture of a community but a poor knowledge of its language, or poor knowledge of a community whose dominant language is nevertheless well mastered’ (Council of Europe 2001: 133). This again puts emphasis on knowledge of cultures. The relationship of knowledge of language, where ‘knowledge’ means ‘competence in’ and of culture, where ‘knowledge’ is declarative ‘knowledge about’ ‘a community’, is an ‘imbalance’ or ‘different types of balance’ and is considered to be entirely normal. It does not imply ‘instability, uncertainty or lack of balance’ but rather ‘contributes, in the majority of cases, to improve awareness of identity’. It is therefore, with the caveat of ‘in the majority of cases’, a positive consequence of a person’s ‘experience of the plurality of cultures’ (ibid.).

What we see then here is that pluricultural ‘competence’ is reduced to declarative knowledge and can be separated from language competence. At the same time, in Chapter 6, the inseparability of language and a ‘conceptual field’, which I consider to be part of the culture of a community, and the differences between word-meanings in L1 and L2, is emphasised:



A problem arises when a particular conceptual field is differently organised in L1 and L2, as is frequently the case, so that correspondence of word-meanings is partial or inexact. How serious is the mismatch? To what misunderstandings may it lead? Accordingly, what priority should it be given at a particular stage of learning? At what level should mastery of the distinction be required or attended to? Can the problem be left to sort itself out with experience? (Council of Europe 2001: 132)

The questions are left unanswered and, unlike many sections of the CEFR, there is no summing up of what 'users may wish to consider'. It is implied nonetheless that differently organised conceptual fields – present in different cultures – have complex relations to different languages, both sociologically and psychologically. Furthermore, in Chapter 5, where competences are listed, the 'general competences' include, under 'declarative knowledge', the notion of 'intercultural awareness' which involves:

Knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the 'world of origin' and the 'world of the target community' (which) produce an intercultural awareness.

In short, there is some incoherence in the text with respect to pluricultural competence, which is not surprising in a text written by several hands over a considerable period of time. There is a vision of a user/learner as a person with complex knowledge, experiences and identities, including but not only 'competence', but there is uncertainty and some incoherence about how they experience the relationship between language and culture or languages and cultures.

The publication of the Companion Volume might have been an opportunity to review these matters, but it has a different approach to pluricultural competence, founded on scales and scaling. It is nonetheless interesting to note that the reason for associating descriptors with levels is 'to provide support to curriculum developers and teachers in their efforts (a) to broaden the perspective of language education in their context and (b) to acknowledge and value the linguistic and cultural diversity of their learners'. Assessment seems not to be included, and an explanation of what 'broadening' of language education might mean is also missing. Another reason, it is stated in the same place, is 'to facilitate the selection of relevant plurilingual/pluricultural aims, which are also realistic in relation to the language level of the user/learners concerned' (Council of Europe 2020: 124). This needs, however, to be related to the way in which the plurilingual and pluricultural – and how they are linked together – are envisaged.

In the introduction to Chapter 4 of the Companion Volume, it is stated that the notions of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in the CEFR were the starting point for the development of descriptors and yet, in the following sentence, the CEFR is described as having a plurilingual vision, and a quotation from section 1.3 of the CEFR is used, which refers to 'the plurilingual approach', where the emphasis is on languages. The authors of the Companion Volume do not appear to recognise the full significance of what is said at the end of section 1.4 of the CEFR where, as discussed above, plurilingual competence is said to be one 'component' among others of pluricultural competence.

The Companion Volume does not problematise the relationship between plurilingual and pluricultural competence but simply accepts and continues the view that they are inseparable and yet separable:

Most of the references to plurilingualism in the CEFR are to 'plurilingual and pluricultural competence'. This is because the two aspects usually go hand-in-hand. Having said that, one form of unevenness may actually be that one aspect (for example, pluricultural competence) is much stronger than the other (for example, plurilingual competence; see CEFR 2001 Section 6.1.3.1). (Council of Europe 2020: 31)

Nor does the Companion Volume have any indication, implicit or explicit, of what relationship is posited between language and culture or languages and cultures. Neither the list of points drawn from the CEFR on page 124, nor the 'other concepts taken into consideration after analysing recent literature' on page 125 include reference to this issue. On the other hand, it is assumed that recognition of 'internationalisms' or 'blending, embedding, and alternating languages' is

appropriate and non-controversial, not recognising the significance of culture-specific meanings of internationalisms and what blending etc. of these might mean for understanding and communication.

The Companion Volume presents pluricultural competence as a repertoire of skills, the ability to explain, identify, describe and evaluate, and interpret. It also includes the abilities to 'control (one's) actions and forms of expression', 'deal with ambiguity', 'discuss objectivity and balance', 'reflect on similarities and differences', 'recognise' that what is normally taken for granted is not shared by others, and 'act appropriately'. Some of these skills presuppose a concept of competence which might be linked to broader educational purposes, but this is not addressed in the way in which the CEFR does, and, again the 'pedagogical user' is excluded from the depth of reflection present in and stimulated by the CEFR.

Taking the CEFR and the Companion Volume together, the pluricultural and plurilingual – my ordering of the two terms is significant – person envisaged is a social agent, acting as a democratic citizen. Their pluriculturalism is articulated in their plurilingualism, but the precise nature of the relationship between their languages and cultures is uncertain. In the CEFR, they have social relations and identities linked to their access to social groups. In the Companion Volume, they have skills which, *inter alia*, allow them to act as a mediator. These skills do not include understanding of the social identities of themselves or of those for whom they mediate, nor of the relationship of individuals to social groups. More attention to the concept of 'intercultural awareness' as presented in the CEFR might have led to the inclusion of such skills in the Companion Volume and would also have enhanced the concept of mediation.

## Conclusion

Identity matters in intercultural dialogue, and intercultural dialogue is, not least in Europe, a condition for social inclusion.

The CEFR – published before the publication of policy on social inclusion and intercultural dialogue – had adumbrated the issues with a vision of the user/learner as a complex individual. The Companion Volume, despite citing the policy, has lost much of the complexity in its vision of the individual, and has cut pedagogical users off from the vision present in the CEFR, missing the opportunity to refine and develop it further. It was often stated that the CEFR should in the course of time be revised. The same should be true of the Companion Volume and when the time comes, it should include identities and pluricultural competence in its vision and share this with pedagogical as well as researcher users.

## Notes

1. The use of scare quotes for 'existential' perhaps reveals some incertitude about this word and its use with the word competence. As suggested above, however, a rich understanding of competence is compatible with this, and with the concept *Bildung*.
2. The 'contact hypothesis', first stated by Allport (1954), and since supported by much empirical research, requires certain pre-conditions for contact to be successful in creating improvements in mutual understanding and regard (Hughes 2017).
3. This point has been often made by Hugh Starkey, for example in Byram et al. (2002).
4. It is also important to note – but beyond the scope of this article to analyse and include – the parallel paper on mediation by Coste and Cavalli (2015).
5. It is worth noting that, in one passage of the text, the CEFR abandons the notion of pluricultural competence and refers to interculturality:

The language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how. They enable the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences. (Council of Europe 2001: 43)

This anticipates the phrase used later in the Languages of Schooling project (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/platform-plurilingual-intercultural-language-education/home>).

## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful for the help and comments of Daniel Coste, David Little and Joseph Sheils.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Michael Byram  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1116-2366>

## References

- Allport, Gordon. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Byram, Michael. 2021. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence – Revisited*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, Michael, Bella Gribkova and Hugh Starkey. 2002. *Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Byram, Michael, and Lynne Parmenter (eds.). 2012. *The Common European Framework of Reference. The Globalisation of Language Education Policy*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Coste, Daniel, and Marisa Cavalli. 2015. *Education, Mobility, Otherness. The Mediation Functions of Schools*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Council of Europe. 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe. 2008. *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue - 'Living Together As Equals in Dignity'*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Council of Europe. 2020. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Ellemers, Naomi. 2012. The group self. *Science* 336, no. 6083: 848–52.
- Hughes, Conrad. 2017. *Understanding Prejudice and Education*. London: Routledge.
- Risager, Karen. 2006. *Language and Culture. Global Flows and Local Complexity*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Spitzberg, Brian H., and Gabrielle Changnon. 2009. Conceptualising intercultural competence. In *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, ed. Darla Deardorff, 2–52. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Tajfel, Henri. 1974. Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social Science Information* 13, no. 2: 65–93.
- Trim, John L. M. 2012. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and its background: a case study of cultural politics and educational influences. In *The Common European Framework of Reference. The Globalisation of Language Education Policy*, ed. Michael Byram and Lynne Parmenter, 13–34. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.