

KEYNOTE PAPER:
What is ‘Common European’ about the Common
European Framework of Reference for Visual
Competency?

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The European context of ENViL

In 2013 the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) initiated the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy. This project was executed by a group of 24 researchers from eleven institutes, active in the domain of Visual Literacy, in six countries. The project took place between January 2014 and April 2016 and was supported by a grant of the Lifelong Learning Comenius Programme of the European Union. The Framework is meant to contribute to the quality development of the related school subjects and to strengthen the contribution of these subjects to a comprehensive education of European citizens. There is a great need for such a framework, as in this domain very little attention is given transnational comparisons at curricular level. But its development also serves a political goal: to keep the (visual) arts in focus in discussions on the needs of contemporary education that, after the results of the first PISA study, seems to concentrate more and more on the contribution of education to economic development only (Wagner & Schönau 2016, p. 11).

The concept of ‘Visual Literacy’ was chosen by ENViL as a neutral umbrella term to refer to the school subjects that are related to learning in the visual domain and are known under a great variety of names: art, art history, audiovisual art, design, drawing, handicraft, photogra-

phy, slöjd, textile art, visual art, visual culture, etc. (Wagner & Schönau 2016: 64). As the concept of ‘literacy’ turned out to be confusing and less neutral than expected, and it also suggests a kind of dependency of the visual from the linguistic, in March 2018 ENViL decided to rename the Framework into: Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competency (CEFR-VC)¹. The concept of ‘visual competency’ also actually more accurately covers the main characteristic of the Framework: to look at this domain from the point of view of competencies. The concept of ‘Visual Literacy’ (with capitals) is now only used by ENViL to indicate the domain of visual learning that is traditionally covered by all the related school subjects that relate to the domain of visual learning at large, and in which other approaches than those of competency-based learning are possible as well.

As ENViL is a European network in the first place, it was decided by the researchers to work on a connection with the more generic discussions and developments in educational thinking in Europe. In the past decades two major transnational European educational projects have been developed and implemented that directly relate to the need for common approaches in education. The first is the development and implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). This framework was developed by the Council of Europe to provide a common basis for the explicit description of objectives, content and methods in second or foreign language education within Europe (Council of Europe 2001). The CEFRL makes it possible to compare levels of language proficiency in a foreign European language. This comparability in levels is necessary for European citizens who will go and work in a European country where they have to speak a foreign language. It also supports the language education of adult migrants.

The development of the CEFRL was initiated in 1991 and the final results were published in 2001. It now covers 40 different European and non-European languages. Since its first

¹See: Schönau, D. & Kárpáti, A.: Renaming the framework: Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competency, *International Journal for Education through Art*. (to be published).

publication adoptions and elaborations into different types of assessment instruments have taken place. The CEFRL is used in teacher education, the reform of foreign language curricula, the development of teaching materials and tests, and for the comparability of qualifications.

The other European project relates to the development of a framework of ‘key competences’. This framework identifies and defines the ‘key competences’ that citizens require for their personal fulfilment, social inclusion, active citizenship and employability in our knowledge-based society. These ‘key competences’ should equip young people for working life, and to help develop and update them throughout their lives (European Communities 2007: 3). In this project the concept of ‘competences’ (or ‘competencies’) plays a major role (European Union 2006). Therefore, as the notion of ‘competencies’ has been around in educational thinking in Europe (and also outside Europe) for quite some time, it was decided by ENViL to concentrate on ‘competencies’ in the domain of visual learning.

The CEFR-VC was developed on the basis of an analysis of 37 curricula from 22 different European countries (including Turkey) and the way the related subject content is described in terms of skills, abilities and competencies. In the end a prototype of a model was developed. In this prototype the core of the subject is composed by sixteen sub-competencies that cover both the production and the reception of images, visual objects and processes.

< Insert figure 1 >

Figure 1: The structural model with differentiation of sub-competencies (Wagner & Schönau 2016)

But visual (sub-)competencies are closely related to more generic competencies that are relevant in all school subjects and domains of learning. These generic competencies have been grouped as ‘self-competencies’, ‘methodological competencies’, and ‘social competencies’. They form the backbone or foundation of any subject specific group of competencies. In the CEFR-VC prototype these generic competencies have been visualized as three overlap-

ping and transparent barrel forms. Where these forms overlap, the domain of visual learning is placed.

Based on the analysis of the 37 curricula two basic dimensions of learning in visual competency can be indicated: to ‘produce’ and to ‘respond’.

<Insert figure 2>

Figure 2: The structural model showing the basic elements and relationships (Wagner & Schönau 2016)

Reflection (or metacognition) is indicated separately, as it is part of all competencies, being these generic or subject specific. As competencies are made of knowledge, skills and attitudes, these concepts are also indicated as constituent parts of the model.

Finally, visual competency is not developed in isolation. First of all this domain of learning contributes to the general goals of education: civic engagement, employability, personal unfolding and social cohesion. But all these goals and activities can only be developed in relevant situations. The notion of ‘situation’ is an essential characteristic of any competency, as a person can only demonstrate competent behavior in a situation that demands for effective action. This has been summarized in the third image that visualizes the prototype of the CEFR-VC.

<Insert figure 3>

Figure 3: Visual Literacy in its context (Wagner & Schönau 2016)

What makes a framework ‘Common European’?

As indicated, the CEFR-VC has been inspired by the projects on the CEFRL and on the development of ‘key competencies’ for vocational education.

As to the European character of the CEFRL the ‘European’ relates to all languages spoken in Europe (Council of Europe 2001). This framework serves mobility of European citizens and civic integration within the European continent. It thus refers to a geographical notion.

A second aspect is that all European countries have agreed to use this framework to develop learning and assessment material in close relationship with this framework. This also implies the use of six reference levels of proficiency. So the same levels apply to all languages, and are used as standards in all countries. But the CEFRL also includes non-European languages, like Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew and Japanese, so it is more than ‘common European’ only.

The ‘key competencies’ framework as developed by the European Commission relates to the economic and social need of the citizens in the European Union to adapt flexibly to a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world. The eight key competencies are seen as instrumental with regard to this perspective. However, these are not typical for Europe, as they are relevant at global level as well.

The CEFR-VC has a more loose European context. It is based on the analysis of curricula of 22 European countries, including Turkey. This makes it only partially ‘European’. As to what is ‘common’: this was defined by the choice for the concept of (visual) competency and its use (and of related concepts) in the curricula that were analysed, the selection of related sub-competencies and the connection with metacognition and generic competencies.

European values

The CEFR for languages is not only an instrument to compare proficiency levels in language; it has a cultural purpose as well. The CEFRL was developed under the guidance of the Directorate General of Democracy that supports the European Council “in fields which are vital for the sustainability of democracy: ensuring respect for human dignity without discrimination on the basis of human rights standards; improving the functioning of democratic institutions; and strengthening the democratic competencies of Europe’s citizens and their willingness to engage in the democratic process and promoting respect for diversity in Europe’s societies, in a spirit of solidarity and tolerance, based on the human rights and legal standards of the Council of Eu-

rope.” (Council of Europe 2001 website). So besides being a practical tool to assess proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing in a foreign language, the CEFRL is also seen as an instrument to support European values. These values are laid down in more detail in preamble to Recommendation R (82) 18 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe as three basic principles:

- that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding;
- that it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination;
- that member states, when adopting or developing national policies in the field of modern language learning and teaching, may achieve greater convergence at the European level by means of appropriate arrangements for ongoing co-operation and co-ordination of policies (Council of Europe 1982:1).

These values as formulated by the Committee of Ministers, have not played a prominent role in the work of ENViL. But their intention certainly plays a role in the views expressed in the CEFR-VC. First, in the CEFR-VC some (European) values are mentioned in passing: “responsible European citizen” (Wagner & Schönau 2016, p.11), “being undogmatic” (id., p.64), “to make political judgements as a democratic competency” (id., p. 104), “<understanding> the strategies and intentions of (...) formations of perspectives through media” (ibid.), and

“autonomous, socially responsible individuals and citizens” (id. p. 105). But also the concept of competency itself, as used in European education, includes the value-related notion of ‘attitudes’. An attitude, as a constituent element of competency, describes the characteristics of behaviour that are needed to perform a task in such a way that the position and interests of others are taken into account, being these clients or colleagues. In his much cited definition of ‘competency’ Weinert refers to “the associated motivational, volitional and social willingness and skills required to use the solutions successfully and responsibly in changing situations.” (translated from Weinert, 1999, p.27).² Demonstrating motivation and willingness, i.e. initiative, and responsibility matches quite well with the principles of the European Commission, mentioned above: mutual enrichment, understanding and co-operation, overcoming prejudice and discrimination.

Cultural values at the core

When one brings this observation a little further, one can state that these social and cultural values should also be taken into account in the CERF-VC, as it adheres by title and ambition to the CEFRL. In the CEFRL the social and cultural values are expressed as follows:

- “1.1. to deal with the business of everyday life in another country, and to help foreigners staying in their own country to do so;
- 1.2. to exchange information and ideas with young people and adults who speak a different language and to communicate their thoughts and feelings to them;
- 1.3. to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the way of life and forms of thought of other peoples and of their cultural heritage.” (European Union 2006, p.2)

²„(...) die bei Individuen verfügbaren oder durch sie erlernbaren kognitiven Fähigkeiten und Fertigkeiten, um bestimmte Probleme zu lösen, sowie die damit verbundenen motivationalen, volitionalen und sozialen Bereitschaften und Fähigkeiten, um die Problemlösungen in variablen Situationen erfolgreich und verantwortungsvoll nutzen zu können“. (Weinert, 2001, 27)

Learning a foreign language is first of all instrumental: to be able to communicate in another language to make oneself understood. In the domain of visual learning, this aspect takes a different form. Visual imagery does not have the notion of a ‘mother tongue’. Visual imagery is ‘universal’. This does not mean any image will be understood by anyone without any misinterpretation, on the contrary. Although images (and visual objects and processes) may seem self-evident, they can be very misleading and even manipulative. The power of the image is also the power of the image to influence people without them being aware of it. Also the symbolism and references included in most images are culturally bound. Finally, visual imagery is possible in many ways, with different materials, tools and purposes. It is not without reason that the school subjects related to the domain of ‘visual literacy’ have taken on so many different names. One might refer to them as ‘visual dialects’ that all refer to what can be communicated by means of one visual ‘language’ or ‘symbol system’. Where in linguistic communication a ‘horse’ can be described in totally different ways and in an arbitrary combination of sounds (e.g. ‘paard’ in Dutch, ‘cavallo’ in Italian, ‘hest’ in Norwegian, ‘ló’ in Hungarian), the image of a horse will be recognized by almost everyone. On the other hand, an image of a horse can take on many different forms and expressions, depending on the materials used, the stylistic tradition one is working in and the intended meaning or function. Here we enter the domain of culture, as ways of visualization are closely connected with ways of expressing meaning.

When we take the recommendations of the European Council for the languages seriously, we might transfer the values underlying these recommendations into the domain of visual learning in the following way:

- “1.1. to deal with the role of visual communication in everyday life;
- 1.2. to have young people and adults understand visual information and ideas that are visually expressed and to communicate their thoughts and feelings by means of visual media;

1.3. to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the way of life and forms of thought of other peoples and of their cultural heritage.”

As the CEFR-VL was designed in such a way that it “describes the characteristics of the fully literate European citizen” (Wagner & Schönau 2016, p.81), the “young people and adults” in the description above can be replaced by “European citizens”.

The third value - which is the same for languages and visual literacy - has a more specific meaning and reference in the domain of visual learning. Cultural heritage in many cases takes on the form of visually interesting objects and processes, being these buildings, art works, regional costumes, films, pottery, etc. The traditions, ideas and emotions expressed in objects of cultural heritage are part of shared knowledge and culture, and thus, at the same time, ‘foreign’ to those who are not part of this culture. But the domain of visual learning is not about cultural heritage only. Like in languages, it also addresses ways of life and forms of thought. This can take two forms: promoting or investigating. In the first case one can think of advertisement and political propaganda, and communicating about one’s understanding of reality. In the second case we find the exploration of one’s own ideas, feelings and experiences. In both cases learning in this domain can concentrate on producing visual products processes, and on responding to visual products made by others.

Within the European area the issue of ‘ways of life’ and ‘forms of thought’ are not understood in the same way by all Europeans. Nowadays one can see a tendency in Europe to give more prominence to one’s own country and to one’s national identity than to values that are seen as common European. This tendency is not unique for Europe only, as someone at the other side of the Atlantic has made clear in his statement: ‘America first’. But in Europe most of us happen to live in a European Union that was founded to unite a continent that was so much torn apart in the centuries before. This tendency to pay more attention to what makes countries unique, instead of what is uniting them can first of all be seen as a reaction to the dominant

role of neo-liberal economics and related political actions. The great multinationals, that have more economic power and capital than most countries in the world, dominate the way countries and people interact at global level, almost ignoring national borders and evading national legal systems. Europe, as a historic unity, seems to become subjected to global forces that endanger the European values. More specifically, data-driven advertisement infiltrates our lives to such an extent, that at individual and even national level it seems Europe is losing control of what it defines as its traditions and culture.

But also at a more practical level borders seem to have lost their traditional role: to keep control over who is entering a country, - or Europe. The last decades Europe has seen large groups of refugees and emigrants moving in from countries outside Europe, looking for safety, freedom and economic prosperity. This introduces religious convictions and related value systems that can be experienced as foreign to traditional and contemporary European values and convictions.

The growing importance given to national identity and even opposition against other cultural and religious identities seem to result in new forms of cultural exclusion even to the extent that at political level personal identity is sometimes replaced by group conformity. The social classes of the past are sometimes being replaced by nation-based ideologies to distinguish oneself from the 'other'. The issue of cultural diversity and contrasts demands for a critical reappraisal of the need for mutual understanding and respect. Europe has a long and bloody history in fighting for individual freedom and human rights and for opportunities to determine one's own life. But the end of totalitarian systems in Europe does not mean that these traditional European values with regard to democracy and individual freedom are now secured, undisputed and available to all. It seems that the need for a search of what is common in Europe is more urgent than expected in 1989, when the Iron Curtain came down and the remains of political division as a result of the Second World War were finally removed.

So in these days of pervasive globalisation of internet-based companies on the one side, the rise of nationalism and strengthening of borders on the other side, and the dominant position given to economic thinking as guideline for educational reforms make the development of a Common European Framework a challenging but highly needed enterprise. Is it possible to find a balance between all these tendencies and ambitions? Is it possible to save the ideas and traditions that are important for European identity and, at the same time, understand and value ideas and traditions that have generated outside this continent?

Commonality in European diversity

The European character of the Framework for Visual Literacy is reflected in some of the implicit values underlying the model: the importance given to individuality, democracy and self-responsibility. One can add to this the notion of 'Bildung', the German concept that more or less covers these values but puts them in a wider context of permanent self-education (Buschkühle 2016). These notions have all originated and evolved in Europe. It was on this continent that the term 'democracy' was coined, and that the first universities were founded. In the religious domain the development of Protestantism in Europe was paralleled by a growing importance given to individual experience and responsibility. Europe has also been very active to export these values to the world, including the quest for scientific and philosophical underpinning of these notions. It must not be forgotten that it was only in the period of Enlightenment that these notions started to become programmatic. It took quite some time to give all Europeans the same legal rights – and the work is still not finished. Also the notion of self-responsibility in relationship to social responsibility is still 'under construction'. This is just to say, that the CEFR-VC reflects values that in Europe are taken for granted to a certain extent, but which are not automatically valid and true at European, let alone at global level. So the CEFR-VC is to be recognized as a European project – because of these notions and even because of its implicit

global, for scientifically substantiated, ambition.

To summarize: the Framework is European and one should be aware that this is a starting point. One might hope that other continents, regions and cultural traditions will come up with their own Frameworks, so that we can start a dialogue on different ways of becoming competent in the visual domain.

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