European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (CEFR-VL)

Why a CEFR-VL?

We live in an increasingly visual culture. Pictures play an important role in public and private communication. Visualizations strongly influence the way we perceive the world. Visual design decides about economic success or failure and by this about economic growth and jobs. Caricatures can decide whether your life is threatened. Visual objects and presentations influence what we believe and how we believe. And last but not least, life without visual art lacks beauty and imagination. Therefore, to be visually literate is important for a fully developed person but also for a responsible and empowered citizen.

However there is a discrepancy between the importance of Visual Literacy and it’s too often marginal position in education. This calls for a combined effort to reduce this gap. Therefore in 2010 a European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) was founded with more than 60 researchers, curriculum developers and teacher trainers from nine European countries. The network began a bottom-up process for the development of a “Common Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy” (CEFR-VL). This framework aims to be a tool for the development of curricula, lesson plans and assignments as well as assessment instruments. (Wagner & Schönau, 2016)

Basic assumptions of the CEFR-VL

- ENViL uses a competency-oriented approach. Weinert (1999) describes competencies as “the cognitive skills and abilities that an individual possesses or is able to learn and that are used to solve certain problems, and the associated motivational, volitional and social willingness and skills required to use the solutions successfully and responsibly in changing situations.”

- ENViL defines Visual Literacy as a group of acquired competencies for the production and reception of images and objects as well as for the reflection on these processes.

- The concept of a framework was chosen to cover different national, regional and subject-specific traditions in the diverse European context.

How was the CEFR-VL developed?

In order to find a common starting point ENViL asked experts all over
Europe about the national or regional curricula. The answers gave an understanding of the curriculum structures, as well as curriculum contents and curriculum contexts. E.g. in most curricula Visual Literacy mainly comprise production (creating and using images) and reception (responding to images). These two main dimensions are divided into different sub-competencies. Sometimes a third dimension is added, which relates to the other two dimensions, reflection. Despite differences in denominations and subcategories, the curricula show a high degree of conceptual similarity.

Based on this survey ENViL developed a systematic and comprehensive competence model that covers these relevant aspects and that can build the ground for assignments, curricula, assessment etc.

The core: CEFR-VL’s competence model

![Diagram of CEFR-VL's competence model]

Visual Literacy is a competency that can be modelled by describing the knowledge, skills and attitudes involved. The model as shown in figure 1 distinguishes in the center three main dimensions: producing, responding - and reflecting (metacognition): whatever a student is doing or learning (by producing or responding), he or she has to use metacognition in order to understand what he or she is doing or to control the learning process. Furthermore, Visual Literacy as a domain-specific competency is embedded in a concept of general education: Visual Literacy is always connected to personal competencies (self-competencies), to social competencies (expression and communication) and furthermore the use of methods (methodological competencies).

The basic dimensions of producing and responding can be broken down into sub-competencies (figure 2). The following sub-competencies have been included: analyse, communicate, create, describe, draft, empathise, envision, experience aesthetically, experiment, interpret, judge, perceive,
present, realise, use, value (in alphabetical order). The CEFR-VL delivers short and in depth definitions of the sub-competencies.

**What is the CEFR-VL good for and how can it be used?**

**Scales of levels**

The CEFR-VL delivers for each sub-competency a scale of levels. Such scales can be used to determine a specific performance of a pupil. The competency level achieved by an individual describes her or his ability to deal with a specific challenge in a specific situation on a specific level. Therefore the set of scales can be used as an instrument to assess learners' achievements. The levels developed by ENViL are general ones, i.e. they are not related to specific ages, contexts or curricula. They build the ground for defining specific levels for certain tasks, ages and learner groups. In order to ensure that consistent differences in, for example, advancements in learning can be recorded, three standard levels have been determined: ‘elementary’, ‘intermediate’ and ‘competent’. The elementary level describes the basic requirements for participation in society and personality development. The third level (‘competent’), by contrast, describes the characteristics of the fully visually literate citizen (i.e. not professionals trained as designers, artists, art critics or art historians).

As an example the three levels of the sub-competency creating are presented in table 1 below. To create means primarily to purposefully develop the visual form of images/objects and, at by this, to interpret a topic. The levels described refer above all to independence of the solution, the scope of the repertoire and the quality of the relationship between form and content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elementary</strong></td>
<td>Can select familiar motifs and topics for a draft or realisation that are appropriate for his/her intention and use pre-set artistic means. Can apply rules and principles, as well as the results of experimentation when producing an appropriate form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intermediate</strong></td>
<td>Can choose appropriate content, motifs and topics on the basis of suggestions and under consideration of what he/she intends to depict. Can select artistic means and strategies from among a number of options and use them appropriately. Can take into account artistic rules but break them to a certain extent in order to achieve a desired effect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competent</strong></td>
<td>Can use a range of contents, motifs and topics and give them an adequate form under consideration of the intended effect. Can use methods and strategies purposefully and in a targeted manner or experimentally in order to enhance his/her artistic expression. Can reflect critically on rules and conventions with regard to a specific effect and consider them when producing (follow or break them).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Example of a scale of levels in respect to the sub-competency create

**Situations in which visual competencies are needed**

Visual Literacy becomes apparent in specific situations in which individuals act. Thus the CEFR-VL offers a collection of relevant, existing and future
situations where Visual Literacy is required. This collection refers to the following questions:

- In which situations will learners need to use Visual Literacy?
- Which activities will they need to engage in them adequately?
- What kinds of people, places, occasions and time periods will be involved?
- What types of images/objects will they draw on?
- How will they produce images/objects and what resources will they use?
- What knowledge (e.g. knowledge of former or other cultures) will they need in order to help shape their world responsibly?

The choice of domains that learners are to be prepared for has far-reaching effects on educational decisions. We consider the following categories as relevant for visual literate European citizens: the personal domain (home life, life with friends or holidays, buying goods, decorating a room or practising a hobby), the public domain in which a person acts as part the general public or a public organisation, the occupational domain in which a person works and organised learning in and outside of educational institutions. As an example, table 2 shows some situations within the personal domain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Images, objects, genres, media</th>
<th>Places</th>
<th>Core competencies, topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dressing with a specific visual appearance in mind</td>
<td>clothes, jewellery, accessories</td>
<td>private space (home), public space</td>
<td>cultural identity, intercultural awareness, creativity, lifestyle, self-confidence, active dialogue with the world, personal fulfilment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>designing one’s own private space</td>
<td>interior design, design, images, textiles, furniture, plants, lighting</td>
<td>home, garden</td>
<td>lifestyle, creativity, cultural identity, self-confidence, ability to express oneself with visual means, personal fulfilment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expressing personal memories with images and objects</td>
<td>photographs, memorabilia</td>
<td>photo album, memory board, cabinet in home, shelf, grave</td>
<td>integrated personality, ability to act, ability to express oneself with visual means, lifestyle, appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>using visual media for leisure activities</td>
<td>TV, digital and interactive media, video, computer games, music video</td>
<td>online, on a screen, TV, home</td>
<td>cultural identity, integrated personality, critical thinking, openness, curiosity, lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>observing foreign customs and rituals and understanding their aesthetic forms</td>
<td>rites - multimodal</td>
<td>travel, urban space</td>
<td>intercultural awareness, critical thinking, openness, curiosity, empathy, appreciation, exchange, active dialogue with the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consuming</td>
<td>consumer products, advertisement, presentation, staging, packaging</td>
<td>supermarket, shops, online on a screen</td>
<td>critical thinking, reflective thinking, ability to act, lifestyle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Example of a table of situations (personal domain)

Teachers can use the collection of situations for formulating assignments. Assignments referring to these situations are in accordance with a competency-based approach and tend to be more life-like and relevant for pupils.

**Forms of assessment**

As all teachers know assessing the learning progress and the results of
pupils is a complex issue. The creative process and the process of visual perception are often associated with unpredictability and individuality. However, teachers need to say which results of learning are expected and need to monitor student learning (formative assessment) and to evaluate student learning after completing assignments (summative assessment). Assessment can be carried out by teachers, but also by the pupils themselves or peers. The advantage of having pupils assess their own performance is that the assessment itself can become a tool for learning as it stimulates self-regulation and metacognition.

The CEFR-VL delivers rubrics as an instrument suited for teacher, peer, and self-assessment. A rubric is a scoring guide, which contains criteria of evaluation as well as definitions of levels of achievement. The criteria are stated in several different levels of competence. Rubrics are transparent for students. Rubrics can be used for scoring and explaining scores. A rubric is mostly in a table format. A disadvantage can be its textual character, which is not very appealing for students. Therefore a combination with a visual rubric is better. Table 3 shows two examples: a rubric of a sub-competency of producing (experimenting) and a rubric of a sub-competency of responding (analysing).
### Table 3: Example of two rubrics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-competencies</th>
<th>Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experimenting</strong></td>
<td>1 You started directly to produce your final product. You did not try out new things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysing</strong></td>
<td>You hardly made any connections between form, content, function, and context of the visual products. The connections you made were not elaborated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Conclusion

The CEFR-VL is a reference document that can be consulted as a foundation for school curricula development, for the development of teaching and learning materials and assignments for students. At the same time, it is an instrument that can be used to observe, describe and assess the visual competencies of learners. It facilitates the dialogue between the teacher and the learner. Its aim is to advise, not to standardise.

### References

Weinert, F. E. (1999). *Concepts of competence. Theoretical and conceptual foundations* (Contribution within the OECD project Definition and selection of competencies (DeSeCo)). Neufchatel: DeSeCo.