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

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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 and design lacks beauty and imagination. Therefore, to be visually literate is important for a fully developed person but also for a responsible and empowered citizen.

Definition Visual Literacy

In the CEFR-VL publication preference is given to the definition of *Visual Literacy* as given by Brill, Kim & Branch (2001, p.9): "Visual literacy is a group of acquired sub-competencies for interpreting and composing visible messages. A visually literate person is able to:
a. discriminate, and make sense of visible objects as part of a visual acuity,
b. create static and dynamic visible objects effectively in a defined space,
c. comprehend and appreciate the visual testaments of others,
d. and conjure objects in the mind's eye."

In contrast to the description given above there is a discrepancy between the importance of Visual Literacy and its 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 and the term Visual Literacy were 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. Despite differences in denominations and subcategories, the curricula show a high degree of conceptual similarity. E.g. in most curricula Visual Literacy comprises 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.

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
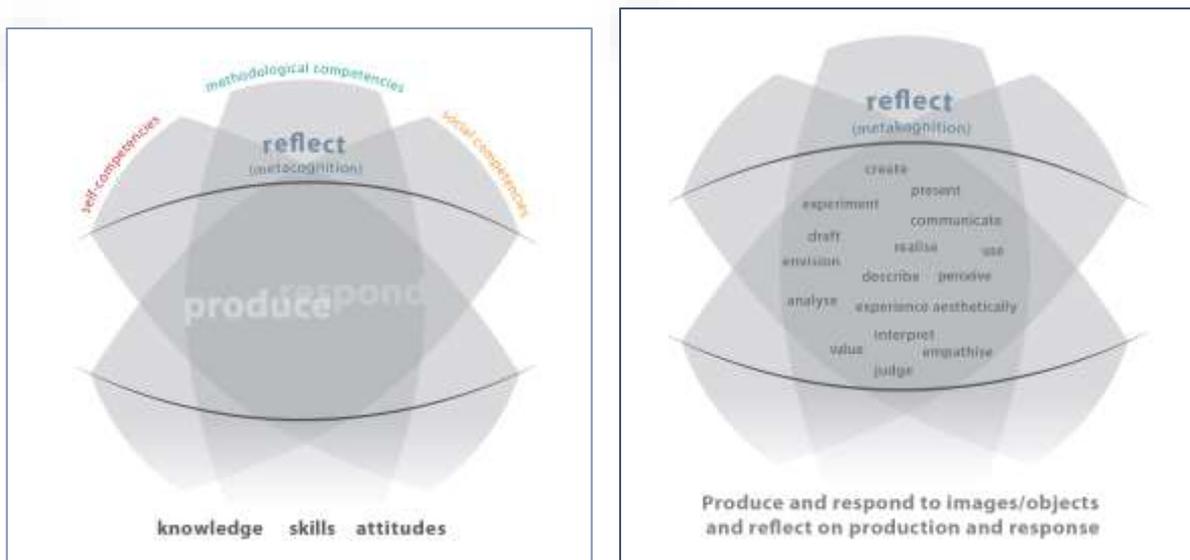
Figure 1 and 2: Basic dimensions of Visual Literacy / Differentiation of sub-competencies

Visual Literacy is a group of acquired competencies 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?

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.

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

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

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

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 the learner. 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. The levels refer to the solution, the scope of the repertoire and the quality of the relationship between form and content.

Level	Description
Elementary	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.
Intermediate	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.
Competent	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).

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

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*).

Sub-competencies	Levels			
	1	2	3	4
Experimenting	You started directly to produce your final product. You did not try out new things.	You spent some time experimenting. You tried out some media, techniques, methods or applications.	You spent time experimenting. You tried out several media, techniques, methods or applications.	You used quite some time to experiment. You tried many different media, techniques, methods or applications. The experimentation resulted in discoveries which were used in the final product.
Analysing	You hardly made any connections between form, content, function, and context of the visual products. The connections you made were not elaborated.	You made some connections between form, content, function, and context of the visual products. The connections you made were somewhat elaborated.	You made several connections between form, content, function, and context of the visual products. The connections you made were elaborated and understandable.	You made many connections between form, content, function, and context of the visual products. The connections you made were well elaborated and understandable (explained thoroughly and/or illustrated with references to sources)
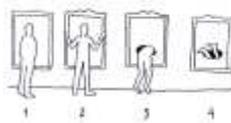
Table 3: Example of two rubrics

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

Wagner, E. & Schönau, D. (2016). *Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy – Prototype*. Münster, New York: Waxmann

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