

# Language certification in French universities: an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice

La certificación de idiomas en las universidades francesas: un intento de cerrar la brecha entre la teoría y la práctica

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**ABSTRACT.** Since the 1990s the dynamics of Europeanization has been interdependent with education. Indeed, the promotion of multilingualism appears to be a necessity for the creation of a peaceful, secure and prosperous area (Barcelona, Nov. 1995). The European Council (Barcelona, March 2012) acknowledged the necessity to improve the linguistic competences of EU citizens, in particular through the teaching of two foreign languages at an early age, placing thus language learning in a lifelong learning process. This article will consider the way multilingualism can be promoted and assessed in higher education through the integration of the CLES (Higher Education Language Certificate) in French students' curricula.

**KEYWORDS:** Certification, CLES, CEFR, French higher education.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s the dynamics of Europeanization has been interdependent with education. Indeed, the promotion of multilingualism appears to be a necessity for the creation of a peaceful, secure and prosperous area (Barcelona, Nov. 1995). The European Council (Barcelona, March 2012) acknowledged the necessity to improve the linguistic competences of EU citizens, in particular through the teaching of two foreign languages at an early age, placing thus language learning in a lifelong learning process. This presentation will consider the way multilingualism can be promoted and assessed in higher education.

We will focus on the integration of the CLES (Higher Education Language Skills Certification) in the curricula of French LANSAD (Languages for Students of other Disciplines) students, namely, those who do not have a language as a main subject. This test, available in nine languages and covering three CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) levels, was created in 2000 (revised in 2007). It is a complete certification system which assesses five competences, including interaction. The CLES is aimed at students in initial training and is accredited by the French Department of Education. Our main interest will be to measure its impact on curricula and students and determine if there is a matching between the objectives presented in the CLES Charter (in line with the EU's objectives) and the practice. "The certification [being] not a purpose in itself, [but] (...) a project of political renovation in language. It is no use to implement the certification if we do not develop the training" (Springer, 2005).

In the line of C. Springer's work on the purpose and impact of certifications, we will focus on the integration of the CLES as a possible lever to help students develop multilinguistic competences, trigger pedagogical shifts and improve the evaluation in higher education with the integration of the CEFR dimension.

A short historical background will allow us to contextualize the issue, within the European context first and within the context of higher education.

## 2. Contexts

### 2.1. Historical European Context

The renewing of the dynamics of Europeanization within the context of higher education was initiated thanks to the Bologna process (June 19, 1999), whose scope was to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The tools it provided the students, the teachers and the institutions of the 47 countries having signed the agreement, were thought over to help gain in readability and comparability across Europe\_ the main tools being the adoption of a two-cycle based system and the establishment of a system of credits as standards allowing the comparison of the students' attainment and performance across Europe and the promotion of mobility (ECTS : European Credit Transfer System). The Lisbon strategy (2000) aiming at transforming Europe into "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion", along with the Bologna process, implied the necessity to consider students differently\_ they were to be the future citizens able to take up the challenge. Then, if we take into consideration the process of becoming a citizen, not only the students but learners from all ages were concerned which was affirmed in Prague (2001) where the learning of a language was placed in a lifelong learning process. In the continuity of this objective, the European Council in Barcelona (March 2002) underlined the necessity to improve the linguistic competences of EU citizens, in particular through the teaching of two foreign languages at an early age.

In order to allow the circulation and exchange of the future European citizens, the mission of the universities evolved. In France the Orientation Act of Higher Education (1968) stipulates that the fundamental mission of the University is "the elaboration and transmission of knowledge, the development of research and the formation of men". Hence, a drastic shift had to occur in the way education had to be organized: the principle of evolving from a knowledge-based education to a competency-based education had to be instituted, the changing of paradigm had to occur and pass from the teaching paradigm whose purpose was to provide instruction

allowing the transmission of academic knowledge, to the learning paradigm, whose purpose is to help learners become competent citizens able to collaborate with others in a foreign language and be part of a competitive Europe. In France, the LMD (BA for Licence, Master, Doctorate) reform (2002) put into effect in 2005 in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the Bologna process was the first major step towards the Europeanization of higher education. Since then, universities have been much concerned with the employability of their students. This taking into consideration of the "individual" dimension in the process of learning, placing the learner at the very heart of the process, represents an upheaval of the founding principles on which higher education was planned till then, since it implies the necessity to evolve from a mass society education (wanted after the 1968 conflicts to put an end to the elitist access to French universities) to an individualized education, from quantitative to qualitative training (Brémaud, & Guillaumin, 2010).

The two major issues higher education establishments were left with was how to manage the shift?

## 2.2. Context in higher education

French universities had since the 1968 Act already made the learning of a foreign language compulsory for all non-linguist students. The reasserted objective of integrating the learning of transversal competences in the students' curricula within the frame of the LMD reform provoked an increase in the demand for language training. This had an impact on what we call the LANSAD (LANGUAGES for Students of Other Disciplines) sector, which encompasses all the students who are not studying language as a main subject. We owe the term LANSAD to Michel Perrin, former Chairman of the GERAS (Groupe d'Etude et de Recherche en Anglais de Spécialité), a research group in English for Specific Purposes in the mid 70s. Though, even if languages take a large part in the LMD reform, they do not benefit from great consideration in the universities where language is not the main subject of the students. The conclusion to the 26th GERAS Congress (March 24th, 2005), whose aim was to assess the teaching and research in languages for specific purposes, was that "there (was) no language policy in universities. There (were) only statements of principle but nothing about means". The gap between theory and practice was wide indeed:

### Most language teachers

- remained isolated since they were not specialists of the subject taught within the frame of the diploma and hence not part of the diploma staff
- were non-permanent staff since the budget allotted to the recruitment of teachers within faculties generally went to the recruitment of specialist teachers, hence, no language position was made available in a Science curricula for example
- came from secondary education and were ill-considered by permanent teachers involved in research, which created a disparity among the staff

### The lessons

- were thus different from one teacher to another, from one faculty to another but also from one year to the other
- were de-contextualized, as well as the exams, and were not linked to the studied subject
- were taught following an indirect paradigm (translation, grammar exercises etc)

### The students

- found no relevant content related to their subject of specialty
- gained not enough points for the validation of the diploma thanks to the mark obtained at their language exam (low ECTS allotted credits)
- found no purpose, no real defined objective to the learning of a foreign language except that of getting an average mark in order to get the diploma. This implied a devaluation of the subject and a blatant lack of

interest on the side of the students.

There was much at stake then in order to accomplish the new mission of transforming students into social actors within the frame of their learning of a foreign language: the improvement of learning (to adopt a competency-based approach), the development of teachers' training and the re-valuing of language assessment in order to make it more relevant.

### 3. The CLES

#### 3.1. The CLES: presentation

The creation of the CLES resulted from the will of LANSAD teachers to impulse a new dynamic in the training of the students who had to take a language test in the course of their curriculum in accordance with the Bologna process exigencies and the LMD system.

Thus, one of the first motivations for creating the CLES was that of re-boosting the LANSAD sector through:

- The valuation of LANSAD linguistic communicative competences
- The implementation of a readable and coherent certificate
- The promotion of multilingualism
- The evolution of teaching practices

(Cahier blanc of the CLES, M-N Olive and MT Maurer, 2005)

Criteria which can be compared to those listed in the CEFR aiming at:

- allowing a reflection on current course practice
- providing a common basis for curriculum development
- promoting multilingualism

The LMD reform along with the Bologna process forced the institutions into adopting a European way of thinking. The aim was to increase the mobility of their students, who now needed an assessment of their level in a foreign language to be accepted in a European partner institution through the ERASMUS programme. This is when French higher education establishments got concerned with the CEFR. The main issue was then about making the choice of a certificate to be proposed to the students. That choice implied of course other considerations than academic ones, the impact on the French universities' budget being considerable, but this is not our point here. We will remain focused on the institutions which made the choice of the CLES.

The CLES is unequally implemented within the French universities. A few of them have been proposing the CLES to their students for more than 10 years, some others have only been habilitated by the French Ministry of Higher Education a pair of years ago and others do not propose the CLES at all, or anymore, as it is the case at the AMU (Aix-Marseille University) which stopped offering the CLES to its students for economic reasons. Another point is that not all the habilitated institutions propose the CLES in the same manner: some leave the choice of taking the certification to the students and others have made the CLES their language exam. Our point here is not to focus on the certificate for itself or in itself, but to present the possible lever-effect it may have in the meeting of what is at stake.

#### 3.2. The CLES: the way it works

The principle on which the CLES relies is that of collaborative work. The universities choosing to propose the CLES agree to take part in the conception process. The process falls into three main steps which have to be validated by the national team readers:

- proposition of a theme (in link with the level proposed, B1 or B2 or C1)
- Proposition of oral and written materials
- Proposition of items

Thus, every year each partner university proposes tests in the different languages they have been habilitated for by the Ministry of Higher Education. These tests are shed to the national base, which allows the multiplication of subjects, and distributed among the other partner universities.

The main advantage of this system is that it implies teachers in the conception. After having followed a training session before starting the conception of a subject, the teachers/writers become active players of the process, collaborating at two levels, local (the elaboration of the tests being a team work) and national. We thus defend the hypothesis that it is not thanks to the CEFR, and then thanks to a downward input from academic authorities, that teachers in French universities have been able to apply a pedagogical shift in their teaching habits, even if the CLES was created in accordance with the CEFR contents, namely as regards the action-based perspective. The CLES is indeed a product from the CEFR but in French universities it may be seen as the driving force for changes, whether they be at pedagogical, institutional or political levels.

As regards the evolution of teaching practices, the CLES seems to be an efficient tool, a driving force for training. "We are teaching differently because we are certificating differently" (Lapaire, 2012). The aim justifying the means, if teachers want their students to pass the CLES they have to put their teaching into the perspective of the certificate exigencies. Teachers at university do no longer have to simply mark a paper for the validation of a diploma, they have to evaluate the language competencies of social actors. Thus, they do have to change the way they have got used to teaching before the CLES implementation and take into consideration the role they need to play in the training of their students. One may claim that one of the most important things the CLES brought is a common finality in the LANSAD curricula, that of being able to use cognitive, functional and social skills in a language in order to perform a mission in link with the current situation of the students.

"The certification [is] not a purpose in itself, [but] (...) a project of political renovation in language. It is no use to implement the certification if we do not develop the training" (Springer, 2005)

As regards the situation in higher education, it is thanks to the CLES advent that the training was developed, since teachers had to adapt their lessons to the way competences were to be assessed. The teacher/mediator has to give sense to the learning. This process of training can be seen as more or less undergone by teachers/formers who have to drastically change their teaching habits. But, from another point of view, if we take into consideration the collaborative system on which the CLES is based as regards the conception of subjects, we can claim that the training becomes quite dynamic and enhances the quality of language teaching.

We may say, as far as the CLES is concerned, that the development of the training has been following an upward move. In the practice, the implementation of the CLES into French universities is not resulting from the putting into effect of a ministerial circular adapted from European recommendations. As mentioned above, it was made possible thanks to the LANSAD teachers' will and need to galvanize the sector through the implementation of a certification which would give value to the linguistic communicative competences of the learners.

In this regard, the CLES is a good example and illustration of the evaluation of competences: it evaluates the four skills of languages plus one, that of interaction. The CLES is a certification built on a scenario-based assessment which matches with the Vygotskian socio-constructivist approach according to which the individual learns a language through and thanks to social interactions and mediations.

"The CLES 2 scenario is defined as the simulation of a realistic situation in which candidates will have to complete a specific mission based on documents about a general theme presented in the form of a problem-

solving scenario. The information provided in the documents will be used to negotiate and interact with other candidates about the given problem, thus enabling candidates to complete a common task”

<http://www.certification-cles.fr>

The candidate taking the CLES2 certification is put in the role of a social actor having a mission to accomplish. The tasks he has to accomplish are interlinked and the acts of communication (oral or written) are made possible thanks to the use of the information gathered during oral and written comprehension, the final common task (macro task) will only be made possible with the use of interaction with another candidate having a complementary role in the mission. This final phase and specific situation thus requires from both candidates to display cognitive, functional and social competences in order to get the certificate.

What the CLES is aiming at is the evaluation of the social act, of the strategies used by the acting candidates, in the frame of an authentic given social activity.

As mentioned in the European Survey on Language Competences: “A language is learned better where motivation is high, where learners perceive it to be useful, and where it is indeed used outside school, for example in communicating over the internet, for watching TV, or travelling on holiday. Also, the more teachers and students use the language in class, the better it is learned.”

#### 4. Conclusion

The reason why certification found its way quite easily in higher education is due to the LMD reform and the fact that students must now be considered as individuals, employable and competent social actors. Competence and employability thus opened the door to the notion of competition between individuals and certifications have naturally found a role to play in the evaluation of those individuals. Brémaud presents the couple “individuation/certification” as a knitted institutionalized relation allowing the learning and the assessment of a language based on the mobilization of individual competences.

However, as regards the CLES, we may claim that it is more “a training tool” than “an instrument of selection” to try and answer the question raised by Huver and Springer’s in their book on the evaluation of languages (Huver & Springer, 2011). For even if some universities have replaced the language examination by a level B2 CLES, usually the validation of the subject is not subjected to the validation of the five competences and the students may validate the subject, and get a good mark, even if they don’t have validated the CLES. Though, without debating over the power of tests, we cannot avoid the issue of selection and classification at an institutional level, the institutions evaluating the level of language competences of their students through the certification being in their turn evaluated according to the results obtained. But the institutional validation is another aspect which is not our point today (Shohamy, 2014).

Hence, can multilingualism be promoted and assessed in higher education thanks to the CLES implementation?

What we can assert is that the CLES did trigger a reflection over the teaching / learning of a foreign language in French universities and thus on the evaluation of the students whose status has evolved\_ passing from a rather passive and simulated posture to an active role being played within the frame of a learning process socially contextualized.

The mission and status of LANSAD teachers has evolved as well\_ passing from an authoritative position to a mediator position. Their mission is to allow their students use a foreign language in order to fulfill micro and macro tasks leading to the solving of a problem together. Their status, as they are implied in the certificates’ conception process, is that of specialists who may have now access to research, and who have allowed a pedagogical shift in practices according to an upward move, initiated at the micro level towards the macro level,

passing then from the micro-didactic to the macro-didactic.

One of the main impacts of the CLES is that it did allow the introduction of the CEFR dimension in the curricula and in the evaluation of LANSAD students, which had not been made possible before. Hence we may argue that the CLES is a driving force, more than a result, of the CEFR.

In that sense we can claim that the implementation of the CLES is matching with the objective presented in its charter concerning the triggering of a pedagogical shift and the enhancement of the quality of language teaching, integrating the CEFR dimension in both, the training and the evaluation of students.

We can see then that the CLES implementation has already had some positive impacts on the LANSAD sector in higher education, though, the question of the means devoted to gain in efficiency, as regards results for example, pedagogical means, training programs etc. remains only partially answered. The CLES seems to appear as an “easy” answer to meet the political demands. As evoked previously, no official ministry circular required the CLES to be implemented in the French universities. However, now its implementation is effective, it can be used as a measuring tool of institutional validation, as an economic asset to meet both social and political requirements.

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