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Evaluation of some difficulties in applying the CEFR's competence levels to Chinese language

Panel: Establishment of Chinese language education as a subject of study in Europe

Every year in Europe, Chinese language courses are increasingly becoming part of the curricula in universities and schools. Even though many claim to refer to European standards, an officially recognized standard does not exist. For European languages, there is an officially accredited reference framework. The Council of Europe created it with the aim to establish definitions of linguistic competences divided into levels together with the criteria to assess them. The landscape of Chinese language teaching in Europe, on the other hand, is inconsistent. It is, however, quite inconvenient that each single institution of each single European country proceeds independently from the others; this can have many disadvantages and can negatively affect student mobility.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a descriptive system used to scale the abilities acquired by those who study a European foreign language. It was developed by the Council of Europe as the main part of the project Language Learning for European Citizenship between 1989 and 1996.

The European project European Benchmarking Chinese Language (EBCL) has recently proposed a definition of the competence levels for Chinese language based on the Common European Framework of Reference. The project was launched in London in November 2010 and ended with the Brussels Symposium in October 2012. The descriptors prepared by the EBCL project concern levels A1 and A2 of the CEFR (five EBCL levels: A1.1, A1, A1+, A2, A2+). The work for level B1 was drafted with the hope that further funding will make it possible to complete the work. A total of 243 descriptors were created together with a series of supporting documents belonging to the CEFR competence range: a list of themes and topics, a list of language functions and lists of Chinese characters and lexical units for the proposed levels. This work might lead in the future to a reform of today's syllabi, textbooks and teaching approach in general.

However, while working at the drafting of syllabi for Chinese language courses in Italy at university and high school levels, some problems aroused in matching the CEFR/EBCL competence scales with the actual teaching situation and requirements. This study will present an overview on the main difficulties in applying the European scales to the case of Chinese language and will try to suggest possible solutions to the problem.