From standards to tasks and vice versa
Challenges in foreign language teaching and learning

Abstract. The present article describes the connection between competence orientation and language learning competence, as standardization, competence and task orientation go hand in hand with the development and the unfolding of language learning competence. However, the implementation of standards in the foreign language classroom depends largely on the quality of tasks and on their capacity to autonomize learners as well as teachers. The reflection on tasks is at the center of this process. A reflective approach undertaken by learners and teachers can contribute to the development and research of competence-oriented tasks and task formats.

1. From standards to tasks

Due to publications that have emerged following the results of the PISA study 2000, Germany has faced an extensive reform process in terms of its educational institutions. In the field of foreign language teaching, this reform has influenced both teaching and learning processes, resulting in a paradigm shift of focus from input to output. As a consequence, the influence and results of educational processes have gained a greater focus of attention. Output orientation signifies that curricula, course books or teaching methods no longer provide a guarantee for the quality of teaching. Instead, the learner’s competence level has become decisive (cf. LEUPOLD 2010: 58). This principle goes hand in hand with three other premises: standardization, competence orientation and task orientation.

An essential result of output orientation is the adoption of educational standards in 2003/2004 for primary and secondary schools (level I) with regard to the subjects German, mathematics and the first foreign language (English/French). By 2006, the educational standards were in binding effect for all German federal states. In autumn 2012, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the federal states (KMK) also adopted educational standards for secondary schools, level II.¹ Standardization has become a benchmark, not only for the teaching of the first...
foreign language (English or French), but also for the teaching of the second, third and any other subsequent languages (Spanish, Italian, Russian) (cf. HESSISCHES KULTUSMINISTERIUM 2011).

**Competence orientation** is associated with specific teaching objectives. In particular, educational standards are used to measure competence development over a period of time. The results of these measurements reveal not only the quality of teaching but also the learner’s individual learning progress. Competence orientation offers the opportunity to change and improve the teaching of foreign languages in general, and, in particular, the teaching of French. This is due to the fact that all communicative language competences are systematically developed, particularly listening and speaking competences as well as mediation, which tend to be neglected in the foreign/French language classroom. Therefore, the orientation of foreign language teaching to the acquisition of verbal skills (grammar and vocabulary) should be reconsidered (cf. CASPARI 2010).

In order to evaluate the learner’s competences, nation-wide exams for the 3rd and 8th grade (VERA 3 and VERA 8) have been carried out. Since the school year 2011/12, these exams have been required in only one subject (German, English or French as a first foreign language, or in math). These surveys are created and monitored by the institute for quality assurance in the education system (IQB, Institut für Qualitäts sicherung im Bildungswesen)\(^2\) and the federal states’ institutions. Since 2008/2009, the assessment for both English and French has been carried out in grade 8. It tests listening and reading comprehension and its goal is internal quality assurance. Studies evaluating the implementation of educational standards (for example in Hesse) do not offer significant results for the teaching of French, as the sample is too small. However, according to statements made by teachers in service, the new curricula based on the “can-do” descriptions taken from the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) lead to an increased transparency for learners as well as for parents and therefore foster learners’ motivation.

The IQB carries out further comparisons among the federal states in grade 9 as a further source of quality control. The aim of these studies is to determine whether students in Germany have achieved the national education standards obligatory for all federal states and to identify any need for regulation. In primary schools, federal state comparisons are carried out every five years, and in secondary schools (level I) every three years. The comparisons carried out in the first foreign language (English/French) in 2009 point to positive results for French (cf. KÖLLER/KNIGGE/TESCH 2010: 175).

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\(^2\) With the introduction of educational standards for secondary schools (level I), the IQB was founded. On the one hand, the IQB evaluates the achievement of standards by means of adequate test tasks and is responsible for both surveys that test learning progress and for the federal state comparisons. On the other hand, the IQB also develops and publishes learning tasks that illustrate how the competences described in the educational standards can be fostered in class (cf. http://www.iqb.hu-berlin.de/institut/about).
The acknowledgement made by teachers on the one hand, and the results of the comparisons on the other, indicate that the implementation of educational standards offers a great potential for innovation with regard to the teaching of French. At the same time, they also hint at risks that accompany this implementation (cf. Hu 2008). In the context of this paper, two aspects must be highlighted:

- The risk of reducing foreign language teaching to the required educational standards (teaching to the test) has been recognized. As a result, competences that can be measured easily are taught, while those that are difficult to measure are neglected.
- The implementation of the standards has revealed that many of the competences that are difficult to measure have been insufficiently modeled. This concerns the so-called soft skills: intercultural competence, aesthetic-literary competence as well as methodological and language learning competence.

These issues point to the deficiencies of a competence model that was taken as a basis for the development of the educational standards for the first foreign language for secondary school, level I (KMK 2003, 2004). Since then, this competence model has been reconsidered and replaced by a more differentiated model through the implementation of the standards for secondary schools (level II).

The (communicative) task is at the center of the competence-oriented approach. Being the starting point of a teaching sequence, tasks not only generate language use in a realistic and meaningful communicative situation, but also competence acquisition during a constructive and meaningful action- and interaction process – true to the motto “using language to learn it” (KLIPPEL 2006: 11).

“A task defines the objective and the expected result of an activity. It emphasises the meaning of what is being said and not the use of a certain form (i.e. the application of a grammatical structure). Tasks try to trigger language use in a way comparable to everyday language use (real or authentic language use)” (MÜLLER-HARTMANN/SCHOCKER-V. DITFURTH 2005: 3).

It is suggested that communicative competence is acquired by producing communicative acts, and that using a language (and thus language learning) is triggered by certain tasks. Standards are to be attained through the completion of different complex tasks.

2. From tasks to standards: tasks as a trigger for learning processes

2.1 A competence model for language learning

The competence model of the educational standards for secondary schools (level II) (p. 102) is founded on the ability to act in a foreign language. It has been developed in accordance with the CEFR and the recommendations made by the (professional) expertise for the development of national educational standards (BMBF 2007), involving a more differentiated notion of learning.
The model displays the interaction of all competences. In the foreign language classroom, intercultural competence is considered an integral part of the educational concept, becoming apparent in foreign language comprehension and action. The functional competences are also of great importance. In order for their acquisition to take place, adequate verbal skills and communicative strategies are needed. The acquisition of competences results from analyzing texts and media (oral, written or media-based). Language awareness and language learning competence represent distinct competences and they are laterally and transversally linked to all other competences (cf. KMK 2012: 12).

At this point, the interrelation between using and learning a language becomes most obvious.

a) Language learning competence controls and regulates the retrieval of specific resources in order to solve concrete communicative tasks. Moreover, its special feature is its transversality with regard to all competences (writing, reading, speaking, listening, mediating, intercultural communicative competence and text and media competence).
b) In general, language use leads to competence development, particularly to the development of language learning competence. When learners face verbal challenges, for example when communicating or performing a task, a shift in attention can occur: the focus shifts from content to linguistic form. The reflection on language and language acquisition does not only result in explicit knowledge of language(s), but also in a development of language learning awareness and language learning competence.

c) By monitoring their language learning activities and actions, learners reinforce their competences (cf. COUNCIL OF EUROPE 2001: 9).

The interrelation between language use and language learning emphasizes the assumption that learners should communicate interactively in order to learn a language.

2.2 The conceptualization of competence

The expertise to develop the national educational standards is based on a specific notion of competence that was first described by the psychologist Franz WEINERT (2001). According to Weinert, competences are “bei Individuen verfügbare oder durch sie erlernbare kognitive 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 f).3

Competences represent a connection between knowledge and skills. Thus, knowledge is seen as the foundation of competence and the interdependence of both dimensions is recognized (cf. THALER 2010). In the CEFR, competences are defined as the “sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions” (COUNCIL OF EUROPE 2001: 9).

Recourse to the competence definition offered by the French industrial psychologist Guy LE BOTERF allows an operationalization of the aforementioned definition for foreign language teaching contexts. According to LE BOTERF (2009)4, competence is much more than the sum of knowledge and skills that can possibly be retrieved. In his view, the individual creates competences by combining and mobilizing different cognitive resources that correspond to “declarative knowledge” (know-that, savoir),

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3 Competences are “an individual’s available or learnable cognitive abilities and skills needed to solve certain problems, including the required volitional, motivational and social willingness and abilities needed to apply these problem-solving strategies to various situations”.

4 The reception of this definition resulted from the implementation of the “Framework for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures” (FREPA) (CANNELIER [et al.] 2012). Developed in 2007, it describes general competences and can be seen as a supplement to the CEFR, which only lists descriptors for linguistic competences. On the basis of a well-grounded analysis of literature dealing with the didactics of plurilingualism, descriptors for plurilingual and pluricultural competences and resources have been developed for the FREPA. When it comes to multi-language acquisition, these competences need to be mobilized. The aim is to foster the multi-language competence (individual plurilingualism) that is been required by the European Council.
“procedural knowledge” (know-how, savoir-faire) as well as “attitudes and values” (attitude, savoir-être) (ibid.: 47 f). Hence, competence is a person’s ability to mobilize different resources, which may be internal (knowledge, skills and attitudes) or external (dictionaries, mediators, learning environments, etc.), in order to achieve complex requirements (cf. CANDELIER [et al.] 2012: 13).

In other words,

“[…] quelqu'un est compétent lorsque […] il fait appel à certaines ressources, qui combinées entre elles, lui permettront de résoudre la situation. La notion de ressources est au centre de la compétence puisque ce sont elles qui sont mobilisées et intégrées entre elles pour résoudre la situation. Sans ressources, pas de compétences. Mais il ne suffit pas de 'posséder' ces ressources, encore faut-il les 'mobiliser' et les 'intégrer'. Cela signifie que la personne doit pouvoir analyser la situation à laquelle elle est confrontée, sélectionner les ressources pertinentes par rapport à cette situation, et les utiliser de manière coordonnée pour apporter une réponse satisfaisante à la situation” (GÉRARD/BRAIBANT 2004: 25). 5

Competence means the ability to mobilize resources to perform a complex task. However, the mobilization of resources related to specific requirements implies that the language learner is capable of controlling the task-solving process (i.e. the language learning process). The learner should be able to

- analyze the task in question and identify (learning) objectives,
- determine the necessary resources,
- control the selection of resources,
- apply the resources,
- evaluate the application of chosen resources with regard to the task at hand,
- evaluate the task.

Planning how to perform a task
Performing the task
Evaluating the process of solving the task and the task

To put it another way: the mobilization of necessary resources implies that the learner is able to diagnose which resources are needed to solve the tasks. Among other things, this depends on the identification of the task’s learning objectives as well as its relevance and feasibility. These analytical processes are not only dependent on cognitive abilities and skills (savoir-faire), but also on attitudinal components (savoir-être).

5 [. . . ] a learner is competent if he/she is able to mobilize and combine certain resources helping to solve the situation. The notion of resources is at the heart of competence because they are mobilized and integrated with each other in order to solve the situation. Competences do not exist without resources. However, the mere ‘possession’ of resources is insufficient as they need to be ‘mobilized’ and ‘integrated’, implying that the learner has to be able to analyze the task he / she is confronted with and to select the adequate resources related to the situation in question. Thus, the learner needs to make use of resources in a concerted way so that a suitable answer can be found.
Research on learners’ motivation in school contexts has empirically proven that a learner’s commitment to tasks depends on several factors: their ability to recognize the task’s relevance (identification of learning objectives), to recognize his/her own competence to solve the task and to recognize that they can control the task and the process of solving the task (e.g. VIAU 2003).

The notion of competence is closely linked to the concept of *savoir-apprendre*, which becomes obvious by equating competence to *savoir-mobiliser* (cf. LE BOTERF 2009).

As a result, reducing output orientation to “teaching to the test” falls too short. Competence orientation deals genuinely with process- and learner orientation.

“Kompetenzorientierter Unterricht mit dem Bezug auf Bildungsstandards oder Lehrpläne darf nicht auf eine kognitiv-methodische Dimension reduziert werden. Es geht um die Entwicklung der Fähigkeit Lernender zur Selbststeuerung in ihrem Lernprozess als Voraussetzung für lebenslanges Lernen in einem umfassenden Sinn” (KENNERKNECHT 2011: 7).

2.3 Fostering competences by mobilizing resources: on the question of constructing adequate tasks

As a consequence of the modeling described above, foreign language teaching should concentrate on performing complex tasks that mobilize resources. In order to foster this, one should consider:

a) creating conditions and scenarios where resources are mobilized and combined in order to solve a problem or a task, respectively.

b) offering opportunities to develop the “*savoir-mobiliser*”.

Quality features of competence oriented complex tasks have been thoroughly analyzed in the context of the discussion on competence and task orientation (CASPARI/GROTTJAHN/KLEPPIN 2010, TESCH/LEUPOLD/KÖLLER 2008, MÜLLER-HARTMANN/SCHOCKER-V. DITFURTH 2005). The aspect of task awareness and task-process awareness will be depicted in the following.

Only experienced learners automatize the monitoring of their tasks. In pedagogical situations and in foreign language learning contexts respectively, learners need to be made explicitly aware of the monitoring process. It is indeed questionable to what extent resources and strategies can be activated to establish long-lasting competences if the necessary resources (for example with regard to *savoir-apprendre*) or the applied strategies are not reflected. Or, as is the case in some French course books, strategies are reduced to learning advice. With reference to research on learner autonomy and metacognition, it can be assumed that (language learning) competences unfold during task completion through the learner’s reflection on the task at hand as well as on the process of finding solutions (task awareness and task-process awareness). It is thus crucial that tasks offer the opportunity to reflect on the process of solving the task. According to ANDERSON (2012) who defines metacognition as the ability to make one’s
thinking visible, it can be concluded that it is necessary to reflect on the process of solving the task and making this process visible.

Such awareness-raising activities can take place retrospectively (i.e. after the problem-solving activity) or while performing the task. The retrospective reflection is partly taken from Willis’ framework, which comprises three phases (components of a task-based language framework):

- pre-task (introduction to the topic and task)
- task cycle (task, planning, report)
- language focus (analysis, practice).

Instead of only concentrating on language forms, it seems appropriate to initiate a reflection on the task and on the problem-solving process, i.e., to address the following questions:

- Is the task meaningful (or not) from the learner’s perspective (task awareness)?
- Is there anything about the task that the learners find especially interesting? Why?
- How did the learners proceed while performing the task?
- What was difficult / easy? Did the learners face any difficulties?

Another possibility is to encourage pupils to reflect on the process of solving the task while performing it. The curriculum of the INSTITUTO CERVANTES (2007) lists a series of approaches that could be helpful in this respect. Referring to the modeling of competences and the strategies-inventory from the curriculum of the INSTITUTO CERVANTES (ibid.: 514–520), raising awareness should concentrate on the following aspects:

| a) planning how to perform the task | b) identification of learning objectives | Ask explicit questions: “What is expected of me? What is the possible outcome after dealing with the task? What do I have to do or know in order to perform the task? Which steps do I have to take?”
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                                   | identification of format        | Analyze the assignment and instructions (underline keywords). Think of similar, previously performed tasks and apply these experiences to the new context.
|                                   | anticipation and identification of possible problems that may arise | Even if the task may be difficult, formulate its objectives as attainable.
|                                   | diagnosis of resources that need to be mobilized | Consider the task as an instrument to satisfy personal interests (i.e. curiosity).
|                                   | planning of evaluation          |
Take into account the positive consequences concomitant with the task’s realization: enhancement of communicative competence, development of new strategies, overcoming communicative situations and concrete learning situations, such as passing a test or resolving problems through language use.

Identify the aspects that may complicate the problem-solving process: lacuna with regard to communicative language use, difficulties while articulating specific phonemes, difficulties in obtaining needed information, difficulties concerning the affective dimension (speaking in front of other people [...]).

Mentally activate and test communicative resources which need to be mobilized for the task and apply them while performing it.

Calculate the time needed to complete the task.

Divide the available time into smaller units that are linked to the different phases of the task.

Eliminate anything that may interfere while performing the task (noise, pressure of time).

Decide whether other learners or the teacher could be of help in situations where one is stuck. Decide when to turn to other information sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>b) performing the task</th>
<th>• mobilization of required resources – not only declarative and procedural resources, but also resources related to the learners personality, i.e. motivation</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Make use of and consult information sources. Use grammars to verify the output.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Look for support: ask questions (exemplify and take into account alternatives), ask other learners, the teacher or competent speakers in order to verify the comprehension of a grammar rule or pragmatic aspects.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Believe in your own capacity and resources in order to successfully complete the task. Arrive for rewards.</td>
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</table>
| e) Evaluating the process of solving the task and the task | • monitoring the learning process while completing the task  
• evaluating resources used, identifying lacking resources  
• evaluating end-product | Determine situations where interlocutors (teachers, other learners, etc.) solicit repetition or clarification.  
Determine problems by comparing your outcome with those of competent speakers.  
Analyze (quantitatively and qualitatively) the performance with regard to the content.  
Analyze the efficiency of the approach and the applied strategies.  
Use patterns or control lists.  
Use learning diaries, triangulation techniques.  
Correct yourself by using grammar or other information sources.  
Use solutions that the learning material, or any other information source, provides.  
Apply strategies that have been used while performing previous tasks.  
Connect the task with real life communicative and learning situations. |

The intensive engagement with these aspects (alone or in groups) is likely to encourage learners “to reflect more deeply on their feelings in a particular context in order to construct a deeper understanding of themselves as a learner and the nature of the task at hand” (VANDERGRIFT/GO 2012: 92).

According to VANDERGRIFT/GO (ibid.), the metacognitive operations described above are “by definition active because they involve conscious attention to one’s thoughts”. Nevertheless, it is not only the mere reflection on cognition and learning processes that enhances language learning competence. Instead, it can be assumed that learning is productive when learners “act on the thoughts they have” (ibid.). This is why this active reflection is referred to as “metacognition in action”. The following list taken from VANDERGRIFT/GO (ibid.) provides the gist of the main features:

- conscious attention to one’s knowledge, experiences, and strategic behaviors;
- reflection on thoughts and actions and recording for sharing, analysis and feedback;
- planning for future learning, based on reflections;
- follow-up actions must be immediate or delayed;
- changes occur in thinking and action in response to changes in the task environment;
- plans and follow-up actions may involve two or more individuals;
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- knowledge or experience is not exclusive to an individual: it can be jointly constructed by two or more individuals.

Performing these reflective activities can lead to task knowledge, or help to ‘objectify’ it, which – following Flavell – is knowledge about the purpose, demands and nature of learning tasks, and includes knowing how to approach and complete a real-life task.

3. Challenges in foreign language teaching, learning and research: From task construction to task evaluation

These explanations suggest that the construction of appropriate (learning) tasks presents one of the major challenges in the context of competence- and task orientation. This is the case for the complex tasks that have been developed by the IQB (cf. KMK 2012; TESCH/LEUPOLD/KÖLLER 2008), but also for the construction of all other tasks that initiate learning processes (i.e. complex tasks in textbooks).

With regard to fostering method- and language learning competences, one has to assert that many tasks in textbooks only focus on the introduction of declarative knowledge. Unfortunately, they contain neither a procedural nor an affective dimension (cf. MARTINEZ/SCHRÖDER-SURA 2011). Thus, these tasks do not encourage the development of personally relevant procedural knowledge. Instead, they presumably generate inert knowledge that cannot be transformed to procedural knowledge and, as a consequence, cannot be used (cf. BARNES 1976). It is therefore crucial to test the ‘validity’ of tasks to see if they actually enhance the development of the features they claim to enhance.

In the following, a preliminary list of criteria for the analysis of competence-oriented tasks will be presented. The list is based on the definition of mobilization competence brought up in chapter 2 and an extended understanding of savoir-apprendre that comprises cognitive, declarative and affective components (cf. CANDELIER [et al.] 2007/2012; MARTINEZ/SCHRÖDER-SURA 2011; MEIBNER 2012, 2013).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competence to mobilize</th>
<th>Questions to ask</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>savoir-faire</td>
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<tr>
<td>being able to learn autonomously</td>
<td>Does the task foster reflective learning concretely via the assignment? (i.e. when controlling the organization of learning strategies)</td>
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<tr>
<td>being able to acquire languages</td>
<td>Does the task promote a reflection on the learning process? (particularly with regard to memory strategies or identifying the learning progress / the absence of learning progress)</td>
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<tr>
<td>generation of learning and language</td>
<td>Does the task stimulate the mobilization / generation of learning and language</td>
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acquisition strategies? (i.e. reading strategies when dealing with reading comprehension, composition and revision strategies when writing a text)
Does the task encourage a reflection on resources that are to be mobilized to solve the task?

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<tr>
<th>Competence to mobilize</th>
<th>Questions to ask</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>savoir-être</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>being sensitive with regard to experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>being motivated for language learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>basic attitudes for the construction of meaningful and well-founded representations of language learning</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>task awareness</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>planning the task’s performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>performing the task evaluation of the task</td>
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Does the task foster a reflection on attitudes with regard to language learning (and the speakers of the target language) and revise them if necessary?
Does the task stimulate a reflection on the learner’s role as a language learner?
Does the task stimulate a reflection on learning styles and learning strategies?
Does the task enable a learning initiated on the basis of one’s own faults?

Is the task transparent enough so that learning objectives are evident?
Does the task enable an understanding of resources that are to be mobilized? (connection to previous knowledge, strategies, attitudes)
Does the task foster a monitoring of the solving process / the working process?
Does the task promote an evaluation of the product / the working process?

Handling complex tasks represents a further challenge as well. Here, the differentiation between ‘task-as-workplan’ and ‘task-as-process’ introduced by Breen is important. The result may be that the outcome is not consistent with the objectives intended by the task designer. According to Breen (1987), Kumaravadivelu (1991) and Murphy (2003) it can be said that learning outcomes are a product of three main factors: the teacher’s and learner’s perceptions of the task, their contribution to it as well as the learning environment. It has been shown elsewhere (Martínez 2011) how subjectively learners and teachers can interpret these approaches.

In his research on the implementation of competence-oriented tasks for the teaching of French in grade 9 and 10, Tesch (2010) revealed that teachers (as well as learners) lack didactic and methodological knowledge when it comes to certain competences.
Thus, carrying out competence-oriented complex tasks requires professional training for the teachers.

Teachers’ task evaluation can contribute to a professional training and, therefore, to the implementation of task-based approaches. According to ELLIS (1997), three types of evaluation can be identified:

- Student-based evaluation (i.e. students’ attitudes towards tasks and opinions about it are investigated).
- Response-based evaluation (i.e. the outcomes – products and processes – of the task are investigated).
- Learning-based evaluation (i.e. the extent to which any learning or skill/strategy development has occurred).

Following ELLIS (1997: 41) it can be assumed that so called “empirical task evaluation” serves several purposes: It encourages teachers “to pay attention to evaluation as they plan lessons” and “forces teachers to go beyond impressionistic assessments by requiring them to determine exactly what it is they want to evaluate and how they can do it”.

Above all, task evaluation serves as “a way of conducting action research and thereby encouraging the kind of reflection that is believed to contribute to teacher development”. Task evaluation serves “as a form of professional empowerment” (ELLIS 1997: 41), being the counterpart to learner empowerment (cf. chapter 2).

4. Conclusion

The discussion points out that standardization, competence- and task orientation naturally follow the development and encouragement of language learning competence. In secondary school level I and level II, the achievement of standards is dependent on the quality of the (learning) tasks. Moreover, tasks should be dealt with in a responsible, reflective and critical manner. By doing so, the learner’s and the teacher’s empowerment can contribute to the development of competence-oriented tasks and task formats, as well as to further task research.

There is still much work to do but this is in the nature of things: (competence-oriented) learning is a life-long process, not only from the learner’s point of view but also from the teacher’s and researcher’s point of view.

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Ellis (1997) proposes a procedure comprising 7 steps: 1) Choosing a task to evaluate 2) Describing the task 3) Planning the evaluation 4) Collecting the information for the evaluation 5) Analysing the information 6) Researching conclusions and making recommendations 7) Writing the report.
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