A New Structural Model of Visual Competencies in Visual Literacy: The Revised Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competency

European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL)

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Abstract: The Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy is work in progress. The Framework was published as a prototype and as the project itself was also limited in terms of time and resources, it is left to colleagues in the field to elaborate on what was presented. In this contribution the sixteen sub-competencies that constitute the core of the model are discussed. In the prototype these sub-competencies were presented as a cloud of concepts without any internal structure. This leaves much to be interpreted by researchers, curriculum developers, and educators. In order to arrive at a more practical and transparent model, a working group of ENViL here presents a new version of these sub-competencies. It is hoped for that this version pays credit to the dynamic, process-oriented character of these competencies – and the subject in general – and will also make it easier to apply them in the domains of both production and reception, as distinguished in the prototype. It is also hoped that this alternative will generate further discussion and research on, for example, the consequences for assignments and assessment, the relationship with what are called 21st-century skills, and the validation of competency levels.

Key words: visual competency, competency model, framework of reference, production of art, reception of art, CEFR-VC

Introduction

Describing educational goals is always a balancing act between clarity and conciseness. To be practical, specified descriptions are needed, but too much text can easily confuse or even discourage readers. In practice many words and concepts used to describe educational goals and curricula are not clearly defined. Their meaning is taken for granted as they are also part of general linguistic usage, but in a discussion among professionals it may turn out that individual teachers use different working definitions for these concepts. Things may become problematic when words are used that are essential for the subject but can have different meanings, depending on their context. Many words have more than one meaning, and some meanings can be covered by different words in more or less the same way. 'Ability' may mean 'proficiency' as well as 'capacity', while 'ability' can also be described as 'skill', or 'capability'. But not all these words refer to exactly the same phenomenon. This problem is not unique to English. For example, 'ability' can be translated into German in many different ways, each one with a slightly different meaning. In reverse, a German equivalent (e.g. 'Fähigkeit') can be retranslated in English as 'aptitude', 'faculty', 'skill', or 'proficiency'. So, when one describes mental or physical activities for educational purposes, one has to be as clear as possible in one's vocabulary in order to avoid the words or concepts used being open to multiple, and thus incorrect, incomplete, or misleading interpretations.

In this article we address these issues by introducing a description of competencies in the domain of Visual Literacy. The concept of Visual Literacy was introduced by ENViL to refer with one concept to the great variety of names used in Europe for school subjects in the visual domain, and also broaden this domain by including all kinds of images and not limit it to 'art' objects only. This new description of competencies will, it is hoped, diminish the lack of clarity of the concepts used – including the concept of 'competency' itself – and can make it easier to use in the context of education. To this purpose the prototype of the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (CEFR-VL) as developed by the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) in 2016 has been reformulated. The cloud of competencies as presented in the original model is restructured into more generic, process-based descriptions of competencies that better reflect common understanding and practice in this domain. It is hoped that this new model is more fit for daily use in schools.

Competency

One of the most complicated 'sloppy concepts' used in contemporary educational theory and policy is 'competency'

(or 'competence'), which can mean 'ability', 'capacity', 'capability', 'proficiency', or 'skill'. Why introduce a new concept when its distinctiveness with regard to other concepts in use is unclear and even confusing?

The concept of 'competency' entered educational theory some forty years ago, but it has been given prominence more recently thanks to international discussions on the comparability of educational results. A well-known example of the introduction of the concept of competency in European education is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, developed to arrive at comparable level descriptions of 'linguistic competence' (Council of Europe, 2020). Another one is the project of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to arrive at the definition and selection of competencies to provide "a framework that can guide the longer-term extension of assessments into new competency domains." (OECD, 2003: 3). This framework was developed to "inform the identification of key competencies, to strengthen international assessments, and to help to define overarching goals for education systems and lifelong learning" (id.: 4). This project is part of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which was launched in 1997 by the OECD with the objective of developing regular, reliable, and policy-relevant indicators on student achievement (OECD, n.d.). We also find the concept 'competency' in many curricula, including curricula for art subjects.

In response to these international developments, which were seen as a political threat that might lead to a (further) marginalisation of Visual Literacy, in 2012 the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) decided to initiate a research project on the concept of 'competency' in Visual Literacy. The results were published as a prototype of the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (Wagner & Schönau, 2016). The researchers of ENViL "believed that the lack of clearly defined competencies was the reason why there were no connections between current empirical educational research and curriculum development in school subjects such as art (….) and design." (id.: 11). ENViL decided to adopt the definition of competency as formulated by the German educational scientist Franz Weinert (2001).

- "A competency always addresses the combined use of learnable knowledge, skills, and attitudes;
- A competency is demonstrated in specific (professional) situations: one is competent with regard to a domain and in situations that are relevant for the domain (or: in situations in which this domain is addressed or made use of);
- A competency is described and presented as an outcome or demonstrab-

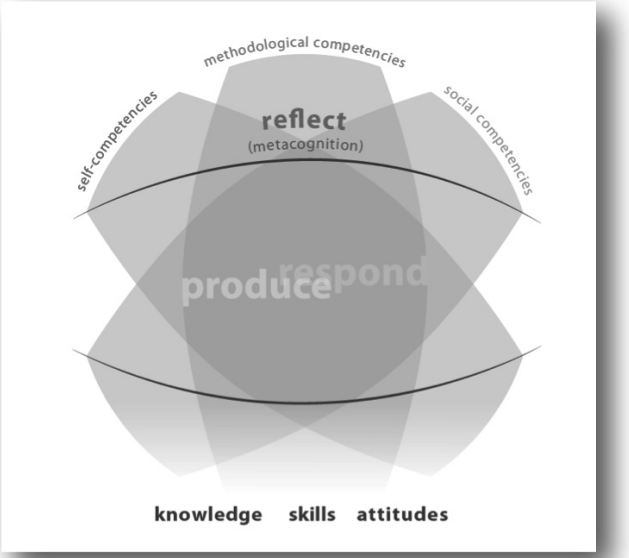

Figure 1. The ENViL competency model: basic elements and relationships (Wagner & Schönau 2016: 67)

le behaviour, not in terms of input;
- Competencies can also be thought of as dispositions: '*The student is able to...*' " (Wagner & Zapp, 2016: 98).

The added value of the concept of 'competency' lies in the *combined* use of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in (subject-) *specific* situations. Knowledge, skills, and attitude are not addressed in isolation, but learned and applied in situations that are specific to the domain at hand, in this case the domain of Visual Literacy.

Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy

In the search for the competencies as described in the school subject covered by the name of Visual Literacy, 37 curricula for the visual arts in primary and secondary education from 22 different European countries (including Turkey) were analysed, focusing on the use of the concept of 'competency' and related descriptions of intended learning in this

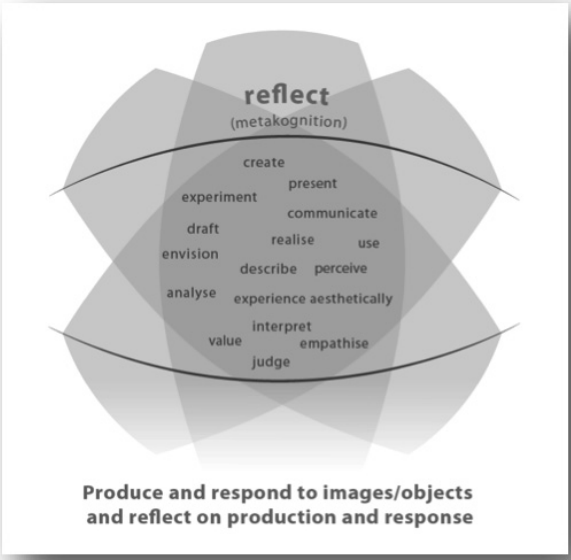

Figure 2. The ENViL competency model: differentiation of sub-competencies (Wagner & Schönau, 2016: 68)

domain (Kirchner & Haanstra, 2016; Kirchner, Gotta-Leger, & Nockmann, 2016). On the basis of this analysis and after extensive discussions it was decided by the research group to select sixteen sub-competencies that together cover the subject-specific content of learning in Visual Literacy (Wagner & Schönau, 2016: 64–108). Figures 1 and 2 give a visual summary of what the resulting prototype of the Framework looks like.

In the centre of the model (Figure 1) we find the two sub-domains of Visual Literacy: 'producing' work oneself and 'responding' to work made by others. The competencies of Visual Literacy in these two sub-domains function along with more generic personal, methodological, and social competencies. These latter represent basic types of competencies that play a role in any action or (learning) situation and that are relevant to all school subjects. At the bottom of Figure 1 we see 'knowledge', 'skills', and 'attitudes'. The interactive use of these

three elements, together with the 'situation' in which they are applied, defines the concept of competency. Above the centre, 'metacognition' (or reflection) is hovering, thus indicating its central role as a 'monitoring' competency that is active and relevant at any moment in life and learning.

In Figure 2 the sixteen 'sub-competencies' are presented: analyse, communicate, create, describe, draft, empathise, envision, experience aesthetically, experiment, interpret, judge, perceive, present, realise, use, and value. Some of these sub-competencies are typical for the production of images, others for responding to visual images, and many competencies can be applied to both sub-domains, sometimes with a different meaning (e.g. 'analyse', 'interpret'). In the ENViL publication each sub-competency is extensively described, to make sure that its meaning is clear and transparent (Wagner & Schönau, 2016: 66-79). For eleven sub-competencies it was also possible to give descriptions of three levels: elementary, intermediate, and competent (ibid.: 80-90). For the remaining sub-competencies (empathise, envision, experience aesthetically, perceive, and value) a usable and meaningful differentiation between levels remained elusive.

At this point of detailing the framework with extensive (level) descriptions, the EU-funded research project ended. As the Framework is presented as a prototype, it includes an invitation to elaborate on its results (Schönau & Kárpáti, 2019). As can be seen in Figure 2, the sixteen sub-competencies are presented as a cloud of concepts, with little internal structure and hierarchy. They are also formulated as a single verb, while their meaning and what they refer to in practice are much more complex than these verbs suggest.

In recent years a working group of ENViL has investigated the possibility of making this cloud of concepts more insightful in order to generate a more practical version for use in classrooms and in curriculum development.

Basic considerations for reorganising the sub-competencies in the Framework

To arrive at a better and more insightful model, the working group based its activities on the following considerations.

Firstly, it was agreed that the sub-competencies could be reformulated better by including 'competency to …' in the description, and not by using one verb only. It should be clear in any description of a competency that it is more than one verb, which normally refers to a specific mental or physical skill or activity (e.g. 'envision', 'make'). A competency, by definition, does not consist only of skills, but of knowledge and attitudes

as well, and is related to specific (types of) situations.

Secondly, it is more logical and helpful to formulate sub-competencies in terms that are relevant to, and typical for, learning in Visual Literacy, to distinguish them from those used in other school subjects or domains of learning (e.g. 'interpret', 'use').

Thirdly, the working group looked for ways to present these competencies not as an amorphous cloud, but in a structure that reflects the complex, dynamic, and yet coherent character of the domain (and its sub-domains) as well as the (potential) interrelatedness of the different sub-competencies. The first step was to clarify the distinction between the 'producing' and 'responding' sub-domains. It was decided to develop two different models, one for each sub-domain. This meant that only those sub-competencies relevant for each sub-domain were included in each model. This division does not mean that producing and responding should be seen and taught as separate domains in education; quite the contrary. Examples of works made by others can be very relevant in one's own artistic activities, and experience with producing can be of help to understand works made by others. However, in some education systems the domain of responding is addressed in a separate school subject such as art history, cultural and artistic education, or critical studies. In museum education, too, the domain of 'responding' is central. By developing two separate models the dynamics and characteristics of each sub-domain can be presented in a more cohesive way.

Finally, the Framework is renamed as the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competency' (CEFR-VC), as the concept of 'visual literacy' has several meanings, as 'literacy' is also seen as related to socio-economic or linguistic-philosophical approaches in education rather than what the Framework actually intends to cover: visual competency (Errazuriz, 2019; Fulkova, 2019; Schönau & Kárpáti, 2019).

The sub-domain of 'producing'

Following this approach, it makes sense to group the sub-competencies for the sub-domain of 'producing' into five more generic competencies related to different phases in the production process. These new sub-competencies not only fulfil the considerations above, but also represent a logic that is recognisable to both learners and professionals in the domain. These five new generic sub-competencies in the sub-domain of 'producing' are:

- the competency to generate visual ideas;
- the competency to do visual research;
- the competency to make visual images;

- the competency to present one's own images;
- the competency to evaluate one's own images and image-making processes.

The concept 'visual' also refers to the haptic, motor, and kinaesthetic aspects of objects and processes in Visual Literacy, as, for instance, in making and experiencing three-dimensional objects or architecture. The order of the sub-competencies is not prescriptive but reflects the most common ways of producing works of art, design, architecture, and the like. Some stages can be skipped and other stages can be repeated, as the task requires, for instance, when a work does not fit the expectations of its maker and she or he must go through the earlier stages again.

The first new generic sub-competency – to generate visual ideas – covers what a maker in Visual Literacy normally does before embarking on the actual production process. Just starting to make an image without any preliminary thinking or research is rather uncommon. In most cases there will be an idea, an experience, an emotion, or a practical or ideational purpose or request. The starting point can be an observation, but it can also be a product of the mind: an idea, a fantasy, a mental image, an experience, or a feeling. It can also be an interest in investigating the expressive materials and techniques, or the desire to make an image or object with a specific practical function. Although in many cases the purpose of the image to be made may not be clear at the beginning, in the end the maker will start to produce a work that fits a 'situation', be this artistic, commercial, educational, recreational, social, or otherwise. In this phase the following sub-competencies, as originally presented in the prototype of the Framework, can play a role: analyse, communicate, describe, empathise, envision, experience aesthetically, interpret, perceive. Which of these sub-competencies actually play a role will depend on where, when, and how a maker is inspired or requested to make an image. Each of these original sub-competencies can play a role in this phase, depending on the starting point or the moment in the process.

The second generic sub-competency – to do visual research – relates to all the practical and material activities a maker can undertake before the actual work is produced: making drafts, experimenting with elements and principles, materials, and/or techniques, looking for available images and ideas that might fit into the work, analysing how things work out visually, and interpreting the results of sketches. In this phase the original sub-competencies analyse, communicate, create, draft, experiment, interpret, and use can play a role.

In the third phase – making a visual image – the ideas are realised and the

work is produced. Of course, a work can be created from scratch, without any intentional generation of visual ideas or preliminary research, but more often the final work is based on a preceding process of investigation and trials, or the research is included in the final work, like in a painting that 'generates' on the canvas. In this phase, the original sub-competencies communicate, create, realise, and use play the major role. It is important to keep in mind that especially in this phase the competency of reflection is crucial: what appears in the process of creation will be judged and corrected by the maker with regard to its visual characteristics and expressiveness. With good reasons one may say that this is the moment in which the act of creation is at its peak.

The fourth phase – presenting one's own images – will start when the maker has decided that the work is 'finished' and the assignment is completed. Depending on the social situation and the purpose of the assignment, the maker will present the result in a specific way. This presentation can be limited to the final work itself, but the presentation can also include preliminary studies, experiments, and research that led to the final work. Because of the complexity of the production process and the visual character of the work made, presenting can be regarded as a productive and even creative activity in its own right. The activities related to the phase of presenting can be addressed by the original sub-competencies communicate, describe, judge, present, realise, and value.

The fifth new generic sub-competency – to evaluate one's own images and image-making processes – can be seen as a phase of (self-) reflection which is typical for a learning situation, but it also applies to any other situation in which a maker looks back at what (s)he has done and made. Reflection may lead to a reappraisal of the working process and even to a decision to start all over again when the result is not in line with the intention or the expectation. In an educational context, the competency to evaluate is crucial in the communication between student and teacher, as it informs both parties about what has been learned and how to move forward. It is the phase in which the original sub-competencies analyse, communicate, describe, judge, and value can be applied.

The sub-domain of 'responding'

With regard to the sub-domain of 'responding', not all sixteen sub-competencies are equally relevant. For example, the sub-competencies create, draft, envision, experiment, and realise are typical for the production of a work. The other sub-competencies can be used in both domains. So eleven sub-competencies are relevant in the sub-domain of 'responding': analyse, communicate, describe, empathise,

experience aesthetically, interpret, judge, perceive, present, use, and value.

As in the domain of 'producing', in the domain of 'responding' too we can see a temporal order of activities, from the first encounter with an image or object,[1] through scrutiny of what can be seen and be known about this image, up to the drawing of conclusions in an informed way and sometimes ending with a presentation of the results, either orally, in written form, or in another visual format. This process is not arbitrary as it follows a 'natural' order in which the observer tries to make sense of the image at hand. This process can be made more sophisticated and systematic by following specific rules for (visual) research in order to arrive at insights and conclusions that can be understood by and shared with others.

The eleven sub-competencies related to the domain of 'responding' are connected to four distinct temporal phases: visual scrutiny, research on relevant contextual information, evaluation, and communication. On the basis of this division four more generic competencies were formulated that not only fulfil the basic considerations as outlined above, but also represent a logic that is recognisable to both learners and professionals in the domain.

The four (new) generic competencies in the sub-domain of 'responding' are:

- the competency to look at images with an open mind;
- the competency to research images;
- the competency to evaluate images;
- the competency to report about images.

In contrast to the structure in the domain of 'producing', the activities related to these four new competencies will normally be executed in a more strict order. Research without looking carefully at the image first, judging without research, and reporting about an image without any of these preceding activities cannot produce good results and can even be seen as a demonstration of incompetence. Naturally, it is always possible to return to an earlier phase to adjust or improve one's observations, insights, or conclusions, but in the end the process of responding will always start with observation, then address the issues of research and evaluation, and end with reporting.

The first new generic sub-competency – to look at images with an open mind – relates to the multifaceted character of visual perception in Visual Literacy: looking carefully and taking one's time, experiencing the visual (aesthetic)

[1] Image in the context of the ENViL model refers to all types of two- or three-dimensional images, objects, and processes that are relevant for the domain of visual learning. See also Wagner & Schönau 2016: 395.

qualities that make this image 'powerful' in a visual and/or artistic way, and connecting oneself emotionally and intellectually with what is there to be seen. This first new competency relates to the phase in which a new visual sensation is seen as an image, before any additional information is intentionally looked for in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the image. It is the moment in which the original sub-competencies of perceiving, aesthetically perceiving, and empathising play a central role.

The next phase – to research images – is needed in order to arrive at a deeper and more complete understanding of an image. Research with regard to an image can be understood in the same way as research in science: a systematic exploration. Here the object of study is the meaning(s) of and in the image, its purpose, the way this meaning is expressed by the visual characteristics of the image, and the contextual information that supports a better understanding about the reasons why the image was made and why it was made in this specific way. Contextual information can be found in comments by the maker or by critics, in historical sources, and in social, political, psychological, philosophical, and other texts and theories that might be applicable to the image. Research with regard to the unique visual qualities of the image can help generate an informed understanding of the image. This can relate to its content and purpose, as well as to its form and unique visual qualities. The sub-competency of researching images is related to the sub-competencies analyse, describe, and interpret. These three sub-competencies cover the dynamic steps taken in researching an image. Describing is a very helpful and fundamental sub-competency as it helps to find words for what is seen, at different levels of detail. Analysis and interpretation are two sides of the same coin: making sense of what is found, and combining what can be seen in the image with what is known or understood about the image.

The third new sub-competency – evaluating an image – plays an important role in Visual Literacy. Evaluating addresses the issue of quality. In Visual Literacy quality plays a fundamental role. It refers to what makes an image relevant, successful, and powerful. This is an essential characteristic of learning in the visual domain that distinguishes it from the scientific disciplines in which quantification is the essential approach to arrive at understanding, proof, prediction, and even 'universal truth', as laws in nature are valid in the whole universe. In Visual Literacy the 'truth' of an image relates to that image only. It is possible to do scientific research on visual phenomena, like in the psychology of perception, but that is neither the content nor the ambition of Visual Literacy in the educational domain. To evaluate means to assign a value to an image. The

sub-competency of evaluating images includes the original sub-competencies of judging and valuing. Judging refers to the use of criteria, be they aesthetic, ethic, political, legal, economic, etc., to arrive at a systematic appreciation or valuation of an image in a comprehensible and intersubjective way. Valuing is a more subjective appreciation in which the image is appreciated for its uniqueness and its expressive qualities, as well as for its contribution to one's own life or to the life of others or society at large. The sub-competency to evaluate an image is used to appreciate an image as a contribution to one's own understanding and enrichment, or as a contribution to other individuals, groups, or society. It is particularly significant in intercultural or transcultural contexts.

The fourth new sub-competency – to report about images – relates to the presentation of the results of the other three sub-competencies. It involves the original sub-competencies communicate, present, and use. The final stage in the sub-domain of responding specifically refers to this notion of sharing with an audience what has been observed, researched, and evaluated. This sharing ('reporting') is normally in (written) language, but it can also be done by means of images, gestures, or other signs ('use'). As in the revision of the competencies in the productive domain the final stage is reformulated as 'the competency to present', it seems more in place to use the verb 'report' in its technical sense here: to share conclusions or to exchange information (in writing or orally). Being competent in sharing the results of one's observations, research, and evaluation can therefore be perfectly subsumed under the new sub-competency to report about images in an informed way. However, we should note that 'reporting' may also take the form of an internal act of arriving at an insight about an image, without sharing it with others. This act of formulating an informed opinion is equally valuable as a result of learning in Visual Literacy. Reporting is useful for social knowledge distribution, but an informed opinion that guides future actions (such as frequenting art shows or safeguarding monuments) is equally important.

Finally, in the sub-domain of responding special attention should be paid to the fact that responding to existing images can be approached from a historical and from a contemporary angle. When an image is approached as a historical artefact one needs to make use of historical sources to arrive at a 'correct' or at least data-driven understanding of the origin, goal, content, and design of the image. However, when an image is approached as an artefact that is relevant today, other sources will be needed that include the physical context as well as its social, emotional, ideological, spiritual, or political relevance or actuality. This is especially the case when a selecti-

on of existing images is being conceived by a museum curator for a presentation to a contemporary public. Here, the perspectives of the museum, the curator, or the scholars involved determine what is presented and in what way. Contemporary theories and practices will influence how images are presented (curated) as part of the actual public discourse or research debates. Curating an exhibition can be seen as an activity in the final phase of the responsive domain of Visual Literacy (use images, etc.). Writing the accompanying catalogue of an exhibition can be considered as the final reporting phase in the responsive domain.

It should be kept in mind that in most countries Visual Literacy in primary and secondary education is part of *general* education, and not presented and organised as a preparation for professional development. Being competent at a professional level surpasses what is covered and presented in the CEFR-VC. When these competencies are demonstrated by professionals in the visual domain, they can also be seen as examples of a fourth level of competency: the professional level. Whether the model will also be helpful and effective in professional training in the academic domain was not investigated by the researchers of ENViL and needs further exploration. So far it is hoped that the revised model presented here will be supportive in curriculum reforms and in daily school practice.

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