

Challenges and Opportunities of the CEFR for Reimagining Foreign Language Pedagogy

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The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) is explicitly meant to cover both assessment and curricular issues. However, as Little states (this issue), to date “its impact on language testing far outweighs its impact on curriculum design and pedagogy” (p. #). One explanation might be that supporting foreign language (FL) proficiency development through the stages described in the CEFR requires a shift in pedagogic routines for those practitioners who are used to teaching in traditional ways, especially in the role they conceive for grammar in the language classroom. The authors of the CEFR were not very explicit about its implications for classroom teaching. Thus, although the CEFR descriptors tell us a lot about what learners at a certain level can do, very little is stated about what they should know in order to carry out these language tasks. In particular, the question of whether a certain level requires mastery of specific grammar items is left open. Grammatical competence is seen as “clearly central to communicative competence” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 151), but it is discussed only in general terms. Although the table on grammatical accuracy (p. 114) describes a relationship between grammatical correctness and the CEFR levels, it likewise remains unclear whether this correctness is based on applied rule knowledge or on, for example, memorized chunks or phrases.

Even so, the descriptors do provide some clues, for example, through an explanatory overview of the characteristics of language use that mark the transitions between the various levels. At the lower levels, descriptors like *lexically organized repertoire* and *frequently used routines and patterns* occur. Form awareness supposedly plays a role only from level B2 onwards; indeed such conscious use of rule knowledge is presented as a “new perspective,” “quite a break with the content so far,” “The learner (...) can look around him/her in a new way” (p. 35). Also new at this level is that the learner consciously monitors speech in order to avoid mistakes. In other words, from these pages the view emerges that formal correctness is expected to develop gradually and concurrently with a broad array of grammatical issues.

The scales of the CEFR show concentric development of proficiency, starting with emphasis on the expansion of the lexical repertoire, counterbalanced by decreasing tolerance of deviations

from grammatical norms. At the lower level formal correctness is mainly based on the lexicon. Only from B2 onward is conscious use of rule knowledge expected and perceived to be helpful. FL teaching, however, as reflected in the most commonly used textbooks in Europe, is perceived as a linear process, in which discrete grammatical issues are presented one after another, and the assumption is made that the next item is introduced only once mastery of the preceding item has occurred. Almost without exception, and in spite of assignments in (sometimes very creative and attractive) communicative guises, most European FL textbooks build on a grammatical canon and rely on a Presentation–Practice–Production approach (PPP, see Thornbury, 1999, pp. 128–129) as their main pedagogical principle. By contrast, the concentric development of FL competence, based on intuitive judgments of practitioners and mirrored in the CEFR, fits in well with recent insights from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and cognitive psychology research. Therefore, in the remainder of my comments I will sketch out some of these insights and discuss their main implications for the design of curricula and teaching practice for those practitioners who want to shape their work according to principles underlying the CEFR.

TWO TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE

In order to understand and produce language, we use several types of knowledge (see, for example, Levelt, 1989). Skehan (1998) distinguished an exemplar-based system and a rule-based system, the former containing lexical units (e.g., words and chunks), the latter consisting of knowledge about regularities in the language (e.g., morphology and syntax). In order to produce language, elements from these systems have to be combined in Working Memory (WM) (Baddeley, 1997). Research shows that the capacity of this WM is very limited. Skehan’s experiments, for example, revealed that capacity problems result in a pay-off between these two systems. In other words, the more effort is needed to retrieve elements from one of the two systems, the less capacity is available for the other. Beginning FL learners are therefore confronted with a persistent problem. If they want to express something meaningful, the use of both knowledge systems takes so much

processing capacity that the production system is in danger of collapsing due to overload. Research shows that to prevent such breakdown beginners choose the exemplar-based system (DeKeyser, 2005). During their initial phases of learning, they tend to invest primarily in the development of the type of knowledge that enables them to understand and produce meaning, namely, their lexical competence. Building up and using rule knowledge comes later, as soon as meaning can be processed so smoothly that there is room left in the WM for other matters. The practitioners in Phase 2 of the CEFR research project estimate that moment to occur between levels B1.2 and B2.1, using CEFR descriptors.

THE ROLE OF FORMULAIC SPEECH

The importance of unanalyzed combinations of lexical units, referred to as *chunks*, which are perceived and learned as a whole (Lyons, 1968), or as *formulaic speech* (Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell, 1998) is often seriously underestimated. European FL classrooms pay very little attention to chunks or formulaic speech. Instead, most teachers and textbooks spend the bulk of their instructional time practicing the application of rule knowledge in so-called *creative speech*. Observations from cognitive psychology, however, indicate that language users continuously weigh whether it is more economical to store frequently occurring combinations, such as *Guten Tag* 'Good morning' or *Sauriez-vous me dire... ?* 'Could you, please, tell me...?' as pre-fabricated wholes or to construct them anew with the help of grammatical rules. Given the capacity constraints of the WM and the priorities of beginning language learners, learning as many chunks as possible is the fastest way to build up the lexical repertoire that enables WM, later on, to attend to the application of rules.

Furthermore, Newell and Rosenbloom (1981) described our knowledge of chunks as a hierarchical system, with short, simple chunks at the basis, longer or combined chunks at a higher level, and combinations of combinations at the top. The lower in the system, the sooner the chunks are acquired; the higher in the system, the less frequently they will occur. The larger the collection of chunks, the smaller the advantage of learning new ones. In that case, it becomes more efficient to use simple rules instead of complicated chunks. Because expanding knowledge of simple chunks saves more and more WM capacity, more processing space becomes available for the application of those rules in the form of creative speech. It is clear that this is a gradually developing process. Once more, referring to the CEFR, the bound-

ary between B1 and B2 appears to be the salient moment for this development. However, the existence of this moment does not mean that it would neither be possible nor useful to anticipate it. In the literature, we find two ways to do so: corrective feedback and simple rules of thumb.

CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Form awareness can be fostered by providing so-called corrective feedback. Lyster and Ranta (1997) distinguished six types, one implicit form labeled recasting and five explicit forms summarized as prompting. In two of these (repetition and explicit correction), errors are highlighted only by the teacher. In three types, which make up negotiation of form (clarification request, elicitation, and metalinguistic feedback), the student is asked for a reaction resulting in repair. Recasting requires the least WM capacity. A disadvantage, however, is a recast does not always result in uptake, often is not even noticed by students although it is the most frequently used teacher strategy (for an overview, see Russell & Spada, 2006). Negotiation of form, however, seems to have the greatest effect. Inasmuch as most experiments were carried out with learners at a rather advanced level, it seems to be plausible to expect results to be different for learners at lower levels. Given the capacity limitations of WM, learners at lower levels might have less space for attending to explicit metalinguistic information than learners at upper levels because processing such information impedes the acquisition of lexical knowledge, the area beginners prioritize.

SIMPLE RULES OF THUMB

A second way to support the development of form awareness at the lower CEFR levels is the use of very simple rules of thumb. The applicability of such rules is a matter of cognitive efficiency. This efficiency means that useful rules are not those rules regulating whole phenomena, like *the strong verb* in German or *the personal pronoun* in French, but rather simple rules like: *Most German words, ending with -e get an -n for plural*. As to the economy and effect of such rules (for an overview see, e.g., De Keyser, 2005), greatest effect can be expected from rules that require very few mental steps, have almost no exceptions, have strong meaning implications, are very frequent, are striking in their appearance, and have similarities with a first language. However, such rules should not be the primary focus of classroom activities. Particularly in the initial phases, priority should lie with building up a lexical repertoire within

content-oriented lessons that focus on meaningful communication rather than specific grammar rules. Rules can be provided ad hoc, for example, when content makes it desirable, correction prevents misunderstandings, or when errors have potentially negative social or pragmatic effects. In any case, teachers should correct only when correction does not disturb the meaningful communication within which the error occurred.

CONCLUSIONS

For many teachers who want to support the development of FL proficiency as indicated by the CEFR scales, this pedagogy may mean reconsidering some long-standing educational routines:

1. There are few, if any, indications, either from the CEFR or from SLA theory, that would justify linking discrete grammar points to specific CEFR levels as is proposed, for example, by Glabionat, Müller, Schmitz, Rusch, and Wertenschlag (2002), and as is claimed by most German textbook publishers.

2. At the lower levels, it seems that a linear presentation of discrete or sequenced grammar items will hinder rather than help learners to “climb the CEFR ladder” because it impedes building up a basic lexical repertoire.

3. Aiming at accuracy at lower levels can be done most profitably by intensive practice using chunks, phrases, formulae, and routines.

4. In addition, from level A2 onward, simple rules of thumb can help prevent very frequent and annoying errors as long as they are functional for the content in question and do not disturb the course of ongoing communication.

5. In most cases, explicit, systematic form-focused metalinguistic information is functional only from level B2 upward.

6. Form awareness and grammatical competence can further be fostered by differentiated forms of corrective feedback. At the lowest level (A1), feedback is preferable in the form of recasting; at A2, more explicit forms like repetition and explicit correction seem appropriate. From B1 onward, negotiation of form (clarification request, elicitation, and metalinguistic feedback) additionally appears to be useful.

7. For textbooks, this gradation means that, particularly at the lower levels, emphasis should shift from exercises that practice specific issues to more meaningful, content-oriented, communicative tasks, preferably in a form and setting that can be associated with the descriptors.

8. For teacher education, more attention should be paid to teaching skills like task man-

agement, classroom management, communicative language methodology, and giving corrective feedback, that is, to managing a task-based, content-oriented FL classroom.

For many European countries, such shifts would mean a small revolution. But without such changes, the CEFR as a framework of reference and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) as an assessment practice will not be compatible with methodologies commonly used in European FL classes, with the risk that teachers and learners, as Little observes, will “see the ELP as an optional extra whose use will involve them in extra work” (p. #). Nonetheless, precisely because of the current incompatibility of CEFR scaling with much common teaching practice, implementing the CEFR might provide a powerful incentive for innovation, particularly if it is supported by systematic curriculum renewal and extended opportunities for in-service teacher training.

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Developing National Language Education Policies: Reflections on the CEFR

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I began this column with the cautionary note that the complexity and multifaceted nature of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) can easily be misread, especially by outsiders. However, I am also convinced that much is to be learned from the CEFR, both as document and policy process, that can contribute to the shaping of language education policies anywhere, including the United States. Using a comparative lens, I have chosen three areas that strike me as particularly worthy of consideration: the crucial role of a frame for policy-making in language education, the influence of policy-making traditions, and the role of research and researchers.

FRAMING A LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY

How a sociopolitical and educational context is interpreted is the intellectual foundation and starting point for the creation of any language policy. The context for the CEFR was the war-burdened history of 20th-century Europe, understood in terms of human rights, by no means the only way of interpreting events. Initial framing placed language at the heart of communication: through communication using the others' languages, so the argument went, one might be able to overcome the kinds of enmities toward them that ultimately led to horrendous violations of their most basic human rights.

But as the desire for political unification of an ever greater number of European countries gained momentum, three additional dynamics further shaped that bedrock assumption. First, initial emphasis on learning to communicate with others in a casual manner on a personal level morphed into hard-core issues about the centrality of language and communication for coordinating, even integrating activities at all levels of an evolving new Europe. Second, the fear of an effacement of linguistic and cultural identities as a result of the drive toward political unification of erstwhile nation-states led to the countermove of retaining strong forms of distinctness, where language, not surprisingly, was the most obvious issue. Various struggles—for position on the part of the major European national languages and

for voice on the part of newly assertive indigenous minority languages—repeated themselves in waves with the expansion of the European Union. Third, migration, both within and from outside the member states of the Council of Europe, further problematized an earlier ideological construct that had paired up normed national languages with nation-based societies. As a consequence, one now has to recognize even non-European linguistic-cultural groups within European language policies.

The emergence of plurilingualism as a framework for language policy is therefore a particular stroke of genius. It uses language as the focal point, but reshapes it from its previous burdened, singular manifestation tied to nationhood to a plural manifestation, as a way of envisioning a new future European identity. Thus, it literally adds multiple voices to the chorus of possibilities for a European identity, on the one hand anchoring plurilingualism in universal notions of human rights, on the other hand crowding out the possibility of identity construction on the basis of geography, political systems, or, quite contentiously, a shared Christian past.

From an American perspective, it is important to understand plurilingualism first and foremost as a call to action toward an idealized future (Beacco & Byram, 2002), akin to the ringing claim that all men are created equal in the American Declaration of Independence, despite the counterfactual of that assertion at the time of its proclamation. As Beacco and Byram noted in the preface to Lo Bianco's (2004) treatment of Australia's language policy, "the relationship of plurilingualism to a sense of identification with other Europeans, with a possible development of a European identity complementing other social identities, national, regional, professional, familial, and so on, which all individuals have, is an issue which remains speculative and which can only be confirmed in future generations of plurilingual people" (p. 6).

Is it possible to arrive at an equally potent and adaptable dynamic for developing language educational policies in the United States? The answer is by no means obvious, despite certain