The Common European Framework, Task-Based Learning, and Colombia: Crossroads for an Intercultural Collision or a Path under Construction for Improvement?

El Marco Común Europeo, aprendizaje a través de tareas y Colombia: ¿Encrucijada para una colisión intercultural o camino en construcción hacia el mejoramiento?

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This paper provides a critical response to the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001) in Colombia by exposing a threefold approach discussing the following areas: Intercultural communication, Task-Based Learning, and some pertinent SLA research. Bearing this in mind, the author provides important cultural differences, and how these differences may affect what is proposed methodologically in the CEF from the standpoint of communication styles and local cultural modes of behavior. Likewise, the author provides reasons that the approach proposed in the CEFR may put at stake important modes of language instruction and the use of computer technology, among other items. Voices from pre-service teachers in regard to the implementation of the CEFR and its principles in the context of a public school would also be included. Finally, the author encourages further academic discussion on the issue in question in order to invite the academic community to contribute to the construction of a locally-made framework bearing in mind the immediate needs and cultural characteristics of the local context.

Key words: Colombia, Common European Framework, cultural differences, foreign language education, public policy

El siguiente documento adopta un enfoque crítico en respuesta a la implementación del Marco Común Europeo de referencia para las lenguas: aprendizaje, enseñanza y evaluación (MCERL) en Colombia para la enseñanza del inglés; esta discusión se hace desde el punto de vista de la interculturalidad, la metodología del inglés por tareas, y algunos puntos de investigación en adquisición de segunda lengua. El autor expone diferencias culturales claves y cómo estas pueden afectar la propuesta metodológica del

MCERL basado en la premisa de las diferencias en estilos de comunicación y algunos comportamientos culturales propios de la cultura colombiana. De igual manera, el autor expone cómo la metodología propuesta en el MECRL pone en riesgo conceptos importantes en instrucción de lengua y el uso de tecnología en dicha entre otros. Este documento también incluirá comentarios de profesores en ejercicio de práctica docente en el contexto de un colegio público. Finalmente, el autor hace una invitación para que el tema se continúe discutiendo académicamente con el fin de lograr la elaboración de un marco de referencia que tenga en cuenta las necesidades locales y culturales del contexto colombiano.

Palabras clave: Colombia, diferencias culturales, instrucción en lengua extranjera, Marco Común Europeo, políticas públicas

Introduction

The Colombian government, specifically speaking, the Ministry of Education has decided that The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR) will provide the methodological foundations for the teaching of foreign languages in the Colombian territory. Such a decision has a plethora of implications that span from the pedagogical and cultural to the educational aspects involved in the teaching of a foreign language, namely, the English language. Bearing in mind the above, this paper will firstly discuss some of the methodological impacts that the CEFR can have in the Colombian context due to the obvious intercultural differences present in such a document. This discussion will inevitably take the reader to explore positively and negatively the type of methodology proposed in the CEFR, the role of educational beliefs, and the effectiveness of such methodology in light of current Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. Finally, this document will discuss how the methodology proposed in the CEFR falls short given the latest advances in computer technology and video gaming in education, and the real-life simulations as explained by Squire and Klopfer (2007) and Squire (2008).

Literature Review and Statement of the Problem

It appears that the CEFR has been adopted in a significant portion of the globe (mostly in Europe) as the language teaching reference authority due to the strong body of language acquisition research supporting it. In fact, one can contemplate at various sections in this document how language learners are conceived of partaking in a comprehensive language learning process involving, but not limited to pluriculturalism, plurilingualism, interculturality, and identity, among other key concepts. In this comprehensive process, students are envisioned to participate in the task-based teaching approach to language learning (See CEFR, Chapter 7) in which classroom activities are encouraged to resemble those activities present in students' lives. By the same token, Willis (1996) as well as Nunan (2004) explains the Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach in which students participate

through various steps in order to simulate those situations that they are most likely to find in real language situations. In theory, both Willis' and the ideas presented in the CEFR should be fully beneficial for language learning in that learners have the opportunity to get prepared for real-life events while learning to plan and perform in various pedagogical tasks that allow them to reflect upon their language and learning performances (metacognitive component or reporting stage as explained by Willis). As described, the TBL approach is then a process-oriented one to language learning bridging the gap between the language classroom and the outside world, the importance of metacognition in learning, and the key role of learning by doing.

The similarities explained above are methodological in nature, but one can establish interesting connections from a cultural standpoint as well. For instance, an approach oriented towards learning by means of following processes (as proposed by the TBL framework, and as presented in the CEFR) and the general traits of Colombian culture appear to be fully compatible at first sight. In fact, Martin and Nakayama (2008) have posited how crucial differences among cultures such as the culture of doing vs. the culture of living and results-oriented cultures vs. process-oriented cultures can cause major discrepancies among cultures, and foreign language teaching is not exempt from this phenomenon. As a matter of course, Ellis (1996) has pointed out how culturally-sensitive language teaching approaches can be. Ellis' reflection has to do with how the communicative approach failed in a Vietnamese context due to the locally held beliefs of teacher-centered classes where silence is seen as a sign of respect, and speaking in class culturally conceived as a sign of disrespect and not as a means of using communicatively a language as proposed by the communicative approach (See Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Brown 1994).

Consequently, importing language teaching approaches that are not locally created can be either beneficial or counterproductive depending on the specific traits of each culture where such approaches would be ultimately implemented. In the case of the Colombian context and the TBL approach proposed in the CEFR, one can observe that teaching by means of processes is an appropriate match culturally speaking because Colombian culture has been described as a process-oriented culture in several aspects of life, as explained by Foster (2002) and Frechette (2007), in which process takes more importance than immediate results. Nevertheless, the metacognitive component proposed in the TBL framework (reporting stage) may be at stake due to the lack of straightforwardness in the pragmatics of the variety of Spanish spoken in Colombia. Before delving into this idea, it is important to remember that another difference observed among cultures worldwide has to do with the notion of honesty vs. politeness in spoken speech. The former relates to how some speakers in European and North American countries prefer to provide information as it is, whereas the latter refers to the way speakers in other countries opt to use a more harmonious approach

where too much directedness in the information provided orally can be seen as a sign of disrespect or a sign of breaking the harmony among speakers. (See Hall, 1976, Martin & Nakayama, 2008)

Given the above, a teaching approach as the TBL framework requires, during its reporting stage, directedness on the students' behalf in order to identify specific problems while performing the task stage of the framework. However, from personal experience and based on the research done thus far in the field of intercultural communication, one can see the clash of the directedness approach vs. the politeness approach in that students oftentimes prefer to ignore their weaknesses in learning due to social pressure in the classroom, lack of assertiveness and, most of all, because of their local cultural notions of silence locally conceived as a way of respect and a factor that helps to maintain harmony among speakers (in this case between teachers and classmates).

In addition to the intercultural concerns, one can find more obstacles that need to be addressed in order to guarantee the effectiveness of teaching by means of pedagogical tasks. This has to do with the role of educational beliefs concerning students. Ertmer (2005), Pajares (1992), and Richards and Lockhart (1995) have emphasized the importance of educational beliefs in both students and teachers, and how these beliefs measure the success or failure of various classroom activities including the use of technology, success in educational activities, and overall classroom decision-making. With this in mind, when educators and language program administrators adopt promising approaches such as the TBL framework, they have to ascertain that both students and teachers are fully convinced of the promises, the procedures and the expected results when adopting a specific language teaching methodology. Also, it is advisable that such beliefs are made explicit so that administrators, teachers and students can make crucial decisions in teaching a foreign language, and of course decide whether or not exposing beliefs is actually feasible due to the communication style preferences aforementioned in Colombian society.

Another issue present when adopting a teaching approach has to do with the benefits (or lack thereof) such approach could bring about in learning from its theoretical foundations. Recent SLA research has focused on the importance of negotiation of meaning that leads learners to language acquisition (Long, 1996; Pica, 1994). Such research has found that language learners tend to transform input into intake when language is used as a vehicle for classroom communication. In light of this principle, the TBL framework has many advantages to reproduce positively these SLA research principles due to its communicative nature. In Willis' (1996) words, the TBL allows learners to develop similar real-life situations in the classroom using any type of language available. In doing this, it is expected that learners improve their confidence while

speaking a second language, negotiate new identities (Norton, 2000; Block, 2007), and above all, learn the target language by using it.

Although the TBL framework appears to agree with current SLA research, other scholars have introduced a series of newly introduced SLA concepts such as those of marked input vs. unmarked input and the role of a first language when learning a second language. Moreover, more SLA concerns have been flourishing as research in the field advances; one of these concerns has to do with the role of instruction and the success in second\foreign language instruction where FonF (focus on form or grammar-oriented instruction) has demonstrated to be more beneficial than FonFs (Focus on Forms or communicative instruction) when teaching beginners (See Sheen, 2000, for a succinct explanation of FonF vs. FonFs). With these concerns in mind, one cannot help but question the efficiency of an approach that dominantly provides learners with communicative language learning and that partially neglects the role of FonF instruction, especially when research has demonstrated that language instruction has to be adapted between FonF and FonFs depending on the learners' L1 features and L2 target grammatical features (Lightbown as cited in Doughty & Williams, 1998 and Spada, 1997).

Leaving the intercultural and language acquisition concerns aside, another issue on the agenda is the use of technology which has become a major concern in a task-oriented teaching approach. The CEFR in some sections refers vaguely to the use and role of technology in language education. Given the advances in the field, it is inevitable to neglect the use of computer technology in language education, especially when its potential (both theoretical and empirically demonstrated) for enhancing language acquisition is promising (See Chapelle, 2003). Therefore, educators and language program administrators must bear in mind that a task-oriented teaching approach is to be implemented in tandem with computer technology that allows students to gain autonomy, enhanced contact with the target language, and the opportunity to develop both low-order and high-order thinking skills that will prepare them for the 21st century. Perhaps the most clear-cut connection between the TBL and technology has been made by Butler-Pascoe and Wiburg (2003); their work includes an important methodological discussion followed by a wide range of activities language educators can implement in order to improve second\foreign language instruction by using the TBL.

Despite the fact that Butler-Pascoe and Wiburg's (2003) work is an important attempt to connect technology and the TBL, more questions regarding the use of computer technology in the language classroom remain unanswered. These questions make up two areas of research interest: computer-technology oriented questions and methodological questions. In the following section, such research interests will be discussed in detail.

Questions about the Use of Technology in the Language Classroom

Computer Technology-related Questions

1) **Why does a framework for teaching languages (second and foreign) completely neglect the use of technology in education?** This question works under the assumption that computer technology is necessary for language learners in order to prepare them for being active members of internet-driven societies in which computer literacy becomes a gate-keeping device for computer illiterate members as explained by Cummins, Brown and Sayers (2007). This claim is controversial in nature, but if it is not true, how can one explain local efforts conducted in order to provide schools with computers as done by *Computadores para Educar* as reported by Sánchez, Rodríguez, and Márquez (2010) in Colombian territory?

2) **What's the next curricular step language educators and program administrators have to locally take into account if they want to fully take advantage of the role of technology in education?** Importing wholesale approaches does not necessarily result in improved acquisition. Proof of this is the fact that the CEFR overtly neglects the role of technology in education. This inevitably creates a chronic need to begin local efforts for the inclusion of technology and the use of video games because of the motivational factor added and the enhanced way to present input, and their potential to encourage incidental vocabulary acquisition as seen in Squire, Giovanetto, Devane and Durga's (2005) study.

An initial reference point to understanding the relationship between education and using video games can be taken from Games-to-teach team's work (2003) which has pointed out how computer technology is restricted by traditional curricular organization and teachers' beliefs (Ertmer, 2005). Likewise, Yang and Huang (2008) have observed that curricular structure completely neglects technology and it becomes language educators' and program administrators' responsibility to take action in contexts where foreign language curricula do not set the right conditions for the use of technology.

Virtual realities and augmented realities are also areas to be researched and to be included in the construction of a local framework for the reference of teaching languages. Such framework should favor the use of technology and the use of video games as tools to recreate the target language's context by means of simulation games as presented by McFarlane and Kirriemuir (2004)

3) **What's the role of video games and simulation software to enhance foreign language instruction?** Games-to-teach team (2003) has also discussed how video games serve more than an entertainment purpose in education. It would be an interesting path to explore how simulation software and video games can enhance the acquisition of a language in contexts (as the local context) where the native context of English is completely absent. This idea is reinforced by the fact that SLA social theories have given context a special value for learning. Similarly, let us not forget that Chapelle (2003) has argued how traditional models of language interaction gain more importance where such models take place inside the learners' mind when communicating either with a computer or another human being in computer-mediated communication (learners' internal voice, See Chapelle 2003).

Methodological Question

4) **What's the role of a task-oriented language teaching approach in foreign language teacher education programs?** Although the TBL framework has been explored for the general public, one wonders how beneficial it is for teacher education where language objectives are higher than any other context. As mentioned elsewhere, both FonF instruction and FonFs instruction tend to complement each other, generally speaking, due to L1 language features and the markedness or unmarkedness of language input. However, to the best of my knowledge it is unknown how these two paths gain more relevance in foreign language teacher education programs, particularly since the CEFR assumes that language learning is a monolithic activity sought by a group of equal members with exactly the same purposes. This is obviously not the case if one compares the purposes of a foreign language teacher program and an ordinary EFL course.

What intercultural areas represent a middle ground (and a potential culture clash) between the cultural models where the CEFR was originally designed to be implemented and the cultural characteristics of the Colombian context?

In this document, some areas of intercultural concern have been discussed. Nonetheless, it is important to fully understand what is being imported methodologically into the Colombian language classrooms and how such innovations could represent a local benefit or a cultural assault.

Implications and Suggestions

In order to provide support to the points being made in this document, a small group of pre-service language educators were surveyed in a language teacher education program in

Bogotá. These teachers were surveyed after having begun their practicum at a public school in Bogotá. It is important to mention that these teachers had had formal education in specific areas such as Teaching Methods and Approaches of English as well as Language Pedagogy. In one of these courses, students have to study local legislation including studying the CEFR. These pre-service teachers were asked about the efficacy of the following three areas in their teaching practice pertaining specifically to the following areas:

- Interculturality (as proposed in the CEFR as plurilingualism, and the section on intercultural competence, section 5.1.2.2, p. 104)
- World Englishes (as explained throughout the CEFR regarding language varieties)
- Task-based learning approach (as presented in the CEFR Chapter 7)

After analyzing the results of this open-ended survey, it was found that pre-service teachers' overall reaction to the teaching of interculturality, the importance of the varieties of English, and the use of the TBL framework are perceived to be important items in the agenda, yet not compatible with the reality of students at the public school where the participants have done their practicum. For instance, regarding the teaching of interculturality and the claims of plurilingualism, the group of five pre-service teachers considers such matters important, yet simply informative and completely disconnected from the reality of students. Further, some pre-service teachers pointed out the fact that the probabilities for their students to travel abroad and experience intercultural communication are rather low due to the socio-economic conditions, beliefs and the abstract value of education of individuals in poverty as explained by Payne (2005). Finally, one of the five pre-service teachers indicated that a good way to teach interculturality is to focus on the marked and unmarked differences of cultures sharing the same native language of students, that is, the cultures of other Latin American nations. Of course, the idea of interculturality exclusively taking place internationally is debatable, and more doubts remained regarding the possibility of an ill-defined concept of interculturallity not taking place among the diverse cultures within a nation, and not only outside its boundaries.

Other items inhibiting the success and the importance of teaching interculturality, plurilingualism, and an awareness of language varieties (in this case varieties of English) are perceived to stem from inadequate administrative support on behalf of public schools limiting the possibilities of students to interact with other cultures. Likewise, it was pointed out that it would be more beneficial to consider the actual reality of students, their needs and how interculturality needs to be tuned up to meet such needs in the context of public schools.

The second item explored was the importance of teaching the differences among the varieties of English and their sociolinguistic component as explained in the CEFR. Some of the pre-service teachers pointed out that the teaching of sociolinguistics and the varieties of English were not immediately important, since learning at least one variety among the many

would be a great achievement per se. Other comments again referred to how irrelevant all the theory could be for students given their socio-economic backgrounds.

The third item explored in the survey was the use of the TBL framework. Some of the surveyed pre-service teachers commented that students were not really aware of the role of English thus their lack of interest and motivation did not allow using any sophisticated methodologies. Another issue mentioned was that there are not enough hours to teach English, and that the TBL usually takes time to accomplish due to the different stages it has. Similarly, some of the pre-service teachers commented that classrooms were overcrowded. Therefore, using approaches such as the TBL was simply not possible. A final problem was related to the attitude of students who simply want to obtain a high school diploma in order to enter the job market and not take education very seriously.

As reviewed above, the survey results have pointed out other factors inhibiting the underlying principles stated in the CEFR. These results reinforce the points already made by Ayala and Álvarez, (2005) in regard to the inappropriateness of the CEFR in various areas such as the impact of public policy in the social, political and economic realms. It is expected that this nascent academic debate and the results obtained from the surveyed pre-service teachers in this document foster further discussion in the following areas:

The existent gap between public policy and foreign language education in Colombia.

The reality of primary and secondary public schools, the needs of their students and the possibilities to learn a foreign language.

The chronic need to create public policy based on real needs without neglecting the role of its participants in the local and global economy.

As a final note, the CEFR offers a methodologically sound platform which may be partially compatible with the local modes of behavior and underlying societal beliefs of language classrooms in Colombia. Nevertheless, it appears that fully importing a framework for language policy as done by the Ministry of Education is a step that requires more attention given the reasons articulated in this document. Further research in the areas of the appropriateness of a task-oriented approach in teacher education programs (and naturally other contexts!), the SLA implications as regards the type of language instruction, and the role of technology could provide language program administrators, in-service EFL teachers, and the academic community an opportunity to develop proposals for public policy that meet the needs and the reality of the Colombian context. That is, how to locally create a language teaching approach and public policy that meets local needs?

A first step would be to increase the number of studies in which the reality of public schools in Colombia is described. If a large stock of studies existed in the area, then it would

be much easier to pinpoint overall problematic areas that ultimately could serve as the foundation for the creation of public policy based on the different ongoing situations and needs. One could foresee such studies to be more sociological, sociolinguistic and economic in nature rather than merely linguistic ones.

Another way to get to the core of the issue of language public policy vs. linguistic needs of students in public schools is to document in a religious manner the different action-research studies conducted by pre-service teachers as part of their graduation requirements. In my experience as a thesis-writing advisor, I have found out very rich, yet ignored material coming from the real classrooms and the real experiences of pre-service teachers. Such material is usually archived in thick books that are hardly ever consulted. As an alternative, undergraduate students should be required to enter academic life by publishing their experiences when doing their practicum. This publishing exercise is ambitious, yet feasible and has demonstrated some acceptance at Universidad Libre where undergraduate students are required not only to write a research paper, but also to publish an article in which they reflect upon their experiences during their practicum. This exercise has proved to be beneficial not only for the general public, but also for the students themselves in that they begin to see Academia as something more realistic and less esoteric.

Finally, efforts to gather different experiences should not be made to simply accumulate academic capital; rather they should collect sound reasons in order to take action to abolish de facto public policy that works under enormous assumptions and pretensions that are not even a possibility in the Colombian context.

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