

The Influence of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in the Asia-Pacific Region

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Abstract

In the last 15 years the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has become a very influential basis for the design of language curricula and the assessment of language learning outcomes, not only in its home continent but around the world. This article provides a basic introduction to the CEFR and then identifies the issues that have arisen when governments and language educationists have set out to apply the framework in the education systems of Taiwan, Japan and China. There is also some discussion of initiatives to establish national frameworks as alternative to the CEFR in Australia and New Zealand. The conclusion is that it is difficult to achieve a balance between the desirability of setting international standards in language learning and the need to represent the social and educational contexts of particular countries.

Keywords: the Common European Framework of Reference, Asia-Pacific Region, International Benchmarking, Language Assessment

Introduction

In many countries in the world, there is a concern to establish standards for English language teaching in terms of international benchmarks. To some degree this function is performed at the university level by the major international proficiency tests like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). For example, the TOEFL Program publishes an annual summary of scores on the internet-based TOEFL (iBT), which includes a table of mean scores by country (Educational Testing Service, 2014). The table shows that among the ASEAN countries, iBT examinees who take the test in Singapore have the highest mean score, followed by those in Malaysia and the Philippines. By contrast, Thailand has a lower mean, but one that is above those for Cambodia and Laos. Of course, iBT test-takers are not representative of all the English learners in a country, but the mean scores may give a broad indication of the level of English proficiency achieved among the country's population.

The Common European Framework (CEFR) in Europe

A more comprehensive approach to defining international standards is represented by the Common European Framework for Languages, or CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). Since its publication, the framework has rapidly achieved a dominant role in language education throughout Europe and, perhaps more remarkably, has been influential in many countries around the world (Byram & Parmenter, 2012). It has clearly met a perceived need to specify the outcomes of language learning in functional terms, although a number of applied linguists have been critical of the extent of its impact and have pointed out numerous limitations of the framework in meeting all the needs of its users (Fulcher, 2004; Hulstijn, 2007; Weir, 2005).

The CEFR is widely seen as primarily a framework for defining levels of proficiency for assessment purposes. The basic six-level scale from A1 to C2 appears to express a natural progression in language learning from beginner to intermediate level and on to advanced proficiency. In addition, the CEFR document includes multiple scales which describe language ability by means of statements of what learners can do at various levels in functional terms rather than their knowledge of grammar or vocabulary. The focus on practical skills is very much in keeping with the modern emphasis on the development of communicative ability as the primary goal of language teaching.

However, it is important to make the point that the CEFR is about a lot more than just assessment. The sub-title of the 2001 volume is “Learning, teaching, assessment”, and the document is concerned with the processes and goals of language learning and teaching as much as with the assessment of learning outcomes. As stated on the website, the CEFR “was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency” (Council of Europe, 2014). Thus, for example, it has become a routine practice to label English teaching materials as targeting a particular CEFR level.

It is useful to trace the history of the CEFR back to the Modern Languages Project of the Council of Europe in the 1970s, when the primary interest was in adult language learning to promote what is now called “plurilingualism” (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 4-5). This means that European citizens should not just study languages formally in school but should be encouraged to develop competence in a variety of languages to meet their communicative needs throughout adult life. To facilitate this objective, the project team worked on a number of concepts and tools which have now become very familiar, particularly in the context of Languages for Specific Purposes: needs analysis, the notional-functional syllabus, learner autonomy, goal setting, criterion-referenced assessment, self-assessment, and the language portfolio. From the 1980s onwards, the CEFR has also been applied to language learning in schools, but until now the various descriptive scales in the framework have not been revised to reflect this expanded application. Obviously, younger language learners differ from adults in a number of ways. One significant difference is that many young Europeans are in school bilingual programmes (particularly those known as Content and Language Integrated Learning, or CLIL) (Coyle, 2008), in which they are not only acquiring second language skills but also studying school subjects through the medium of L2. The CEFR lacks scales and descriptors for this type of academic learning.

Two recent academic conferences in Europe have been devoted to a systematic review of the current status of the CEFR within its home continent: “Language testing: Time for a new framework?” at the University of Antwerp in Belgium in May 2013 (www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=LT-CEFR2013); and “The CEFR and language testing and assessment – Where are we now?” (11th EALTA Conference) at the University of Warwick, UK, in May 2014 (www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/conferences/ealta2014/). At the EALTA Conference, it was reported that there are projects underway to extend the CEFR descriptors in various ways, by specifying more fully the A and C levels, and balancing the current over-representation of speaking descriptors with more in the other three skill areas. Contemporary language uses that need to be better represented include: reading for pleasure, using modern

telecom systems, and written online interaction (discussion forums). The Council of Europe plans to publish an Extended Set of Illustrative Descriptors in 2015 to supplement the 2001 book.

Interest in the framework has spread well beyond those who are directly involved in language education. As McNamara (2014) has pointed out, the CEFR appeals to policymakers who need to respond to calls for accountability in education. Thus, the framework has come to function as a management tool for government officials to exercise control over language education by specifying learning outcomes in general terms, without reference to a particular test. It is also attractive as a means of defining minimum levels of language proficiency in contexts such as higher education, employment and immigration. “The functionality of a universal letter/number system to code the six levels is a key feature of the CEFR, which makes it attractive to administrators and policymakers” (2014, p. 227). For example, UK Visas and Immigration (formerly the United Kingdom Border Agency) specifies the minimum language requirements for the issue of various types of visa for entry to Britain in terms of levels on the CEFR, which can be assessed through various approved English tests.

The CEFR in East Asia

As previously stated, the influence of the CEFR has spread well beyond Europe and it is interesting to compare how three different societies in East Asia have responded to it. In Taiwan, the Government wanted to have a basis for evaluating the level of English ability of students, English teachers and civil servants according to a common standard. As Wu (2012) explains, although there was already a national test, the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), Taiwan is a competitive, free-market society and there was pressure to recognize other, international English tests as well for this purpose, in order to give test-takers a choice as to which test they could take. Therefore, the Ministry of Education decided in 2005 to adopt the CEFR “as a common yardstick of English language proficiency in the country” (Wu, 2012, p. 213). This meant that each of the recognized tests (including the GEPT) needed to be calibrated against the CEFR so that its scores could be interpreted in terms of the levels on the framework. Then minimum standards were defined. For example, students graduating from an English teacher education programme are expected to achieve at least the B2 level, whereas other university graduates have the B1 level as their target.

In compliance with this policy, the provider of the GEPT, the Language Training and Testing Center at National Taiwan University, undertook a project to map the five levels of their reading test on to the six levels of the Common European Framework. They were able to demonstrate a very acceptable level of alignment between the first four levels of the GEPT and the A2 to C1 levels of the CEFR. However, Wu (2012) points out that there were a number of problems with the process of calibrating tests to the framework. First, there is the general conceptual difficulty (which is very familiar to language testers) in comparing the results of tests which have been designed differently for a variety of purposes on a common “equivalency table”. The second problem is that the Ministry of Education in Taiwan does not have the technical expertise to evaluate the validity of the claims made by test publishers that their tests have indeed been aligned with the CEFR. Thirdly, it was not clear how assessment of English proficiency according to the CEFR related to the grading criteria used by the universities to assess their students’ achievement in English through their course work.

This last problem takes us back to the point that the CEFR is not simply an assessment framework. In order for it to function effectively in the Taiwanese context, those involved in

English language education need to understand its underlying principles and apply (or adapt them) in their teaching in ways that are socially and culturally appropriate. Cheung (2012) notes in particular that, in a society where English is a foreign language, school students in Taiwan do not have the exposure to the language or the opportunities to use it communicatively that would allow them to demonstrate the kinds of skills that are described on the CEFR scales. According to Cheung, it would be a massive task to adapt the framework, especially for learners in elementary school.

In Japan a team of language researchers at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies undertook just such a project to adapt the CEFR to the Japanese context. The main project ran from 2008 to 2011 and resulted in a version of the framework which they have labelled the “CEFR-J” (Negishi & Tono, 2014). There were two main ways in which the CEFR was adapted. First, the researchers took account of the fact that more than 80 per cent of Japanese learners and users of English (the dominant foreign language in Japan) are located at Levels A1 and A2 of the framework. Thus, they added a Pre-A1 level and divided the A1 level into three sub-levels (A1.1, A1.2 and A1.3), in order to differentiate among Japanese learners with a very basic amount of English ability. Similarly, Levels A2 to B2 were divided into two sub-levels. The other adaptation was a thorough review of the level descriptors in the CEFR so that they would better reflect the degree of difficulty that Japanese learners experienced in performing various communicative tasks in English and the opportunities to use English in the Japanese context. Both teachers and learners were used as informants in this process.

Thus, the CEFR-J has been very much modeled on the principles and procedures followed in Europe in the development of the original framework, but with the necessary modifications to make it suitable for use with Japanese learners. In addition to the new can-do statements, the project team have been developing companion resources for the CEFR-J, including a handbook for teachers and a wordlist which specifies the target vocabulary for learners at the various levels of the framework. They are also analysing corpora of textbooks and of Japanese learner language to identify grammatical and lexical features which are associated with levels of the CEFR-J. Another objective of the project has been to track the impact of the CEFR-J through innovative use of “big data analysis” to identify positive and negative references to the framework in the media and on the web in Japan.

A new initiative in China has taken a different approach from the Japanese one. Rather than adapting the CEFR, the project team has proposed the development of a Common Chinese Framework of Reference for Languages (CCFR), with a particular focus on the teaching of English (Jin et al., 2014). According to the authors, there are seven English language curricula for different levels of the education system, which have each been established without much reference to the others and with their own separate tests as measures of student achievement. Thus, a major concern of the project is “to improve the coherence and efficiency of foreign language education (especially English)” in China (Jin et al, 2014, p. 10). The authors argue that laying the groundwork for a CCFR would provide the opportunity to examine some fundamental questions about language education in the country. These include: what the motivations are for Chinese learners to study foreign languages; at which age they should begin foreign language study; what learning resources are available to them; what their cognitive processes are in language learning; which languages (and which variety/-ies of English) should be taught; and what proficiency levels they should aim to achieve (Jin et al., 2014, p. 23).

However, the project team also recognized that there were major challenges to overcome. At the macro-political level, they describe the Chinese education system as highly segmented, with different government departments having responsibility for education at the various levels. Currently there is a lack of transparency and coordination in the way that the various language curricula are designed, and this would create barriers to the acceptance and implementation of a common framework. At the micro-level, many stakeholders have vested interests in the current system and would resist the imposition of a new one. These include examination boards, publishers of teaching materials and textbook writers, as well as teachers and learners, who would need to adjust to the newly formulated learning objectives.

The initial work on the project was conducted under the auspices of the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP), the largest publisher of foreign language materials in China. It has now been taken over by the National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA), the agency directly under the Ministry of Education with overall responsibility for national examinations in China (Yan Jin, personal communication, August 22, 2014). This enhances the prospects that the project will move forward, but it remains to be seen how effectively the CCFR can be implemented throughout the education system, once it has been developed.

National Frameworks for Australia and New Zealand?

In the light of the CCFR initiative, it is worth reporting that in the last decade there have been less ambitious projects in both Australia and New Zealand to explore the possibility of having their own national frameworks for defining English language proficiency levels, particularly for international students at universities and other tertiary institutions. In New Zealand the project was initiated by Education New Zealand, the organization which promotes education opportunities internationally on behalf of both public and private providers (Read & Hirsh, 2005), whereas the Australian project was undertaken with funding from the federal Department of Education, Science and Training (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2007). The focus of the Australian project was on ELICOS Centres, which offer English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students, and which must meet high quality standards regulated by the government.

Both projects involved first a review of the literature on English proficiency frameworks and then a survey of academic managers and teachers in language schools across the country to obtain their views on the proposed framework. The results were quite similar in the two cases. Among the arguments in favour of a national framework were: the perceived need for more consistency in reporting students' proficiency levels; the desirability of making assessments and certificates more portable when students transferred from one education provider to another; the potential to improve the assessment skills of teachers; and the value of the framework as a marketing tool for recruiting students from abroad. Most of the survey respondents accepted these points.

Nevertheless, the arguments against a national framework were stronger. First, a number of language schools had already invested a lot of resources in developing their own assessment procedures and they were reluctant either to share them with other providers or to replace them with a new national proficiency framework. Partly for this reason, there was really no powerful motivation for introducing such a framework, and no indication from either of the organizations which set up the two research projects that they would be willing or able to provide the substantial amount of funding required to develop a proficiency framework in a professional

manner. Perhaps the most telling argument was that the levels defined by a national framework would not be understood or accepted internationally, so they would need to be benchmarked against a framework like the CEFR anyway to achieve wider currency.

In practice, the IELTS test is well established in both of these countries as the preferred international test for assessing the proficiency of international students. The meaning of IELTS band scores is widely understood and they act as a means for ESOL professionals to identify students' English levels and to specify the minimum entry requirement for a particular language course. However, Elder and O'Loughlin (2007) found that, among the frameworks their Australian survey participants were familiar with, there was a preference for the CEFR as the most suitable one for their purposes. This led the authors to propose that individual ELICOS centres could make a voluntary decision to apply the CEFR to their own teaching program. They suggested that this could involve an initiative to enhance the assessment literacy of their teachers; the alignment of their own internal assessments to the CEFR; or as a starting point for new curricula and assessments.

Conclusion

The CEFR has been so influential around the world, and is so attractive to policymakers and educational administrators, that it is difficult to ignore. This means that it is easy to assume that the framework can be applied universally to second language learning situations. However, it was developed in the particular context of adult language learning in Europe and still reflects that context in many respects. Many language educationists in East Asia have come to recognize that the CEFR must be adapted, if not completely re-thought, if it is to play a meaningful role in defining language learning objectives and curricula in their own education systems. The ideal of international benchmarking of learner achievements in acquiring second languages has to be balanced against the diversity of social and educational contexts in particular countries. In Australia and New Zealand, the relatively modest initiatives to develop a national framework were not successful, and it remains to be seen whether the more ambitious Common Chinese Framework of Reference will come to fruition in the longer term.

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