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The Relevance of the CEFR to Teacher Training

What is the CEFR about?

1. The CEFR and Teacher Training

This article considers certain aspects of the CEFR in relation to teacher training; readers are referred to North (2007) in this journal for a more detailed description of the work itself. Teachers' view of the CEFR tends to be oversimplified, confusing it with the European Language Portfolio and focusing on the six levels. Readers may be surprised to hear that, although there are guides and articles about the CEFR, there is in fact little published about the implications of the CEFR for teaching apart from Keddle (2004), Goullier (2006/7) and Westoff (2007a; 2007b). A Council of Europe survey of Member States in 2005 (Council of Europe, 2006) found that although use of the CEFR in teacher training is widespread, the focus tends to be on the reference levels and the descriptors, with little mention of the CEFR's descriptive scheme as a way of conceptualising language learning and use, nor of the "action-oriented approach" as an inspiration for teaching. At an intergovernmental CEFR Forum, (Council of Europe, 2007) there was much discussion of the need for practical guidance for curriculum developers, preferably with case studies showing the development of CEFR-based curricula and of teaching materials linked to it. There was stated to be a need to develop training kits for teachers, materials illustrating the implications of the proficiency levels in different contexts, and for documents making the CEFR more accessible for teachers.

As stated in the introduction the course reported tried to provide this accessibility, focusing on planning, teaching and assessment. The biggest surprises for this writer in that process were (a) the ease with which the participants acquired a good feel for the levels – given access to CEFR criteria grids from the CEFR exam manual (Council of Europe, 2003 / forthcoming) and the related spoken and written illustrative samples for English, French, German and Italian now available, and on the other hand (b) the considerable difficulty many had in grasping what the CEFR implies for planning and teaching. It is these issues that this article focuses on.

2. The CEFR and Planning

The main methodological implications of the CEFR all concern planning: ***needs analysis*****:** select objectives (communicative and linguistic) related to tasks the learners are going to have to perform in the language, rather than teaching obscure parts of the grammar; ***action-orientation*****:** present objectives in terms of what learners will be able to *do* in the language, always linking language taught to fluency practice in communicative tasks; ***transparency*****:** inform learners about the objectives and involve them to some extent in the setting and in the monitoring achievement of them – even as far as ***self-assessment*** (North, 2007: 26). The CEFR/ELP "Can Do" descriptors offer an ideal starting point for planning years, semesters, weeks and even lessons, ensuring a link between real life tasks and language points necessary to perform them effectively. Some schools, like Eurocentres, publish

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formal objectives in the classroom (a) for the term as a whole and (b) for this week in particular – showing a link between the two. Such documents typically have two sections: communicative tasks (= "Can Do" descriptors) and language resources necessary (= grammar, vocabulary). Other schools use an "Aims box" with an abbreviated "Can Do" written in a top corner of the whiteboard. Course books and examinations also increasingly make explicit reference to "Can Do's" in order to relate to real-world objectives.

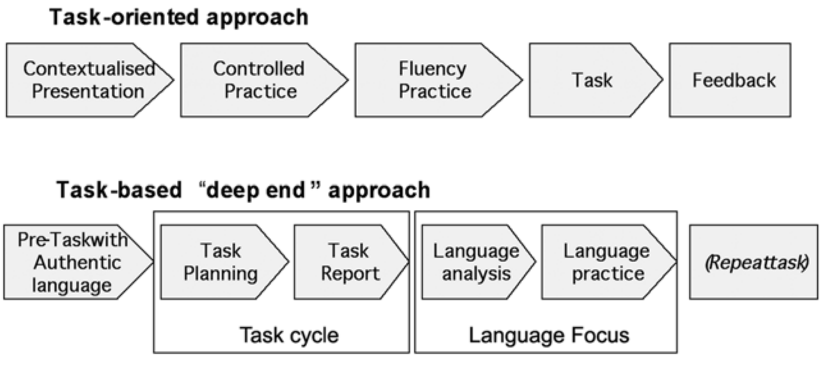
The key to planning of this type is (a) to select clusters of CEFR/ELP "Can Do's" that can be considered together, (b) to identify the necessary enabling language, making it transparent to the learners and teaching it explicitly, and (c) to select and adapt appropriate CEFR descriptors for the quality of language expected, that can serve as assessment criteria for giving marks.

3. The CEFR and Teaching

An "action-oriented approach" as promoted by the CEFR involves tasks and texts. At lower levels, there is a tendency for tasks to be situation-based and for texts to be mainly everyday artefacts relevant to those situations. At higher levels there is a tendency for tasks to become more text-based, involving information exchange, summarising, glossing and debate in relation to those texts. Some people express the opinion that the CEFR is hostile to the teaching of literature, but this could not be farther from the truth; it is easy to identify CEFR/ELP descriptors at especially Level B2 that are directly relevant to an active exploitation of literature as teaching material.

At the risk of oversimplifying, one might say that the action-oriented approach emphasises a familiar truth: the essential difference between good and bad language teaching is summarised by the extent of and sophistication of the connections between action and language in both the aims themselves and in the classroom activities designed to achieve them. As shown in Figure 1, the connections can be in two directions: (a) a "task-oriented" approach in which one teaches language, gives communicative drills to achieve fluency, and then looser tasks in which learners (should) use the target language at the end of the "unit", or (b) what Brumfit (1984), using a swimming analogy, called the "deep-end approach." Since Willis (1996), this approach is usually referred to as "task-based:" one starts with a task that calls for a "contingent use of language" (Widdowson 1984), and then adds language practice as required.

Figure 1: Tasks in the Pedagogic Sequence



One should not lose sight of the fact that, in the abstract, both approaches are equally valid. However, the task-*based* approach assumes that the language necessary for the task is already present in the group. Whilst this may be the case in a university pre-sessional course or a short, intensive language learning stay abroad, it is not necessarily true in a lower secondary classroom; input has to come from somewhere. There is one point on which there is near unanimity in second language acquisition research: although meaning is primary, there *must* be an explicit focus on form at some point if learning is to take place. If learners do not notice something, how can they learn it? In discussing tasks and the CEFR both Königs (2006) and Goullier (2006/7) stress that task-orientation does not make explicit practice obsolete; without practice the learner will not always have the resources for the task. Learning a sport or skill always requires repetition and controlled practice of subskills as well as the whole skill, plus knowledge; football players go jogging and study tactics as well as practising specific moves - and playing practice matches. With new language, repetition in contextualised practice shifts new grammar, vocabulary and functional "chunks" down into more stable interlanguage. This may seem obvious, but is worth remembering.

Whether one takes a task-oriented or task-based approach, there is the question "When is something a task and not just an exercise or an activity?" Goullier (2007: 21), Skehan (1998: 268) and Königs (2006) give useful definitions of what constitutes a task in language learning, the key points of which are as follows:

- Goal: The activity must be purposeful; there must be a reason for it.
- Meaning: Opportunities must exist for personal meaning - not just mechanical regurgitation.
- Interactive: The activity must be in

some way collaborative; there is an element of collectivity.

- Cognition: Processes like framing (how to go about it), negotiating, collaborating, taking stock.
- Outcome: There is a result, a report, an evaluation – plus reflection of some kind.

It is of course unrealistic to expect that learners will be accurate all the time when performing a task. However, teachers are often unaware of the fact that whereas fluency is a linear phenomenon that increases with level, this is not the case with accuracy. Klein (1986: 108) and Fulcher (1993), for example, show that accuracy actually decreases around Level B1; mistakes increase as learners struggle to use language for real communication. Westhoff (2007a; 2007b) points out that this fact is reflected in the CEFR illustrative descriptors. It is the attempted use of new, more complex language that should be encouraged – and fear of making mistakes discourages this. Complexity of language (range) should be assessed positively as well as accuracy being assessed negatively.

4. The CEFR and Assessment

This brings one to the question of assessment – and criteria for it. It is surprising that any secondary school language teachers should still give grades by counting mistakes, like in the 1950s. It is equally astonishing to claim to test language ability without assessing speaking. Perhaps the main effect of the CEFR on school systems so far – notably in Germany – has been to finally win the argument that oral assessment is necessary and should be based on criteria for qualitative aspects of language use (e.g. complexity, accuracy, fluency, interaction and discourse coherence, as in CEFR Table 3). North (2005) described in this journal one way to do this with speaking; similar approaches can be used for writing.

The key to sensible assessment in relation to the CEFR is principled selection of "Can Do's" for communicative tasks (CEFR Chapter 4) linked to sensible adoption of qualitative aspects like those listed above (CEFR Chapter 5), plus standardisation training for those involved in the production of tests and the evaluation of performances. The Manual for examination providers (Council of Europe, 2003 / forthcoming) gives advice on how to relate listening and reading tests to the CEFR. Some of the articles which follow show examples.

5. Conclusion

The CEFR is not a method and it is certainly not a panacea, but it is considerably more than just a set of six proficiency levels. It offers an opportunity to look at planning, teaching and assessment from different perspectives and see how they all link up. Joined-up-thinking is the key, as shown in the following articles.

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