

Language Teaching in a European Context (II)

In the last TESOL-SPAIN Newsletter (Vol 24, Autumn/Winter 20001) I briefly described how the Common European Framework of Reference (CEF), a comprehensive definition of six levels of proficiency, is already beginning to have an impact upon the teaching and learning of languages within a European context. In this report I continue describing the growing significance of the CEF in Spain, with a summary of the *Congreso Nacional sobre la Enseñanza-Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras en España*, held by the *Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte*, at the Palacio de Congresos de Madrid, 25th- 27th October, 2001.

In the second part I further examine the usefulness of CEF to teachers of foreign languages in terms of the scaling of communicative proficiency through a brief a summary of a presentation I gave at the GRETA jornadas, 'Just (*think before you*) Do It' in September: 'What's in a Level?' which looks at issues surrounding describing a student's communicative proficiency using terms like elementary, intermediate, etc. It seems that many of us involved in EFL (teachers, course designers, textbook writers) have significant differences in perceptions of communicative proficiency at various levels.

The Autumn/Winter 2001 TESOL-SPAIN Newsletter also included a competition, listing 21 language-related tasks (each tied to the CEF), and invited members to estimate the level at which a student who could perform each task should be placed. At the end of this report are the answers to the quiz and the two winners, who each receive free matricula to the *25 Edición de Jornadas para Profesores de Inglés, "Access Europe: Language as a Common Currency"*, to be held in Madrid, March 15th – 17th, 2002.

Congreso Nacional sobre la Enseñanza-Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras en España

In October, 2001, the *Subdirección General de Programas Europeos del Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte*, in collaboration with the *Instituto Superior de Formación*, held a three day national conference which was attended by around 300 teachers working in the different State school sectors. This conference took place in accordance with the principal objectives of the European Year of Languages (2001) and was directed at professionals in the field of education who are closely involved with the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Spain.

Dr J. L. Trim (Project Director for Modern Languages, Council of Europe, 1971 – 1997) gave the opening plenary in which he contrasted the characteristics of the 'classical paradigm' for foreign language learning (in which knowledge of a language was the focus of study) with those of a 'modern paradigm' which looks to language teaching and learning in a world in which being able to use the language is paramount. It included a linguistic situational analysis of language knowledge in the European Union which, in turn, laid the foundations for an explanation of the CEF. The introduction to the event

met the first of four objectives of the conference, namely to present and disseminate the directives and studies carried out in the field of language education as part of the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

The second objective of the conference was to provide a situational analysis of foreign language education in the Spanish education system. Presentations centred on language education and communicative competence at each level of the Spanish Education system: Pre-school education, Primary education, Secondary education, Bachillerato and Formación Profesional and Adult education. The final two objectives of the conference were to provide a platform for the presentation and the discussion of in-depth studies of new tendencies and educational focal points concerning foreign language education and to encourage innovation and research on language learning strategies and techniques. With a view to enriching teacher development and enhancing language learning there were presentations which analysed existing materials and provided criteria for the preparation of teaching materials.

Overall, the reports presented during the conference (produced nationally and supported by comparative studies in other European countries) showed that the level of acquisition of linguistic competence in Spain has not been in proportion with the input of material and human resources. It was suggested that this situation, which reflects the limitations and deficiencies of Spanish students' communicative capacity in foreign languages and revealed serious structural problems in education, demands a clear response, not only methodological and didactic, but also in terms of decision making at organisational and functional levels.

The impact of the CEF on the teaching of foreign languages in Spain is clear. The Framework, which provides categories for describing language use and the internal competences which enable a learner to use the language for communication, has provided a foundation for the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport to reflect upon communicative competence of students in the different educational sectors and has enabled the profession to begin to address emerging issues and problems with a view to anchoring achievement to a common European standard. It is 'enabling educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts' (Understanding the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, Council of Europe, Cambridge University Press, 2001 pg. 3).

The Scaling of Communicative Proficiency .. or What's in a Level?

One of the first problems we meet when considering this question is the terminology we use to label levels. Consider the following: In your teaching environment what 'in house' words or labels do you use to describe different levels? (e.g. elementary, etc.). What about your

coursebooks? Do your students attend classes in more than one institution? Do both institutions use the same terms to describe levels? If the answer is 'yes', do both institutions mean the same thing by the same term? Are your students level tested? How are levels determined?

In an article published in *ETp*, "Distinctions and Dichotomies", October, 2000, Roger Gower presented an interesting account of why the use of labels to describe levels might be of limited or even dubious value. He suggested many reasons for this; for example, in primary and secondary schools there is usually the assumption that learners will move roughly at the same speed, in academies 'elementary' might comprise complete and false beginners to make up numbers, and that not all elementary coursebooks are at the same level. However, if we situate ourselves in an ever-expanding community of diverse languages and cultures, with professionals looking to be better able to communicate with each other, as well as facilitate mobility of population, it becomes apparent that language teachers and learners will need to be able to describe their competencies by employing terms which hold the same significance for all users. Use of a common language, or meaning the same when we refer to a level, would:

- facilitate greater student mobility between classes, levels, schools and institutions (nationally and internationally),
- provide for more efficient communication between professionals and educational institutions (nationally and internationally),
- assist learners, teachers, course

designers, examining bodies, textbook and materials writers all to situate and co-ordinate their work,

- facilitate a common understanding of the elements or components comprising various levels of communicative competence and hence help in the planning of language learning programmes according to stated criteria,

- provide practitioners with criteria which enhance transparency and allow for the evaluation of the usefulness, appropriate and shortcomings of teaching materials (coursebooks, resource books for teachers),

- provide pointers for materials design and, for example, the exploitation of input material available on the www.

The descriptions of ability that were used for the quiz in the last edition of the Newsletter were taken from the different University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) handbooks. Each examination is scaled according to ALTE criteria (Association of Language Testers in Europe, which, in turn, is calibrated to the CEF). I asked 10 ELT practitioners (teachers in the different public sectors, academy teachers, course planners and evaluators, and coursebook writers) to do the activity and found an overall tendency to associate an ability to successfully complete the task with higher levels than they are actually used to refer to by UCLES. In 12 out of 21 cases more than 50% of responses followed this pattern. 3 other responses produced a range of levels, either from elementary to upper-intermediate, pre-intermediate to advanced or, finally (and incredibly), from elementary to very advanced. The same patterns continue to emerge as more

professionals complete the activity.

The answers to the quiz were as follows: 1d, 2a, 3b, 4d, 5a, 6a, 7d, 8d, 9f, 10b, 11a, 12e, 13d, 14d, 15e, 16a, 17b, 18d, 19e, 20f, 21b

The winners were: **M^a Pilar García Pérez**, Idiomas Santa Justa, Sevilla and **Luis Alfonso Díez**, IES Julio Verne, Leganés. Congratulations!

Leaving aside the important issue how language levels can be best described (for interesting coverage of this area see *Understanding the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, 205-6), it seems that, in Spain, we might have a different perception of difficulty level or scale from that used in the CEF and by UCLES. The CEF will provide a sound basis for all involved in the profession to situate ourselves with regards to levels. At the *25 Edición de Jornadas para Profesores de Inglés*, organised by TESOL-SPAIN, we are honoured to have Dr. J. L. Trim as one of our plenary speakers. He will be providing an introduction to the Framework, a discussion of its relevance to Spain, and also offering some comments on the role of Spanish in Europe. In addition, there will be many other presentations on the different aspects of language teaching and learning. For more details please consult the TESOL-SPAIN web site <http://www.tesol-spain.org>. Come and join us, and update on theory and practice so as to broaden your professional contribution to improving the teaching and learning of English in Spain and in a European context.

Annie McDonald
President TESOL SPAIN

References

Useful resources

Web Sites:

Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte: <http://www.mec.es/sgepe>

Waystage 1990, Council of Europe, J.A. van Ek and J.L. Trim, CUP, 1991

Threshold 1990, Council of Europe, J.A. van Ek and J.L. Trim, CUP, 1991

Vantage, CUP, 2001

Understanding the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, Council of Europe, CUP, 2001 (see also <http://www.cambridge.org>)

"Distinctions and Dichotomies", Roger Gower, in *English Teaching Professional*, October 2000, Issue Seventeen

The Quick Placement Test (available as pencil and paper test and in computer-based adaptive form) OUP, 2001

Council of Europe <http://www.culture.coe.int/lang>

ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) <http://www.alte.org>