

1 Introduction

The CEFR was created as a universal means to first and foremost standardise the assessment of language skills while at the same time promoting plurilingualism and fostering autonomous, intercultural competent citizens through action-based learning (Parmentier, 2014: 203). Being widely adopted even beyond European borders, the implementation of the CEFR takes place on various levels, from the actual classroom to government bodies. A development which can be classified into three levels as follows: 1) macro level - governmental educational policy makers, 2) meso level - institutional level and curricula, 3) micro level - the classroom. As education systems and teaching conditions vary widely across different nations, the CEFR should "...be contextualized in a suitable way, based on current conditions and salient issues in specific contexts" (O'Dwyer et al., 2017). However, it has widely been suggested the CEFR often is misused with a bias being placed on certain CEFR concepts, especially the most well-known proficiency scales and the 'Can Do' descriptors (North, 2014). This rigidity leads to skewed results in language ability assessment and hinders the original CEFR objectives.

2 The 'Critical, Constructive Assessment of CEFR-informed Language Teaching in Japan and Beyond' (CriConCef) Research Project

As higher education language teachers/researchers in Japan, we frequently come across the CEFR-J, a macro level Japanese adaptation of the CEFR for the Japanese education system designed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). However, as is often the case with macro level created guidelines, the CEFR-J was not accompanied with sufficient materials or practical guidelines and instructions for the meso and micro levels, leaving many teachers and curriculum developers uncertain how to actually implement the CEFR(-J) at their given institution or in their classroom. Similarly, the nationwide adoption of the CEFR in Vietnam has been passed on the macro level without proper support for the meso and micro levels. These top down approaches, that do not sufficiently consider lower levels, lead to the adoption of the CEFR remaining on the surface, without reaching the learner.

Similarly, most research on adaptation of the CEFR has focused on the macro level (e.g. Broek and Van den Ende, 2013, Figueras, 2012, Martyniuk and Noijons, 2007, Piccardo et al., 2011, Takala, 2013), again leading to a skewed perspective of the prevalence of the CEFR. In order to critically

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The CEFR as an immigrant in the globalised world?

Considerations from an Asian perspective

Abstract

Der GER (Gemeinsamer Europäischer Referenzrahmen für Sprachen) und das ESP (Europäisches Sprachenportfolio) werden weit über die Grenzen Europas hinaus angewandt und implementiert. In vielen nicht europäischen Ländern wurden der GER/ESP und ihre Prinzipien adaptiert und den Gegebenheiten vor Ort angepasst. Diese Entwicklung lässt sich sowohl auf der Makro- (Schulbehörden) als auch der Meso- (Institutionsebene) und der Mikroebene (im Unterricht) beobachten. Bei der Umsetzung des GER und der Verbindung der verschiedenen Ebenen gibt es jedoch häufig praktische Probleme. Dieser Artikel beleuchtet die Umsetzung des GER in zwei asiatischen Ländern, Japan und Vietnam.

but constructively assess implementation of the CEFR across all, but especially on the meso and micro levels, we undertook in-depth research at various institutions in Japan and Vietnam on the MEXT funded CriCon-Cef research project. For results to be comparable, assessment of realisation of the CEFR at a given institution needs to be transferable regardless of the specific conditions at that institution. We thus crystallised the following key questions that apply to any CEFR-implementing institution:

2.1 Key Questions

2.1.1 Curricula

What type of implementation has been adopted? What specific practices have been implemented? What practices have been seen to be effective?

The aim here is to generate ideas of current practice that can be adapted and implemented by others.

How are all stakeholders involved? Can the people engaging in CEFR-informed teaching and learning develop a sense of ownership? How?

The 'Can Do' descriptors of the CEFR are unwieldy if not contextualised effectively. The focus of this question is that teachers and learners should engage with the 'Can Do' descriptors (and the general principles of the CEFR and ELP), contextualising the 'Can Do' descriptors for individual classes and learners. In this way, they may develop a sense of ownership of the practices.

Has the CEFR promoted a system for in-house evaluation of curricula and learning targets? Do curricula and courses include transparent and concrete learning objectives, with accepted 'Can Do' descriptors at the centre? How?

This question is in response to the prevalent focus on testing (e.g. teaching to the test) and language knowledge over language use in language curricula in Japan. By focusing curricula on the competencies put forward by the CEFR, classroom learning may be focused and improved.

Is it possible to compare the results of instruction in different classes?

This is particularly relevant for tertiary level, where in many cases individual teachers work alone, with little co-ordination between classes. There is little relationship between what learners undertake in a first year class and second year class, for example. There is also the issue of a lack of links between what is learned at high school and university. Scaffolded, CEFR-informed curricula could be one solution.

2.1.2 Classroom instruction

While the latter two questions in section 2.1.1 most definitely apply to the classroom, key questions specific to this area include:

Do 'Can Do' checklists serve as the key reference point for processes of reflective learning in which self-assessment plays a central role? How?

This is based on the viewpoint of Little (2010: 171): that initiatives in the university context are most likely to succeed if 'Can Do' checklists serve as 'the key reference point for processes of reflective learning in which self-assessment plays a central role'. Reflection and self-assessment are important practices in which learner autonomy can be developed. Learning to learn is an important concept. Learners can become self-directed by finding out how to get to their desired learning 'destination'. It is thought that the effectiveness of reflection and self-assessment can be improved if they are combined with the learning progress mapped out in the CEFR self-assessment grid and illustrative scales. Learners often encounter this learning map via 'Can Do' checklists, which 'explode' a global scale of the CEFR. An example of reflective learning could include learners, aiming to write to the B2 level, defining the elements that contribute to the quality mentioned in a 'Can Do' descriptor 'expanding and supporting points of view at length' (Council of Europe, 2001: 61). If 'Can Do' checklists are used as reference points in assessment and reflection, then the learners are guided towards an appropriate learning 'destination'.

What are the interpretations of teachers, students and other stakeholders, of the philosophy and ideas of the CEFR?

Some initiatives have been pushed from the 'top-down', with little effort to engage teachers and others from the 'bottom-up'. It is important that those pushing initiatives consider those involved with language learning at other levels in the institution in question. This is directly related to the penultimate question below.

Are the CEFR-informed materials (textbooks, teaching content etc.) action-oriented, and easily applicable by both teachers and students? How?

Putting a CEFR stamp on the back of a book, or a 'Can Do' descriptor at the top of a chapter opening page may not be the most effective way to implement a CEFR informed programme. Appropriate learning outcomes should be at the centre of learning efforts.

Can all involved readily see the benefits of the CEFR-informed approach for their own teaching/learning? Is autonomous learning beyond the specified materials (e.g. textbooks) supported and encouraged? If so, how?

Autonomous learning, discussed above, is central to the lifelong view of learning that the CEFR and ELP movement promotes.

3 Assessment Grid

Based on the key questions above, we developed an assessment grid (see below) that reflects the degree of alignment of a given curriculum to the CEFR and thus enables corresponding adjustments. We would like this assessment grid understood not as a simple means for evaluation, but rather as a tool to highlight effective learning practices and their learning outcomes, with an understanding of the contextual choices that underlie these practices. This includes contextualising 'Can Do' descriptors for specific purposes, while also incorporating some important principles that underlie the CEFR including learner autonomy. North (2014) outlines some important steps for aligning a curriculum to the CEFR, and developing descriptors for communicative

language activities. Successful projects involve conducting a needs analysis to identify target situations and tasks, and find suitable 'Can Do' descriptors for these. The next step could be formulating 'Can Do' descriptors that briefly and positively describe tasks in a concrete manner. In validation teachers, learners, or both sort 'Can Do' descriptors, and give comments (North 2014: 145). Aligning a curriculum to the CEFR revolves around providing a clear idea of practical course aims. Steps, after needs analysis and presenting objectives, include: specifying objectives for different levels, sequencing objectives into short units of work, analysing the specific needs and interest of learners to decide final schedules and plans, presenting objectives and plans to learners, and involving learners in monitoring their achievement. These steps form the background of the assessment of the practices outlined in the chapter. Several frameworks are possible for analysing models of learning programme evaluation (e.g. Shufflebeam, 2000).

Table 1 Assessment grid for learning programmes

Language learner can receive tuition informed by the following	* ** ***
* = reasonably well, ** = well, *** = very well	
Teachers, students and other stakeholders accept the philosophy and ideas of the CEFR (e.g. learner-centred, forward-looking assessment)	
In-house evaluation of curricula and learning targets, informed by the CEFR	
Is it possible to compare the results of instruction in different classes	

People engaging in CEFR-informed teaching and learning develop a sense of ownership
All stakeholders are involved
All can readily apply, and see the benefits of the CEFR-informed approach for their own teaching/learning
'Can Do' checklists serve as the key reference point for processes of reflective teaching/learning in which self-assessment plays a central role
Autonomous learning beyond the specified materials (e.g. textbooks) is supported and encouraged

3 Case Studies: Implementation of the CEFR across all Levels

3.1 Japan

The CEFR was first introduced to Japan in 2004 (Yoshijima and Ohashi, 2004) but only took off more recently with the formation of the CEFR based foreign language teacher network JALT FLP SIG in 2008 (JALT FLP SIG, 2015), the Japan-specific adaptation of the CEFR in 2012, the so-called CEFR-J (Tono 2013, Tono and Negishi

2012), and the Japanese national broadcasting agency (NHK) announcing in 2013 the adaptation of their educational language programmes to the CEFR-J (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, 2012). The CEFR-J was adapted specifically to Japanese learners in that it reflects Japanese learners' low foreign language proficiency at university entrance level and comparatively slow progress through a finer-grained proficiency scale, consisting of 12 instead of the CEFR's 6 ability levels. To shed light on the present situation of the CEFR in Japan, three studies were conducted. Firstly, the KAKEN database¹ of publicly funded CEFR-related research projects in universities was searched. Secondly, university curricula from 50 national universities across the country were consulted, and finally a questionnaire on tertiary level language teachers' perceptions of the CEFR was conducted with 36 teachers from 6 out of the 7 Japanese regions. A general increase in publicly funded research projects was evident from 2004 to 2015, and although many studies and scholars are involved in research projects, traces in the curriculum are yet to be seen. The survey of foreign language curricula at 50 national universities revealed only four which referenced the CEFR and of these four, only one appeared to use the CEFR comprehensively. Public universities seem to show re-

¹ kaken.nii.ac.jp

luctance in using the CEFR and are under pressure to fulfil ministerial guidelines in their curricula. The distinction between the CEFR and the CEFR-J has further created confusion for all involved as it also does not address meso or micro level questions. The teacher perceptions study revealed a general desire to use the framework among participants who are aware of the CEFR's advantages but seem to be hindered by the CEFR's complexity, noting that its use is associated with significant challenges. This returns to Parmenter and Byram's (2010) point that the influence of the CEFR has remained muted, and that it is up to stakeholders on the front line of language education, namely the teachers, to determine the course of the CEFR's future.

3.1.1 *Special focus: Meso Level - Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University*

The Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University (HBWU) policy makers decided to adopt the CEFR-J for their FL curricula in 2012. This decision was amended in 2014 to use the original CEFR rather than the CEFR-J due to the CEFR being more clearly defined and the richer offer of supporting materials around the CEFR. Curriculum renewal involved among others mapping the existing curriculum to CEFR 'Can Do' descriptors, evidence-based setting of CEFR scale targets for the different years (Runnells, 2013), action based learning teacher workshops, and CEFR expert consultation. The mapping remains incomplete due to the midway policy change but staff as well as students have indicated they regard the CEFR as a better standardisation framework than the very vague and unsupported CEFR-J. This case study highlights that to ensure a successful CEFR implementation at a given institution, all stakeholders at a given level need to be on the same page, calling for in-depth training and preparation in advance.

3.2 *Vietnam*

With the implementation of the national socio-economic reform policy in 1986 and the impact of globalisation, English has become the preferred foreign language at all educational levels in Vietnam (Le, 2002, Nguyen, 2011, Pham, 2013, Wright, 2002). In 2008, the Vietnamese government launched a programme to nationally adopt the CEFR for all language teaching in the country. However, only in 2014 was this supplemented by a national reference framework. Thus, most English students still cannot communicate well in English even after numerous years of learning

it at school and university, although they may have accumulated a good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (Ministry of Education and Training, 2013). The adoption of the CEFR in the current Vietnamese educational context, which still constantly faces limited human capital and resources, has created a number of challenges in different areas, varying from language teacher professionalism, through curriculum and materials development to assessment.

3.2.1 *Special focus: Meso Level - Hue University*

Hue University (HU) has held regular workshops for its teachers with international CEFR experts to help drive align the HU foreign language (FL) curricula to the CEFR. This has led to a better understanding of the CEFR and its concepts and an increased sense of ownership in the teachers. However, issues include huge gaps in FL ability at university entrance level which make it difficult to set universal CEFR scale targets across all students, and due to budget and staffing limitations not all language proficiency aspects can be assessed at HU. Some of these issues are being addressed by HU teachers and researchers increasingly focusing on enabling students' autonomous learning, be it through online materials or autonomous learning based research grants.

4 *Conclusion*

While the CEFR has found widespread acknowledgement and macro level adaptation ruled on by governments around the globe, institutions, teachers and students have struggled with how to use the CEFR and what it actually means for them. Top-down approaches in Japan and Vietnam have met with limited success, with the CEFR being the official FL framework but the reality of curricula and classroom teachings not reflecting this policy due to a lack of instructions and supporting materials. There have been a considerable number of research projects into the CEFR or the CEFR-J in Japan over the past 12 years, however, adaptation of the CEFR or CEFR-J in curricula remains low in Japan (O'Dwyer et al., 2017). In order to be able to assess the implementation of the CEFR at a given institution regardless of that institution's specific circumstances, we developed a set of key questions that apply in any context and an assessment grid based on the answers to those questions. Through extensive university teacher surveys conducted nation-wide in Japan and locally at Hue University, we established that there is little familiarity with or impact of the

CEFR at those institutions. The most substantial struggles in using the CEFR have stemmed from three areas: a) a lack of supporting resources (Japan, Vietnam); b) a lack of teacher training (Japan, Vietnam); c) a lack of understanding of the framework among institutional staff (Japan, Vietnam); and d) a lack of human resources (Vietnam). Our key questions and assessment grid are aimed at helping education institutions around the world in aligning themselves with the CEFR through highlighting positive outcomes and how they were achieved. Key concepts for successful CEFR implementation include in-depth teacher and faculty staff training, contextualised 'Can Do' descriptors, and enabling action based autonomous learning. Based on our findings, research into the CEFR in Japan might decrease in the future but local CEFR implementation might increase. The latter is certainly going to be the case in Vietnam, where all institutions offering FL education are expected by the government to have adapted the CEFR by 2020. We hope our research and assessment grid will help institutions worldwide adapt the CEFR in their given context.

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Der Gemeinsame Europäische Referenzrahmen
für Sprachen und seine
Adaption im Hochschulkontext

6. Bremer Symposition zum Sprachenlernen und -lehren

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