

# Book Reviews

## Reflecting on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and its Companion Volume (a review)

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This is a book for students and teachers of linguistics but also for language education policy makers, curriculum designers, materials writers and language testing agencies and teachers around the world.

Based on a conference held in London in 2020 hosted by the British Council, the authors present their analyses of the Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), introduced in 2001 and the Common European Framework of Reference – Companion Volume (CEFR-CV), the final version of which was published in 2020. The thirteen chapters present papers by attendees at the conference based on their presentations, edited by David Little and Neus Figueiras, and cover theoretical issues and issues of practical application as well as presentations of how the CEFR and CEFR-CV have been adapted in different countries, notably Greece, Japan, Ireland, Spain and the United States.

The book is divided into five parts, each with an introduction by David Little and preceded by an overall introduction by the editors David Little and Neus Figueras. Part 1 examines *The CEFR Past, Present and Future*, including a paper on the impact of the CEFR in Japan by Masashi Negishi and an assessment of what

the CEFR has achieved by Brian North. Part 2 explores the *Action-Oriented Approach* and asks if a change of paradigm is needed, with contributions by John H.A.L. de Jong among others. Part 3 deals with *Plurilingualism, Plurilingual Education and Mediation* with papers on a data-driven curriculum and mediation descriptors by Bessie Dendrinou, testing by Peter Lenz and implementation by Deidre Kirwan and David Little based on their research in an Irish primary school. Part 4 examines the CEFR *Descriptors, Scales and Constructive Alignments* with papers on refining the vertical axis for classroom use, a comparison of commonality and localisation in the curriculum and an assessment of the CEFR Companion Volume. Finally, in Part 5, *Afterword*, Barry O'Sullivan of the British Council summarises the discussions and considers how best to make the CEFR work and what the future roadmap might look like.

Introduced almost 50 years ago in 1975, the Council of Europe 'Threshold' level set up the three levels of language proficiency, A, B and C, from elementary to proficient user and indicated what language should be taught at each level. The three levels of the Threshold level were subdivided into six sub levels; A1 Beginner, A2 Elementary, B1 Lower intermediate, B2 Upper inter-

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mediate, C1 Advanced and C2 Proficiency. In its English version the Threshold level was seen by many English language teachers as meeting the requirements of the Cambridge Exams (now Cambridge English) FCE (First Certificate in English) qualification, now called the B2 Certificate.

In 2001 the Threshold Level was replaced by the Common European Framework of Reference, known as CEFR, and in 2020 by the CEFR Companion Version (CEFR-CV) a revised and updated version, all published by the Council of Europe.

Originally, designed for use in Europe with the aim of making language education clearer and easier to understand it has been translated into 37 languages and is now one of the key references used by language education policy makers, curriculum designers, teacher educators, materials writers and publishers and teachers all over the world.

In his introduction to Part 1, David Little refers to John Trim, one of the creators of the Threshold Level, emphasising how the Council of Europe Modern Languages Project aimed to facilitate the free movement of people and ideas, make the language learning process more democratic and provide a framework for international communication. He also mentions how it moved language teaching from a lexicogrammatical process to a communicative process – how to help people communicate more easily and more effectively. A key to the Threshold Level was the introduction of ‘indicators’, which presented the grammar and vocabulary appropriate at each of the six levels. The Threshold level was the foundation on which language curricula, assessment and as a result, materials development and teaching were built, taking a ‘can do’ approach to language proficiency as opposed to ‘must learn’.

CEFR took the same approach and greatly expanded the ‘indicators’ at each level but failed to emphasise the action-oriented approach, the social agency of language users and learners, plurilingualism and pluriculturalism and mediation, all key concepts of the Council of Europe policy on language learning. All these areas are discussed in the book and in particular the role of the CEFR-CV in helping develop and expand their use.

In Part 1, Masashi Negishi shows how CEFR was localised in the CEFR-J (J for Japan) to meet the needs of Japanese communication in English and, in doing so, states how CEFR has centred on levels of proficiency and ‘can do’ descriptors and says it will take time before other principles of CEFR are established in language teaching and learning practice. In his discussion of the role and achievement of CEFR-CV, Brian North explains the key aims of the revised framework; to update the CEFR model and clarify its role; update the descriptors, especially at A and C levels; develop descriptors in areas not dealt with in the CEFR itself and create tangible tools for language teachers to use.

In Part 2, Mark Levy and Neus Figueiras discuss the importance of an action-oriented approach to implementing change by teachers of languages and stress the importance of including the approach in teacher education courses. A survey of teachers in primary and secondary schools and in colleges revealed that few teachers knew of the CEFR and CEFR-CV. Using an action-oriented approach means focusing communication on students’ practical needs and developing their ability to employ the language they use in concrete situations. This also means mediating with the students and allowing them to express what their language needs are and creating the opportunity for their inclusion. Time, the demands of the curriculum, the textbook and exams can make this difficult, but teacher education programmes should definitely include how to use an action-oriented approach and practise mediation in the classroom and with colleagues and students.

In Part 3, Bessie Dendrinos addresses the issue of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in teaching and in educational policy. Despite the 2002 Barcelona Agreement of the EU advocating that that European students should learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue she notes that the language of teaching still tends to be the language or official language of the country. In piloting cross-language test tasks in Greek schools she and her team saw from the results that the most competent students benefited from a pluralistic approach in that they could achieve higher marks in performance and translation. She concludes that plurilingualism and mediation improves overall language and communication ability but that practical research is needed into what language learners actually

use in order to achieve successful mediation. The CEFR is not based on practical language use research and she stresses that it offers a framework for adoption and adaptation and should not be seen as a curriculum.

The papers in Part 4 emphasise that there is more work to be done, including the alignment of curricula with the CEFR and CEFR-CV indicators, managing the large numbers of descriptors included in the CEFR-CV and agreeing procedures and making the complexity of mediation skills described in the Companion Volume adaptable to different systems of assessment, feedback to students and the setting of standards.

Finally, in his Afterword, Barry O'Sullivan reminds us that language learning programmes have tended to 'silo' their components with inadequate communication between testers, curriculum developers, teacher educators and textbook writers, frequently leading to incoherence and failure. He argues for a comprehensive learning system, stating that the CEFR and CEFR-

CV offer a unique opportunity to unite the concepts of curriculum, delivery and assessment in an integrated system. He gives examples of how language policies may not be 'bought into' by teachers or education authorities leading to failure. O'Sullivan stresses that to influence positive change in achieving a comprehensive learning system the CEFR-CV must be operationalised throughout the education system. Its users must have a clear theory of action or delivery and a system of evaluation of its success and make sure that all stakeholders feel equally involved in the rollout of an updated system and their opinions respected. In conclusion he summarises the opinions of many of the contributors to the book that it needs greater focus on plurilingualism, action-oriented learning and mediation. Above all, as users of the indicators as teachers, teacher educators and curriculum designers we should see the framework as just that, a framework of recommendations, and not as a rigid lexicogrammatical syllabus.

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