Book Review

CEFR-informed learning, teaching and assessment: A practical guide

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The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) and the *CEFR Companion Volume* (CEFR/CV), issued by the Council of Europe in 2001 and 2018, respectively, describe levels of English language proficiency as a common framework for the design of language syllabi, curricula, assessment tests, textbooks, and so forth across Europe. However, the CEFR has had a more profound impact than originally anticipated on teachers, learners and researchers from a diversity of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Due to the sophisticated theoretical framework underlying it, the interpretation and implementation of the CEFR may be challenging to language teaching practitioners outside Europe, especially those who are English as a foreign language (EFL) learners themselves and are used to more traditional teacher-centered language teaching and learning. *CEFR-Informed Learning, Teaching and Assessment: A Practical Guide*, as the title suggests, systematically guides the reader through the three topics.

As the intended uses of the CEFR include the planning of language learning programs (curriculum design), language certification (syllabus design and assessment), and self-directed learning (learner autonomy), the book covers the three areas in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, respectively. The integration of these areas is addressed and elaborated on in Chapter 5. In addition, self-directed learning by teachers is discussed under the umbrella term of *teacher autonomy* in Chapter 6.

Chapter 1 introduces the CEFR, the CEFR/CV, the *European Language Portfolio*, and practical resources related to the CEFR. The primary purpose of the CEFR is to address the issue of the complexity of language proficiency with a taxonomic descriptive scheme, covering a wide range of domains of language use that are represented by communicative language activities, each indicated by a number of "can-do" descriptors, strategies, and competences. Communicative language activities and strategies are classified into four modes, namely, "reception, production, interaction, and mediation" (p. 10). In this chapter, the descriptive scheme and the common reference levels are reviewed, followed by a brief account of the history of the CEFR and its current development in and beyond Europe. One of the main criticisms levelled at the CEFR, though, is insufficient empirical research in the area of second language acquisition in support of its descriptive scheme (Alderson, 2007). The last section of the chapter is an outline of the key institutions and resources that are referenced in the volume. Each of the resources, accompanied by a brief note, is classified and presented in a user-friendly manner.

Chapter 2 delves into CEFR-informed curriculum and course design. This chapter demonstrates the use of the global scale of the CEFR and the self-assessment grid as the main tools for local curriculum design, and how to design a language course with the illustrative descriptor scales of the CEFR/CV. This involves flexible selection and modification of the illustrative descriptors to meet specific needs. The exercises and case studies included in this chapter further show how the CEFR is implemented in course design. Since the terms *plurilingualism* and *pluriculturalism* are new creations of the CEFR, and according to Council of Europe (2001, p. 169), curriculum design should align with the ultimate goal of fostering plurilingualism and linguistic diversity, the reader would logically expect an in-depth discussion and demonstration of how to build and balance learners' plurilingual and pluricultural competences, which generally develop unevenly. Unfortunately, the terms and relevant issues are only marginally addressed in this chapter.

Chapter 3 introduces CEFR-informed language assessment. Based on the clarification of basic concepts of language assessment, this chapter focuses on the development cycle and types of CEFR-informed assessment. For classroom teaching, CEFR-informed assessment can be classified as self-assessment, teacher assessment, portfolio assessment, and CEFR level placement tests. Each type of assessment is introduced in terms of design, use, revision, and validation, and

advice is given accordingly. Four follow-up exercises in this chapter guide the reader through the process of design and implementation of CEFR-informed language assessment. A case study further demonstrates contextualized CEFR-informed assessment in an English language course. While the CEFR provides an overview of all types of assessment and general guidelines for designing assessment with the CEFR descriptors, this book goes into specifics, demonstrating the design of assessment for each language skill as well as grammar and vocabulary. This step-by-step guide together with concrete examples is particularly beneficial to teachers who are not skillful at assessment.

Chapter 4 is concerned with CEFR-informed learner autonomy. The central focus in this chapter is the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP), which is introduced to serve the purposes of facilitating learners' understanding of the abstract concepts in the CEFR, and developing their plurilingual awareness, pluricultural awareness and capacity for autonomous language learning. This chapter focuses on the functions, types, and applications of the components of the ELP. The exercises that follow further familiarize the reader with the components of the ELP and the steps involved in designing them. Three case studies are also presented to demonstrate how to implement and contextualize ELPs for particular pedagogic purposes. This chapter shows in considerable detail how the ELP mediates the core concepts of the CEFR to the learner, and how teachers may support and guide learners in fulfilling the aims of the CEFR.

Based on a separate analysis of CEFR-informed teaching, assessment and learning in previous chapters, Chapter 5 emphasizes the integration of the three processes in light of the CEFR. The action-oriented approach adopted by the CEFR integrates the three processes with a common definition of language proficiency by means of real-world "tasks represented by CEFR 'can-do' descriptors" (p. 90). This chapter culminates in the discussion of the implementation of integrated CEFR-informed learning, assessment and teaching, for which learning outcome statements and a checklist of illustrative descriptors need to be developed to inform lesson plans and autonomous learning, as well as learner self-assessment and teacher assessment. The exercises in the chapter illustrate the importance of ensuring the validity of CEFR implementation in classroom teaching and assessment. The case studies exemplify the integration of task-based language teaching, the CEFR and learning-oriented assessment in a learning cycle, and a contextualized development of intercultural and communicative language competences, respectively. The discussion in this chapter provides a multifaceted picture of the goal-oriented implementation of the CEFR in language teaching, assessment and learning, highlighting the transparency and coherence as it claims.

Finally, Chapter 6 addresses teacher autonomy, which plays an integral role in the development of learner autonomy (Benson, 2000; Little, 1995; Raya et al.,

2017). Addressing the "vagueness" (p. 243) of the definition of teacher autonomy offered by Little (1995), this chapter redefines the construct as consisting of "self-directed teacher-learning and self-directed teaching" (p. 248), referring to professional development and professional action, respectively. Teacher reflection is generally regarded as a key factor in developing teacher autonomy (Benson, 2011). The chapter formally proposes a three-stage model of reflective practice, including self-reflection, critical evaluation, and action. The *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (Newby et al., 2007) and the *European Profiling Grid* (North et al., 2013), which are built in accordance with the CEFR, are recommended and elaborated on as helpful tools to facilitate reflective teaching. Follow-up exercises are also included in the chapter for the reader to experience reflective practice.

Overall, the book can be highly recommended for its manifold strengths. The most impressive is its comprehensiveness. It covers practically all the areas of CEFR implementation, including teaching, learning, assessment, and the integration of the three. More importantly, it goes further to discuss how the CEFR stimulates teachers to reflect on their current practice, thus promoting the development of teacher autonomy (North, 2014, p. 9). Moreover, abundant, widely-cited research projects and recommended resources are provided to the reader for reference, followed by a detailed list of such resources (e.g., key institutions, ongoing projects run by the European Center for Modern Languages, and self-assessment tools), which are relevant, accessible, and up-to-date. The volume is, therefore, a valuable source of inspiration for language teachers, student teachers, language assessment designers, researchers and the like, who are keen to improve their knowledge and practice of language teaching and assessment, and, above all, who strive to be autonomous teachers capable of supporting and facilitating learner autonomy.

Another distinctive strength of this volume lies in its resourcefulness. As a useful trouble-shooting guide, the book explicitly addresses problems that may occur in the implementation of the CEFR, and offers feasible solutions. For instance, ambiguity in the CEFR scales is sometimes found to be a major problem for designing test specifications. As a practical solution, examining the tasks and items of a test in the public domain that is connected to the CEFR could somehow be a starting point instead (p. 115). Another example is the discussion of how to solve "the problem of specification," "the problem of complexity," and "the problem of extrapolation" in task selection for task-based teaching by means of needs analysis (p. 211).

Admittedly, there is still some room for improvement in this volume. Certain parts of the book could be more coherently organized. In Chapter 1, for example, the use and key features of the CEFR are presented before the introduction to the main components of the CEFR. The two sections would make more sense

if they were put the other way round. Additionally, the connection between the topics of learner autonomy and teacher autonomy in Chapters 4 and 6 seems somewhat weak. The volume claims that though research on teacher autonomy has progressed apart from the CEFR, the trajectory of its development follows that of learner autonomy (p. 241). Nonetheless, it does not demonstrate how the two are related, and, more importantly, how they are integrated in Chapter 5.

In addition, more elaboration, demonstration, and exemplification are needed for new concepts introduced in the CEFR. For instance, the term *action-oriented approach* as a central concept remains vague throughout the book, due to lack of an explicit definition and straightforward clarification of its relationship with task-based teaching. Similarly, despite explicit definitions of the new terms *interaction* and *mediation*, the implementation of the two concepts may still pose a challenge for practitioners. By the same token, more discussion is necessary on the rather new topic of teacher autonomy, which, however, could be a determining factor for accomplishing the aims of the CEFR.

Despite these limitations, as a guidebook on the CEFR and the CEFR/CV, the volume has the potential to enhance readers' understanding of the CEFR and its use for their own needs in language teaching, learning and assessment. Being informative, insightful, and user-friendly, the book is bound to benefit teaching practitioners, teacher educators, curriculum and course developers, policy makers, etc.

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