

Morten Hunke, Fergus O'Dwyer, Alexander Imig

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- (Instutionsebene) 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.

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, interculturally competent citizens through action-based learning (Parmenter, 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 curricula 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

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 reserach 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.

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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Kontakt Daten der Autoren

Morten Hunke
Aoyama Gakuin University/Keio University, Tokyo
morten.hunke@keio.jp

Fergus O'Dwyer
University College Dublin/Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
fodwyerj@gmail.com

Alexander Imig
Chukyo University, Nagoya
imigalexander@gmail.com