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THE INFLUENCE OF THE CEFR

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Annotation
This paper provides some context for the unquestionable influence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) on language learning, teaching, and assessment ten years after its publication. If a survey about the most relevant and controversial document in the field in the twenty-first century were to be carried out, the CEFR would most surely be the top one. The document itself has been translated into all European languages, and its scales are now available in more than 40 languages, including sign language. The CEFR levels and its scales have become currency in Europe and beyond, and its recommendations—having seduced governments and institutions—are slowly finding their way into everyday practice.

Defining what students should learn and describing it in such a way that it is useful and understandable for all parties involved has been for many decades the Holy Grail for educators and for policymakers.During much of the twentieth century, theorists, researchers, and language professionals were very active in trying to describe what it means to learn languages and how they could be operationalized and sequenced for learning, for teaching, and for assessment purposes. Work was triggered almost in parallel on both sides of the Atlantic in the aftermath of World War II and the Korean War, international conflicts that made very apparent the need to learn foreign languages in order to be able to use them in everyday transactions, for social interaction, and for information transfer. Being able to use a language meant being able to put linguistic knowledge into practice; for the sake of certification, it was necessary to identify different levels of mastery along the learning continuumHowever, despite the huge amount of work that has been put into changing language syllabi, changing methodologies, and changing assessment practice, and despite the discussions, debates, seminars, and congresses on the usefulness of the CEFR, it is still not possible to say that these language policies have been effectively transferred to classrooms or to teaching materials. Not all teaching and learning objectives are designed to meet communication needs, and not all assessment is geared to outcomes, that is, specific descriptions of what a student has demonstrated and understood at the completion of an activity or course. A lot has changed, but there is still the feeling that there is still much to be done before it can be said that policy matches real life, if that is ever possible.The success of the CEFR is due to two main factors. The first one has been outlined in the Introduction, and it is both geopolitical and scientific. Governments and applied linguists wanted to link language learning, language teaching, and language assessment to a more real-life oriented approach and were striving to find a common currency, in terms of terminology and in terms of levels of attainment. The CEFR was a timely publication in this respect and acted as a catalyst. It provided a complex but operational definition of language that embodied the work of many decades, presented as the ‘action-

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oriented approach' and commonly referred to in the text as the 'horizontal dimension'. The CEFR gained international attention and respect very soon after its publication (Alderson 2002; Morrow 2004a, 2004b; Byrnes 2007), and there were two features in the document, both closely related to the 'vertical dimension', which were the most salient and the most rapidly put into use. The issues addressed in this article outline two possible areas for action, already pointed out here, and which are, somehow, 'in the air' in the field. The first area is related to the responsibility of users and was already suggested by Keith Morrow, who lucidly responded to the question 'Does the CEF work?' with 'The jury is out' (2004a: 10), and 'The CEFR treats us like adults, are you grown up enough to handle it?'(2004b: 6), and was clearly specified in the Recommendation issued by the Committee of Ministers already quoted. The second area for action has to do with research, and a number of significant areas (11 tasks) are identified in Little (op.cit.), among which are L2 pedagogy and how it can be improved, the development of additional descriptors (for classroom language, for written interaction, …), the development of CEFR-based curricula, or the exploration of the application of existing descriptors in L1. It looks as if the next decade will still have the CEFR and its related documents at the forefront of discussion. Let us hope that the profession lives up to the challenge.

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