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Language proficiency and CEFR

To measure is to know?

Kasper Maes

1. Introduction

The publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (Council of Europe, 2001) by the Council of Europe in 2001 could be regarded as a turning point in language teaching and acquisition. The CEFR was presented as a framework which consists of three language levels: basic, advanced and proficient. These three language levels are each divided into two levels, resulting in a framework of 6 language proficiency levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. The level of language proficiency of each of the CEFR levels is described using "can-do"-descriptors.

The introduction of the CEFR marks a transition in language learning from 'what do I know about the language?' to 'what can I do with it?', i.e. from theory to practice. Of course functional language proficiency did play a role in language learning before 2001. However, after the publication of the CEFR theoretical aspects like grammar and spelling become less important. The focus is now on being able to read, speak, write and listen in the L2 language in concrete, realistic situations.

In addition to that, the CEFR framework provides a new perspective on language learning. L2 learning is more and more regarded as a continuous process which starts at a breakthrough (A1) level and leads to mastery (C2) of an L2 language. Language learning thus becomes a lifelong learning concept with different intra-institutional and extra-institutional stages, e.g. elementary and secondary education, higher education, language courses, stay or study abroad, self-study, e-learning, etc. As a consequence, the question is raised how to measure the language proficiency at different stages in this process.

Can the CEFR and its descriptors be used for language testing? And if so, does the CEFR provide any specific information that can help to assess language proficiency?

2. CEFR and (formal) assessment

The concept of assessing language proficiency does not play an important role in the 2001 CEFR publication. The document only briefly mentions some types of assessment (chapter 9), without going into details. In the same year the CEFR was published, the European Language Portfolio (ELP)¹ was presented by the Council of Europe as an instrument for reflection on proficiency in any L2 language. This instrument can be used by language learners for self-assessment and to keep track of their language progression. What the ELP does not do, is provide information on how to

use the CEFR in formal assessment. However, there are situations in which the L2 learner should have his or her language proficiency formally assessed, simply because L2 learning usually takes place in an educational context, e.g. school or course.

The CEFR levels are already used in a wide variety of educational contexts. In Dutch secondary education for example, the requirements for the *examen* (final national examination) have been translated to CEFR terms for languages such as French, English and German.² In the SLO³-publication *Handreiking schoolexamen moderne vreemde talen havo/vwo* (Guide to final examination modern foreign languages havo/vwo) (Meijer & Fasoglio, 2007) the existing final examination's level descriptions are compared to the CEFR level descriptions. In higher education, there is a tendency towards entrance and exit levels for study programmes such as International Business and Languages or German Language and Culture. And in the descriptions of language courses at university language centres or language training providers, the CEFR levels are usually mentioned.

In 2009 the Council of Europe published *Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) - A Manual* (Council of Europe, 2009). This manual helps providers of examinations and teachers to relate their examinations to the CEFR levels. More recently, the Dutch SLO and Cito⁴ publication *Toetsen en beoordelen met het ERK (Examination and assessment using the CEFR)* (Til, van et al., 2011) contains useful information on testing and CEFR including examples of CEFR-proof examination questions.

3. Use of the CEFR levels

In secondary education, publications like *Taalprofielen (Language Profiles)* (Liemberg & Meijer, 2004) and *Handreiking schoolexamen moderne vreemde talen havo/vwo* (Meijer & Fasoglio, 2007) provide useful information for language teachers to compare the final exam language requirements with the CEFR descriptions and to shape their language teaching in line with the CEFR descriptors. In addition to that, secondary school teachers can use a wide variety of course books which are already written in accordance with the CEFR levels. In Dutch higher education or institutions like university language centres, on the other hand, the situation is different. A 2011 panel review of Dutch International Business and Languages (IBL) study programmes (HBO-raad, 2011) showed that language teachers in higher education often use their own entrance tests or online tests which are not related to the CEFR. They then draw their own conclusions from the results of these tests regarding the CEFR level of the language learner. The same can be said with respect to examination. The IBL panel review and a quick scan of exams at two Dutch university language centres (Tilburg and Nijmegen) show that most language teachers do not use CEFR-proof exams. Exams usually consist of a portfolio with written assignments and/or a written exam, focussing mainly on grammatical and lexical items. Language proficiency is measured in this way; however, not

from a CEFR point of view. The absence of a CEFR-related test at the end of a course or study programme raises the question to what extent the program itself is CEFR-proof. A possible solution for this problem would be to use objective, valid and reliable CEFR entrance tests and examinations. At the moment, such tests are provided by institutions like the Goethe Institut (Goethe-Zertifikat), the French Ministry of Education (DELTA/DALF), the Foreigners University of Siena (CILS) and the Instituto Cervantes (DELE). In addition to that, placement tests or examinations from test providers are available online (e.g. TELC). However, these tests are usually linked to language training institutes, test providers or publishers, which questions their objectivity and reliability.

4. All skills are equal?

Which skills are to be tested? Reading, writing, listening and/or speaking? At the same level or at different levels? Are all skills equally important? In examination requirements (e.g. secondary school or IBL) the receptive skills are usually scaled higher than the productive skills. Maybe language teachers reason that it is easier for an L2 learner to attain a higher level in receptive skills. Or that it is more important to be able to read and listen at a high level than to produce texts and speak at the same level. Yet the question why the level for the receptive skills is higher than for the productive skills is hardly ever answered.

A language learner is never at one and the same level for all four skills. So at what overall level is an L2 learner when his or her speaking skills are tested at B1 and listening at C1? It is almost impossible to test the language proficiency at one and the same level. Keeping in mind the differences between the skills mentioned above, maybe we should consider testing language proficiency at different levels for each skill or at least for the receptive and productive skills. This tendency towards skill-differentiated testing is already visible in official language tests, such as the new version of the Goethe-Zertifikat C2⁵. This test consists of 4 modules - speaking, listening, writing and reading - which makes it possible for language learners to have skills tested separately.

5. Conclusion

The CEFR level descriptors are rather vague and ambiguous, which makes it hard for language teachers to understand and apply them consistently in language teaching and examination. Therefore, the descriptors first have to be specified and concretized. In addition to that, both benchmarking and standardization training are needed to assure more reliable measurement.

Some efforts have already been made to concretize the CEFR levels and their descriptors. One of the first attempts was Profile Deutsch (Glabionat et al., 2005), a German project supported by the Goethe Institute and experts from several universities. Profile Deutsch translates the CEFR level descriptors in scenarios and language examples. Roughly the same has been done for English by the British Council - AEQUALS association. Here A

Core Inventory for General English (North et al., 2010) provides selective lists of language content for each CEFR level which can be used by teachers as a point of reference. A different example of concretizing the CEFR is the Van Dale grammar project (Van Dale Publishers, 2011). In this Dutch project, for six different languages the grammar was categorized using the CEFR levels.

With respect to benchmarking and standardization training, the CEFcult project⁶ (2009-2011) and its predecessor WebCEF⁷ (2006-2009) provide a platform for collaborative online assessment of oral proficiency using the CEFR. Another important project for training in the use of CEF scales is the CEFtrain project⁸ (2003-2005). Coordinated by the University of Helsinki, this project provides a training area with language samples for listening, speaking, reading and writing in order to achieve a common understanding of the CEF levels. In the Netherlands, a standardization project has been carried out by the University of Groningen. In this EMBED project⁹ (2009-2011) panels of experts filtered student essays to provide samples of academic writing at the B and C levels of the CEFR. More recently, the Nederlandse Taalunie launched a useful and extended training website¹⁰ (2012) containing language samples for all skills and CEFR levels.

The results of these projects, language samples and training materials, are mostly available online and can be used by individual teachers. In addition to that it is important to organize teacher training and standardization sessions to familiarize teachers with the materials. In this way, not only the content of language teaching, but also the examinations and thus the exit levels can be truly CEFR-proof, making them comparable in the way that was intended by the 2001 Council of Europe publication.

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1 <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/>

2 In Germany, the Conference of the Ministers of Culture has only recently (2011) recommended: "Grundlage für die Definition der Abschlussniveaus fremdsprachlichen Lernens vom Primar- bis zum Sekundarbereich II ist der Gemeinsame europäische Referenzrahmen für Sprachen des Europarates (GER) mit seinen Kompetenzstufen." (Basis for defining the final level of foreign language learning in primary and secondary education is the Common European Framework of Reference for languages of the Council of Europe (CEFR) with its competence levels.) [my translation] (http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2011/2011_12_08-Fremdsprachenkompetenz.pdf) In other words, in Germany the CEFR and its levels also play an increasingly important role in (primary and secondary) education.

3 *Stichting Leerplan Ontwikkeling* (Dutch Institute for Curriculum Development)

4 *Centraal Instituut voor Toetsontwikkeling* (Dutch Central Institute for Test Development)

5 <http://www.goethe.de/lrn/prj/pba/bes/nc2/bes/enindex.htm>

6 <http://www.cefcult.eu/index.html>

7 <http://www.webcef.eu/>

8 <http://www.helsinki.fi/project/ceftrain/index.html>

9 <http://www.rug.nl/talencentrum/overhetTalencentrum/Embed?lang=nl>

10 <http://erknederlands.org/>