

Framing Modern Language Education – A European Approach

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ABSTRACT

This is an updated text version of a speech given at the 1st ASEAN English Language Teaching Conference held at the Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia, 15-17 March 2018. The theme of the Conference was “Maximizing the Potential in ASEAN Diversities through the English Language”. Language education development work undertaken under the auspices of the Council of Europe and the European Union is reviewed and related to this theme. Improvement of the conditions for language learning and intercultural communication has long been a concern in the Council of Europe and work has been undertaken in many areas of language policy, language education, and language assessment. Examples of advances are the formulation of principles for the description of goals for language learning, the elaboration of a comprehensive Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and the production of a model for a European Language Portfolio. Some such initiatives are here illustrated and commented on in light of the theme of the Conference. The point is made that language study of the kind referred to here leads to improved intercultural communicative ability and enhanced learner empowerment and that the approach in question may stimulate similar initiatives, with similar means, in other contexts. In conclusion, it is suggested that the provision of language instruction is particularly efficacious if it can be realized within a theoretical framework that allows both easy comparison between learning targets and transparent evaluation of their attainment.

Keywords: CEFR, intercultural communication, language assessment, language education, language policy, learner empowerment, linguistic diversity, self-diagnosis of language ability

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of this first International ASEAN ELT Conference, “Maximizing the Potential in ASEAN Diversities through the English Language”, has a familiar ring to it. It reminds one of issues that have

been discussed in Europe for quite some time. For instance, when the Council of Europe was set up after World War II, the aims of the organization were determined to be, among other things, “to promote awareness and encourage the development of Europe’s cultural identity and diversity” (Lobey, 2005). In a later Council of Europe document, it was argued “that a better knowledge of modern European languages will lead to the strengthening of links and the increase in international exchanges on which economic and social progress in Europe increasingly depends” (Trim, 2007)¹. The European Commission (of the EU) likewise has “a long-standing commitment to promoting language learning and linguistic diversity” (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). Evidently, the theme of the present Conference on one hand and certain basic ideas behind what has happened in Europe over the last several decades, on the other, have an important feature in common, and that is the attention paid to the role of language study and learning. Or more specifically, the view that language, not least knowledge of the English language, plays a critical role for the development and enhancement of fruitful co-operative action at a supranational level. Associate Professor Dr. Arshad Abd. Samad of the Organizing Committee succinctly expresses this basically common realization in these words:

“In today’s globalized village, international cooperation plays a critical

¹ Quoting a preamble to Resolution (69)2 (‘On an intensified Modern-Language Teaching Programme for Europe’)

role in socio-economic success of nations. ASEAN countries acknowledge the importance of English as an international language ...” (Conference Book, 2018, p. 8)

In light of this parallel between the stances expressed in Europe and the ASEAN region, it seems worthwhile to try to summarize and discuss some of the measures that the Council of Europe and the European Union have taken in *their* attempts to renew and boost language education in member states. The point of departure is that the “diversity” in question is enormous and that foreign language skills are highly valued and widely regarded as important learning objectives (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). My rather humble offer is therefore a short reminder of what many language educators feel are very helpful outcomes of the development work undertaken. Hopefully, they will help to stimulate the discussion and development of new ideas at this Conference.

As from the 1960’s, the Council of Europe has been intensely involved in a broad range of language projects aiming for many practical goals. The work has mainly been undertaken by experts from member countries under the coordination of the Council’s Language Policy Division (now Language Policy Programme). Similarly, the The European Commission has actively conducted language research and development work in the past few decades, e.g. in the area of assessment.

What can be presented here is of course a strictly limited view of the subject. Language education in Europe is a

multifarious business and it is only possible to touch on *some examples* of theoretical principles and suggested practices that have been discussed and put to the test in our own various contexts. Their relevance to language teaching in contexts that differ significantly from those under which they were developed must of course be determined in each individual case.

Developments

As mentioned above, the question of how to solve problems related to international language communication and foreign language learning has been on the agenda of the Council of Europe for a long time. The key role of languages came into focus in the 1960's when the first of a series of *Modern languages projects* was launched by the Council's Language Policy Division (now Language Policy Programme) (Trim, 2007). It was based on the realization that in order to further the aims of the organization, it was important to raise the level of citizens' communicative skills. Having attained a certain functional level was believed to be critically important, both in an individual and a collective perspective.

Some of the guiding principles adhered to in project activities were that the first step to take was to strengthen the learning of languages by adults, and then, successively, the learning by wider groups of students; that linguistic diversity must be respected; that retained multilingualism should be seen as self-evident; that language is primarily a means for communication between people; that communicative ability is the goal of

chief interest; and that constructive support of the *independent learner*, for instance through promotion of autonomous learning and self-assessment of skills achieved, is important (Oscarson, 1980).

Significant progress was made in many areas of language policy, language education, and language assessment. Examples of concrete innovative developments were the description of goals and standards for communicative language learning, starting with the development of the *Threshold level*, exemplified for English by van Ek (1975). Then followed the elaboration of the comprehensive *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* (Council of Europe, 2001) and the production of a *European Language Portfolio* (Council of Europe, 2013). A further important outcome was the organization of 31 international *Workshops* for teacher trainers, centred on examination and discussion of the principles for language learning and evaluation formulated by the Council (Council of Europe, 2019).

In particular, a shift of attention from form to function caught on and was quickly followed by EFL textbook writers. Syllabus designers soon adopted the apparatus of situations, themes, notions and functions as a descriptive framework/vehicle for both curricular guidelines and public examinations (Trim, 2007). The key source of information for educators and materials producers was the CEFR "blue book" (Council of Europe, 2001), which has been translated into 40 languages and sold in record-breaking numbers.

After this brief sketch of the general background, let us now turn to examining, in a little more detail, the way in which much of European language education has been framed in recent years. The review will be fairly practical and focus on concrete results, starting with the CEFR.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

One of the things the Council of Europe came to stress was that of important targets in language learning. What are they? How can they be defined? In what ways can the attainment of them be assessed? Answers were provided language by language. Naturally enough, English was focused first, and after that came a whole range of other languages. In all, there exist no less than 40 language-based representations (basically translations) of the original (Council of Europe, 2001).

CEFR has now become a household acronym in contemporary language education discourse. The best brief explanation of what it stands for is given on the Council of Europe homepage (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/>):

“The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) is exactly what its title says it is: a framework of reference. It was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the

design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency.”

The framework is thus envisaged primarily as a planning tool to be used in order to contribute to greater clarity and more easily defined aspects of language education theory and practice. While it does not prescribe any particular methodology for reaching levels specified in it, adoption of the CEFR does have certain instructional implications such as focus on action-oriented classroom activities and communicative practice.

The CEFR has been well received and has found wide use in the reform of foreign language curricula, in the development of teaching materials, and in assessment and evaluation (Mader & Urkun, 2011; North, 2014). The central component is a range of scales which specify six levels of language ability, extending from level A1 (called Breakthrough), through levels A2, B1, B2, C1, and up to level C2 (Mastery). The scales now also include three ‘plus’ levels (A2+, B1+, B2+). Each level is defined by a number of descriptors that reflect actual language use. Underlying the elaboration of the scales are detailed analyses of communicative contexts, themes, tasks and purposes.

There now exist upwards of 50 such scales covering different aspects of communicative language ability as well as different communicative language activities and strategies. Examples are scales of grammatical accuracy, spoken fluency, and overall reading comprehension (Council of Europe, 2001).

The conceptual work and the practical results of discussions and fieldwork have been tested outside Europe as well, with somewhat varying results. The fact is, however, that reference to and use of CEFR scales and level descriptors is becoming more and more common internationally. The scales are often employed to compare tests and examinations, both across different languages and across institutional and national borders. An Asian case was described by Wu & Wu (2007). They undertook a test-linking investigation in Taiwan, following a decision by the Ministry of Education to adopt the CEFR as a model when establishing target levels of English proficiency for Taiwanese students. Comparisons between different systems of qualifications were found to be difficult, depending in part on vagueness in the description of criteria. There were, for example, problems in aligning the General English Proficiency Test with the CEFR (according to the experience of GEPT exam boards).

A more recent example of using CEFR level descriptors for test calibration purposes was reported by Zou and Zhang (2017), where the focus was on the question of adaptability. The research query was whether the descriptors can be edited to suit local circumstances, which in this case was a Chinese higher education context and the description of the writing ability of English major candidates. Questionnaire and interview data were used as the basis for band setting. Results showed that it was possible to construct a reliable writing ability scale for English majors using CEFR

descriptors, but that these in many cases needed to be slightly reworded or to be assigned to a different level.

A study by Uri and Aziz (2018) showed positive attitudes expressed by teachers to mapping the SPM, the new equivalent of the Malaysian Certificate of Education, to the CEFR (see further Uri and Aziz below).

The CEFR Companion Volume

In response to reactions and feedback from both language education policy makers and users in the field, there has recently been launched (May 2018) a complement to the original CEFR publication of 2001 under the title of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors* (Council of Europe, 2018). Requests for change have mainly concerned the need for further support material, especially with respect to the range of illustrative descriptors of second/foreign language proficiency.

Essentially, this extension thus comprises an update of the illustrative scales of 2001. It contains a new complementary set of descriptors which fill gaps in the original. Examples of previously missing scales, now available, are those of *Mediation, Reactions to literature, Online interaction, and Sign language*. For the sake of better overview, a set of new as well as previously developed descriptors relevant to the category of *Young learners* have been selected and put together, and these are now downloadable on the CEFR official website (www.coe.int, under Collated representative samples).

Included in the volume is also an introduction to the aims and main principles of the CEFR.

Members of educational institutions in 56 countries around the world participated in the validation of the new descriptors, and also assisted in piloting. Fittingly, it is therefore pointed out in the Preface to the Companion volume that it “owes much to the contributions of members of the language teaching profession across Europe and beyond.” The production of the Companion Volume has no doubt benefitted from this empirical feedback.

An online version of the publication is available at: [CEFR 2018 Companion Volume](https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/relating-examinations-to-the-cefr)

The Manual for relating Language Examinations to the CEFR

It is not uncommon that testing agencies and educational systems make claims that their tests are linked to the CEFR, often without provision of supporting empirical data (Bartning et al., 2010; Papageorgiou, 2009). As a result, such claims tend to be viewed with a degree of scepticism as to how valid they are and what empirical evidence exists. More general and practical queries are: In what way can in fact tests and examinations be linked to the CEFR in a reasonably dependable manner? What concrete steps need to be taken in the validation process?

This Manual for relating Language Examinations to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018) provides answers to such questions. It describes certain technical

procedures by means of which providers of language tests and examinations can relate their instruments and results to the CEFR. A subsidiary aim indicated by the authors is to stimulate cooperative networking and competence building in the area of test interpretation. Achievement of such an aim is likely to contribute to better clarity in matters of inter-institutional language proficiency measurements.

The Manual can be downloaded at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/relating-examinations-to-the-cefr>

Self-Diagnosis of Language Ability – DIALANG

As explained earlier (at p. 775), the CEFR concept can be used in several different ways and for different purposes, e.g. as a “basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency” (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/>). The creation of DIALANG, a freely available language diagnosis system, is an example of how the framework has been employed in the last-mentioned area, i.e. assessment.

DIALANG was developed in a major joint effort supported by the European Union and involving a number of higher education institutions in member states between the years 1996 and 2004 (Alderson, 2006). Tests are delivered over the Internet, online,

and can be downloaded via the project Website (<https://dialangweb.lancaster.ac.uk/>) hosted at Lancaster University. Test results are expressed in CEFR scale terms as exemplified in the previous section.

On offer in DIALANG are parallel tests in these languages: Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Icelandic, Irish-Gaelic, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish. Test instructions and feedback are also available in some other languages, including Mandarin Chinese, Bahasa Indonesian, Korean, and Japanese. There are sub-tests in reading, writing, listening, vocabulary, and grammar. Also included in the system are instant feedback functions, which give the test taker instant information about results obtained, as well as advice on how the next level of proficiency may be reached. It is reported on the system's home page that several million test sessions tests have been recorded over the years. A brief count showed that some 18,000 tests were started in one month alone (Dec 2017).

DIALANG is special in that it is a self-managed test instrument. Its main purpose is to inform users directly, i.e. not via somebody else, about their language levels. The results that the system delivers can therefore not be employed for certification purposes. The tests can, however, be used in several other ways and are very useful tools in the hands of both learners and educators. Apart from serving individual self-assessment purposes, the test material is also administered in classes and study groups as a general measure of ability at

the start of courses and language programs. Sometimes work with the material is organised as group activities in class under the instruction of a teacher.

It should be reiterated that DIALANG is a tool for users and learners in the first place, for their own guidance, and it is not a high stakes test. But while the results do not carry strong weight as external evidence, they can still be of very great value, not least when used on a purely personal basis.

The European Language Portfolio (ELP)

Another product which has been found suitable as an assessment tool, but also as a learning aid, is the *European Language Portfolio*, or ELP for short (Council for Cultural Cooperation, 2000). It is a resource for recording a learner's progress and achievements in languages. This too uses the CEFR as its frame of reference. Again, the distinguishing characteristic is that the learners are themselves involved in the estimation of the quality of own work samples and of levels reached, normally in discussion with their instructor. A commonly held view behind this involvement is that if students become more cognizant of the learning process and its results, and thereby enhance their self-awareness and realistic beliefs in their abilities, they will also become more insightful and efficient learners (Alderson, 2006).

Learner autonomy is thus a prime focus in ELP philosophy. As explained by Little (2005), the portfolio has a reporting function in that it involves two kinds of

self-assessment: summative in a so-called Language passport, and formative in a Language biography which “uses goal-setting and self-assessment checklists derived from the CEFR’s illustrative scales” (p 326). The checklists are normally used intermittently as the learning progresses, so that achievement may be discerned more easily. Included in an ELP is also a Dossier of work samples judged by the learner to best represent own ability.

Today the ELP exists in many languages and in most of them in different versions for different age groups. Over a hundred models have been validated and accredited by the Council of Europe. The full versions of 51 of them, in various languages, can be downloaded from this site: <http://elp.ecml.at/Portfolios/tabid/2370/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

A Teaching Portfolio

A counterpart to the above is the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL), which is primarily intended as a self-assessment tool for students undergoing their initial teacher training, but which is also suitable for practising teachers. Its main purposes are to stimulate users to reflect on their knowledge and skills, to estimate their own didactic competences, to monitor their progress and to record their experiences of teaching during the course of their training. The material contains among other things checklists relating to the planning and teaching of lessons, to methodology, and to assessment.

The portfolio builds on experiences from the CEFR and the ELP as well as the project European Profile for Language Teacher Education—A Frame of Reference (Kelly et al, 2004). It has been translated into several languages.

EPOSTL can thus be used as a fairly general assessment tool in a great many different ELT contexts. For practical examples, go to: <https://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2016-2019/Towardsa-CommonEuropeanFrameworkofReference-forLanguageTeachers/Guidetoresources/tabid/3022/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>; <https://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2016-2019/>

The portfolio can be downloaded at: <https://www.ecml.at/Resources/ECMLPublications/tabid/277/language/en-GB/Default.aspx?q=EUROPEAN%20PROFILE>

International Impact

The CEFR has had a normative impact on language education in Europe. It is widely adopted as the standard reference document for teaching and testing languages, similarly to the role played by the ACTFL document ‘Guidelines’ in the US (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003). A majority of countries indicate expected minimal exit levels, in terms of the CEFR scheme, at the end of compulsory and upper secondary school (European Union, 2013).

Views on and use of the CEFR in Asia, both in the original form and as adaptations, have been reported from a number of countries. A few examples may be briefly mentioned.

In Malaysia, a recent qualitative study on English teachers' (N=331) and Ministry of Education officials' views on the implementation of CEFR showed that "teachers generally accepted the framework ... positively" even though their knowledge of the CEFR was very limited (Uri & Aziz, 2018). This was considered a challenge to implementation of the system in the country. The government officials, however, "strongly believed that the adoption of CEFR would result in good outcomes". According to a previous article from the same authors, "the [Malaysian] government has agreed not only to incorporate and align the framework into the present education system but accelerate its implementation" (Aziz & Uri, 2017).

As of 2018, CEFR-aligned English textbooks are being used in Malaysian schools following the standard curricula for primary and secondary education (Chin, 2018). The aim is that this will improve the proficiency of students. Plans are also underway to align the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) with the framework.

Thailand's Ministry of Education announced in 2014 introduction of the CEFR in schools. This was part of a policy to improve the level of English proficiency among Thai students. A case study involving a sample of teachers at state secondary schools in the south of Thailand revealed pronounced differences in individual teachers' knowledge and appreciation of the policy plans (Franz & Teo, 2018). These were in fact little known by the majority

of participants in the study. Meanwhile considerable government resources seem to have been invested in launching the system.

In a qualitative case study with 21 participants, Van Huy and Hamid (2015) investigated the adoption of the CEFR in a Vietnam public university setting. They found that the CEFR did not seem to solve "the complex and time-consuming problem of improving the quality of English language education in Vietnam".

A Japanese long-term project (CEFR-J) resulted in the production of a large number of descriptors adapted from the original to be used in schools (North, 2014). The possibility of creating an Asian model based on the CEFR, i.e. a CAFR, has also been discussed (Yoneoka, 2014). As mentioned above, Chinese researchers successfully developed a writing ability scale adapted for English Majors based on CEFR writing descriptors (Zou & Zhang, 2017).

As the above selection shows, reactions have been mixed in Asian countries. It is obvious that more information work needs to be given particularly in those cases where the approach described in this article is judged to be of wider interest. Further empirical studies are also crucially important in order to put indicated ideas and possible practices to the test.

Readers interested in a very particular source of information about the CEFR and its impact may wish to listen in to two video-taped interviews with the late Director of several Council of Europe language projects, Dr John Trim, who comments on

the origin of the CEFR and on the history of modern foreign language teaching and learning, respectively.²

Among other things, Dr Trim talks about the history and achievements of the Council of Europe language projects since the 1970's. With his usual caution and humility, Dr Trim points out that "the Council of Europe has no directive power. It is a mechanism for cooperation between the member governments." Discussing the notion of "freedom for teachers", Dr Trim furthermore makes the point that "empowerment is what I think the research world, and the academic world, can provide to the language learning practitioners". This statement might be taken to mean, here, that by backing research, and notably English language teaching researchers, we participate in furthering the cause of "maximized potential in ASEAN diversities through the English language".

A further field of inquiry deserves some consideration. In Europe, and beyond, outcomes of comparative studies of student achievement, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and IEA (The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), have become more and more important as indicators of educational standards. Thereby the chances for fruitful competence building and cooperation in many areas of study,

² Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSJNGHDK6IM&list=PL33753FF2F7614EC0> An interview with John Trim and Nick Saville, taped in 2011, and https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=john+trim John Trim in a conversation with Richard Smith and Nicola McLelland, taped in 2012.

including that of languages, have no doubt increased measurably. Support for such mutual efforts is likely to boost the potential of language teaching the world over.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In view of the theme of this 1st ASEAN English Language Teaching Conference, the aim of this presentation has been to exemplify efforts made in Europe to improve the conditions for language learning and intercultural communication among its citizens. It is hoped that the samples given will stimulate discussion and lead to further ideas on how to maximize "the Potential in ASEAN Diversities through the English Language".

Over the last few decades, there have been significant advances in European language education. Many of them emanate from initiatives taken by the Council of Europe (the Language Policy Programme) and the European Union. The outcomes have been very successful and have attracted considerable attention, not only in Europe but in some other parts of the world as well. Curricula, syllabuses, and materials for teaching and assessment are types of instruments that have been impacted in the first place. The effect from the public reception of the CEFR concept is particularly noticeable.

Much of the work has further aimed at supporting fundamental values such as access to language, enhanced communication skills, and increased national as well as international and intercultural understanding. Results obtained have, in

line with this, facilitated interaction between “stakeholders” in language education, e.g. teachers, learners, school managers, curriculum designers, text book writers, and testing agencies.

The wide attention the CEFR has attracted seems to be due to the fact that it constitutes an analytical system that is at once concrete, coherent, and transparent in its various parts. In addition, the fact that it can serve different purposes and caters to many practical needs underpins its popularity. Yet some other possible explanations for it seem to be:

- The issues that were tackled resonated well with strongly felt needs among both professionals and learners.
- Prestigious organizations stood behind the various projects launched.
- A visionary leadership and dedicated teams of experts gave generously of their time and energy to achieve the goals that were set up.
- There existed a generally positive and cooperative spirit among the many players in the field, among them policy makers, project advisers, national representatives, educational specialists, school administrators, teachers, and students.
- Very useful support was provided by producers of study materials, by test agencies, and by organisers of language programs and courses.

To sum up, this article illustrates some European language education work that aims at supporting fundamental values and goals such as enhanced communication abilities and increased international understanding. As appears to be implicit in the general theme of this Conference, language education in South-East Asia is geared towards much the same goals. Prof Dr Dede Rosyada of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, reminds us of this in the Conference book, when he quotes a statement by the former ASEAN Secretary General, H.E. Le Luong Minh:

“With the diversity in ASEAN reflected in our diverse histories, races, cultures and belief systems, English is an important and indispensable tool to bring our Community closer together” (Conference Book, 2018).

One might add that advances and experiences gained in our respective geographical and educational contexts, i.e. Europe and South-East Asia, are likely to be of mutual benefit.

It is no doubt the case that the European results described above have facilitated interaction between educationists working under very variable teaching circumstances. This is particularly obvious when we consider the vigorous development of the CEFR. Its reception has been tremendously positive in Europe and has in many ways changed the scene of language education there. Not least important is the fact that the model and materials have been put to good use in practice, as evidenced in, for example, Mader and Urkun (2011) and North (2014).

The projects referred to have also sparked considerable interest beyond Europe. The proficiency scales, for instance, are used as a fairly common reference scheme in some other parts of the world and this has enabled language educators to interact more effortlessly across different linguistic, cultural and educational systems. It has become easier for us to talk to international colleagues about goals and achievements, depending in large part on the existence and use of now fairly well-known criteria.

The other language education and language assessment tools referred to, DIALANG and the ELP, also contribute to improved communication between stakeholders in the field (educators and learners in the first place): DIALANG, as a model for self-managed foreign language assessment on the widely known CEFR scale, and the ELP as a likewise learner-centered assessment tool, used as a device for storing and communicating students' achievements. Both of them enjoy extensive recognition and they can both help strengthen the communicative skills of the language user.

To be sure, the latter effect must be regarded as the ultimate goal of a vast majority of language teaching professionals around the globe.

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Mats Oscarson

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