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ESOL Examinations

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The CEFR and its impact on learning the Asset Languages case study

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Outline

- Background to Asset Languages: a learning ladder based on the CEFR
- The CEFR: a positive force for language learning
 - An action-oriented approach
 - Reference levels to structure learning and to motivate
- The role of assessment
 - Summative
 - Formative
- Assessment can be part of the problem or part of the solution

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Tokyo 1986



- What is Communicative Language Ability?
- How can I measure progress?
- Showing them progress would really help motivate these kids.

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National Languages Strategy 2002

Perceived problem:

'a cycle of national underperformance in languages, a shortage of teachers, low take up of languages beyond schooling and a workforce unable to meet the demands of a globalised economy' (DfES 2002:10).

Three overarching objectives:

1. To improve teaching and learning of languages
2. To introduce a recognition system
3. To increase the numbers of people studying languages

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Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000 (1)

- Current qualifications
 - Inflexible
 - Confusing and uninformative about the levels of competence they represent

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Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000 (2)

- Recommended a National Languages Framework
 - Common European Framework (CEFR) + existing UK frameworks
 - Meaningful proficiency levels
 - Reward partial competences
 - Small steps, positive achievement
 - Expressed in functional 'can do' terms
 - Widen range of languages (taught and assessed)
 - Promote self-assessment



Two complementary goals

- A motivational, supportive language learning ladder
- Meaningful, comparable accreditation of language proficiency through a link to the CEFR



The Asset languages

Arabic	Hindi	Somali
Bengali	Italian	Spanish
Mandarin Chinese	Japanese	Swedish
French	Punjabi	Tamil
German	Polish	Turkish
Modern Greek	Portuguese	Urdu
Gujarati	Russian	Yoruba



<http://www.assetlanguages.org.uk/> **asset languages**

Asset Languages is a unique assessment scheme to support language teaching from primary to secondary and through to adult education.

Whether you work in primary, secondary, further or adult education; with young learners or adults; in French and German or Urdu and Punjabi, Asset Languages can help you to offer your learners more from languages learning.

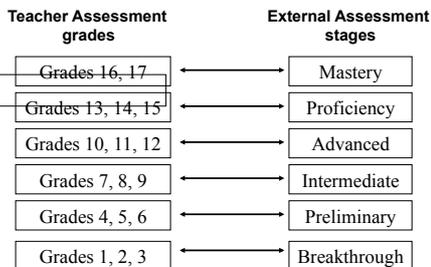


Asset Languages and General qualifications

- **General qualifications (existing qualifications)**
 - Test all students in a cohort
 - Standards defined in terms of expected levels of achievement – designed to be broadly comparable across subjects
 - Summative – exams come at end of period of learning
 - Integrated skills testing
 - Provision for community languages is patchy
 - Not appropriate for lifelong learning
- **Asset Languages**
 - Intention is: test when ready at appropriate level for individual
 - Standards purely related to language proficiency
 - Summative, with formative dimensions, in short more regular cycles. Smaller learning steps, each positively accredited
 - Modular testing of skills, e.g. community languages
 - Wide range of languages
 - Serves lifelong learning by design



Summative and Formative assessment in Asset Languages



Why was the proficiency focus seen as an improvement?

- We promoted Asset Languages as “curriculum-neutral” – that is, not requiring special exam preparation.
- The test specifications list topics and functions, and grammar areas for each level.
- Teachers are also referred to the Languages Ladder can do statements.
- We wanted to discourage teaching to the test.
- Our message was: “equipping kids to use the language will be more effective than drilling them to pass tests.”
- The communicative focus was thus hoped to inspire better classroom practice.



The CEFR: a positive force for language education

- What is the CEFR exactly?
- It's a book
- one which probably few people read from cover to cover, and many misunderstand.
- It's a major ongoing project,
- an area of activity which is focusing the efforts, coordinated or uncoordinated, of many language specialists across Europe and beyond: policy makers, testing bodies, curriculum designers and teachers.



The CEFR is two kinds of framework

- First purpose:
- Conceptually, it offers a comprehensive discussion of the many ways in which contexts of learning differ - learners, purposes, skills, content, teaching methodology, and so on. The CEFR lays out the range of choices which must be made.
- Second purpose:
- to provide a set of reference levels. This amounts to a claim that *despite* the differences between contexts of language learning it is possible and useful to compare them in terms of level. The levels are a neutral point to which any context of learning can be referred.

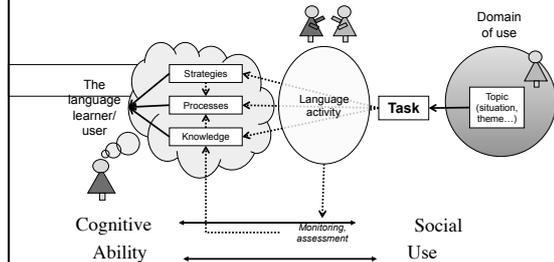


The CEFR as a framework for learning and teaching

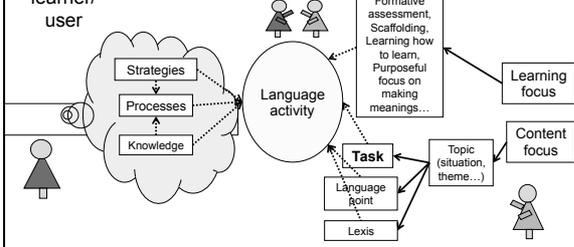
- It says on page 1: "We have not set out to tell people what to do or how to do it."
- BUT the CEFR quotes Council of Europe statements which emphasize learners' "communicative needs" - everyday life, exchanging information and ideas, achieving intercultural understanding.
- How? By "basing language teaching and learning on the needs, motivations, characteristics and resources of learners", and "defining worthwhile and realistic objectives as explicitly as possible" (p.3).
- This conveys the CEFR's basic communicative, action-oriented approach.
- Tasks and interaction are at the centre.



The CEFR's model of language use and learning

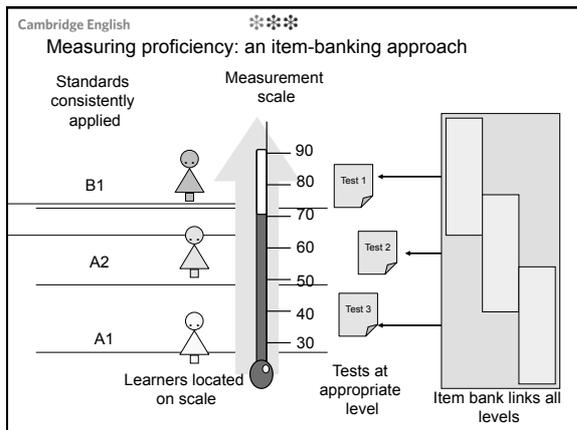


The language learner/user and The classroom domain



The CEFR as a framework of levels

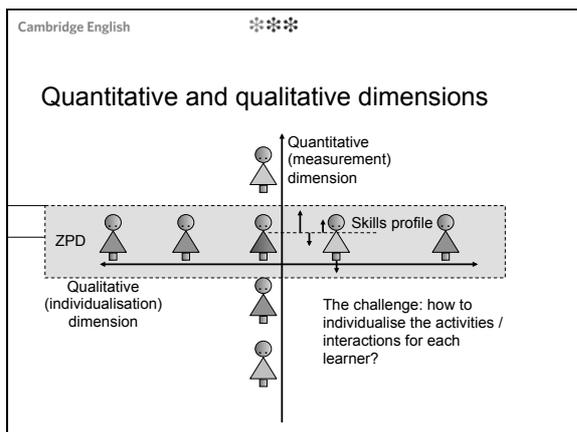
- Proficiency frameworks should be good for learning!
- (as I realised in Tokyo in 1986)
- Focus on useful outcomes of learning
- Provide a learning landscape: where did I start, where am I, where am I going?
- Help individualise learning: For each learner there is a level which is optimal for learning.
- Allow teaching to focus on strengths and weaknesses, things which are helping or hindering the learner.
- Enable a shared understanding of levels - realistic learning targets for a group - an ability to do a particular job - successfully pursue university studies using the language, etc.



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Two models of learning

Adaptivity	Interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning happens by exposure to comprehensible input. • Formal language learning (teaching) does not work • Chomskyan: Language acquisition is an innate capacity • Comprehensible input is at a level just beyond the learner's current capacity to use (the $i+1$ level) • (Focus on the quantitative: Item banking enables us to implement the $i+1$ level). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning happens through interaction with a more knowing other (e.g. a teacher). • i.e. all cognition is socially constructed. • What a learner can achieve with assistance defines the <i>zone of proximal development</i>. • (Focus on the qualitative: These ideas have been influential e.g. on Dynamic Assessment, Assessment for Learning..)
Krashen	Vygotsky



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How to read the CEFR: the descriptor scales

- The descriptor scales are the most read and least well understood part of the CEFR.
- They are meant as *illustrations* of CEFR levels – they help you to *recognize* the level when you see it, e.g. in a learner's speaking performance.
- Unfortunately they are treated more as *definitions*, even in the CEFR itself. This is a problem because there are some language teaching contexts which they do not relate to very well, e.g.:
 - young learners,
 - CLIL contexts, etc.
- This is not to criticize the CEFR, just to say: don't treat it as a finished product or a bible.
- In particular, don't treat the descriptor scales as definitive, but be prepared to continually enrich the conception of levels by incorporating other contexts.

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The descriptor scales (2)

- In order to be context neutral they are intentionally underspecified.
- They tend to describe outcomes of learning rather than what precisely is to be learned – e.g., "Can follow most lectures, discussions and debates with relative ease" does not indicate:
 - what language forms, vocabulary and rhetorical conventions need to be mastered to achieve this outcome,
 - how the ease in listening is to be acquired.
- A lot of carefully-planned teaching of intermediate objectives are needed to achieve this high-level goal.
- So most descriptors are not immediately useable as statements of learning objectives, at a suitable level for designing a syllabus.

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The descriptor scales (3)

- Neither are descriptors intended as necessary or sufficient *specifications* for what should be taught at a given level.
- Thus the A2 descriptor in the *Correspondence* scale – "Can write very simple personal letters expressing thanks and apology" is not intended as an exhaustive specification for what should be taught in the area of correspondence at A2 level.



The descriptor scales in summary

- The CEFR descriptors are *illustrations* of level, to help users understand what the level means.
- As *definitions* of levels they are problematic because they don't describe some contexts well.
- They are not necessary or sufficient *specifications* of what should be taught.
- There are different kinds of descriptor scale in assessment: constructor-oriented, rater-oriented, user-oriented.
- The CEFR scales are chiefly user-oriented.

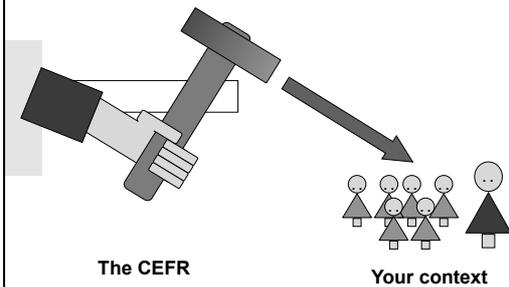


Your context and the CEFR

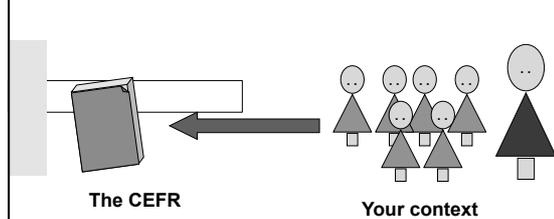
- We should never speak of 'applying the CEFR to a context'.
- Rather, of relating or referring a context to the CEFR.



"Applying the CEFR to a context"



"Referring a context to the CEFR"



Aims, objectives and CEFR descriptors

- A language teaching context has its own specific *aims* and *objectives*.
- Language tests must be designed to measure learning outcomes in terms of these aims.
- Aims and objectives define the *distinguishing features* of a language context.
- Note that CEFR descriptors rather stress what makes language contexts *comparable*.
- Reference to the CEFR must respect the aims and objectives of the context.



Aims and objectives

- Aims reflect the ideology of the curriculum, e.g.
 - We wish our students to grow into aware and responsible citizens
- and show how the curriculum will seek to realize it, e.g.
 - They will learn to read newspapers, follow radio, TV and internet media critically and with understanding;
 - They will be able to form and exchange viewpoints on political and social issues
- Objectives:
 - Describe what the aim seeks to achieve in terms of smaller units of learning
 - Provide a basis for the organisation of teaching activities
 - Describe learning in terms of observable behaviour or performance.
- Objectives have the advantage that they:
 - Facilitate course planning and materials construction
 - Provide measurable outcomes for judging success or failure
 - They are prescriptive.



Objectives

- Aim:
 - Students will learn to listen critically to radio and tv.
- Language objectives:
 - Learn vocabulary of specific news topic areas
 - Distinguish fact and opinion in newspaper articles
- Language learning objectives:
 - Infer meaning of unknown words from context
- Nonlanguage objectives:
 - Confidence, Motivation, Cultural enrichment,
- Process objectives:
 - i.e. Focus on the knowledge and skills which learners need to develop:
 - investigation, reflection, discussion, interpretation, cooperation ...



Referring a context to the CEFR

- Finding relevant scales and descriptors in the CEFR you can state the language proficiency level at which you expect students to be able to achieve the objectives.
- Using CEFR-linked exemplars of performance you can monitor and evaluate the range of levels achieved by your students.
- You can adjust your objectives to what is practically achievable, (either upwards or downwards).
- You can report all this in terms that will be readily understood by others in your profession.
- These are benefits of linking your context of learning to the CEFR.



Assessment – part of the problem or part of the solution

- Asset Languages is a response to perceived problems with existing language assessments.
- As a framework for promoting good language learning it tries to tick all the boxes.
- But it has not yet been able to challenge the standard exams.
- The impact of an educational innovation depends not only on the benefits it offers, but on how its users appreciate these, or are able or willing to exploit them.



Assessment – part of the problem or part of the solution

- Where teachers and school heads are judged on exam grades, they may have little incentive to focus on communicative proficiency as an outcome of language learning.
- Teachers will not adopt an optional alternative to existing assessments if it involves extra work or training.
- Testing when ready, or matching levels to individual students, may be logistically too difficult for most schools.
- Following a languages ladder of progressive steps is more complex than having a single big-bang test at the end of secondary school.
- Formative assessment is very difficult to do well – only the best teachers can manage it.



Conclusion

- The CEFR is having a great impact in Europe and more widely, particularly in policy making and assessment.
- Its impact on teaching has been less, partly because what that impact should be is not obvious to many.
- Educational reforms can be led by assessment, but success may require changes at every level – syllabus design, teacher training, materials, tests.
- In focusing on the CEFR's framework of levels, do not lose sight of its primary purpose - to inform the design and implementation of programmes for learning and teaching.