

Reflecting on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and Its Companion Volume

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The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a highly influential language policy and education guide. Officially published in 2001, it is available in over 40 languages and used by individuals, institutions, and policymakers in various contexts with different aims and degrees of rigor, having a great impact on countries within and beyond Europe.

Nowadays, the increasing social mobility and dynamic changes in communities globally have given rise to a growing plurality. This phenomenon presents both opportunities and challenges for language education. In response to these, the Council of Europe updated the CEFR and released its Companion Volume (CEFR-CV) in 2018 (a provisional) and 2020 (the definite version).

It is the responsibility and of great significance of its member states, language education agencies, and together with professionals to effectively utilize both documents.

Emerging from a two-day conference held in London, the book gathered expanded oral presentations from the guest speakers to the vision of “Towards a Road Map for Future Research and Development,” (p.xv) uniting diverse perspectives and essential questions. It is structured into five parts, with Parts 1 to 4 aligning with the conference structure, and Part 5 functioning as an epilogue.

Part 1 (Chapters 1-3) examines the origin, ethos, and impact of the CEFR. Chapter 1, by Masashi Negishi, delves into the CEFR’s significant influence in Japan, where it is used for test alignment, language proficiency surveys, course objectives, Japanese language teaching, and broadcasting programs. It is worth noting that with the guidance of CEFR, CEFR-J was developed to guide language education. However, people in Japan tend to be more interested in levels and can-do descriptors, leaving key conceptual ideas neglected and needing more time to be comprehended.

Margaret E. Malone, in her exploration detailed in Chapter 2, highlights the “international initiative” (p.23) focusing on aligning studies of the ACTFL and the CEFR. Emphasizing the pivotal role of plurilingualism and underlining the significance of public education, Malone advocates for the promotion of the CEFR-CV in the forthcoming stages. Attaining the ultimate goal necessitates effective communication and patience in language learning.



In Chapter 3, Brian North contributes a pivotal clarification of misconceptions surrounding the CEFR. He outlines the objectives of the CEFR-CV, shedding light on essential concepts such as “mediation,” “action-oriented approach,” “agency,” “plurilingualism,” and “inclusivity.” North emphasizes the alignment of the CEFR-CV with the Council of Europe’s mission, which centers on fostering a democratic culture and equipping individuals with crucial 21st-century skills. Serving as a foundational framework, this chapter sets the stage for the subsequent content in the book.

Part 2 (Chapters 4-6) delves into the action-oriented approach and its potential for a paradigm shift in the field of language education. John de Jong, in Chapter 4, illuminates the under-utilization of the action-oriented approach via online survey. The author unveils a stark disparity between theoretical knowledge and its practical application, prompting the need for advanced technologies to accurately assess plurilingualism. De Jong also raises concerns about the operationalization of mediation and its potential implications for fairness in language testing.

Transitioning from the Spanish case study in Chapter 5, where Mark Levv and Neus Figueras scrutinize the impact of the CEFR-CV, the unexpected revelation challenges pre-conceived notions. Despite the proficiency scales being well-known, a comprehensive understanding of the action-oriented approach remains elusive. Spain, despite its provision of bilingual and plurilingual education opportunities, grapples with hindrances like document accessibility issues, limited integration into official curricula, and inadequate teacher education.

Building upon this exploration, Chapter 6, authored by Constant Leung, further expands the discussion by adopting a mediational and plurilingual perspective. Exploring the facets of emotional intelligence and plurilingualism as integral elements in mediating social interactions, Leung identifies a conspicuous disparity between the practical application of plurilingualism and the prevalent monolingual framing of language proficiency. This recognition underscores the imperative need for additional conceptual analysis and empirical exploration before the systematic operationalization of such approaches can be effectively implemented.

Adopting a holistic approach to plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, Part 3 (Chapters 7-9) focuses on appropriate curricula and classroom practices. It begins with Bessie Dendrinou’s exploration of the relationship between curriculum languages and crosslinguistic mediation. In Chapter 7, Dendrinou discusses how crosslinguistic mediation can be taught and assessed, drawing on the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum in Greece. This curriculum relies on ongoing corpus linguistic research and a language profile based on learner data from national foreign language exams. Notably, it includes linguistic mediation descriptors drawn from empirical data gathered since 2023.

Chapter 8 continues the discussion on crosslinguistic and offers critical reflections on mediation testing. Peter Lenz notes the vastness of the CEFR-CV’s descriptive framework and argues for a discussion of rating criteria for performances. He illustrates his points through tasks from the Occupational English Test (OET) Speaking Sub-test and emphasizes the need to avoid “one-size-fits-all” (p.113) solutions.

Expanding on the discussions regarding the above issue, the focus transitions to Chapter 9, where Déirdre Kirwan and David Little explore a plurilingual approach. Lenz’s reflections on the expansive descriptive framework of the CEFR-CV and the need for nuanced rating criteria resonate as Kirwan and Little explore an Irish primary school setting. Here,

pupils from immigrant families are actively encouraged to utilize their home languages both inside and outside the classroom, independent of the reasons. This holistic approach not only motivates the students but also results in the development of age-appropriate literacy across all languages involved. The case study highlights the pupils' initiative in gaining a satisfying degree of metalinguistic awareness, showcasing that the plurilingual approach not only enhances self-esteem but also contributes to social cohesion.

Part 4 (Chapters 10-12) takes a comprehensive dive into the practical implementation of descriptors and scales across curriculum, teaching/learning, and assessment. Armin Berger contributes to Chapter 10 by advocating for a subtle approach to refining reference levels in the classroom. Berger encourages teachers to trust their intuition and suggests the subdivision of levels for specific classroom needs. He recommends incorporating empirically supported benchmarks, such as "local reference points," to facilitate a coherent and purposeful vertical progression.

In Chapter 11, Elain Boyd introduces three distinct approaches to aligning curricula with the CEFR and CEFR-CV: the retrofit model, an assessment-driven model, and a coursebook model. Boyd emphasizes the need to consider existing practices while developing alignment procedures. These procedures should not only be manageable but also offer clear evidence, ensuring accessibility for non-expert users.

In the following part, Elif Kantarcıoğlu shifts focus to mediation scales, emphasizing their pivotal role in bringing meaning to assessments within academic contexts. Kantarcıoğlu scrutinizes evolving assessment practices at Bilkent University and raises concerns about the complexity of assessing mediation skills. The alignment of examinations with the CEFR introduces challenges, particularly when interaction and mediation activities overlap. Together, these contributions shed light on the practical challenges and strategic considerations in effectively incorporating descriptors, scales, and alignment within language education frameworks.

Part 5, afterword written by Barry O'Sullivan, offers solutions to the "systemic incoherence and failure" in language learning programs. According to the author, education should be viewed as a comprehensive learning system (O'Sullivan, 2020). Provided with the underlying philosophy of language learning and use, the CEFR and CEFR-CV offer a unique opportunity for education policymakers worldwide, and they can be converted into practice by drawing on the practical and theoretical considerations stressed in the volume.

The book offers critical and interpretive perspectives on the CEFR and CEFR-CV in a well-structured and comprehensive manner. It begins by tracing the origins and development of the CEFR before delving into the underlying conceptual ideas and practices in a global context. The cases examined provide a representative range of depth and breadth: for instance, Japan focuses on holistic planning and localized innovation, while Ireland and Greece explore specific aspects such as plurilingualism and mediation at the micro level within the CEFR framework. Furthermore, the mediated feature within the CEFR also highlights the intricate process of mastering language proficiency, which requires significant time, cognitive resources, and is influenced by psycho-affective variables (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024). Additionally, the case topics are quite extensive, covering various subjects such as curriculum alignment, teacher education, classroom teaching, assessment tests, and more.

Another notable feature of this book lies in its chapters' authors with diverse backgrounds, coming from countries including the United Kingdom, United States, Japan, Vienna, the

Netherlands, Athens, Spain, Turkey, and Sweden, among many other European nations. This brings forth a rich and insightful perspective to the book, not only aiding in bolstering the influence of the CEFR and the CEFR-CV on a global scale but also rendering the realization of its visionary roadmap possible. It's particularly worth mentioning that among the authors, there are witnesses and contributors to these documents who can provide authoritative and thought-provoking ideas in an accessible manner. For scholars who are just starting to engage with the CEFR and the CEFR-CV, this proves instrumental in avoiding unnecessary detours.

In examining the book's merits, it's essential to highlight a notable gap: The book primarily focuses on Europe and North America in case studies, neglecting the Asian context, with only Japan represented. To address this, proposed enhancement includes concise content boxes for each research aspect, covering subject, duration, methods, results, and practical strategies, as the provided practice cases lack sufficient background information.

Overall, as an invaluable contribution to the field of innovative language education, the book encourages and enables language policy makers, teaching practitioners, and researchers to advance their understanding of the CEFR and its Companion Volume, helping them to make full and wise use of these two guidelines to inspire language education in the new era.

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