

講演記録

第 10 回大会 基調講演

2008 年 11 月 8 日 奈良教育大学

European Approaches to Language Policy. Historical and contemporary perspectives

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‘European approaches’ to language policy, and in particular language education policy, in the title of this article needs some preliminary definition. What is meant by ‘Europe’ here is not a geographical definition but a cultural and political one. There are two supra-national bodies which are important:

- The European Union which is probably most familiar to most readers and consists of 27 member states which are in a political and economic union
- The Council of Europe which is a group of 47 member states in a cultural cooperation with the aim of protecting ‘human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law’.

The Council of Europe was founded in 1949. The European Union in its present form – there have been several stages in its growth – has existed since 1992.

It is above all the Council of Europe which has led the developments in language education policy and I shall be talking mainly about the Council of Europe here but there is much overlap and co-operation between the two bodies with respect to language education policy.

The most well known document produced by the Council of Europe is the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). It is a document which, though formally published in 2001, gained an increasing reputation and influence from the mid-1990s when early versions were widely circulated for consultation. Several informal and unpublished impact studies at the Council of Europe, in the form of questionnaires to government representatives (summarised by Martinyiuk and Noijens, 2007), have shown that it has had considerable influence. In my personal experience too, there is constant reference to the document in professional discourse¹. It is used in curriculum planning, in the development of examinations – not least in central and eastern Europe-

an countries which have been introducing national examinations in recent years – and it is referred to in textbooks which claim to follow the principles of the CEFR. It has also spawned numerous guides, for teachers, for teacher trainers, for administrators and so on, and in particular there is now a document which explains to those responsible for examinations how to calibrate levels of competence in specific examinations while referring to the six levels of competence described in the CEFR (see: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Manuel1_EN.asp).

It must also be said that there are criticisms of the CEFR, often of a technical nature and focused on the definitions of scales and levels but one of my purposes in this lecture is to emphasis that there are many more aspects of the CEFR than the scales and levels which we should pay attention to.

One of the interesting questions is how the undoubted influence actually happens, because the Council of Europe cannot compel member States to take specific actions. All it can do is make recommendations. These recommendations are agreed by the ministers who represent the member States but there is no legal obligation to carry them out.

Historical perspectives

To understand the influence of the Council of Europe it is instructive to consider the context in which the CEFR has appeared. A general introduction to the Council of Europe on its website refers to the concept of ‘European identity’:

The Council was set up to (...) promote awareness of a European identity based on shared values and cutting across different cultures.

(www.coe.int/EN/Com/about_CoE - 2007)

This central idea can be traced back to the founding convention of the late 1940s, where the notions of nationality, commonality and recognition of diversity in the statement cited above are already present. The purpose of the CoE is described in the convention, inter alia, as follows:

To develop mutual understanding among the peoples of Europe and reciprocal appreciation of their cultural diversity, to safeguard European culture, to promote national contributions to Europe’s common cultural heritage respecting the same fundamental values and *to encourage in particular the study of the languages, history and civilisation* of the Parties to the Convention [i.e. the member states – my addition]

(<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/cadreprincipal.htm> - emphasis added)

Language teachers can note here the significance attributed to language learning and to ‘civilisation’. Today we would more probably refer to the ‘cultural dimension’ rather

than ‘civilisation’ in language teaching and learning, but the meaning is similar.

This emphasis on the cultural dimension is repeated in the CoE’s more recent statement of language education policy (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Division_EN.asp). This document also refers to the importance of languages as modes of communication and, secondly, as expressions of identity, with emphasis here too – as in the quotation from the original treaty – on mutual recognition.

This more recent statement thus repeats the established views of language learning but also adds the political concepts of ‘democratic citizenship’ and ‘social cohesion’ which emerged in the discourse of the 1990s and are linked here to language competence:

- Democratic citizenship: participation in democratic and social processes in multi-lingual societies is facilitated by the plurilingual competence of individuals;
- Social cohesion: equality of opportunity for personal development, education, employment, mobility, access to information and cultural enrichment depends on access to language learning throughout life.

(http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Division_EN.asp)

This political emphasis corresponds partly to the enlargement in the 1990s of the Council of Europe with the accession of countries of east and central Europe, formerly under communist/socialist rule.

It was also in the 1990s – in 1992 to be precise – that there was major change in the political dimension of the European Union, which was mainly until that point an economic union, a ‘common market’ as it was called, where all could trade on equal terms. From the 1990s, the EU has had a parliament, and the introduction of European elections is the most visible symptom of change. In the course of the 1990s, the European Union has also emphasised the significance of language learning. The European Commission’s White Paper of 1995 which described the ‘knowledge society’ for which we must prepare, made two important statements about language learning. It first argued that economic opportunities for individuals are dependent on language learning:

- Proficiency in several Community [i.e. EU languages – my comment] languages has become a precondition if citizens of the European Union are to benefit from the occupational and personal opportunities open to them in the border-free single market.

The second statement makes a stronger claim. Whereas in the first, language proficiency is a ‘precondition’, in the second there seems to be an assumption of cause and effect between language proficiency and European identity, in the phrase ‘build up’:

- Languages are also the key to knowing other people. Proficiency in languages

helps to *build up the feeling of being European* with all its cultural wealth and diversity of understanding between the citizens of Europe.

(European Commission, 1995: 67 – emphasis added)

In summary, we can identify in the European context three socio-political aspirations for language teaching and learning.

- First, there is the hope that language learning will facilitate mobility within a common market economy, thus strengthening flexibility and competitiveness.
- Second, it is hoped that language learning creates mutual understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity with the result that there will be greater social cohesion.
- Third, there is the suggestion that language learning will lead to a new identification with ‘being European’.

In all of these there is a postulated relationship of cause and effect: that language learning will be a cause of some desirable outcomes – social, political and economic. All three aspirations are yet to be tested by reality and, ultimately, we need scientific investigations of the relationships between language learning, economic success, a cohesive European society and a European identity.

Principal concepts and purposes

A more detailed history of the language education work of the Council of Europe has been written by John Trim (2007), the leader of the projects for more than 30 years and is available on the website (www.coe.int/lang). Here I want to focus on some of the key ideas and purposes of the work in that period, and then return to the question of how the policy becomes influential and is implemented.

Let me list what I see as key points:

- the focus initially was on language learning for adults, and in particular migrant workers, who were a crucial group in economic and cultural mobility
- the starting point was in analysis of language needs – not in the structure of language – in analysis of the things people needed to be able to do with language and the concepts they needed to express – this was the notional-functional approach to language to learning;
- there was a pragmatic definition of the language level people need to be able ‘to communicate socially on straightforward everyday matters with people from other countries who come their way, and to be able to get around and lead a reasonably normal social life when they visit another country’ (van Ek in Trim, 2007); this

was called the Threshold Level;

- the idea of a Threshold Level was then transferred to planning learning for pupils in schools;
- methods were developed which focused on how to teach learners so that they could fulfil their linguistic needs and feel motivated; they were summarised in a book by Sheils: *Communication in the Modern Languages Classroom* (1988);
- short term assessment and qualifications for achieving very clearly stated objectives were developed.

My personal experience of the effect of this was as a teacher in a secondary school in the mid-1970s and it illustrates how the Council of Europe influence worked. I was teaching French and German in a secondary school to pupils of all abilities and motivations, some high and some low. The textbooks we were using had been designed for learners of high ability and motivation and we had many problems teaching learners with low ability and motivation. Together with about 10 other teachers in the region where I worked, I was invited to a meeting by the regional inspector and adviser. I now assume she had been to a Council of Europe workshop but at the time I had never heard of the Council of Europe. She introduced some of the ideas I have mentioned above and some new teaching materials and invited us to experiment with them. They proved more effective than what we had, because they were based on children learning very specific language for very specific needs. For example they were told 'This week we are going to learn how to book a room at a hotel when you go to France' and by the end of the week they could do it, and they could go home and tell their parents what they had learnt. Previously they had been learning tenses of verbs and lists of vocabulary which meant very little to them and even less to their parents. If they could do the task of hotel booking well, they also got immediate credit and when all the tasks were added together at the end of the year they got a certificate which they could take home and show their parents. They did not have to wait 5 years until the end of the course, and the end of course examination.

This approach was a success and teachers began to talk about it at meetings; the ideas spread and new teaching materials were published. It became in Britain a national movement with lots of people going to conferences and reading about notions and functions and needs analysis. This is how it was implemented in Britain and it was successful because it seemed to solve the problem we had with learners of low ability and low motivation. It also appealed to those with high ability and high motivation to do something practical and to get immediate rewards and recognition.

It is important to know that it was relatively easy for British teachers to change things since they had the right to decide on what they wanted to teach and how they wanted to teach. Today they have a National Curriculum which tells them what to teach and how to teach but this has been influenced by the work of previous years and the spirit of the Council of Europe.

On a personal note I must say that I had my doubts about the approach in the form I knew it, because it was too utilitarian. It was too focused on supposed needs and the children I was teaching did not really have those needs – we had to pretend they had them (Byram, 1978). But I was in a minority at that time and in a sense I still am since the idea that language learning should be focused on what are assumed to be real world needs is now widely accepted and not even questioned.

The Common European Framework of Reference

Let me return to the developments at the European level. In the 1990s it was decided that it was important to create a common way of thinking about language teaching in Europe and to encapsulate it in a document which discussed language teaching, learning and assessment in all its forms.

One of the main purposes of the CEFR is stated as follows:

It is desirable to develop a Common European Framework of Reference for language learning at all levels, in order to:

- promote and facilitate co-operation among educational institutions in different countries;
- provide a sound basis for the initial recognition of language qualifications;
- assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts.

(CEFR, 2001: 5-6)

Behind this call for co-ordination, co-operation, and mutual recognition lies the desire to create a European entity in which people can live and work together, the ideas I quoted earlier from the Council of Europe and European Union policy documents. When the work towards the CEFR began in the early 1990s, this European entity was emerging as a political body as pointed out above. By the time of publication in 2001, this political entity was even stronger. However the political changes were not the only important ones. A focus on common social and cultural purposes had been growing for many years in the Council of Europe and this was strengthened massively in the 1990s as countries

of eastern and central Europe became members and looked towards western Europe and its beliefs and practices, as they changed to a post-communist world. This change applied to language teaching and learning too. During the 1990s, the Council of Europe's Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, Austria, provided courses and seminars where representatives of western, central and eastern Europe began to exchange ideas and learn from each other.

Against this background, the socio-political purpose of the CEFR is to create a 'common language' for everyone concerned with languages in the 47 member states. It is important to create transparency so that people from so many different countries can talk together about language teaching, learning and assessment:

By 'transparent' is meant that information must be clearly formulated and explicit, available and readily comprehensible to users.

(CEFR, 2001: 6).

This is a high ambition since language is not of itself transparent but is made so by the way we use it. The CEFR is thus an attempt to use language and create a common discourse which has the status of a reference, a text to which we must constantly return in order to ensure transparency². The ambition is all the greater because transparency is to be developed in two languages simultaneously – in French and English, the official languages of the Council of Europe – and, as time has demonstrated, also in many other languages into which the text has now been translated, including Japanese. There is an interesting task for future researchers to analyse to what extent transparency has in fact been maintained across languages.

The essence of the CEFR is that it is a taxonomy, that it breaks down competence (mainly language competence but also cultural competence) into composite parts and puts them into scales from 'basic' to 'proficient'. There are 9 chapters in the CEFR. The first 2 chapters are introduction and then there are 3 chapters (3-5) dealing with competences and including many scales. Then there are 4 chapters discussing matters of language learning/acquisition, tasks in language learning, curriculum design and principles of assessment. There are therefore more chapters about teaching learning and assessment than about the taxonomy of competences but nonetheless, the CEFR is most widely known for its statements about competences and levels of language performance - what learners 'can-do'.

It is the way in which these levels are described which has been crucial in making the CEFR well known and influential. The descriptions are easy to grasp and useful because of the heavy focus on description of outcomes. Outcomes have become important in all

education systems because of the way in which national and international comparisons of outcomes have been used to describe the efficiency of education systems. The most well known of the international comparisons in Europe is the PISA survey, but in Britain, at least, there have been public comparisons of schools for the last ten years or more. This means that simple measurements are very attractive and the CEFR offers measurements in a language which is easy for all – teachers, learners, parents, employers and politicians – to understand. Indeed many people talk about the CEFR as if it consisted only of a definition of levels of competence and ignore the rest.

This is why the levels are well known but we should also know where the levels come from. As Trim says in his historical overview (2007: 19), the original working group were sceptical that there are natural levels and that there is a cogent argument for a specific number of levels for language learning. The scales which appeared in the CEFR are based on an analysis of descriptions of proficiency to be found for example in examinations documents. They are, to put it very simplistically, ‘average’ descriptions of the language which learners are expected to produce for examiners and which examiners can allocate to pre-defined levels. The decision of where there is a ‘cut-off point’ between levels is a matter of interpretation of what examiners are looking for, not of the stages of learning which learners go through. There is no guarantee that these are what Trim calls ‘natural levels’; they are constructs used in education systems to produce quantifications of performance. The uses of those quantifications are many – and some of them may be desirable and others may not.

The focus on levels therefore is unfortunate because there are many more aspects to the CEFR than the definition of levels, and this has been recognised by the Council of Europe itself in a recent conference (February 2007), where as the report says, it was possible to:

clarify the status and the purpose of the CEFR – as a *descriptive rather than a standard-setting document* it allows all users to analyse their own situation and to make the choices which they deem most appropriate to their circumstances, while adhering to certain key values.

(Goullier, 2007: 7 – emphasis added)

What is important is to use the CEFR as a basis for analysing a particular teaching and learning situation in a transparent and coherent way. The CEFR does not make proposals or decisions; decisions have to be made by users of the CEFR whether they are teachers, curriculum designers, policy makers, examiners and so on.

This perspective was reinforced in an explanation of the most recent Recommendation

of the Council of Ministers of the Council of Europe, a document which influences by its reasoning not by any political power:

- 1 The CEFR is purely descriptive – *not prescriptive, nor normative*;
- 2 (...)
- 3 The CEFR is context neutral – it needs to be applied and interpreted with regard to each specific educational context in accordance with *the needs and priorities specific to that context*;

Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)7 - explanatory note

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/SourceForum07/Rec%20CM%202008-7_EN.doc

It is also made clear that the description attempts to be comprehensive but cannot be exhaustive and that further developments are welcome. So the CEFR should not be seen as definitive even though it has clearly established a view of language teaching, learning and assessment which is being widely disseminated and implemented.

Let me return now to the question of dissemination and implementation, and to do so let me put the CEFR in the wider context of documents and activities of the Council of Europe. The website (www.coe.int/lang) contains many documents, including reports of conferences, working papers supporting main documents and other major documents including the *Guide for Language Education Policies in Europe* and the *European Language Portfolio*. There are illustrations of levels of language proficiency, reference level descriptions for specific languages (remembering that the CEFR is language neutral means that for each language there need to be specific descriptions); and it has a *Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR*.

All of these provide practical help so that people can use the fundamental ideas for their specific contexts but there are no specific proposals; readers are always invited to consider alternatives and make their own decisions. Decisions have to be made locally. The Recommendations I have mentioned above are at the political level i.e. recommending to states that they should adopt the principles of the CoE approach to languages, but the principles are that users should make their own decisions. For example, the question is often raised how long a course of study is needed for learners to reach level A2 or level B2 etc. There can be no simple answer. It will depend among other things on whether the target language is in the same language family as the learner's own, whether they have to learn a new script, whether there are other sources of learning in the environment, what methods are used, how old learners are, whether they are in large or small learner groups etc etc.

The Council of Europe does not make recommendations for specific situations – with

one exception.

The exception is in what are called Language Policy Profiles. Member States invite the Council of Europe to send a team of experts to analyse language education (*all* languages: mother tongue/national languages, second languages, foreign languages, regional and minority languages) and work with local experts to make plans and policies for the future. In doing this, the external experts always bring the perspective of the Council of Europe and its documents to the attention of people responsible for education in the country in question. This is one of the most effective ways of dissemination, but implementation is always the responsibility of the member States and their own experts who know the specific situation and what needs to be done.

Conclusion

What is the relevance of all this is for the Japanese situation? The answer according to the principles I have just explained is that only Japanese experts can know, but it is important to remember that the most important function of the CEFR is to create a means of talking about languages across national borders. It is a document for a continent, not just for individual countries. In this sense, the parallel for the CEFR would be a document for Asia not just for Japan, and the benefits would come from working with language people of other countries.

What I have tried to do in this article is to reinforce the point made frequently in Europe that all the documents and ideas have to be put into operation as aids to description and decision making, *not* as European standards or norms for application in individual countries. That these ideas are focused as much on curriculum development, on methods of teaching (e.g. the importance of tasks in learning), on approaches to assessment. In short, the emphasis is on ensuring a comprehensive approach to language education, one which links all languages for the benefit of the individual, one which puts into practice language education which supports human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law.

It is important in conclusion to return to the introduction and the relationship of language learning and teaching to desired social, political and economic change in Europe. Put simply, we can ask if language teaching has facilitated or even caused the development of a European identity, a cohesive European society and a successful European economy. There is no systematic evidence for this and it would be very difficult though not impossible to identify and assess the contribution of language teaching to these policies. My own view is that language education of all kinds needs to be more explicitly re-

lated to education for citizenship if these changes are to take place (Byram, 2008). I also think that the CEFR needs to be expanded to take into account the complexity of intercultural competence – but that is another topic for another day. Similarly the curricular relationships between language teaching, history teaching, teaching about religions and geographies need to be developed more than they are. Work at the Council of Europe on an *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* is a small step in this direction, but that too is a topic for another day.

Finally, it is clear from the new Council of Europe *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* that language learning is now seen as just one part of a much more complex response to the European situation. It is important to stress at the end of this article that language education has to be understood as social policy and that language education is part of a response to social, cultural and political changes – and is therefore a very serious matter.

Notes

- 1) I have heard frequent references to the CEFR not only in Europe but also in East Asia – particularly Japan because of the existence of a translation – and also in South America. In the USA it is known but not as influential because of the existence of the American Standards.
- 2) There is a danger that the text thus becomes the object of exegesis but it should also be the object of critique since it is, as the authors would readily recognise, imperfect and in need of revision as time passes and experience is acquired.

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