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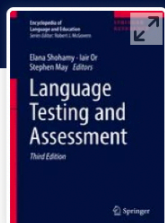
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Language Testing and Assessment

Editors: Elana Shohamy, Iair G. Or, Stephen May

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The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

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Abstract

Drawn up by the Council of Europe, published in 2001 and adopted by the European Commission in its language policies, the CEFR was born within a scenario where the EU member states and its institutions were characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity. Since 2001 the CEFR has become the most important reference document in the fields of language learning, teaching, and assessment, both in Europe and beyond, but in recent years, little attention has been paid to the debate concerning the direct impact of the CEFR on language teaching and assessment and, consequently, on language policy throughout the EU.

Indeed, although the theoretical approach of the CEFR reflects the will of the EU to address multilingualism as an asset allowing for the active inclusion of all citizens, CEFR descriptors define the linguistic competence from a monolingual perspective, using arbitrary standards relying on professional experience rather than on empirical data based on actual learner performance. Furthermore, the CEFR and its standards are often used as benchmarks in migrant competence, although they were not created for this, which changed the CEFR from a tool used to measure language knowledge to a political instrument. The Italian situation can be considered emblematic as

concerns the lack of reflection on the (mis-)use of the CEFR and the fact that it is too often used as a label without considering the impact and consequences of such a use, according to which CEFR levels are now enshrined in laws and policies incorporating the administration of language tests in migration domains.

The CEFR: A Historical Overview

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*: *Learning*, *Teaching and Assessment* (henceforth CEFR) was drawn up in 1996 by the Council of Europe which made the document accessible to everybody on its website (Council of Europe *1996*). The open-access system on the Council of Europe website had a strong symbolic value, implying the possibility of spreading the language and culture policy document. Published in 2001 both in English and in French editions, the CEFR was conceived with an aim to value and increase the linguistic and cultural diversity the EU member states and its institutions are characterized by, and which, nevertheless, generates a widespread concern about social cohesion and integration.

Based on three main concepts – use, knowledge, and ability – the nine chapters of the CEFR illustrate the theoretical model for describing linguistic competence, the six levels of proficiency, the contexts of language use, the learning process, as well as the operational implications on assessment. The document addresses both those who learn a language and those who are involved in language teaching and assessment.

Notwithstanding this, although the theoretical approach of the CEFR – like most of the EU documents and recommendations (Council of the European Union *2002*) – reflects the will of the EU to address multilingualism as an asset allowing for the active inclusion of all citizens, multilingualism is dealt with most often as a problem (Blommaert et al. *2012*). This becomes visible in the case of migrants, and not all kinds of multilingualism are considered as having the same value, since no consideration is given to immigrant languages (Extra and Yağmur *2012*).

Since 2001, the CEFR has been adopted by the European Commission in its language policies (e.g., Committee of Ministers *2008*; EC Action Plan *2004*–2006). Its greatest merit lies in providing a valuable guidance for goals, methods, development of curricula, and teaching materials selection, representing not only a theoretical reference system both in Europe and beyond but also a guide to implementation in the field of learning, teaching, and assessment of languages (see North *2001*; Morrow *2004*; Trim *2010*). Nevertheless, no deep reflection has been done in these years about the direct implications the CEFR ideology of language has had on language teaching and assessment and, consequently, on language policy in the EU. In the next paragraphs, we will try to shed light, with the support of various documents (Council of Europe *2009*, among others), on some contradictions of the CEFR compared to its initial intents.

The Contradictions in the CEFR: Plurilingualism and Monolingualism, Norm and Performance, and Language Testing

The first point on which we intend to develop some reflection concerns the paradox of the plurilingual approach of the CEFR, in contrast with the monolingualism toward which its descriptors tend. Indeed, the CEFR is based on a plurilingual approach, which reflects a pragmatic and sociolinguistic view of language, mainly conceived in a social and interactional dimension:

> The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. (Council of Europe *2001*, p. 9)

Such a view of language is founded on the idea of communicative language competence, consisting of three components: a linguistic, a sociolinguistic, and a pragmatic one. Linguistic competences "include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as system, independently of the sociolinguistic value of its variations and the pragmatic functions of its realizations" (Council of Europe *2001*, p. 4). Sociolinguistic competences "refer to the sociocultural conditions of language use" (ibidem): in this component the plurilingual approach finds its fullest expression as it "affects all language communication between representatives of different cultures, even though participants may often be unaware of its influence" (ibidem). Finally, pragmatic competences "are concerned with the functional use of linguistic resources (production of language functions, speech acts), drawing on scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges" (ibidem). Therefore, the plurilingual approach of the framework refuses a merely structural concept of competence and embraces the idea of language as a social action. Moreover, the theoretical approach also takes into account the results of research studies on second language acquisition, establishing a relationship between its didactic proposal and the studies on processes of competence development:

> since it is one of the principal functions of the Framework to encourage and enable all the different partners to the language teaching and learning processes to inform others as transparently as possible not only of their aims and objectives but also of the methods they use and the results actually achieved, it seems clear that the Framework cannot confine itself to the knowledge, skills and attitudes learners will need to develop in order to act as competent language users, but must also deal with the processes of language acquisition and learning, as well as with the teaching methodology. (Council of Europe *2001*, p. 18)

Nevertheless, the impression one gets from reading some pages of the CEFR is that the idea of a plurilingual approach is only a theory, an empty model, as the operational implications arising from the issues of languages in contact are never clearly defined:

> the plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other people (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. (Council of Europe *2001*, p. 4)

move away from the supposed balanced dichotomy established by the customary L1/L2 pairing where by stressing plurilingualism where bilingualism is just one particular case (*ibidem*).

consider that a given individual does not have a collection of distinct and separate competences to communicate depending on the languages he/she knows, but rather a plurilingual and pluricultural encompassing the full range of the languages available to him/her. (Council of Europe *2001*, p. 168)

Although the intents of the CEFR, on a theoretical level, seem to mirror the awareness that human interactions bear "the traces of worldwide migration flows and their specific demographic, social and cultural dynamics" (Blommaert and Rampton *2011*, p. 2) in a context of "super-diversity," as it has been defined (Vertovec *2006*, *2007*), or "hyper-diversity" (Baynham and Moyer *2012*; Kelly *2008*), the linguistic competence is still mainly described from a monolingual perspective. The language descriptors are largely based on a monolingual view according to which only standard language is supposed to be used. Language continues to be considered as a bounded system linked with bounded communities, and a plurilingual repertoire is just considered as the juxtaposition of different monolingualisms (language 1 plus language 2 … language *N*); people are still considered plurilingual when they are able to speak different languages and, in interactions, are able to switch from one language to another. Consequently, people with very rich linguistic repertoires and with a learning background far from formal education – like migrants for whom, in most cases, the official language of the host country is an L2, while one, two, or more language(s) and also mixtures of languages are used in their linguistic exchanges – are considered as lacking sufficient competence in "the" language of "the" country, as we will see below.

In this perspective, the CEFR, as Byram and Parmenter (*2012*) note, has become an operational tool used to justify choices in language policies, both at an educational and a social level:

the CEFR is clearly a policy document bearing values and intentions. Yet, like any text, the intentions of its authors may not be read by its users and be taken in entirety but only used in part for the purposes of the users. (p. 4)

Moreover, the part of the document that has been read and used the most and that has had the strongest impact on education and society at large is the one describing the scales of proficiency. As a result, the CEFR is mainly seen in terms of levels of proficiency in a language.

However, which language proficiency is considered? This is the second point to which we would pay specific attention. As McNamara (*2009*) notes, the genesis of frameworks like the CEFR is characterized by several features, among which is the fact that the acceptability of the framework was negotiated by all interested parties during the course of its development and is not based on empirical evidence, as the same is now repeating for the validation of the CEFR descriptors of mediation:

[…] the CEFR is primarily a policy coordination and administrative initiative, acting as an accounting system and management tool whereby control is exercised by specifying the outcomes of learning independently of any specific test (or language; McNamara *2011*). Policymakers need tools that serve their need, which are for accountability, administrative ease, ease of explanation to stakeholders, "scientific" respectability, and so on. The CEFR, with its pyramidal shape (culminating in the six numbered reference levels), is such a tool. The functionality of a universal letter/number system to code the six levels is the key feature of the CEFR, which makes it attractive to administrators and policy makers. (p. 227)

In line with McNamara, Chapelle (*2012*) defined alignments to frameworks such as the CEFR as "controversial because they attempt to connect social and political meanings associated with

frameworks with the scientific procedures used to understand score meaning" (p. 25). Therefore, the CEFR would describe the linguistic competence not only from a monolingual point of view but also using standards (Spolsky *2008*), relying on professional experience rather than on empirical data based on actual learner performance, in order to produce uniformity despite "the complexity of languages and human behavior" (Cumming *2009*).

Indeed, as the CEFR states:

> However, it is not usually advisable to include descriptors of communicative activities in the criteria for an assessor to rate performance in a particular speaking or writing test if one is interested in reporting results in terms of a level of proficiency attained. This is because to report on proficiency, the assessment should not be primarily concerned with any one particular performance, but should rather seek to judge the generalisable competences evidenced by that performance. There may of course be sound educational reasons for focusing on success at completing a given activity, especially with younger Basic Users (Levels A1; A2). Such results will be less generalisable, but generalisability of results is not usually the focus of attention in the earlier stages of language learning. This reinforces the fact that assessments can have many different functions. What is appropriate for one assessment purpose may be inappropriate for another. (Council of Europe *2001*, p.168)

With regard to this explanatory note, Harsh (*2014*) concludes that:

> Although the CEFR scales have been empirically calibrated using teacher judgment (North *2002*), this does not amount to a validation of the scales for specific purposes, such as assessor-oriented or constructor-oriented purposes. Similarly, the statements in CEFR Chapter 9 (Council of Europe *2001*, pp. 180) that proficiency scales might be useful for such purposes would need to be backed up by empirical validation. (p. 161)

The third point of reflection is the political use of the CEFR and, more specifically, the link between the CEFR and its standards of language testing. As an example, the language descriptors of the CEFR are used as benchmarks in migrant competence, although they were not created for them (McNamara *2011*). There has been a "shift in the understanding of the functions, status and roles of language tests. From tools used to measure language knowledge, they are viewed today more and more as instruments connected to and embedded in political, social and educational contexts" (Shohamy *2007*, p. 117). Language tests are more gradually being used as policy tools for declared and undeclared policies (Shohamy *2006*): "establishing entrance criteria that include a test of another language, a new de facto policy is created, the implication of which is that the 'tested' language becomes the most important language to acquire and master" (Shohamy *2007*, p. 120). In addition to this, criteria and constructs of tests embody and sustain the most appropriate language variety that should be used by people ("the" norm), imposing, in this sense, monolingual policies and consequently suppressing multilingual diversity.

As Shohamy states (*2004*), the implications of the political use of language tests involve determining a hierarchy of languages, suppressing diversity, homogenizing languages, and perpetuating criteria of correctness:

> One of the most salient uses of tests affecting language policies is perpetuating language homogeneity, a construct which is detached from the reality of what languages are and how they are being used, especially in multilingual societies. Most tests impose homogeneous criteria of correctness and thus deliver a message that languages are uniform, standard and follow the same written norms. (Shohamy *2007*, p. 124)

Therefore, the power of tests becomes even stronger when test criteria affect language policy, and the definitions of "what it means to know a language" answer generic descriptions which are far

from any context and from the contextualized nature of language and language performance in multilingual scenarios.

As a case of how tests become more evident and problematic when they are used as gatekeepers, we will describe the Italian situation. An example of the political use of the CEFR and its levels is the Ministerial Decree of June 4, 2010, which introduces a test in Italian (the level chosen for immigrants is A2) for those migrants who request a long-term residence permit. Among the reasons behind the introduction of the test, the CEFR itself is cited in the preamble to the decree, as a document that is believed to give the mandate for such tests. According to the same agreement, the tests are to be implemented, administered, and assessed by teachers in each of the adult education accredited centers in Italy. This choice implies that dozens of different tests and markers are used, and everything is justified in the name of the CEFR and European language policies, but all decisions are left to individual teachers.

In support of what we state, between December 2010 and May 2011 (the most recent available data), the average rate of failure on the test was 13.6 % nationally. The city of Turin showed the highest number of candidates passing (96.5 % pass rate) and similar figures were seen in Rome (96 %) and Naples (95 %). Much lower passing rates were seen in Milan (86 %), Venice (70 %), and Verona, where only 65 % passed the test (Masillo *2015*).

At this point, it is reasonable to wonder whether these results reflect immigrants' proficiency in Italian or they are influenced by the characteristics of the person conducting the assessment, where such characteristics involve not only theoretical knowledge and technical skills about language testing and assessment but also the attitude toward the persons being passed. Such a situation can be emblematic of the consequences of such a use of the CEFR, as Van Avermaet (*2008*) underlines, dealing with language and societal knowledge regarded as a key element in integration, education, and language policies:

> In a policy of a more conditional nature, language courses and language tests have to be more uniform in format as well as in content. A universal and fixed level of language proficiency for all immigrants is a prerequisite. In an obligatory policy, failure or success in a language course or language test can function as a gatekeeper, a mechanism to exclude people.

> In a more facilitating policy, language courses and language tests can be more flexible, more tailor made in format and content. The level of language proficiency can vary depending on the needs of the immigrants and on the linguistic requirement in specific domains of the host society in which an immigrant wants to function. A more facilitating policy is more encouraging than discouraging. It is aimed at integration and non-discrimination. It also offers more opportunities for acknowledgement of immigrants' plurilingual repertoires.

These and other questions, therefore, continue to foster the need for reflection on the CEFR and its impact on language assessment and language policies.

Conclusion: Problems, Difficulties, and Future Directions

In *2008* Shohamy claimed that:

> Language tests should mediate ideologies and practices in more open, democratic and negotiable ways, and prevent the use of tests as powerful mechanisms capable of imposing

draconian policies that have no empirical base. This happens especially when language tests violate diversity, when a false view of language development is being dictated through tests, when language is viewed in isolated ways detached from actual use of multilingual codes in communities, when there are empirical data about the advantage of different accommodations that are being denied… (p. 372).

Nevertheless, the Italian situation, in terms of linguistic management of immigration, shows that an "open, democratic, and negotiable way" of viewing competence in language is still far from being achieved and it opens "old wounds" within reflection on the CEFR: the plurilingualism of its theoretical approach vs. the monolingualism of its descriptors, norm vs. competence as a parameter to describe linguistic competence, and uses and misuses of its levels as political benchmarks.

As Van Avermaet (*2010*) suggests, there is a certain incongruity between the goals of the CEFR and the profiles of its addressees: "the CEFR descriptors at the lower levels clearly imply an already existing basic knowledge and literacy. […] The CEFR descriptors at higher levels presuppose higher levels of education" (p. 21). These are therefore two conditions which could be problematic if the CEFR descriptors are used to design language programs for integration and as a theoretical model of language tests for low-literate learners. Such situations reflect an idea of linguistic competence as static, mono-normative and artifact (Extra et al. *2009*) and show an ideological-linguistic basis hiding behind the CEFR as well.

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