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Developing a Speaking Curriculum for EFL Learners with the CEFR-J

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Abstract

The Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) is increasingly becoming the basis for curriculum development in second language contexts all over the world. In Japan, CEFR has been adapted to the Japanese context with the CEFR-J. In order to be applicable to many contexts, CEFR and CEFR-J are not very prescriptive. This leaves the job of defining the curriculum to specific institutions and instructors. This paper describes one specific attempt to construct a coherent CEFR based speaking curriculum for Japanese university students and the issues that have come up in the process.

Key words: Teaching Speaking, CEFR, Curriculum Development

I. Introduction

The Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) was developed in Europe by the Council of Europe (COE) in 1991 to help create mutual recognition of language qualifications across Europe. Since then the framework has been adapted across the world including Japan. The CEFR has been increasingly used a basis for curriculum development at publishing houses, at Ministries of Education and institutions of learning. In Japan an increasing number of universities are using the Common European Framework for Languages adapted for Japan (CEFR-J) to plan language education. However the CEFR-J descriptors are often vague and the actual implementation of the curriculum is left up to the teachers. This gap from the administrators' intentions to the realities of the classroom is the focus of this paper.

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II. Background

Europe is a politically, culturally, and linguistically diverse continent. The European Union (EU) alone has 24 working languages for its 28 member states, but within the wider European area there are up to 50 countries and as many distinct languages. The 45 member Council of Europe (COE), not connected to the EU, decided that to promote trade and the exchange of ideas as well as to avoid conflict, ways of communicating needed to be more developed. One promoted notion was to use a Lingua Franca like English, but this was resisted in many quarters as it was felt that Europe's linguistic diversity was a strength. The COE embraced the concept of pluralingualism as the most suitable model for the future of Europe (Morrow, 2004). The next task was how to promote language teaching and learning across such a diverse linguistic landscape and what methods and standards to adopt and develop.

The CEFR generally follows Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods and is mainly inspired by the Notional Functional Syllabus (Wilkins, 1976; Wilkins, 1981). This approach emphasizes the communicative purposes of speech acts. A function is language used to achieve a purpose, i.e.: inviting, apologizing, ordering etc. A notion is a concept or a specific or general idea such as time or place. Communication is always situational and must take into consideration both the social linguistic facts of situations plus the language. CEFR's levels have been developed with functional objectives in mind (Morrow, 2004).

Although the CEFR has a clear purpose and approach, it is has been designed to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. The CEFR needs to be applicable to many languages and educational situations in order for practitioners to use the framework to describe their own practice accurately and then be able to compare it with other teachers and learners in another context. This flexibility makes it possible for users to produce their own specifications for their own specific purposes (Morrow, 2004). CEFR-J for example, in addition to translating the CEFR, also split the levels effectively adding 7 smaller levels in addition to the original 6 levels of the CEFR in order to be more appropriate for Japanese learners, especially at the beginner level (Negishi, 2013).

There is a tension in the CEFR between the need to create standards and yet remain flexible across a large number of languages and educational environments. The usual first level of the CEFR encountered by teachers is the *Common Reference Levels: Global Scale* (Verhelst, 2009). However, this document has only about 60 words to generally describe each of the six CEFR levels including all 4 skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. The next document is the *self-assessment grid* and is often the document given to teachers by their departments and given to

students to self-assess their level (Verhelst, 2009). This document is slightly longer, but for the speaking portion of the document, that is the focus for this paper, the document has only a 15 word description for some levels and a maximum of 53 words for the hardest (C2) level. In reality, teachers with large classes meeting only a few times a week are unlikely to be able to accurately place students on this scale (Morrow, 2004).

More problematic than the short length of the descriptions of the skills is the vagueness of the terms. Words such as "simple," "familiar," "routine," "a series of," "very short," "pertinent," "brief," "clear," "spontaneously," "sustained," and "coherent" are ambiguous and leave a lot of room for interpretation. What topics exactly are simple, familiar, and routine? How long is short or brief? How do we define and assess spontaneous, pertinent, or coherent? What language should teachers choose to teach to fit into these levels to match these descriptors? How do the different levels of descriptors relate to each other? Of course teachers and learners will manage, but how will progress be accurately measured and compared across learning environments and languages?

Perception of what the definitions should entail once operationalized varies widely. According to the *self-assessment grid* at the A2 level of spoken production learners should be able to ". . . use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms their family, living conditions . . ." How long learners should be able to talk and what specific language they should be able to use is not defined. The few official example videos show learners talking for about 90 seconds at this level. The author has set the goal for these tasks at 1 minute for his classroom. At recent conferences in Japan and Europe, the author asked teachers who claimed to be very familiar with the CEFR how long a student should be able to talk at the A2 level. The answers ranged from a couple of sentences, approximately 15-20 seconds, to 5 minutes of continuous talk. This gap is far too large for effective assessment, comparison, or curriculum planning.

The next level of detail available for teachers and curriculum planners are the CEFR levels and skill descriptors. These descriptors are mostly written in an action oriented "can-do" form, but are still mostly short, less than 100 words for each skill at each level, and use much of the same vague language as the other CEFR documents (Verhelst, 2009). Some organizations using the CEFR have expanded the descriptors and have organized more detailed "can-do" lists for the CEFR. The CEFR-J has developed its own list of "can-do" statements for use in Japanese schools with over 650 unique descriptors (Tono, 2013).

Most of this criticism has been noted before by academics despite the popularity and increasing use of the CEFR as a basis for language teaching and curriculum development around the world. In 2000, Brian North noted that CEFR based assess-

ment was measuring the student or teacher's perception of proficiency rather than proficiency itself (North, 2000). Starting in 2004, Glenn Fulcher and his colleagues have published a series of articles pointing out many of the problems with the CEFR, specifically as an assessment tool. First, the descriptors were not validated in any quantifiable way by using corpus linguistics or other quantitative data, but by the qualitative perceptions of certain groups of language teachers. Second, the language in the descriptors is not consistent, the distinction between levels is not clear and some elements are not connected to the whole (Fulcher, 2004).

However, much more detailed specifications were written for the first four levels of the CEFR. Unfortunately these useful documents seem to be relatively unused and unknown. Each document is more than 100 pages long and contains specific lists of functions and language that is included for each level. The document names are: Breakthrough for A1, Waystage for A2, Threshold for B1, and Vantage for B2 (Trim, 1990). From these documents, teachers and researchers can see specific and exhaustive lists of the language students are expected to know and this grammar and vocabulary is connected to specific lists of notions and functions. These documents, in contrast to the CEFR documents mentioned above such as the self-assessment grid and "can-do" lists, are not too short or vague, but rather too long and detailed to be of use to most students or even for busy classroom teachers on a daily basis.

1. Problem

Despite being popular with administrators, the CEFR guidelines are either too short and vague or too detailed and confusing to be of much use to the average student or teacher. Students will not understand what is expected of them and instructors researching the CEFR will likely soon feel they have fallen down the proverbial "rabbit hole" of the CEFR, but be no clearer on what they will be teaching on Monday morning or how to progress students' learning over a semester or years of a program.

2. Solution

The proposed partial solution from this author has three parts. Part one is to summarize the level specifications into lists of basic topics and tasks suitable for classroom use and easily understood by students and teachers. Part two is to create a bank of exemplars to serve as guidelines and part three is to develop or collect materials for each topic and task. The author decided to focus on speaking skills for levels A1 to B1 as these are the most common classes and levels at universities in Japan, especially for foreign instructors. Speaking skills on the CEFR are divided into two parts, "Spoken Production" and "Spoken Interaction." Through trial and error with students in the classroom, the author decided the baseline for spoken pro-

duction for these beginner (A1), elementary (A2), and lower intermediate (B1) learners would be one minute of speaking monologue and two minutes for spoken interactions, almost always as a dialogue. Depending on the level of the student or the perceived difficulty of the task they can of course be lowered to 30 seconds or increased to 3 or more minutes depending on pedagogical necessity.

Each specification document for the first 3 levels of the CEFR, A1, A2, and B1, was examined, summarized and the functions, grammar, and lexis mapped. The author then put the results into three one-page documents each containing 24, 1-minute spoken production tasks and 12, 2-minute spoken interaction tasks. The formation and placement of the tasks was purely based on the author's judgment and experience after consulting many language learning materials and of course the CEFR specifications. As such, the results can certainly be challenged as subjective much like the CEFR itself can. A proposal to improve this part of the CEFR using quantitative methods is introduced in the *Future Research* section below. Each document can be used by the teacher or the student as a checklist for a speaking course curriculum, as a diagnostic tool, or as an assessment tool. Please refer to the appendix.

III. Conclusion

As one teacher stated in Morrow's book on the CEFR, "I am both an enthusiast and a critic" (Morrow, 2004). Most teachers and learners can undoubtedly see the value of having an overall framework to language learning, but are often over or underwhelmed by the CEFR materials presented by their institution or available as the CEFR is notoriously not user friendly. This paper has shown a few common sense summaries of the CEFR levels that can be used as a basis for curriculum and materials development. This paper also laid out some future steps that can be taken to improve the CEFR's usefulness, including more empirically based revisions of the order of the topics and a bank of videos and supplemental materials of speakers doing the tasks to help students and teachers understand what is expected at each level.

IV. Limitations and Future Research

The CEFR levels were created by groups of teachers based on their teaching experience and validated by comparing the results to other groups of teachers doing the same thing (Fulcher, 2004) and is not a measure of actual learner proficiency. Since the creation of the CEFR there has been a lot of research in two areas that can fundamental inform any attempt to order language in an optimal learning order.

First, the recent use of corpus linguistics to map the actual English used by actual English speakers in real life to inform levels of usefulness and difficulty of any language to be learned and has informed a lot of textbooks and materials development (Tomlinson, 2011). Second, there has been a lot of research on task complexity by Paul Robinson and other researchers that can help order which tasks are easier to master (Robinson, 2005;Robinson, 2011). This research has been intertwined with the development of Task-Based Language (TBL) teaching yet the CEFR related materials rarely, if ever, mention this research (Ellis, 2009).

This author's proposal to partially address this gap is to record and transcribe learners and native speakers performing the spoken production and spoken interaction tasks at each level, analyze the language actually used, and reorder the tasks more logically by their actual complexity and or their actual occurrence in everyday spoken English. Perhaps the language used in describing a person's appearance in CEFR B1 level is in fact easier than describing one's family relationships in CEFR A1 level. Teachers generally agreed that it was harder, but no one checked the actual vocabulary and grammar involved in these common tasks.

A notable limitation was a lack of suitable exemplars for the tasks being performed with the appropriate language for the level by learners or native speakers. Although materials in general are plentiful there is little direct connection to the actual CEFR levels, topics, and tasks available for instructional use. The author's second proposal is to film learners at various levels and native speakers performing the tasks and make the video and transcripts available online for both teachers and learners.

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Appendix

A1 CEFR/CEFR-J Speaking Fluency Topics

1. Spoken Production

Self-introduction
My family
My best friend
My hometown
My house
My neighborhood
My commute
My daily routine
My favorite music
My favorite movie
My favorite holiday
A place I want to go on holiday
My favorite sport or game
My school (present)
My school (past)
What I did yesterday
What I will do tomorrow
My hobby
My favorite possession
My part-time job
Something I like

Something I don't like
Something I can do
Something I can't do

2. Spoken Interaction
Buy a ticket and going to an event
Buy a ticket for transportation and boarding
Make and accept an invitation or offer
Ask another person about themselves
Tell a doctor that you are unwell
Give directions
Tell a dentist about a dental problem
Buy something in a shop
Go to a restaurant and order a meal
Mail a letter at the post office
Report a problem to a police officer
Introduce two people to each other

A2 CEFR/CEFR-J Speaking Fluency Topics

1. Spoken Production
I think ____ because . . . (Giving an opinion with reasons)
____ is better/worse than ___ because . . . (comparing two things)
Something I regret and why
Something I am wishing for and why
I often/sometimes/rarely ___ because . . . (How often I do something)
What I do on the weekends
Describe an out of sight object
My beliefs about . . . (Life and death, love, money, marriage . . .)
How I stay healthy
My favorite festival or special occasion
Plants and animals in my country
My favorite book
Something I want to study or learn and why
A time I was really sick or injured
The best food I can cook
My favorite article of clothing
My best travel experience
My best school subject
What I look for in a friend
The most famous places in my country
My ideal boyfriend or girlfriend
My ideal job

My ideal house
Explain how certain I am that ___ is true

2. Spoken Interaction
Ask about another's opinion
Give advice about a problem
Make a telephone call and leave a message
Give a taxi driver directions
Give directions in a busy part of town
Make an appointment
Negotiate a discount
Ask for an adjustment of a good or service
Change money at a bank
Report a lost item
Explain the rules at school or another environment
Ask for a recommendation at a restaurant

B1 CEFR/CEFR-J Speaking Fluency Topics

1. Spoken Production
Describe a person's appearance
Describe a person's personality
Explain how you deal with stress
Your best/worst childhood memory
What are you afraid of?
Talk about your future plans 10 or 20 years from now
Tell us about your occupation
How would you deal with a personal emergency or natural disaster?
Summarize a recent news story with some comment or analysis
Tell an interesting short story
Explain why you did some unusual behavior
What is your favorite artwork?
What are your views on religion?
What are your views of the current government?
Which world leader do you admire the most and why?
What are your views on crime where you live?
What do you think can be done about terrorism?
What do you think about global warming and pollution?
What do you think about wealth inequality in Japan and the world?
What do you think is attractive or beautiful?
Could you be an entrepreneur or CEO?
What are the current issues in your field of study?
Has globalization been a success?

Is technology generally a positive or negative influence on society?

2. Spoken Interaction

Reassure someone who has had a setback or serious problem
Talk to a lawyer or accountant about tax, contract, documents etc.
Arrange house or car repair
Rent a car and use a gas station
Go through customs and immigration
Host and guest at a formal function
Condolences for a death or big loss
Congratulations on a marriage, child, new job etc.
Complaint and full apology
Ask for and give permission
Make an accusation and denial
Get detailed info about a problem from a spouse, a child's teacher, or coworker.