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**Book Review: Common European Framework of
Reference for Languages: learning, teaching,
assessment: case studies, Insights from the Common
European Framework**

Spiros Papageorgiou

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Alderson, J.C., editor, 2002: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment: case studies*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. vi + 198pp. ISBN: 92-871-4983-6. Also available online at: http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/documents/case_studies_CEF.doc

Morrow, K., editor, 2004: *Insights from the Common European Framework*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. v+148pp. ISBN 0-19-430950-9

Since the publication of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001), these two sets of case studies have been published to illustrate the wide range of contexts in which the Framework (henceforth CEFR) can be used. The two volumes are reviewed here in chronological order.

Alderson, 2002

The Council of Europe chose a prominent European language tester (J.C. Alderson) to edit the first collection of articles by experienced authors in CEFR-related areas and as a result *Case studies* is a valuable tool for those who want to learn more about practical uses of the CEFR. A distinguishing characteristic of the volume is the variety of topics, and a range of readers will find the book interesting, from language teachers to testers and foreign language teaching researchers.

In the foreword, Alderson provides an overview of the CEFR for the reader who is unfamiliar with the Framework. In addition, he offers a brief description of each chapter of the volume, thus giving the opportunity to CEFR-familiar readers to choose the articles they wish to concentrate on. Alderson notes that '[t]he book is organized in such a way as to allow readers to develop their understanding of the Framework as well as of the various ways in which it has been used, in a cumulative fashion' (p. 5).

Two different educational settings are described in the first two chapters. In Chapter 1, Komorowska gives an account of the role of the CEFR in the educational reform implemented in Poland in 1999 and discusses the positive and negative aspects of the dissemination of the framework. In Chapter 2 Figueras and Melcion illustrate the use of the CEFR in governmental and academic contexts in Catalonia, Spain as a point of reference for curriculum design and assessment (p. 19) and as a tool for reflection (p. 21). The authors

also pose a question that nowadays dominates discussions among testers after the publication of the preliminary pilot version of the CEFR Manual (Council of Europe, 2003): who should check the validity of the claim that a test is linked to the CEFR and the proper use of the methodology?

The next two chapters discuss uses of the CEFR in secondary and tertiary education. Garrido and Beaven share their experience of developing Spanish courses at university level and describe how the CEFR was consulted for syllabus design and the development of audiovisual material. In Chapter 4, Jaakkola and colleagues describe the use of the CEFR in Finland, reporting on a project exploring the practicability of the Framework in Finnish schools. The readers of this chapter will find very useful the detailed description of the project, which demonstrates convincingly the potential of the CEFR as a practical tool in foreign language education.

Chapters 5 and 6 are valuable for those who want to learn more about the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and its pedagogical function. In Chapter 5, Little, Lazenby Simpson and O'Connor describe a project that used both the CEFR and the ELP to elaborate proficiency benchmarks and encourage learner autonomy in order to meet the needs of refugees in Ireland. The ELP in the Swiss context is the theme of the discussion in Chapter 6 by Lenz and Schneider. The authors emphasize the reciprocal nature of the interaction between the CEFR and the ELP and conclude with a set of suggestions for future work with the ELP.

The following two chapters offer insights into the construction and validation of scales. In Chapter 7, North provides an overview of the history of the development of the CEFR scales, perhaps the best known part of the Framework. North stresses the limitation of any descriptive scheme similar to that of the CEFR (p. 101), warning against any misuse of the Framework deriving from lack of knowledge of its limitations. Kaftandjieva and Takala describe in Chapter 8 how the CEFR scales were validated for the purposes of the EU-funded DIALANG project. Despite the highly technical language used, this chapter shows in a comprehensive way that the CEFR scales 'can be successfully used as a framework for foreign language learning, teaching and assessment' (p. 127).

Chapters 9 and 10 illustrate uses of the CEFR in self-assessment. Chapter 9, by Huhta and colleagues, illustrates the way in which the CEFR was used in the development of DIALANG. The Framework played a major role in the development of the project's assessment framework and the feedback given to the test-takers. The authors

conclude that ‘above all the Council of Europe Framework influenced the DIALANG project in terms of its overall approach to assessment’ (p. 143). Chapter 10 is North’s second contribution to this volume, reporting on a project that developed a CEFR-related self-assessment instrument for placement into appropriate classes at the University of Basle. Based on the success of this project, the author concludes that the CEFR descriptors can be useful from both measurement and educational perspectives.

In Chapter 11, Jones describes the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) framework and the approach taken to align it to the CEFR. He also discusses issues that arise when developing a framework and, more specifically, in relating one framework to another. In the final chapter, Wertenschlag, Muller and Schmitz present the European Level Descriptions for German as a Foreign Language (ENDaF) and their relationship to the CEFR, thereby showing how the CEFR can be applied to a specific language.

To summarize, this volume shows in great detail how the CEFR has been implemented in various contexts across Europe and how it has been adapted to meet the needs of learners, teachers, researchers and others. This collection of articles illustrates the deep impact of the CEFR on curricula, the teaching of foreign languages and their assessment. The linking of language tests to the CEFR has now become a major issue, especially after the publication of the Manual (Council of Europe, 2003). Alderson is correct to predict in the Foreword (p. 8) that:

the influence of this Framework will grow over the coming decade, and it is hoped that the accounts of the use of the Framework in this volume will contribute in some small measure to encouraging the use of and experimentation with the Framework in language education throughout Europe.

The influence of the Framework is indeed growing, and Alderson’s edited volume is a substantial contribution to the CEFR-related literature. The fact that it is available online from the Council of Europe website allows for easy access, although it would have been preferable if a major publishing house had produced it.

Morrow, 2004

Fortunately, the second volume to be reviewed here has indeed been produced by a major ELT publisher – Oxford University Press – and will perhaps meet the need for a more widely available volume on the CEFR. *Insights from the Common European Framework*

attempts to bridge the 'theory' represented in the CEFR and the 'practice' when the Framework is applied by professionals. The editor and the contributors aim to:

- explain some of the background of the CEFR;
- clarify some of its contents;
- explore some of its possible implications; and
- provide concrete examples of ways it has been used. (p. 1)

This collection of articles is organized into five main sections, each of which consists of about two articles focusing on various aspects of the CEFR. There is also an appendix containing extracts from the CEFR volume itself. As will be shown below, some chapters overlap considerably with chapters in Alderson (2002).

In the first part Morrow reviews the history of the Council of Europe, outlines some of the main characteristics of the CEFR, and discusses its intended use. The second chapter in this section, by Heyworth, describes the relationship between language education and the CEFR. This first section of the volume is recommended to the reader who wants to learn more about the CEFR and identify its link with various aspects of language education.

In the second part, the focus switches to the learner. Lenz describes how the ELP supports language users in the development of their autonomy and in self-assessment. Then, Mariani describes the learning-to-learn ability of language learners, with specific reference to Chapter 5 of the CEFR, and how the fostering of this ability can be part of a teaching programme. Overall, this section provides an informative learners' perspective on the CEFR.

The third part of the volume consists of two chapters on school syllabuses and teacher education. Starr Keddle illustrates the experience of working with the CEFR in secondary schools and stresses that the Framework is a helpful tool for syllabus design and re-evaluation, despite the challenging nature of this task. Komorowska suggests that the CEFR is very useful in teacher education, even though there are difficulties deriving from the lack of user-friendly documentation. Thus, the third section illustrates in some detail uses of the Framework in two areas outside the classroom: course design and teacher education.

The field of testing is the focus of the fourth section. Huhta and Figueras briefly describe DIALANG and its aims, one of them being to demonstrate the possibility of using the CEFR for assessment purposes. In the other chapter, North discusses a major issue in language testing over the last three years, namely the linking of assessments to

the CEFR. The author also illustrates how the CEFR descriptors can be a tool for establishing the comparability of language qualifications awarded on the basis of language tests. Users of the Manual for relating tests to the CEFR are advised to read this chapter, as it outlines the rationale behind the linking process and offers an overview of its stages. Both chapters in this section are essential reading for researchers in the area of language testing and practitioners involved in the construction of language tests.

The fifth section consists of three case studies involving the design of syllabuses and materials. In the first one, Little and Lazenby Simpson report on an ESL curriculum development project for newcomer students in Irish primary schools. In the other two case studies, Manasseh reports on work carried out at the British Council teaching centre in Milan, and Wall draws on work done at Cheltenham International Language Centre (CILC). Overall, this section is of interest to syllabus designers and materials writers.

To sum up, this volume is a valuable addition to the literature on the CEFR and its implementation. It is highly recommended for teachers, curriculum and materials designers and, of course, language testers. From a testing point of view North's chapter on the linking of exams to the CEFR is of particular value.

It is expected that readers will compare Morrow's volume with that of Alderson and will find many similarities. Since the two books cover the same topic area and many of the same authors are involved, overlap is inevitable. There is obvious repetition of the following topics, among others:

- using the CEFR in teacher education;
- uses of the European Language Portfolio;
- description of DIALANG.

Both volumes contribute to our knowledge of the CEFR and its potential uses, but it may appear that the later publication largely replicates the earlier one, without adding more detail or a new perspective.

There are, however, also obvious differences between the two volumes. Morrow (2004) is a more attractive book, being published by Oxford University Press and dealing with the topics in a more concise manner. Alderson (2002) is somewhat forbidding due to its bulk and the highly technical language used at times, especially if the reader is not an expert in teaching or testing. It is highly unlikely that teachers would go to the Council of Europe's website to download

this publication, and the print version is available only directly from the Council of Europe.

Perhaps what should be the next step is the publication of books that have a more clearly specified and focused readership. It would probably help to disseminate work on the Framework if one volume discussed CEFR issues for teachers, whereas other volumes dealt with issues in testing, measurement, research on language learning, and so on. However, until this happens, Alderson (2002) and Morrow (2004) are important additions to the CEFR literature and deserve careful study.

References

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Spiros Papageorgiou
Lancaster University