The linguistic integration of adult migrants

and the

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

David Little

Introduction

In order to secure rights of entry, permanent residence or citizenship, adult migrants are increasingly required to demonstrate proficiency in the language of the host country. Language requirements are usually defined in terms of the proficiency levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR).[1]

Because the CEFR's levels have been adopted by most independent language testing agencies in Europe, it is sometimes assumed that the levels are a set of rigid testing standards. This is not the case, however. The Council of Europe developed the CEFR to provide

- 'a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe' (CEFR, p.1)[2] and

- 'the means for educational administrators, course designers, teachers, teacher trainers, examining bodies, etc., to reflect on their current practice, with a view to situating and co-ordinating their efforts and to *ensuring that they meet the real needs of the learners for whom they are responsible*' (ibid.; emphasis added)

The priority that the CEFR gives to the needs of learners (rather than teachers, educational authorities or testing agencies) is fundamental. It is also important to emphasise, however, that its descriptive apparatus and proficiency levels were not developed with the communicative needs of adult migrants in mind, and they should be applied to them and their situation with caution.

This text provides a brief introduction to the CEFR for decision makers and for providers, designers and teachers of language courses for adult migrants. It

- explains the relation between the CEFR and the Council of Europe's core values;
- summarises the communicative range of the CEFR's six proficiency levels;
- outlines the two principal dimensions of the CEFR's descriptive apparatus;
- emphasises that the CEFR does not provide ready-made solutions in any educational domain;
- illustrates how the CEFR can be used to analyse the communicative needs of adult migrants and identify appropriate language learning targets for them;
- reflects on the implications of the CEFR's action-oriented approach for language teaching.

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[1] For an overview of the levels of language proficiency required by some Council of Europe member states, see C. Extramiana and P. Van Avermaet, *Language requirements for adult migrants in Council of Europe member states: Report on a survey*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2011.

[2] CEFR = Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

The CEFR and Council of Europe values

The Council of Europe has three foundational values: human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. These are enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the preamble to which declares that the organisation's aim is 'the achievement of greater unity between its members', that 'one of the methods by which that aim is to be pursued is the maintenance of human rights and fundamental freedoms', and that those rights and freedoms are best maintained by 'an effective political democracy'.

By definition human rights are concerned with the individual. Accordingly, the Council of Europe's educational projects have always aimed to enhance the individual's capacity to contribute with maximum effectiveness to the democratic process at national, regional or local level. This concern with individual agency is also characteristic of the organisation's language education projects, which since the 1970s have focused on the learning and teaching of languages for purposes of communication and exchange: learning second and foreign languages has the potential to extend the individual's social, cultural, political, academic/intellectual and vocational/professional range.

These considerations account for the CEFR's action-oriented approach, which defines communicative proficiency in terms of language use: what the individual learner can *do* in second and foreign languages. They also explain why the CEFR is concerned with the communicative needs of the individual language user/learner.

The CEFR's six proficiency levels

The CEFR's proficiency levels reflect the language learning trajectory characteristic of European educational cultures: language learning for general communicative purposes (A1–B1) provides a basis for the development of more advanced proficiency (B2–C2) that increasingly interacts with academic, vocational and professional use of the target language. The six levels may be briefly characterised as follows:[3]

- **A1** – the lowest level of generative language use: the point at which learners can interact in a simple way rather than relying purely on words and phrases.

- **A2** – learners can cope with a basic range of social interaction and make simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks.

- **B1** – learners are able to maintain interaction and get across what they want to in a range of contexts and can cope flexibly with problems in everyday life.

- **B2** – learners are able to engage in sustained and effective argument, can more than hold their own in social discourse, and have an enhanced language awareness.

- **C1** – learners have good access to a broad range of language that allows fluent, spontaneous communication.

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[3] For a more detailed summary, see CEFR, pp.33–36.

- **C2** – learners communicate with a high degree of precision, appropriateness and ease.

At the lower levels, the emphasis is more on oral than written communication. Learners can *understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type* (A1; CEFR, p.24), *communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information in familiar and routine matters* (A2; ibid.), and *deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken* (B1; ibid.). Reading and writing skills support this predominantly oral repertoire. Learners can *understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues* (A1; CEFR, p.26), *find specific predictable information on familiar topics and activities* (A2; ibid.), and *understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency or job-related language* (B1; ibid.); and they can *fill in forms with personal details* (A1; ibid.) and write *short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need* (A2; ibid.) and *simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest* (B1; ibid.).

At the higher levels reading and writing assume greater importance as proficiency is increasingly associated with learners' areas of academic and/or professional specialisation. Learners can *scan quickly through long and complex texts, locating relevant details* (B2; CEFR, p.70), *understand in detail a wide range of lengthy, complex texts likely to be encountered in social, professional or academic life* (C1; ibid.), and *understand and interpret critically virtually all forms of the written language* (C2; CEFR, p.69); and they can write *clear, detailed descriptions on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest* (B2; CEFR, p.62), *clear, well-structured expositions of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues* (C1; ibid.), and *clear, smoothly flowing and fully engrossing stories and descriptions of experience in a style appropriate to the genre adopted* (C2; ibid.).

The CEFR's description of language proficiency has two dimensions

According to the CEFR language proficiency develops from sustained interaction between the learner's competences – the 'knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions' (CEFR, p.9) – and the communicative tasks whose performance requires him or her to use the target language. The CEFR's descriptive apparatus thus has two complementary dimensions, language use (Chapter 4) and the user/learner's competences (Chapter 5).

Language use – The CEFR begins its treatment of language use by considering the context of communication, which it divides into four domains: personal, public, occupational and educational. Within each domain communicative situations can be described in terms of

- the *locations* in which, and the *times* at which, they occur;
- the *institutions* or *organisations* – the structure and procedures of which control much of what can normally occur;
- the *persons* involved, especially in their relevant social roles in relation to the user/learner;
- the *objects* (animate and inanimate) in the environment;
- the *events* that take place;
- the *operations* performed by the persons involved;

- the *texts* encountered within the situation. (CEFR, p.46)

The CEFR goes on to discuss the conditions and constraints that shape communication, the mental context of the user/learner and his/her interlocutor(s), communication themes, and communicative tasks and purposes. All of this prepares the way for the best-known part of Chapter 4, the treatment of communicative language activities and strategies. This is where we find the illustrative scales for production (speaking and writing), reception (listening and reading), and interaction (spoken and written). The chapter concludes with an extended discussion of communicative language processes and texts.

The user/learner's competences – The CEFR distinguishes between general competences and communicative language competences. It identifies four general competences:

- 'declarative knowledge', which includes knowledge of the world, sociocultural knowledge and intercultural awareness;
- skills and know-how;
- 'existential' competence – 'selfhood factors connected with [user/learners'] individual personalities, characterised by the attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality types which contribute to their personal identity' (CEFR, p.105);
- ability to learn, which includes language and communication awareness, general phonetic awareness and skills, study skills and heuristic skills.

Programmes of language learning require learners to draw on their existing competences, but they also seek to develop those competences further. For example, they may aim to expand learners' knowledge of the world specific to the countries or regions where the target language is spoken and in doing so to develop their intercultural awareness. They may also set out to develop learners' ability to manage their own learning.

The CEFR identifies three categories of communicative language competence, for each of which it provides further illustrative scales:

- linguistic competence, sub-divided into lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic, and orthoepic competences;
- sociolinguistic competence – the ability to handle linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk wisdom, differences of register, dialect and accent;
- pragmatic competence, sub-divided into discourse and functional competences.

The CEFR does not provide ready-made solutions

The CEFR aims to be comprehensive, transparent and coherent, flexible, open and dynamic (CEFR, pp.7–8). As a result, using the CEFR to develop a programme of language learning or specify a communicative repertoire for purposes of assessment involves two kinds of adaptation. First, it is necessary to make a selection: no programme or repertoire for assessment can possibly include *everything* described in the CEFR; and secondly, whatever is selected must be 'translated' into the language in question because the CEFR itself is language-independent. In

accordance with the Council of Europe's concern for the individual citizen and the CEFR's emphasis on the agency of the individual language user/learner, selection and translation should always be based on an analysis of the learner's needs.

These considerations have an important consequence that is often overlooked: *in the real world there is no such thing as (say) A2, only an infinite variety of communicative repertoires in specific languages that correspond, more or less, to some or all dimensions of the CEFR's definition of A2.*

Any attempt to use the CEFR's descriptive apparatus to analyse the communicative needs of adult migrants or specify learning targets for them should take account of this fact. Level A1.1 for migrant learners of French,[4] for example, describes a level of proficiency that may be acquired autonomously or by attending a course. It provides a basis for valorising language learning at that level and guidance for course designers and testers. Because it is based on the CEFR it is clearly and explicitly related to higher levels of proficiency in French, but its elaboration required the creation of new descriptors and the inclusion of many vocabulary items that are not high-frequency but are nevertheless essential for adult migrants because they refer to administrative and other procedures that migrants need to be able to cope with.

The CEFR and adult migrants: from needs analysis to language course design

Needs analysis – At the beginning of Chapter 4 the authors of the CEFR list the questions they expect users of the CEFR to ask themselves as they work through the successive sections of the chapter. These questions (CEFR, p.44) provide a starting point for needs analysis, so some of them are worth quoting here:

- Can I predict the domains in which my learners will operate and the situations which they will have to deal with? If so, what roles will they have to play?
- What sort of people will they have to deal with?
- What will be their personal or professional relations in what institutional frameworks?
- What objects will they need to refer to?
- What tasks will they have to accomplish?
- What themes will they need to handle?
- Will they have to speak, or simply listen and read with understanding?
- What sort of things will they be listening to or reading?
- Under what conditions will they have to act?
- What knowledge of the world or of another culture will they need to call on?
- What skills will they need to have developed? How can they still be themselves, without being misinterpreted?

These questions are as relevant to adult migrants as to any other category of learner. They are also relevant to the design of language learning programmes and the specification of the communicative repertoire that language tests for adult migrants are designed to assess.

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[4] J.-C. Beacco, M. de Ferrari and G. Lhote, *Niveau A1.1 pour le français (publics adultes peu francophones, scolarisés, peu ou non scolarisés)*, Paris : Didier, 2005.

As the order of the questions implies, an analysis of adult migrants' communicative language should begin by considering the context in which they are expected to communicate, taking account of situational and other constraints. When that has been done it should be possible to specify the communication themes they need to cope with, the tasks they should be able to perform, and the communicative purposes they must meet. The information thus generated can be used to identify the varieties of language activity – reception (listening and reading), production (speaking and writing), and interaction (spoken and written) – that they need to master and the proficiency level at which they need to be able to perform. These can be double-checked by considering the range of (spoken and written) texts they will be called on to understand and produce. The final step is to make this context-sensitive repertoire language-specific by adding appropriately elaborated scales of communicative language competence.

Two constraints – There should be two constraints on this exercise. First, the goal should be to identify the *minimum* communicative repertoire that adult migrants need in order to function in the host community; and second, at every step account should be taken of the learning burden that is gradually being accumulated. Adult migrants generally attend language courses on a part-time basis; language learning may not be among their highest priorities, especially if they have families to care for; and the educational culture of their country of origin may be very different from that of their host country. What is more, many adult migrants received little or no education in their country of origin and thus have very limited literacy skills in their first language. Account must be taken of these factors if language requirements and language courses are not to become insuperable obstacles.

The diversity of migrant learners – Chapter 5 of the CEFR begins as follows:

> In order to carry out the tasks and activities required to deal with the communicative situations in which they are involved, users and learners draw upon a number of competences developed in the course of their previous experience. In return, participation in communicative events (including, of course, those events specifically designed to promote language learning) results in the further development of the learner's competences, for both immediate and long-term use. (CEFR, p.101)

National education systems tend to be organised on the assumption that all learners start with more or less the same competences; that their knowledge of the world, cultural assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs are broadly similar. Some will no doubt be more successful learners than others, but all will have been shaped by the same kind of previous experience. This assumption cannot be made of a randomly assembled group of adult migrants. They may come from different countries and speak different languages, and they may belong to a wide range of ethnicities and have widely differing attitudes, values and beliefs. They may also have very different educational backgrounds, and (as noted above) some of them may not be functionally literate in their language of origin. In other words, there may be a serious mismatch between the very varied competences adult migrants bring with them and the competences they are expected to develop as part of their proficiency in the language of their host community. This adds significantly to the learning effort required of them, and it poses a serious challenge to the pedagogical skills of teachers; it must also be taken into account when designing language courses for adult migrants or specifying the communicative repertoire that will underpin an official test.

Needs analysis in action: an example – Taking account of the length of time that they can reasonably be expected to devote to language learning, an analysis of the needs of adult migrants who are seeking permanent residence may conclude that priority should be given to communication in the public and occupational domains: dealing with officialdom and the formal demands of the workplace. The private domain is not irrelevant to adult migrants since it encompasses informal communication with colleagues at work and members of the community with whom they do not share a language of origin. But it is reasonable to leave the development of proficiency in the private domain to 'natural' processes – migrant learners will gradually become better at communicating with their colleagues and neighbours as a result of their efforts to communicate with them. In most courses for adult migrants the target language is likely to be the language of instruction, but we may also conclude that the target repertoire need not include communication for educational purposes beyond the immediate goal of learning the language of the host community.

As regards communicative language activities, the greatest emphasis may fall on the skills of listening (adult migrants need to understand the officials who interview them and managers or foremen who give them instructions in the workplace) and spoken interaction for transactional rather than social purposes (again, dealing with officials and managers/foremen). These considerations may lead to the conclusion that an appropriate target repertoire involves more than one CEFR level, perhaps A2 in listening and spoken interaction (transactional tasks only), and A1 in reading (with a strong emphasis on public notices and printed instructions) and writing (chiefly filling in forms, if necessary under guidance). The fact that writing plays a relatively minor role in the target repertoire does not mean, of course, that learners should not be expected to use and further develop writing skills in the service of their learning.

Experience may show that this repertoire is more than many migrants can achieve. In that case it may be appropriate to reduce the target repertoire to one that focuses on the same domains and language activities, perhaps exclusively at A1, always bearing in mind that A1 constitutes a viable repertoire for limited communicative purposes, and always supposing that the language programme in question is intended to be facilitative rather than discriminatory.

Implications of the CEFR's action-oriented approach for language teaching

It is not the function of the CEFR to promote one particular language teaching methodology but rather to present options (CEFR, p.142). This does not mean, however, that the CEFR is methodologically neutral. Its action-oriented approach and the ethos on which it is based have two implications for the way in which language courses should be designed and delivered, including those aimed at adult migrants.

The first implication arises from the CEFR's understanding of how languages are learnt. If proficiency develops out of sustained interaction between learners' competences and the communicative tasks whose performance requires them to use the target language, it follows that use of the target language should play a central role in learning and teaching. However, although courses for adult migrants that are delivered in the host country will probably be taught in the target language, there is no guarantee that they will automatically engage learners in modes of

communication likely to result in successful learning. Also, it is important to acknowledge that proficiency in at least one other language is among the competences that adult migrants bring with them, and there are various ways in which they can use that proficiency to support their learning of the language of the host country. For example, if their class contains other speakers of their home language, they can exploit that fact to clarify learning tasks and discuss learning problems; and teachers can encourage migrant learners to draw on their plurilingual repertoires for purposes of simple linguistic comparison and analysis.

The CEFR's second implication for language teaching arises from its focus on the user/learner's agency: what he or she can *do* in the target language. The authors of the CEFR point out that learners are 'the persons ultimately concerned with language acquisition and learning processes', while conceding that most of them 'learn reactively, following the instructions and carrying out the activities prescribed for them by teachers and by textbooks' (CEFR., p.141). However, they go on to argue that 'once teaching stops, further learning *has* to be autonomous', adding that autonomous learning 'can be promoted if "learning to learn" is regarded as an integral part of language learning' (ibid.). The Council of Europe's commitment to lifelong learning generates a concern to develop learners' ability to manage their own learning. This has particular relevance for adult migrants, whose language learning should ideally continue long after the end of their language course. At the same time, of course, it must be acknowledged that the notion of lifelong learning is remote from the educational experience and expectations of many adult migrants.

Helping adult migrants to manage their own language learning – The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was developed in parallel with the CEFR partly in order to promote the development of learner autonomy. It requires learners (among other things) to use checklists of 'I can' descriptors arranged according to the language activities and proficiency levels of the CEFR to identify learning targets and assess learning outcomes. If the curriculum or course programme uses 'can do' descriptors to define target outcomes, versions of those descriptors can be included in ELP checklists. This helps to ensure a close fit between learning/teaching and curriculum or programme goals. This line of argument is further developed in three other elements in the Council of Europe's toolkit of resources for those concerned with the linguistic integration of adult migrants:

- an introduction to the European Language Portfolio, aimed at decision makers, language programme providers and teachers;
- a generic version of the ELP for adult migrants that can be easily tailored to meet the requirements of specific contexts;
- a handbook for teachers that explains how the different parts of the ELP can be used in the classroom.

Further reading

The website of the Council of Europe's Language Policy Unit (www.coe.int/lang) provides a variety of information and supports for those who want to explore further the issues discussed in this text:

- The full text of the CEFR in English and French (altogether the CEFR now exists in 38 languages)
- *Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR*
- *Manual for Language Test Development and Examining*
- *Language Tests for Social Cohesion and Citizenship – An Outline for Policy Makers*
- Illustrations of the CEFR's proficiency levels in a number of languages
- The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and the development of policies for the linguistic integration of adult migrants
- *Curriculum Framework for Romani* – an example of a generic curriculum based on the CEFR's action-oriented approach and proficiency levels