

Key Concepts in the CEFR¹

Before the publication of the CEFR in 2001, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the common approach to language education was still largely based upon a linear Cartesian vision – that the pieces make up the whole. This was epitomised by the dissection of language use into Lado's (1961) model of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and three elements (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation), all embedded in (static) cultural knowledge. The learner in this model was seen as a speaker/listener engaging in producing and receiving a code. Code produced should be as accurate as possible, which is to say as similar as possible to the standardized code spoken by a certain type of idealized 'native-speaker'. Progress was seen in terms of becoming increasingly like such a 'native speaker' in the way the code was interpreted and produced. Evaluation tended to be through counting mistakes.

The focus on accuracy with syllabuses based on supposed grammatical progression with vocabulary lists to learn by heart, much criticised theoretically, was partly mitigated by the addition of fluency as a success criterion to balance accuracy (see Brumfit 1984). In the 1980s, the communicative approach initially tried to move away from grammatical syllabuses to ones based on the analysis of real-life needs, the notions that needed to be expressed and the various functions necessary to "do things" (Austin 1962) in the language (e.g. van Ek 1975; Wilkins 1976,). At the same time, the division of language use into four skills, revolutionary in 1961, was heavily criticized by proponents of the communicative approach as being abstract and artificial – as simply not reflecting the reality of language use (e.g. Alderson and Urquhart 1984; Breen and Candlin 1980; Brumfit 1984; Stern 1983) – as well as misrepresenting the differences between spoken and written language by neglecting the interactive, iterative processes involved in both (Halliday 1989).

The CEFR therefore introduced a holistic, integrationist, social model of language learning and use in its 'descriptive scheme' (CEFR 2001: chapters 2, 4, 5) and the new concept of plurilingualism (CEFR, 2001; sections 1.3, 6.3, 8.1, 8.2.2.). This perspective aligned with recent views of the language repertoire (Bloomaert 2008; Busch 2017), a complex paradigm (Larsen-Freeman 2011, 2017, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008; Larsen Freeman and Todeva 2021), and related ecological approach (van Lier 2004, 2007, 2010), as opposed to the traditional, linear perspective which had held sway in the structural linguistics of the 1960s, exemplified by Lado's (1961) model. The CEFR proposed four modes of communication: reception and production (which divided by spoken/written make the four skills), plus interaction and mediation. As the CEFR pointed out, these four modes are not isolated from each other either: "Communication is an integral part of tasks where participants engage in interaction, production, reception or mediation, or a combination of two or more of these" (Council of Europe 2001: 157, emphasis added). Interaction is not just the sum of reception and production – it is the process of weaving together discourse through a negotiation of meaning. Mediation usually involves reception, interaction and production and adds a shift of perspective: to the construction of new meaning, often with or for others – as opposed to the self-expression of production.

The Companion Volume underlines the CEFR shift to a complex vision of the situated and integrated nature of language learning and language use, with a focus on the agency of the user/learner as a *social agent*. This view takes into account both the social and individual nature of language use, as well as the

¹ This text is an extract from Piccardo, E. and North, B. (in press), "Enriching the scope of language education: The CEFR Companion Volume", Chapter 1 in North B., Piccardo E., Goodier T., Fasoglio D., Margonis R. and Rüschoff B. (eds.), *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR companion volume, examples from practice*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

external and the internal context. The social agent mobilises *all* their competences, general (i.e. personal, non-linguistic) as well as (pluri)linguistic, plus appropriate strategies, in the fulfilment of a task, and improves those competences and strategies in that process. This vision calls on us to move away from seeing language as a code to be taught, with subtraction of marks for mistakes, towards seeing *language as action* in the articulation of thought and (co)construction of meaning through *linguaging*, as is explained further when discussing mediation below. This holistic, action-based approach (Bourguignon, 2010; Piccardo & North, 2019; van Lier 2007) to language and language education also moves beyond the transactional function of language to the creative function – which actually appears in child language acquisition well before the informative, transactional function (Halliday 1975).

Many of the concepts introduced in the CEFR 2001 were very innovative at the time and were new to the vast majority of the field. The most significant innovative concepts that appeared in the CEFR 2001 are listed below:

1. Definition of learner needs from a user standpoint
2. A 'can do' proficiency approach, rather than deficiency approach, to defining learners' abilities and corresponding reference levels
3. Backward design (Richards 2013, North et al 2018): defining needs with 'can do' descriptors and working backwards from them to define course objectives, activities and content
4. Transparency and coherence: the constructive alignment of planning, enactment in teaching, and assessment, with the help of descriptors
5. Self-assessment and learner autonomy, for example through the European Language Portfolio associated with the CEFR
6. Moving from four skills to four modes of communication through the addition of interaction and mediation to the traditional reception and production
7. The user/learner as a social agent
8. The concept of mediation
9. The action-oriented approach
10. Plurilingualism.

Some of these concepts, especially those like interaction that were already foregrounded in the communicative approach, made their way into the field more easily. Others, lower in the list above, did not make it through so quickly because there was a need for more time to allow theorization and practical bottom-up developments to take place. It would be no exaggeration to say that when people, during the 2000s, talked of CEFR implementation, they were thinking primarily of the first five points on the list above – all related to the CEFR descriptors, which were the most visible and tangible part of the CEFR. Those concepts which were not adopted so quickly have now been further developed both in theory and on the ground over the last 20 years or so. Therefore it proved to be possible to elaborate them further in the Companion Volume. In this series of texts, we outline the major characteristics of concepts towards the end of the list in the previous section, plus that of online, digital interaction and transaction, which, as experience in the piloting phase suggests, are the concepts that people consider most innovative in the Companion Volume.

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