

Case Studies in Mediation, Online Interaction and Plurilingualism: Implementing the CEFR Companion Volume

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The publication *Enriching 21st Century Language Education: The CEFR Companion Volume in practice* (North et al., 2022) presents a series of case studies with contributions from 15 countries following the launch of the new edition of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – the CEFR Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2020; henceforth CEFR CV) – at the event *CEFR Companion Volume: Language Education for Dynamic and Inclusive Societies: Promoting plurilingual and pluricultural education* held in Strasbourg in May, 2018, during which the participants (academics, teachers and experts in various fields) were invited to form networks and plan case studies. This short text seeks to place the resulting volume of case studies in context.

The CEFR CV highlights how the main purpose of the CEFR project is to stimulate innovation in language education through the concepts of the user/learner acting as a social agent, (co)constructing meaning and knowledge, while drawing on their full plurilingual repertoire to do so. The purpose of this volume of case studies is to provide teachers and teacher educators with examples of practical applications of the CEFR CV's new descriptors for mediation, online interaction, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, and phonological competence.

The timing of the initiative to update the CEFR is interesting since the period in which the research took place, 2013 – 2016, saw a number of developments in language education that the CEFR CV reflects, particularly with the central position it gives to *the action-oriented approach*, to *mediation* and to *plurilingualism* in the CEFR model. The case studies reflect this positioning, which is not the way the CEFR has always been interpreted.

Immediately following the 2001 publication, the CEFR seems to have been used mainly with a focus on the levels and assessment in relation to them, with the draft manual for relating examinations to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2003), its final version (Council of Europe, 2009), a related volume of case studies (Martyniuk, 2010), and another manual on developing CEFR-related tests (ALTE, 2011). The most positive aspect of this phase was the revision of major language examinations (e.g., DELF/DALF for French; DELE for Spanish; CILS and CELI for Italian, plus Trinity for English). Parallel to this development a large number of versions of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) were produced, following the initial experimentation in Switzerland (Schneider, North & Koch, 2000; Schneider & Lenz, 2001). The ELP introduced teachers all over Europe to the idea of descriptors as learning objectives, and, together with the new exams, facilitated CEFR-inspired innovation in classroom practices in many countries (see, e.g., Figueras, 2009; Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Piccardo, 2006, 2020). However, the focus on exams and the ELP checklists of descriptors for single CEFR levels reinforced the focus on levels rather than pedagogy. One or two European Centre(s) for Modern Languages (ECML) projects sought to support a greater understanding of the CEFR (e.g., Piccardo et al., 2011), but in general it would be fair to say that the CEFR was at first interpreted as a series of proficiency levels.

This led to a natural focus on the ‘content’ of each of the CEFR levels, which produced a series of ‘Reference Level Descriptions’ for different languages (French: Beacco et al., 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008; German: Glaboniat et al., 2005; Spanish: Instituto Cervantes, 2007; Italian: Parizzi and Spinelli 2009; English: <https://www.englishprofile.org>) with user-friendly versions for English and French developed by Eaquals (North, Ortega & Sheenan, 2010; Eaquals & CIEP, 2014). Many publishers and associations of language programme providers related their courses to the CEFR levels and descriptors. However, the extent to which there was a widespread effect on classroom

practices in mainstream education is questioned (e.g. Moonen et al, 2013; Diez Bedmar & Byram, 2017).

As regards classroom practices, in France, the action-oriented approach (AoA) was clearly distinguished from communicative language teaching (CLT), including its ‘strong’ variant task-based language teaching (TBLT), by several scholars (e.g., Puren, 2002, 2009; Bourgignon 2006, 2010; Richer, 2009, 2012), considering that the AoA focuses on learner agency and self-regulation in tasks/projects and on the mobilization and further development of competences and strategies in the process. However, in the English-speaking world the CEFR was generally interpreted as a tool to help implement CLT and in German the same expression *handlungsorientierter Unterricht*, is used to translate both TBLT and the AoA. On the other hand, from about 2014 a practical focus on the action-oriented scenarios appeared, particularly in programmes for immigrants in Switzerland and Canada, with Piccardo (2014), for example, being commissioned to explain the difference between CLT and the AoA.

Mediation meanwhile had been taken up from 2003 – in the sense of *mediating a text* and of *acting as an intermediary*, the way mediation had been briefly presented in the CEFR 2001 – in Germany (Reiman & Rössler, 2013; Kolb, 2016) and Greece (Dendrinos 2006, 2013; Stathopoulou, 2015). From 2015, mediation tasks have been included in the German school-leaving Abitur and also in 2015, a very innovative “Certificate of Plurilingualism” – an oral exam involving mediation tasks – was introduced in the Austrian Berufsmatura, the school-leaving exam for upper secondary professional colleges, as reported in one of the case studies (Steinhuber, 2022).

However, what is perhaps the CEFR’s main message for language education – plurilingualism – was not at first appreciated, despite the considerable coverage given to it in 2001 (Sections 1.3 and 6.1.3 and parts of Chapter 8). John Trim, the director of the CEFR project, lamented at a 2007 intergovernmental Symposium:

Most users of the CEFR have applied it only to a single language but its descriptive apparatus for communicative action and competences, together with the ‘can-do’ descriptors of levels of competence, are a good basis for a plurilinguistic approach to language across the curriculum, which awaits development. (Trim, 2007, p. 51)

Indeed, one had to wait until the so-called pluri-/multilingual turn in 2013-2015 (Taylor & Snodden, 2013; Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014; Piccardo & Puzos, 2015) before the concept began to be widely considered in language education. More recently, a range of plurilingual pedagogies have been documented (see, e.g., Choi & Ollerhead, 2018; Lau & Van Veen, 2020; Piccardo et al. 2022a, 2022b).

The fact that these various developments all happened in the same period 2013-2015 cannot be a coincidence. The CEFR 2001 was ahead of its time and sowed seeds that took some time to come to fruition. The fact that the main data collection to validate the descriptors for mediation and related areas (North & Piccardo, 2016) took place in 2015 was fortuitous because something was clearly ‘in the air.’ As a result 190 institutions took part in the series of activities to finalise and validate the descriptors, with over 140 institutions and 1,000 individuals taking part in all three phases of activity throughout 2015 and 500 taking part in further validation activities for plurilingual/pluricultural competence and phonological competence in 2016. 2017-2019 then saw piloting and finalization alongside a parallel project to develop descriptors for signing competences.

The perspective on mediation taken in the CEFR CV is broader than that presented in 2001. Mediation had in the meantime become mainstream in education with the increasing adoption of theories and practices inspired by the work of Vygotsky (situated learning, collaborative learning, communities of practice, constructive alignment, etc.), plus awareness of the need for education to adapt to increasingly diverse school populations as a result of mobility (see Piccardo & North, 2019). As a result, mediation is introduced in the CEFR CV as follows:

In mediation, the user/learner acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language, sometimes across

modalities (e.g. from spoken to signed or vice versa, in cross-modal communication) and sometimes from one language to another (cross-linguistic mediation). The focus is on the role of language in processes like creating the space and conditions for communicating and/or learning, collaborating to construct new meaning, encouraging others to construct or understand new meaning, and passing on new information in an appropriate form. The context can be social, pedagogic, cultural, linguistic or professional. (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 90)

In addition to a short, user-friendly chapter explaining the key concepts of the CEFR, the CEFR CV therefore offers 23 descriptor scales covering aspects of *mediating a text*, *mediating concepts* and *mediating communication*, and *mediation strategies*, as well as two scales for *online interaction*, three for *plurilingual and pluricultural competence* and a completely revised scale for *phonological competence*.

After such a long period of gestation (2013-2019) of the CEFR CV, comparable to the research for the CEFR 2001 (North et al, 1992; Coste, Moore & Zarate, 1997; North & Schneider, 1998; North, 1994, 1995, 2000; Schneider & North, 2000) the Council of Europe's Education Department felt that the emphasis should be put on practical implementation of the descriptors with the aim of broadening the scope of language education. This was the aim of the case studies. Of the 35 proposals originally received following the 2018 conference, 19 projects were realized during the following academic year and were selected for publication. All of us involved in the case study volume project hope that you will enjoy reading the resulting volume, freely available at <https://rm.coe.int/enriching-21st-century-language-education-the-cefr-companion-volume-in/1680a68ed0>.

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