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Abstract

This article reports on French as a second language (FSL) teachers' perceptions of using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)-informed instruction (action-oriented instruction focusing on language use) in FSL classrooms in Ontario. In particular, this paper focuses on teachers' perspectives of the strengths and challenges of providing CEFR-informed practice in FSL classrooms. FSL teachers (n=93) as well as elementary and secondary school students (n=943) participated in this province-wide study. Participating teachers were introduced to the CEFR and CEFR-informed activities and resources. Teachers then used the resources in their classrooms for approximately three months. At the end of this period, teachers participated in interviews and focus group sessions which focused on their perceptions' of CEFR's action-oriented approach. Teachers reported that CEFR-informed instruction increased student motivation, built self-confidence in their learners, promoted authentic language use in the classroom and encouraged learner autonomy. These findings have implications for FSL programs in Canada and possibly other second language education programs worldwide.

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une recherche sur les perceptions des enseignant(e)s de FLS (Français Langue Seconde) en Ontario quant à l'utilisation du CECR (Cadre Européen Commun de Référence) dans leurs salles de classe (une approche actionnelle de l'enseignement des langues qui met l'emphase sur l'utilisation même de la langue). Cet article vise principalement à décrire les perspectives des enseignant(e)s quant à la

promotion de l'autonomie d'apprentissage tout en utilisant des pratiques proposées par le CECR. Cette étude a été menée dans la province de l'Ontario avec 93 enseignant(e)s de FLS et 943 élèves d'écoles élémentaires et secondaires. Les professeur(e)s ont été tout d'abord introduit(e)s au Cadre et à des activités et des ressources qui développent l'autonomie chez l'apprenant. Ils (elles) ont ensuite utilisé ces ressources en cours pendant plus ou moins trois mois et à terme, ils (elles) ont exprimé leurs perceptions sur l'utilisation de l'approche actionnelle du CECR lors d'entretiens dirigés et de discussions en groupes. La plupart de ces enseignant(e)s ont clairement exprimé que cette approche a élevé la motivation d'apprentissage de leurs élèves, qu'elle a développé la confiance en eux-mêmes, qu'elle a encouragé l'utilisation de la langue cible et qu'elle a favorisé l'autonomie d'apprentissage. Ces résultats ont des conséquences importantes pour les programmes de FLS au Canada et en général, pour l'enseignement des langues au niveau international.

The Power of "Can Do" Statements: Teachers' Perceptions of CEFR-informed Instruction in French as a Second Language Classrooms in Ontario

Introduction

Since the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) by the Council of Europe in 2001, there has been significant interest in using this document in second language (L2) education programs around the globe. Ministries and boards of education worldwide have considered using the CEFR to revise curricula and improve L2 learning outcomes. This article reports on a province-wide study commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME)[1] to examine the role and feasibility of implementing the CEFR to improve French as a Second Language (FSL) learning outcomes across the province. This paper focuses on teachers' perspectives on implementing CEFR-informed approaches in FSL classrooms in Ontario. First, the context and status of French and FSL programs in Canada are presented. Next, the CEFR and related literature that discusses its potential and limitations for L2 education programs are introduced. Then, the study, its participants, the methodology, sources of data, and data analysis procedures are described. Finally, three emerging issues that pertain to introducing the CEFR in FSL programs are discussed.

French as a Second Language in Canada

Canada is officially a bilingual country but this does not necessarily mean that all of its residents speak the two official languages (English and French). Whereas public and private institutions are required to provide services in both languages (Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, 1967) and the promotion of personal bilingualism is a significant objective of the Canadian government, a mere 18% of the Canadian population speaks both official languages (Canadian Heritage, 2009a) and only 35% of Canadians speak more than one language (Statistics Canada, 2007). In 1969, the Official Languages Act legislated that Canadian students have opportunities to learn both official languages through English and French second language (ESL and FSL) programs (Canadian Heritage, 2009b). In the 1980s, the study of FSL became mandatory in the province of Ontario (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2011). According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, French is compulsory from Grades 4 to 8 and students must complete the equivalent of one French credit in secondary school to obtain an Ontario secondary school diploma (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 1999). French is generally offered through Core French programs (where French is taught as a subject) and French Immersion programs (in which French is taught as a subject and used as a medium of instruction for teaching subject matter such as math and science). In spite of official support to promote bilingualism across the country, there is widespread dissatisfaction with levels of French language proficiency among students, teachers, and FSL programs

(Lapkin, Mady, & Arnott, 2009). Drop-out rates in FSL programs across the country are very high and retaining students in French programs beyond the mandatory grades is a matter that has seriously concerned educators and officials. Core French students account for 90% of all FSL students and only 3% of them study French until Grade 12 (Canadian Parents for French, 2008). In French Immersion programs, only 27% of students who finish Grade 8 continue in the program until the end of Grade 12 (Canadian Parents for French, 2008). In an attempt to improve students' learning outcomes of FSL programs in Ontario, and given the widespread international and national interest in the CEFR, the OME commissioned a province-wide study to examine the role the CEFR might play in advancing students' French language proficiency. The study reported in this paper draws on the reports prepared for the OME by Majhanovich, Faez, Smith, Taylor, and Vandergrift, (2009, 2010a, 2010b).

The Common European Framework of Reference: Potential and Limitations

In the past ten years, language policy makers and second language education programs worldwide have shown considerable interest in using and implementing the CEFR document in their programs; for example, The English Language Proficiency Benchmarks developed in Ireland to support the teaching of English as a Second Language to students from immigrant backgrounds (Integrate Ireland Language and Training, 2003) and The Curriculum Framework for Romani (Council of Europe, 2008). International language testing agencies have aligned their examinations to the CEFR's proficiency levels (see http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/ManualRevision-proofread-FINAL_en.pdf for a manual by the language policy division of the Council of Europe). According to the Council of Europe website, the CEFR document has been translated to thirty-seven languages and two additional translations (Macedonian and Romanian) are currently underway (Council of Europe, 2011a). Among the 37 translations are Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

Within the Canadian context, there has also been considerable interest in adopting and implementing the CEFR in language education programs in the public school system as well as in higher education institutions. The Ministry of Education in British Columbia and the Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute at the University of Ottawa have aligned their language education curricula with the proficiency levels of the CEFR (see British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2010; University of Ottawa, 2012). Researchers at the University of New Brunswick have been working with invested teachers at a local high school to develop and implement a school-based language portfolio for students (University of New Brunswick, 2012a). In conjunction with the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT, 2011), a project is underway to develop a Language Portfolio for French Teachers (University of New Brunswick, 2012b). The widespread interest in using and implementing the CEFR document across the country inspired CASLT to host a stakeholder meeting in March 2011 to harmonize a pan-Canadian coordination of CEFR-inspired initiatives.

The CEFR has also been utilized beyond the confines of language classrooms and programs. The CEFR was used for selecting language volunteers for the 2010 Olympic and

Paralympics Winter Games (European Centre for Modern Languages, 2011). The organizing committee required a practical and cost-effective tool to select about 200 volunteers out of the 5000 applicants who wished to provide language services at the Olympic Games. Following initial screening, CEFR's self-assessment grid was sent to applicants to self-identify their (oral) level of language proficiency. Hence, it is evident that the spread of the CEFR goes far beyond the Council of Europe's 47 member states and language programs.

The Council of Europe developed the CEFR in order to provide "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). In spite of the CEFR's explicit emphasis on planning and development of curriculum, criticisms have been made that CEFR's major impact in L2 education has been on assessment (Coste, 2007; Council of Europe, 2006; Fulcher, 2008a; Little, 2007). The CEFR describes L2 proficiency as the ability to use the language across five activities (listening, reading, writing, spoken interaction, and spoken production) at six levels: A1 and A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), and C1 and C2 (proficient user) (Council of Europe, 2001). The descriptors for each category are written as "Can Do" statements which describe what learners *can do* in their L2s at each proficiency level. The CEFR is descriptive, rather than prescriptive, therefore the CEFR does not prescribe any particular teaching or testing methods (Coste, 2007; Little, 2006, 2011; Piccardo, 2010). Hence, the CEFR is not intended to be used as an instrument of centralization and harmonization (Jones & Saville, 2009). Instead, the framework is designed to be flexible and practitioners are encouraged to adapt it across various L2 educational contexts.

Can Do statements signify that the CEFR adopts an action-oriented approach to language education which encourages teachers to use task-based instruction (Little, 2006). Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) describe a task as "an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (p. 11). Through task-based instruction, learners are engaged in goal-oriented communication that resembles real world activities (Ellis, 2003; Pica, 2008; Skehan, 1998, 2003). In this approach, task completion has priority over mastering the structure of the language and learners engage in "goal oriented communication to solve problems, complete projects, and reach decisions" (Pica, 2008, p. 71). Therefore, it is clear that the CEFR is not innovative in its theoretical orientation, which is grounded in concepts drawn from a communicative competence framework, for example the CEFR's attention to the significance of interaction (Long, 1983, 1985), or its emphasis on language use are aligned with the tenets of the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1995, 2005). Little (2006, 2011) argues that the CEFR is innovative due to its ability to bring curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment into much closer interdependence than has traditionally been the case in L2 education. He attributes this capacity of the CEFR to its use of Can Do statements to describe language proficiency as language use. Can Do statements focus on what students know and are able to do using the language rather than what they don't know.

Along with the CEFR document, the Council of Europe developed the European Language Portfolio (ELP) to implement the ethos of the CEFR. The ELP is a mediating

tool that facilitates the implementation of the core principles of the CEFR. L2 learners can use the ELP to record and reflect on their language learning and intercultural experiences whether at school or outside school. Principles embodied by accredited ELPs include: reflective learning, self-assessment, learner autonomy, pluralinguism, and intercultural learning (Council of Europe, 2011b). There are currently 118 validated versions of ELPs designed for various L2 educational programs in primary, secondary, and tertiary education for children and adults (see http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Contacts_EN.asp for a list of validated models). The "E" in ELP refers to their validation by the Council of Europe. The use and development of language portfolios are not restricted to the European context.

In spite of widespread enthusiasm for the CEFR, it is worth noting that the CEFR is not without criticisms. These criticisms specifically refer to the CEFR descriptors and use of the CEFR as a test development instrument. Fulcher and his colleagues (Davidson & Fulcher, 2007; Fulcher, 2004, 2008a, 2008b; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; Fulcher, Davidson, & Kemp, 2011) have been critical of the CEFR for its validation process as well as the quality of its impact on language test development. North (2000) stated that what has been scaled in the CEFR is not actual learner proficiency but "teacher/raters' perception of that proficiency – their common framework" (p. 573). Drawing on North's argument, Fulcher (2004, 2008a) criticized the CEFR for its descriptive scales and the fact that its validation was based on teachers' judgments. With regard to language testing, Davidson and Fulcher (2007) argue that the flexible language of the CEFR and its non-purposive nature make it an inappropriate framework for language test development. They criticize the CEFR descriptors for the following reasons: (a) some descriptors refer to specific situations while other descriptors do not; (b) where a specific description is indicated, it is not referred to in other descriptors; (c) the descriptors tend to mix the roles of the participants within a single level; and (d) the distinction between the levels is not clear. In support of the CEFR, North (2000, 2007) provides a detailed description of how the scales in the CEFR were developed and empirically validated following extensive qualitative research with practicing teachers. He argues that the CEFR validation process has not been in the form that traditional quantitatively oriented (positivist) second language acquisition research regards high value but in fact the validation process in different languages resulted in similar outcomes which is evidence for CEFR's validity as a framework.

There is little doubt that there is widespread global interest and enthusiasm for using and implementing the CEFR. Given the widespread interest, the issue of whether and how the CEFR and the ELP impact L2 teachers and learning outcomes becomes of paramount importance. This significant issue has not received the attention it deserves. The Council of Europe (2006) conducted a survey to explore the extent to which the CEFR is known and used within 37 European States, Egypt, and Mexico in a variety of educational institutions. Stoicheva, Hughes, & Speitz, (2009) conducted a study to explore the qualitative impact of the ELP. Little is known about the impact of the CEFR and ELP beyond the Council of Europe member states, specifically in FSL programs in Canada. The study reported in this paper is a first step in this direction. This study was intended to be exploratory, focusing on the impact of CEFR-informed instruction on L2 instruction and learning outcomes in FSL

programs in Ontario from the perspective of teachers. Following the tenets of the CEFR, CEFR-informed instruction encompasses the following characteristics: (a) it is action-oriented, (b) it promotes language use, (c) it encourages reflection, (d) it emphasizes progression through levels, (e) it encourages learner initiatives (learner-centred), (f) it focuses on the positive (what learners can do rather than what they cannot do using the language), and (g) it is goal oriented.

The Study

The purpose of the broader study was to examine the feasibility of using the CEFR as a frame of reference for FSL education programs in the province of Ontario in Canada. More specifically, the study intended to examine if and how the CEFR might enhance the FSL educational experiences of teachers and students in Ontario. This paper focuses on teachers' perspectives on the CEFR's action-oriented approach.

Participants, Sources of Data, and Data Analysis

This study employed a mixed methods approach whereby data were collected through pre- and post-study questionnaires with teachers and students in addition to interview and focus group sessions. Participants included 50 Core French (CF) and 43 French Immersion (FI) teachers from nine Ontario school boards as well as 943 students in grade one through grade 12. Fifty-four teachers were elementary teachers and thirty nine were secondary level teachers. The focus was on specific FSL-program entry points (i.e., grades 1, 4, 7, 9, and 12). Teachers were invited to attend information sessions in which they were introduced to the CEFR and CEFR-informed instruction. The pre-study questionnaire was designed to elicit their attitudes to communicative language teaching and task-based approaches. Each teacher was given task-based activity kits[2] geared to their students' CEFR level (e.g., A1, A2, B1, B2) to promote French language use in their classrooms. The activities were connected to the CEFR's Can Do descriptors for each of the five activities (listening, reading, writing, spoken interaction, and spoken production). For example, during an activity for the spoken production component at the A1 level the student describes his/her family with the use of picture cards. The teacher asks the student questions about her/his family. In response to the teacher's questions about the student's family, the student replies (spoken interaction) while pointing to the picture cards. An activity for the reading component and subsequently spoken interaction at the A2 level, for example, requires the student to read a brochure about a museum and answer questions about the museum and timetables. The activity kits also included Can Do statements for students' self-assessment for appropriate levels geared to the CEFR levels. The activity kits were developed with the intention of implementing the ethos of CEFR-informed instruction explained above. After they had been shown how to use the activity kits, the goal was for teachers to use the kits to promote CEFR-informed instruction in their classroom.

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[2] A group of experienced FSL teachers from the Thames Valley District School Board in Ontario developed the activity kits.

Approximately three months after the introductory session, the teachers participated in focus group sessions to share their perspectives on and experiences with CEFR-informed instruction FSL classrooms. Fifty-three teachers attended the focus group sessions during which each teacher also completed a post-study questionnaire. The post-study questionnaire sought to examine the shift in teachers' perceptions of task-based approaches and CEFR-informed instruction. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used to interpret the data gathered in the project. The pre- and post-study questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively using the SPSS program to determine the extent to which teachers' attitudes regarding students' confidence and competence to perform tasks in French changed after using CEFR-informed activities (as determined by the Can Do statements). Statistical findings (measures and comparisons of t-tests) revealed that teachers' overall perceptions regarding their students' confidence and ability to perform tasks in French increased after using CEFR-informed instruction. Both CF and FI teachers offered significantly higher estimates of student ability on the post-study questionnaire than on the pre-study questionnaire. Also, the amount of teachers' experiences with CEFR-informed instruction was correlated with their interest with continuing to use this approach. Therefore, the more teachers used task-based activities and CEFR-informed instruction, the more they would like to use them in their future lessons. The quantitative findings have been discussed in more detail in Faez, Taylor, Majhanovich, Brown, and Smith (in press). In this paper, qualitative findings are emphasized.

Qualitative data was gathered as a way to triangulate and provide a deeper understanding of quantitative data and findings. Core and Immersion teacher participants were offered a half-day release time in order to participate in a focus group session with the researchers at a site located a short traveling distance from their schools. Focus group meetings were held in May and June of 2009 in five towns across Ontario with a total of fifty-three teachers attending their respective meeting. At each of the focus groups, teachers were divided into two sub-groups; namely, elementary and secondary groups. The questions asked during these sessions focused upon the teachers' understanding of the descriptor levels and their experiences using the CEFR-informed instruction with their students. The participants also exchanged practical classroom strategies they found useful as well as any additional activities they had created. At the conclusion of the focus groups, the researchers reviewed the main study data, and, on the basis of those data, prepared fourteen interview questions for an additional qualitative component of the research. Eleven teachers, representing various grade levels, were invited to participate in an interview with one of the researchers. All interviews were conducted in person or by telephone by a member of the research team. The interview questions sought to identify the frequency and effectiveness of teachers' use of CEFR-informed instruction, if they noted increased student confidence and/or learner autonomy, and if they saw indications of student interest in CEFR-informed instruction. All focus groups and interviews were transcribed in full. Analysis of the focus group and interview data included reading the transcripts for content analysis (Creswell, 2003) with an aim to derive meanings and codes. The resulting codes were then organized into themes through the use of NVivo software. Salient features were extracted from the data and the coding was refined using constant comparisons in order to

better understand teachers' perceptions of CEFR-informed instruction. Despite the variety in geographical location as well as student and teacher demographics, there were common themes from the focus groups and interviews. The following three themes are discussed in this paper: (a) strengths of CEFR-informed instruction, (b) challenges of implementing CEFR-informed instruction, and (c) applicability of CEFR-informed instruction for various second language programs.

Strengths of CEFR-informed Instruction

The consensus that emerged from the voices of FSL teachers in both CF and FI programs was that CEFR-informed instruction has many advantages for FSL classrooms as it enhances learner autonomy, increases student motivation, builds self-confidence in learners, promotes real and authentic use of the language in the classroom, develops oral language ability, encourages self-assessment, focuses on the positive, and can be used for formative and diagnostic assessment. The following quotes from participating teachers reflect the strengths of CEFR-informed instruction.

Ann[3], a grade seven Core French teacher, commented in the focus group that CEFR-informed instruction enables students to take "charge of their own learning" and as such increases learner autonomy and student motivation. Ann commented that when engaged in activities that enable them to see real-life applications of language use, students realize the benefits of second language learning and their motivation increases. According to Ann, even young students can take responsibility for their own learning but it is up to the teacher to guide the students in this direction:

> They are completely in charge of their own learning with the CEFR. The cool thing is, is that I've seen and been pleasantly surprised that in a Core French atmosphere where you ask anyone and they think the kids don't want to learn it, you know they don't want to learn French, they don't enjoy French, they're hesitant to be here, I think the pleasant surprise is that we are wrong-- they do want to learn it and they do want to be there; they do really like it, and as soon as they realize that it's useful and it's real, they do want to go through these stages and even though it's a big responsibility to give them ownership of their learning I really have been pleasantly surprised by how many students want to, they want that responsibility and they really run with it if you give them the tools to be able to do it.

In the post-study survey, focus groups, and interviews, teachers were asked about their perceptions regarding Can Do statements and their influence over student motivation. Mandy, a grade 7 Core French teacher reported that the Can Do statements gave her students a sense of accomplishment when they realized they were able to complete certain tasks in French and therefore their level of confidence increased. In this sense, students felt positive about their abilities in the language. She reported:

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[3] All names are pseudonyms.

I think because of the way they are built, because of the Can Do statements, a kid never comes to do an activity with you and leaves feeling like they blew it. They come when they are ready, they come when they know they can do it and when they leave it's not a pass or a fail sort of thing, it's a, you did great, but maybe you want to fix this next time or maybe you want to remember, you use the verb avoir when you are talking about your age. You give them little pointers, but they all leave feeling very confident…. I would say it is a huge confidence builder.

Overall, teachers felt that students appreciated CEFR-informed practice and the Can Do descriptors provided a way for students to become aware of their potential and recognize their limitations. Julie, a Core French teacher, reported in a focus group that Can Do statements helped boost the confidence of students, especially those who evaluate their abilities as low even after studying French for many years. Since CEFR-informed instruction focuses on the positive it encourages students so that they enjoy such activities and gain a sense of independence. Julie thought that using CEFR-informed activities also promoted students' authentic and spontaneous use of language:

My students, they really liked the idea of "I can do," so even the ones who figured after 5 years they didn't know anything, there was always something positive, [like] "Oh I can say my name in French" [and I would say:] "Oh great, that's positive! Now let's try to go beyond that. Where do you live?" My grade 7 students really enjoyed the independence of [the CEFR activities]. They created whole skits . . . so I found that their conversation was very realistic. The spontaneous speech was excellent.

Most teachers were pleased with the nature of the CEFR-informed activities. They felt that using such activities could perhaps enhance their instruction. Sofia, a grade 4 Immersion teacher, commented that the activities resembled real-life applications and uses of language and as such were very useful for enhancing students' oral language abilities. She said:

The oral component was good because it was completely different from what they were doing in class but it really gave them an idea of, it was a realistic context in the activities, they were doing things they could see themselves doing outside of the classroom, the language was useful, and the structures they were studying were very useful for real world application.

According to Sofia and the other 9 teachers present in the same focus group, the other major strength of CEFR-informed instruction was the opportunity such activities provided for self-assessment and learners' awareness of their abilities in French. Even though students were initially intimidated by the activities, they appreciated them later when they realized the benefits. Diane, a grade 4 Core French teacher shared her students' experience in the same focus group.

My grade 4 students, when they first received the Can Do statements were quite overwhelmed and intimidated when reading it but when we actually went through one or two of the first interviews they came back after and said I'm amazed that I

can actually do those things and it really improved their self confidence and it made a big difference and it gave them the feeling that "I can do this" and they decided to move on and it was just such a huge thing, I think having that checklist there and for them to be able to see where they were at and headed to was great.

The data collected from the focus groups and interviews indicated the majority of teachers were also pleasantly surprised that, with appropriate guidance and instruction, students could actually asses their own abilities in French. Joan, a grade 12 Core French teacher, was pleased at how her evaluation of her students' abilities matched students' self-assessment and believed that self-assessment would allow students to be more responsible for their own learning:

That's one of the things I found, I had my students self-assess to see what level and I had done the assessment that I thought corresponded to theirs and in most cases we arrived at the same conclusion. I guess from that point of view that would allow them to be more accountable for their learning.

Overall, teachers' reactions towards CEFR-informed instruction were very positive. The comments of teachers in the focus groups and interviews indicated that CEFR-informed instruction could increase student motivation and self-confidence, promote authentic language use in the classroom, and consequently enhance their French instruction. Introducing such instruction was not without its challenges. The challenges of implementing CEFR-informed practice are discussed in the next section.

Challenges of Implementing CEFR-informed Instruction

The two main challenges that teachers faced in implementing CEFR-informed instruction were: (a) time restriction related to viewing the CEFR as an additional component, and (b) lack of understanding the CEFR and its applicability in their classrooms. The majority of teachers who participated in the study indicated that they often faced a time crunch and did not have sufficient time in the classroom to implement the CEFR-based activities and cover the demanding curriculum. Therefore, some teachers viewed the CEFR as an "add-on" rather than as an approach that could be used to cover various aspects of the curriculum. Amy, a Grade 9 Immersion teacher, explained the challenge:

First, would be finding the time for it in among the curriculum, that was the biggest challenge, just like getting the students to complete the questionnaires, with material and time constraints, it was hard to fit it in as an extra.

The other concern regarding time limitations centered on the length of time required for students (and teachers) to become familiar with the CEFR-informed practice and complete the activities in class. Christine, a grade 9 Core French teacher, indicated in her focus group that she had to do the activities outside of class time:

My students were really slow with their tasks, and I found I wanted to do one little [activity] but I couldn't because they needed so much prepping before, so it took me two weeks to prep and then it took me almost a week and a half just to do a little

activity. I ended up having to do some of mine outside of class, there just wasn't enough time and I just couldn't devote more time in class, so I did them outside of class time.

The second major challenge was teachers' limited understanding of the CEFR and a teaching approach based on Can Do tasks. Several teachers felt that they did not fully understand the CEFR (levels) and its many dimensions. Thus, it was very difficult for teachers to try and implement an approach which they did not fully understand. Jennifer, a grade 1 teacher, explained some of the confusion surrounding the CEFR levels:

> I liked the headings on the rubrics and how they were broken down for example, like they are broken down for A1, spoken language is broken into fluency, interaction, range and control, grammatical accuracy, and things but because it's not a typical rubric where there is a level 1, 2, 3, and 4, it was I think harder to gauge exactly where they would sit, so just, they may have that interaction or some fluency but how much fluency and is there enough to be at the top of A1 or the bottom of A1 or are they somewhere in the middle and that was really hard to gauge.

Ann commented that her estimate of the levels and descriptors were different from the actual examples provided in the activity kits which could have created confusion for her in evaluating her students' performance:

> I typically found that the examples of any given descriptor were at a higher level than what I imagined them to be and that sort of seemed to be across the board for all of the descriptors, whether reading, writing, or oral, so they were clear and comprehensible, but the examples that were held up as matching the descriptor didn't always seem to match to me.

Teachers indicated the need to have more exemplars available to help them better understand what student performance at each level would look like. Teachers wanted to see examples of students completing activities at various levels. Linda, a grade 1 Immersion teacher stated:

> I would love to have some exemplars for my own use to be able to share with the students that would be terrific just to be able to say Okay here is somebody who was successful at this level.

In addition to challenges with understanding the levels and descriptors, the transition from a more grammar oriented pedagogy to a more communicative (action-oriented) approach was also a challenge. As Christine, a Core French grade 7 teacher stated:

> The first challenge was wrapping my mind around it, how am I going to do this. It was something I so wanted to do but it was different from what I am doing. So to get fully into that communicative approach and get away from that grammatical based structural lessons we do, that was the first challenge.

Many teachers indicated that their understanding of the CEFR descriptors would increase with time and familiarity as can be seen in the following quote from Michelle, a grade 7 teacher, who said that she spent a lot of time on her own to read about and work through the descriptors and activities:

> The best way of understanding something is to teach it to other people so I have a good grasp of what I feel the descriptors are trying to outline and I would think if people spend more time on it and delved into it a bit, I think the descriptors are well written.

> Despite the challenges, the majority of teachers believed that their understanding of the CEFR and its descriptors would increase over time. The key to better understanding seemed to be more time and exposure to various applications of CEFR-informed practice as well as the opportunity to work through them.

Applicability of CEFR-informed Instruction for Various Second Language Programs

One of the key areas of interest in this study was the applicability of the CEFR-informed instruction in both the Core and Immersion classrooms. The majority of the teachers in this study had taught, at one time or another, in both programs. As a result, the participants were well suited to provide their perspective on this issue. The majority of CF and FI teachers felt that the CEFR-informed approach is highly applicable in each area. However, the approach would have to be applied differently in CF and FI programs as the purpose and proficiency expectations of the two programs are different. As Deborah, an elementary Core teacher stated:

> ….I think it could work depending on the class and what they've been working on in class, I could see a Core French class even excelling with some of the descriptors more than a French Immersion class but having said that, ideally if a student is doing well and everyone is doing as they are supposed to then we just have to make sure that your descriptors or your expectations for the French Immersion class are a bit higher.

Although most teachers felt that the CEFR is applicable to both programs, some teachers commented that it could have a stronger impact on CF programs. In CF programs, French is taught as a subject and the CEFR descriptors focus on the ability of learners to perform tasks using the language whereas in FI programs, the focus is on mastery of the content (in addition to language) and CEFR descriptors do not address the ability of learners to perform tasks in a particular domain (unless they are adapted for the specific context, an issue that will be discussed in more detail later). Aaron, a grade 7 Immersion teacher believed that the impact of the CEFR can be greater in CF programs as students' confidence in their abilities to complete certain tasks in French is generally lower compared to students in FI programs:

> I think it's applicable to both. I think it does more good in Core. I think that my students are very enthusiastic and keen to demonstrate their abilities they were already confident in their abilities in French and motivated to use it. You know in

> my experience, in Core, especially, students are often really un-motivated and demonstrate a lack of confidence about their French abilities, especially as compared to the Immersion students.

Linda, a Grade 7 Immersion teacher noted that the adoption of CEFR-informed instruction would necessitate the modification of activities towards the more content-specific objectives of content-based classrooms:

> When we were thinking about things earlier, in terms of the kits and the activities we thought if they were more content specific it would be a little less daunting and a little easier to manage and easier for the students too to realize, kind of, what they are capable of, if it was geared more to grade level content areas.

Other teachers also commented that since the focus of CF programs is learning the language, CEFR-informed instruction is more applicable to CF compared to FI programs in which the focus is also to learn the content. Thus, due to the different structure of each program, CEFR-informed instruction would have to be applied differently in each to match the reality of teaching in a Core or Immersion classroom.

Discussion

The quantitative (see Faez, Taylor, Majhanovich, Brown, & Smith, in press) and qualitative findings of this study suggest that teachers were positively inclined toward CEFR-informed instruction for FSL classrooms in Ontario. They commented on the power and influence of Can Do statements in promoting student confidence and motivation as well as increasing students' awareness of their abilities. In the Core French program, student motivation and attrition are generally a concern (Canadian Parents for French, 2004; Duff, 2007), an observation also reported by many of the teachers in this study. Finding ways to increase student interest in learning French is a constant challenge. Many of the participating CF teachers reported an increase in student motivation and attributed this predominantly to the Can Do statements. Teachers indicated that the Can Do descriptors gave students a sense of accomplishment and eagerness to try using the language more than they would otherwise. The concrete descriptors exemplified through the Can Do statements allowed students to gain awareness of their capabilities in French. The realization of this self-awareness cannot be underestimated as it forms an essential part of taking responsibility for one's own learning, one of the defining characteristics of autonomous learners (Little, 2006, 2011). Findings suggest that CEFR-informed practice has the potential of increasing learner autonomy and consequently student motivation, two important factors associated with increased success in L2 learning. The other significant impact related to using CEFR-informed practice was the promotion of authentic language use in the classroom. CEFR-informed instruction would seem to enhance the potential to accomplish the main objectives of task-based instruction: engaging learners in using the language for communication that is similar to real life use of the language (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Pica, 2008; Skehan, 1998, 2003).

In spite of the enthusiasm for CEFR-informed instruction, teachers reported many challenges associated with the new approach. These challenges (e.g., lack of time and

viewing CEFR-informed instruction as an add-on, lack of understanding and applicability of CEFR-informed instruction) indicate the need for teacher professional development. Some teachers were confused about the CEFR's descriptive scales and levels, a concern raised by Fulcher and his colleagues (Fulcher, 2004, 2008a, 2008b; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; Fulcher, Davidson, & Kemp, 2011). The complexity of the CEFR document and the way its new approach is presented is also referenced by other practitioners (Council of Europe, 2006). Teachers in this study indicated that they needed to see more exemplars of learner performance at each level, which was not available to them at the time of the study. The Council of Europe has made such exemplars available in a number of languages (Council of Europe, 2011c). Teachers need concrete examples to show them how to incorporate CEFR-informed instruction in their classrooms to attain the learning objectives identified by the curriculum they were following. The initial training teachers received, even though informative, left some teachers unsure as to how to proceed in an actual classroom.

Finally, the degree to which teachers found CEFR-informed instruction relevant to their teaching context varied considerably. Core French teachers saw it as more relevant and effective than French Immersion teachers, simply because of the context of use. In Core French programs French is taught as a subject and thus the objective of the program is for students to learn the language. The kits developed for the purpose of this study included tasks and descriptors that focused on general language use (e.g., I can give directions to someone who has lost their way, or I can express my feelings of surprise and happiness) and were not subject-specific. In French Immersion programs, French is used as the medium of instruction and the objective is for students to learn the content and language. Since the same activities and descriptors were used for both Core and Immersion programs (at levels geared to their proficiency) in this study, teachers commented on the requirement for subject-specific activities and descriptors (e.g., I can write a science or geography report). For CEFR-informed instruction to have a stronger impact in various classroom contexts the descriptors and expectations need to be adapted to meet the requirements of that specific context.

Limitations and Implications

The implementation of CEFR-informed instruction in this study was limited to introducing task-based activities. Also, the tasks focused on general language use, an emphasis of CF programs, and were not subject-specific, which is a focus of FI programs. While teachers perceived that CEFR-informed instruction has a positive impact on learner motivation and increases language use, both of which in turn could enhance L2 learning outcomes, there is much more to CEFR-informed instruction than task-oriented activities. As Little (2010) argues, the implementation of the CEFR in Canada or any other context requires a much more comprehensive approach for it to have a significant and lasting impact on L2 learning outcomes. The CEFR is a language/culture/context-neutral framework and in order to implement it in any second language program, it is necessary to develop an adapted framework that has explored the L2 learning context in question (Little, 2010). The study reported in this paper was intended to be exploratory and a first step in

"implementing" CEFR-informed practices and did not utilize an adapted framework tailored to the learning expectations of CF and FI programs. Nor was the ELP, the implementation tool for the CEFR, developed and utilized in this study. CEFR-informed instruction should be accompanied by a language portfolio developed for the specific learners and context of use.

       This study was unable to capture how teachers' made sense of the CEFR, the extent to which they used CEFR-informed instruction and how they applied its ethos in their classroom. Teachers' self-reports were used as indicators of their use of the suggested tasks. Nor was this study able to capture the quality and nature of tasks and how teachers implemented them in their classroom. A large number of teachers participated in the study and the researchers did not conduct classroom observations. Students' views of CEFR-informed practice were not considered for the research reported here although this line of investigation would provide a more complete understanding of CEFR-based instruction in FSL programs. In spite of these limitations, the findings highlight the usefulness of goal-oriented authentic activities in the classroom. While there is perhaps considerable variability in terms of how these teachers understood CEFR-informed instruction and how they implemented it in their classroom, it appears that overall, teachers felt that CEFR-informed instruction has the potential to improve L2 instruction.

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