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Postgraduate English: What Guidelines and Descriptors according to the CEFR?

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Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has made a highly significant breakthrough in the language teaching profession and practice, outlining the different levels of language competence and communicative effectiveness across languages. However, despite the positive effect of the CEFR in terms of clear learning pathways diversified into levels of proficiency, it appears to be mostly concerned with general English and fails to take into account the features of specialised discourse or Content and Language Integrated learning (CLIL). Moreover, its mainstream use in the school curricula has associated it with "general English" and meant it has been largely ignored in academic and specialised language teaching. The present paper sets out to investigate the relationship between a postgraduate course of English for management and public administration and the general and specific guidelines provided by the Common European Framework of Reference. Preliminary findings suggest that a more attentive and unbiased analysis could disclose its full potential even in graduate and postgraduate teaching.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that the descriptors set out in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) have made a highly significant breakthrough in the language teaching profession and practice, outlining the different levels of language competence and communicative effectiveness across languages (Alderson 2002; Council of Europe 2001). As pointed out by Alderson (2007, p. 660), «*The six main levels of the CEFR have become a common currency in language education, and curricula, syllabuses, textbooks, teacher training courses, not only examinations, claim to be related to the CEFR*». However, despite the positive effect of the CEFR in terms of clear learning pathways diversified into levels of proficiency, it appears to be mostly concerned with general English and fails to take into account the features of specialised discourse or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Little (2007) outlines the challenges ahead for the CEFR and identifies CLIL programs as one of the future developments, while North (2007, p. 657) acknowledges «*the 'general language' nature of the descriptors*» and Alderson (2007) calls for more research aimed at the teaching of languages for specific purposes.

The CEFR general scale outlines a progression from everyday language (A1-A2 levels) with «*frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment)*» to independent and proficient levels, where communication takes place «*for social, academic and professional purposes*», «*on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions*» (Council of Europe 2001, p. 24).

By contrast, some English for Specific Purposes scholars and practitioners have highlighted the flexible language and discourse syllabus that can be adopted in academic specialized courses in light of the students' disciplinary priorities (Hyland 2002), also taking into account the role of motivation and the advantages of a genre-based approach to the study of specialised materials (Bandini, Pennarola 2012). The present paper, still at an initial stage, sets out to investigate the relationship between a postgraduate course of English for management and public administration and the general and specific guidelines provided by the Common European Framework of Reference as to the learning experience and assessment of a foreign language.

2 OVERVIEW OF AN ENGLISH POSTGRADUATE COURSE

The Course "Lingua Inglese Analisi dei Linguaggi Speciali" is aimed at the students of the postgraduate degree course in Management and Public Administration

("Scienze della Pubblica Amministrazione") at Università di Napoli Federico II. Most of them attended an English language course as part of their undergraduate degree course and because of this they are expected to have at least a B1 level of English, and to have familiarised themselves with the kind of text-based activities which make up so much of our academic language-based courses.

At the start of the course I ask them to fill in a questionnaire in which they assess their English language skills, outline the kind of skills they would like to develop (e.g., reading a research article, writing an email; watching films; etc.) and indicate their main objectives for studying English, e.g., for professional reasons or for socializing and having fun. The little English they use in the questionnaire very often reveals quite a disappointing lack of vocabulary and (even worse) of accuracy as many basic mistakes creep in the answers (e.g., missing subject; wrong verb tense; plural adjectives ending in -s; etc).

However, lack of accuracy is counterbalanced by some remarkable communicative competence: the students are able to follow the instructions, explanations and round-up in English, to participate in the activities and they usually manage to complete the tasks in the time slot allocated. This mismatch between accuracy and fluency, so manifest in any activity they tackle, has always surprised me; I have no theory about their polarized skills and I can only take note that they obviously are very good at top down processing, i.e., grasping the gist of complex either spoken or written text, but much less so at noticing the language and keeping it accurate: lexicogrammatical rules are blatantly disregarded and ignored provided that the message gets across. This "anything goes" attitude is typical of so much of our students' interaction abroad but is also increasingly characterizing the international English arena with specialists and professionals all over the world using English fluently but not accurately, and even imposing a new standard of "accuracy" or rather "acceptability" within the wider landscape of English as a lingua franca (Brutt-Griffler 1998; McKay 2002; Seidlhofer 2001).

The course revolves around the world of work, which accounts for the high motivation of the students: texts closely related to job hunting and workplace discourse are examined in class, including news articles or videos on the job market in the US and Europe; CVs and covering letters; job advertisements and guidelines for the prospective applicant. Among the job-related genres the one which absorbs the most of our classroom time and energy is the presentation, because of its versatility and relevance to any kind of job. Moreover, the focus on presentation skills entails that the students will practice and, hopefully, improve their oral subskills such as pronunciation, intonation, pausing. The topics, which are very relevant to the interests and concerns of the postgraduate students, and the focus on presentation skills stimulate them to get over their initial difficulties particularly with the new vocabulary and oral-written production.

2.1 A sample text and activities

The first text we examined in class this year was a New York Times article, "Why What You Learned in Preschool Is Crucial at Work" (Cain Miller 2015). Before reading it, I asked the students to work in groups of 4-5 people maximum and discuss the following points:

What are the most needed job skills in today's world?

Are any of these job skills taught at school or at university?

After 20 minutes discussion, each group had to report on their findings, and give a very short presentation to the rest of the class. This discussion activity, which was mostly meant as a warm-up to the rather complex reading provided by the New York Times, proved to be much more elaborate as the students had to carry out a number of tasks:

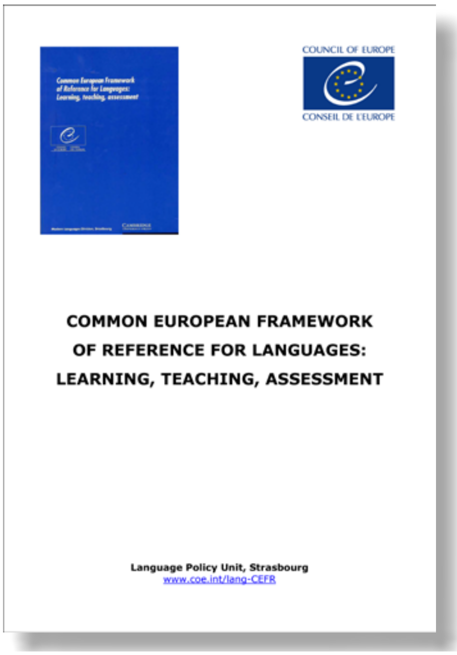
- sharing their opinions;
- opting for a more general or more specific approach (e.g., indicating the most needed job skills in absolute terms vs. the most needed job skills in their dream job);
- deciding whether they wanted to talk from experience or in the abstract;
- agreeing on a set of job skills;
- organizing their presentation: for example, deciding whether everybody would say something or only one of them would take the floor.

This activity was very stimulating on a number of accounts: it gave a practical demonstration of the advantages of groupwork: e.g., giving a chance to the more confident students to collaborate with and support the weaker students; it started a collaborative feeling between the students and healthy competitiveness between groups; it also showed that carrying out a task entailed a flexible sequence of actions entrusted to the students' decision-making and that it could be a demanding but also extremely rewarding activity.

Indeed, comparing the job skills identified by the various groups was a very stimulating follow-up and raised important issues like the traditional divide between soft and hard skills, the importance of teamwork vs leadership; the prominence of languages or computer literacy. This three-part activity consisting of a small-group discussion, presentation, whole class discussion took more than one hour considering there were 11 groups and it ideally prepared the ground to the complexities of the New York Times reading. After discussing job skills also with reference to the educational authorities - school vs. university - which helps develop them, the students were asked to identify the most needed job skills according to the news article, which proved a much easier task after all the preparatory work, so much so that they had no difficulty grasping the gist of the news article despite the sophisticated vocabulary and the numerous extratextual references.

3 RELATING POSTGRADUATE COURSEWORK TO THE CEFR

The CEFR approach to language use is described as «*an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of*



COUNCIL OF EUROPE
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COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK
OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES:
LEARNING, TEACHING, ASSESSMENT

Language Policy Unit, Strasbourg
www.coe.int/lang-CEFR

Copertina del "Common European framework" - https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action» (Council of Europe 2001, p. 9). As the focus of the CEFR is language in action, i.e. the needs of language learners in real life contexts, the Framework is repeatedly presented as a highly flexible instrument, «*open, dynamic and non-dogmatic*» (Council of Europe 2001, p. 18), which should be adapted to the different teaching environments. In the initial "Note for the User", a cautious disclaimer encourages language practitioners to adapt the Framework to their teaching environments and groups of learners:

> *Neither the categories nor the examples claim to be exhaustive. If you want to describe a specialised area, you may well need to sub-categorise further than the present classification goes. The examples are suggestive only. You may well wish to keep some, reject others and add some of your own. You should feel quite free to do so, since it must be for you to decide on your objectives and your product.*

The principle underlying the CEFR is that variety of languages and cultures across the member states must be protected and enhanced by means of a common language policy and framework for a unified approach to language teaching and learning across Europe (Bonnet 2007). All the many language competences are thoroughly examined with regard to domains, skills, activities, and even with regard to the language system, quite regardless of the CEFR language-independent nature, assuming that communicative tasks demand a comparable level of proficiency from language to language (Little 2007), and also that different language systems have similar characteristics, something which has not been validated by empiric demonstration (Alderson 2007). Illustrative scales are provided for all the main skills (listening; reading; oral interaction; oral production; writing), but also with regard to specific tasks or communicative activities such as making presentations, attending formal meetings, negotiating, interviewing and being interviewed. However, the sheer number and meticulousness of the language proficiency scales according to task and communicative context suggest that the main focus of the CEFR lies in the description of the language levels for assessment purposes, while a real pedagogic approach for the acquisition of a second or third language is missing, or more precisely, «*The authors of the CEFR were not very explicit about its implications for classroom teaching*» (Westhoff 2007, p. 676).

Given the preliminary stage of the present analysis, I will only briefly examine three aspects of the CEFR – presentation skills, linguistic competence, the European Language Portfolio – as they seem to be more relevant to the course "Lingua Inglese Analisi dei Linguaggi Speciali".

3.1 Addressing the audience

The ability to give a presentation is scaled into the six main levels of the CEFR according to various parameters:
a) delivery: e.g., whether the presenter reads a script (A1), gives a basic rehearsed presentation (A2) or can improvise adapting the talk to the audience (C2);
b) content: e.g., familiar or well-known subjects (A1-A2) vs. complex subjects related to a specific field (B2 onwards);
c) organization: e.g., «*basic*» vs. «*systematically developed with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples*» (Council of Europe 2001, p. 60).
d) language use: e.g., the degree of «*fluency and ease of expression*» shown in delivering the presentation, responding to questions and, only at proficiency levels, «*handling difficult and even hostile questioning*» (Council of Europe 2001, p. 60).

Perhaps surprisingly considering the complexity of this oral production activity, the CEFR scale accomodates all levels of learners simply distinguishing their output and performance, and seems therefore particularly suitable for university mixed-level classes.

3.2 Grammatical competence

Linguistic competence is defined as «*knowledge of, and ability to use, the formal resources from which well-formed, meaningful messages may be assembled and formulated* (Council of Europe 2001, p. 109), i.e. the lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic, orthoepic resources of the language. In particular, the grammatical accuracy scale correlates grammar control to communicative effectiveness, linking the ability to use accurate language to good interaction with other language users. Moreover, the CEFR encourages the users of the Framework to consider «*what grammatical elements, categories, classes, structures, processes and relations learners will need/be equipped/required to handle*» (Council of Europe 2001, p. 115), thus highlighting the purpose-driven and context-bound nature of language learning.

3.3 The European Language Portfolio

Another powerful instrument to promote language awareness and plurilingualism is the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which records the learners' language biographies, including certificates awarded while studying a particular language but also their intercultural experiences (Council of Europe 2001, p. 175). An essential part of the ELP is the «*Dossier, used to collect examples of what the owner can do in his/her L2s (evidence to support self-assessment)*» (Little 2007, p. 650), and a form of «*continuous assessment*» integrated into the course and taking more account of learners' creativity (Council of Europe 2001, p. 185).
The script of the presentation formally performed by each student at the end of the year as well as individual and groupwork presentations carried out during term time could then be added to my students' Portfolios together with their assessment sheets.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since its publication at the start of the new millennium, the CEFR has been extremely influential in shaping language education and assessment, so much so that it has become part of common knowledge and not exclusively of the language professionals: our students can navigate the descriptors well enough to use them in their CVs giving evidence of their second and third language proficiency in the receptive and productive skills. However, its mainstream use in the school curricula and highy comprehensive scope in a wide range of domains have associated it with "general English" and meant it has been largely ignored in academic and specialised language teaching. A more attentive and unbiased analysis, as shown by these sketchy observations, could then disclose its full potential even in graduate and postgraduate teaching.

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