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Intercultural skills in the newly developed elementary and the revised secondary French Curricula in relation to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Suna Timur Ağildere* , Neşe (İşik) Tertemizb

* Department of French Language Teaching, Education Faculty, G.U.Gazi, Ankara, 06560, Turkey
b Department of Elementary Education, Education Faculty, G.U.Gazi, Ankara, 06560, Turkey

Abstract

The primary and secondary French language curricula in Turkey aim at preparing students to make use of the language as a communication tool in order to meet their needs and to improve themselves as intercultural mediators based on their knowledge of the other cultures following the goals stated in the European Framework of Reference for Languages. This study deals with the critical analysis of the primary French language curricula which was developed firstly in 2011 and secondary French language curricula which was updated in 2011 in terms of goals, content, instruction and evaluation based on European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Keywords: European Framework of Reference for Languages; curricula of French as a foreign language for primary and secondary schools; intercultural communication skills.

1. Introduction

Education systems around the world aim to develop human power in accord with scientific, technological, economic, social and cultural developments and shifts. Educational systems meet this responsibility through curricula. Similar to other countries, the structure, function and operations of the Turkish educational system and curricula are also influenced by factors such as the internal social dynamics of the country, advances in knowledge and technology, better access to informatics and communication, globalization, and the economic and political interactions between countries. The rapid development and spread of information, technology and its products change individual and public life and social systems in every country. Schools need to create curricula that reflect such developments and changes in order to be able to prepare students to cope with them. One such move would be to prepare foreign language curricula based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2000) so that these courses are aligned with foreign language courses taught throughout Europe. This document concerns not only language teachers, but also programmers, test-writers and textbook writers.

* Suna Timur Ağildere, +90 5325628604
E-mail address: sunatagildere@yahoo.fr
Its main purpose is to enable learners to develop the competencies and skills needed to effectively communicate in a foreign language. The framework also aims to facilitate the evaluation of lifelong learning by categorizing learners' linguistic levels under Common Reference Levels.

In line with the issues mentioned above, the elementary and secondary French curricula in Turkey aim to enable students to use this language as a tool of communication as mentioned among the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) criteria, get to know different cultures, and develop themselves as intercultural mediators and social actors. The most serious limitation of the study is that it examines the elementary French curricula developed in 2011 and the secondary French curricula revised in 2011 only in relation to intercultural skills, in light of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages document.

2. The action-oriented intercultural approach of the elementary and secondary French curricula in light of the CEFR

Overall, both elementary and secondary French curricula have an innovative perspective. Both curricula were prepared with the guidance of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which was created by the European Council in order to set comparable standards for foreign language instruction and implementation of courses. This is also reflected in the various dimensions of the curricula.

It puts the student in the center and proposes the use of methods alternative to traditional foreign language instruction methods (e.g. action-oriented and project-based learning). Individual differences are emphasized in both programs. In the introduction to the elementary French curriculum, its goal has been stated as “enabling students to fulfill their needs by using French, teaching them how to learn for continuous development, and enabling them to solve problems by using thinking skills” (Elementary French Curriculum, 2011, p. 2).

The CEFR sees the foreign language student as a social agent and learner that can communicate with others in the target language in their daily, private or professional lives (here, French). The following is stated in the introduction to the document:

Communication calls upon the whole human being. The competences separated and classified below interact in complex ways in the development of each unique human personality. As a social agent, each individual forms relationships with a widening cluster of overlapping social groups, which together define identity. In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favorable development of the learner’s whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture. It must be left to teachers and the learners themselves to reintegrate the many parts into a healthily developing whole. (2009, p. 1)

The same line of thought is reflected in the vision of both curricula. To illustrate, the following is stated in the introduction to the document:

The Secondary French Curriculum aims to equip students with the following skills by using French as a tool of communication to meet their needs, get to know different cultures and develop themselves socially:

- Advancing knowledge, skills and attitudes,
- Learning how to learn for continuous development,
- Linking learning to subject area,
- Implementing learning in real life,
- Reading, writing, speaking and listening,
- Understanding responsibilities of self and others,
- Having social responsibility for the environment and the world,
- Having strong self-motivation and developing awareness of own talents,
- Using technology effectively,
- Displaying a lifelong learning attitude,
- Establishing cause-effect relationships, making decisions, and solving problems by employing thinking skills. (2011, p. 4)
While the elementary French curriculum emphasizes the action-oriented approach, the secondary French curriculum is based on the communicative method and project-based learning. The CEFR document defines the action-oriented approach that it has adopted as follows:

“The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of 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. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. We speak of ‘tasks’ in so far as the actions are performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competences to achieve a given result. The action-based approach therefore also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to an applied by the individual as a social agent. (2009, p. 1)

For easy communication in the target language in various social and cultural contexts, the CEFR views intercultural skills as equally important as linguistic ones in foreign language instruction. These intercultural skills are mentioned in the fifth part of the document which focuses on the development of learner competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes):

- The ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other,
- Cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures,
- The capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations,
- The ability to overcome stereotyped relationships. (2009, p. 107)

Foreign language learners thus develop an awareness of the target language (here French) and its culture. Such intercultural awareness increases the sense of identity of learners who are social agents, and enables them to use the foreign language to interact with its speakers who belong to a different culture with tolerance and no prejudice.

The committee of authors that created the CEFR largely drew upon the work of Michael Byram on linguistic and intercultural education. Byram contends that intercultural communication and awareness has two crucial aims: “making better meaning of the target language and culture” And “getting rid of prejudice for other cultures and peoples” (1992, p. 77).

Elementary and secondary French curricula state the following regarding the main principles of achievement of objectives which also shed light on the process of language instruction:

- Enjoy learning foreign languages,
- Recognize and distinguish the cultural values of the countries where the target language is spoken,
- Recognize their own values and have tolerance and respect for differences,
- Explain their cultural values to foreigners,
- Get to know different world cultures via written and oral products,
- Develop their self-expression, communication, cooperation and problem solution skills,
- Develop personally, socially and culturally,
- Improve their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills,
- Enrich their vocabulary in the target language,
- Make use of information technologies to advance their learning,
- Adapt to the criteria mentioned in the CEFR,
- Believe in the importance of learning foreign languages and resolve to learn at least one. (2011, p. 4)

The action-oriented approach mentioned above stated that foreign language learners become a social agents of that language and culture. However, becoming a social agent of another language does not isolate learners from their own native language or culture. Indeed, those who embrace another culture become richer by merging their knowledge of the world with that of the target culture.
As pointed out by Pretceille-Abdallah and Porcher whose ideas also helped shape the work of CEFR authors, the intercultural approach in education has a very simple foundation: “The other is both similar to and different from me” (1996, p. 8). This approach enriches the perspective of learners and their sociocultural information, and helps them discard cliches about the target society.

The issue of similarities and differences between the culture of origin and target culture is clearly stated in the objectives of the Secondary French curriculum: “Recognize and distinguish the cultural values of the countries where the target language is spoken, recognize their own values and have tolerance and respect for differences, explain their cultural values to foreigners” (2011, p. 15).

The contents and themes of the elementary and secondary French curricula involve many topics aiming to maximize the intercultural acquisitions of the foreign language learner. For instance, the secondary French curriculum includes the theme “Values, History, Our World, Our Country” and the units under this theme are expected to “touch upon country information and enable students to compare and contrast their own world with that of the target culture” (2011, p. 15).

The section in the elementary French curriculum on the instructional process states that “topics should include country information to improve intercultural empathy skills”(2011, p. 15). However, as the learners are aged between 8 and 11, curriculum contents do not include as intensive cultural elements as the secondary French curriculum does.

3.Conclusion

If Turkey is to become an EU member state in the near future, educational practices should move toward the integration of intercultural skills which are among the mile stones of European thought. It should be kept in mind that multilingual individuals are no longer an exception; they are the norm in a multicultural and plurilingual world. Overall, the multiculturalism and intercultural communication mentioned in the CEFR document are reflected in the vision, objectives, contents and themes, and the instructional process in both elementary and secondary French curricula. Future studies should deal with more than a mere examination of curricula, and explore practical reflections in educational materials (such as textbooks, workbooks, teacher’s guides and CDs) and organization of instructional settings (such as the classroom environment or student-teacher interaction).

References