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Is CEFR Really over There?

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Abstract

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a comprehensive guideline for teachers with respect to the processes of planning, learning, teaching and assessing and it has brought standardization, transparency, coherence and consistency across different countries. Despite its popularity, reputation and wide spread approval, CEFR-based English language teaching is far from effective implementation in Turkey. This study aims to reveal this problem-if any- by referring to English language instructors' perceptions regarding their current teaching practice on the basis of CEFR and CEFR based curriculum at the tertiary level. An adapted Likert Scale was administered to 18 instructors from private university and 36 instructors from state institution. The data gathered from the survey were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS.17 and descriptive statistics were performed. The findings of the study shows that although their perceptions do not vary on the knowledge about the CEFR and the necessity of CEFR-based curriculum development, there is a significant difference between instructors working at a state university and private university regarding their CEFR based experiences. One striking result is that in-service training they have received exerts an enormous impact on the practices of English language instructors at the private university. Another finding is that both groups desire to have more projections of CEFR on the curriculum and teacher training services. These results imply that both pre-service and in-service training should educate teachers on CEFR and raise their awareness on how to use the reference for foreign/second language teaching in a more effective way ranging from setting objectives, materials development to evaluation.

Keywords: Common European Framework of Reference; teacher training, Council of Europe ; university instructors

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1. Introduction

Council of Europe was founded in 1949 in Strasbourg, France, in order to promote European unification, identity and protect human rights. One of the main aims of the council was to support social cohesion among member states and minority groups. On that count, two bodies of the council; Language Policy Division in Strasbourg and European Center for Modern Languages in Graz, Austria operate collectively and collaboratively developing and implementing language policies (CEFR, 2001).

The studies on language date back to 60s and 70s although CEFR was published in 2001. 1960s was the heyday of notional-functional syllabuses and it was the time when Modern Languages Project started in Europe. Publication of Threshold level paved the way forming authoring groups in order to generate more communicative and innovative supplements and assessment tools in 1990s. The studies of Swiss National Science group project between 1993-1996 brought CEFR into existence and it was officially published in 2001. Rightly after, CEFR was translated into 34 languages-including Turkish-in order to promote transparency, standardization and unity in language learning, teaching and assessment across the continent.

1.1. CEFR

CEFR is based on socio-cognitive and action-oriented approach. Language learning is regarded as dynamic, coordinated, transparent and a life-long process. The framework includes six ascending levels of proficiency namely; Breakthrough (A1), Waystage (A2), Threshold (B1), Vantage (B2), Effective Operational Proficiency (C1) and Mastery (C2) (Little, 2007). Each level is explicitly, comprehensively but not exhaustively explained in terms of language use and language learning. CEFR is composed of two main parts: descriptive scheme and common reference levels. The descriptors of 34 subscales of skills are brief, transparent and positively formulated so as to serve language users, teachers, curriculum developers and assessors` needs. CEFR is a detailed document and it is divided into nine chapters. The first chapter puts CEFR`s political and educational context, the second chapter illustrates framework`s approach and the common reference levels are dealt with at the third chapter. The fourth and fifth chapters examine language use/users and their competences. The nature of Language learning and teaching and opposing theories are discussed in chapter 6. Chapter 7 deals with tasks and their role in language teaching. Chapter 8, Linguistic diversification and curriculum, is the backbone of the framework as CEFR supports intercultural diversity and cultural dimensions. The last chapter describes assessment and its use in language learning, teaching and evaluation process. The formulation of descriptors, scale development methodologies, illustrative scales of descriptors, DIALANG scales, ALTE "Can Do" statements are provided to the users in appendices (CEFR, 2001; North, 2007).

1.2. CEFR and curriculum development

CEFR is not meant to be utilized as a method itself and does not provide any ready-made solutions but offer methodologies with sample cases. By virtue of its descriptive nature the framework suggests integration of skills, activities, and strategies in order to map the practices on CEFR-based curriculum. CEFR suggests curricula to be peculiar to institutions` needs, objectives and content; therefore, the framework advocates detailed needs assessment and meticulous specification of goals and objectives.

As reported by the framework the programs can be global, modular, weighted or partial in accordance with proficiency needs of the users of the framework. Language users are regarded as social agents who have tasks to accomplish under certain contexts and constraints. The framework suggests that communication, interaction, mediation, and reception are maintained through tasks and they have identifiable and evident effects. Hence, general competences, approaches; linguistic, socio-linguistic and socio-cultural competencies are clearly and transparently described in the framework to be adopted. The role teacher and learner beliefs, instructional technologies and approaches for dealing with errors are also contextualized with the examples (CEFR, 2001).

1.3. CEFR in Turkey

Since becoming a member of the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1949, the Turkish Republic has been trying to follow European Union regulations, including foreign language policies in the Ministry of Education [Çelik, 2012; Kır, 2011; Ministry of Education (MoNE, 2005); Mirici, 2008]. In this vein, MONE has been trying to adapt the teachers and the curriculum to the premises of CEFR. MONE piloted the ELP and the CEFR in 20 schools in two towns during the 2001–2002 Academic Year (Hişmanoğlu, 2013). It familiarized language teachers in these schools with the ELP and the CEFR during the in-service teacher training programs. By 2004, CEFR-based curriculum an ELP had been piloted in 30 schools with 60 teachers and 1357 students nationwide (Sülü & Kır, 2014). After the piloting process, the ELP prepared by the Ministry of Education in Turkey was presented to the Validation Committee of the Council of Europe and was acknowledged as suitable for meeting the standards of the Council. After this validation process, digital copies of the ELP were prepared, and distributed for the use of teachers and students (Demirel, 2005; Sülü & Kır, 2014). As Şahinkarakuş, Yumru, & Inozu (2009) reported, the MoNE piloted the ELP in more ten towns and decided to gradually put the program into practice throughout the whole country in the 2006–2007 academic year. MoNE also organized a number of seminars entitled "Training of English Teachers", the aim of which was to adapt almost 48000 English language teachers to the practice of CEFR in their classes (Hişmanoğlu, 2013; MoNE, 2011).

When it comes to the use of CEFR at higher education, the studies conducted till now seem to reveal that English preparatory programs at universities do not align with CEFR principles and the adaptation process to the CEFR has not gone as smoothly as in MoNE. To illustrate, Kınsız and Aydın (2008) study, the web-sites of Schools of Foreign Languages of state-run universities in Turkey were scrutinized and it was found out that only six of the universities have preparatory programs in accordance with the CEFR principles. The study also put forward that unlike European countries, Turkish universities do not seem to follow the guidelines of CEFR.

Similar to Kınsız and Aydın (2008), Gökdemir (2010) shed light on the problems faced by foreign language education at Turkish universities, implying its incongruences with the CEFR. For example, some of the challenges posed by the current educational policies were found as teacher-centered lessons, lack of practice in language, students' autonomy, and also hectic pace of the preparatory program curricula regardless of the students' needs.

Maden, Ere and Yiğit (2009) investigated whether the universities' language proficiency exams were compatible with the CEFR. Also, they forward that there is a great variety among the universities' curricula, which is far from the standardization of CEFR. Similarly, a standardized CEFR-based foreign language teaching policy with regard to the contents of the assessment seem to be non-existent according to Maden, Ere and Yiğit (2009). This inconsistency seems to stem from the fact that educators and students are not familiar with the reference tool as proposed by Elder &O'Loughlin (2007) and Morrow (2004).

Sülü & Kır (2014) administered a questionnaire to 46 language instructors at different universities around Turkey to analyze what language teachers know about CEFR document and the way they apply the issues stated in this reference tool. The results indicate that more than half of the participants stated to have read the document. However, most of the teachers do not follow studies conducted by the EU in foreign language education. It is clearly seen that foreign language teachers need in-service training on CEFR. Another result is most of the teachers do not apply the issues stated in the reference tool in four skills. These results imply that they either do not value the issues which are strongly emphasized like culture, process-based learning or they are not aware of these issues.

Considering the efforts to adjust the foreign language education to the CEFR at primary, secondary schools (which are under the control of MONE), studies reviewed above reveal that the foreign language teaching objectives of the universities in Turkey are not clear and the teaching programs are not in line with the standardized reference levels of the CEFR and its basic principles. Although a growing number of universities are applying the CEFR criteria for proficiency in the target language, each university appear to follow a different way in foreign language teaching. Considering a few number of studies conducted on the projections of CEFR at tertiary level in Turkey (Arslan & Coskun, 2013; Gökdemir, 2010 ; Kınsız & Aydın, 2008) and a lack of study on a comparison between private and state university implementation of CEFR, this study aims to address :

1. What is the perception of instructors working in a state university
   a. in relation to CEFR?

b.   in relation to CEFR based curriculum?
2.   What is the perception of instructors working in a private university
a.   in relation to CEFR?
b.   in relation to CEFR based curriculum?
3.   What is the perception of
a.   instructors working at a state university on CEFR based curriculum development?
b.   instructors working at a private university on CEFR based curriculum development?

2. Methodology

2.1. Aim of the study

The primary aim of this study was to explore English language instructors' knowledge on the basis of CEFR and their perceptions on CEFR based curriculum at the tertiary level by comparing the implementations at a state and a private university.

2.2. Participants and setting

The participants in the study were 18 instructors from a private university and 36 instructors from a state institution preparatory program in the academic year 2013-2014. Both programs aim to enable the students, whose level of English is below the proficiency level, to acquire basic language skills, so that they can pursue their undergraduate studies at the university without major difficulty. To achieve this aim, the department runs a two-semester intensive program putting emphasis on reading, writing, listening and speaking in an integrative way.

Female participants were 85% while the number of male participants was 15%. With respect to their education background, 63% of them graduated from the ELT department, 28 % of them were from the Literature, 6 % of them were graduates of Linguistics departments. Only two instructors graduated from other departments. While 18 % of the teachers held the BA degree, 61.1 % of them reported to have completed an MA program and three teachers had a PhD degree. Regarding their teaching experience, 42% of the teachers have more than eleven years of experience, 18 % have 6-10 years of experience and 15 % have 1 to 5- year experience.

2.3. Data collection instrument

The instrument of this study is a Likert Scale Questionniare (3 sections), which was adapted from Kır's (2011) dissertation and a survey retrieved from Language Policy Division (Council of Europe, 2006). It was administered to the language instructors using google drive.

The questionnaire has three parts. The first one includes information about the participants' demographic background and their teaching experience. The second part, consisting of 10 Likert-scale items, is mainly about their awareness and knowledge about CEFR and whether CEFR is reflected in their curriculum or their own practice. For these questions in this part, the instructors circled the options from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) in order to show their degree of agreement with the statements. The last section of the questionnaire covers questions about CEFR-oriented curriculum development at their school.

2.4. Data collection procedure

After examining the instrument with a professor and a PhD candidate in the ELT department at Hacettepe University, the researchers sent the survey questions to both instructors at a state university, and a private one in Ankara in the fall term of 2013-2014 academic year. Snowball sampling was used to collect the data; that is, the instrument was sent online to the instructors with the help of the colleagues of the researchers.

2.5. Data analysis

The researchers used descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations…) to show the level of awareness among the language instructors about the CEFR and its projections on the present curriculum. While presenting the results in the table, the percentages are introduced as "agree" (including, the sum of agree, and strongly agree scales) or as "disagree" (including the sum of disagree and strongly disagree).

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Analysis of question 1a

The descriptive statistics, in general, shows that instructors at the state university are aware of the CEFR and its contents. The details are illustrated below in Table 1:

Table 1. Perceptions about the CEFR at the state university.

Item		SD	D	NS	A	SA
1.I know about the CEFR (Common European Framework).	f	2	2	6	19	7
	%	5.6	5.6	16.7	52.8	19.4
2. I can understand the contents of European documents (e.g., the CEFR, the European Language Portfolio) and I can adapt them to my teaching	f	2	9	13	9	3
	%	5.6	25	36.1	25	8.3
3.I took a course / got education concerning the CEFR or the CEFR related subjects.	f	11	14	6	5	0
	%	30.6	38.9	16.7	13.9	0
4.I have sufficient amount of knowledge with respect to the CEFR.	f	3	14	10	7	2
	%	8.3	38.9	27.8	19.4	5.6
10.I can plan and organize an interdisciplinary project work by myself or by with other teachers.	f	1	1	13	13	8
	%	2.8	2.8	36.1	36.1	22.2

The findings of the study show that most of the instructors working at a state university know about the CEFR. However, they reported that they are neutral about understanding the content of European documents. Similarly, the majority of the instructors (68.9 %) noted that they didn't take a course or education concerning CEFR and CEFR related subjects. They also stated that they didn't have sufficient knowledge with respect to CEFR. More than half of the instructors (58.3 %) seem to be confident in planning and organizing an interdisciplinary project work by themselves and with other teachers. However 36.1 % of the instructors are cautious about this item. These findings are in line with Elder &O'Loughlin (2007) and Morrow (2004) studies in that teachers are not familiar with CEFR despite stating that they received courses on CEFR.

3.2. Analysis of question 1b

The findings concerning the perceptions of the language instructors at the state university on the CEFR-based curriculum is presented as in Table 2:

Table 2. Perceptions about the CEFR-based curriculum at the state university.

Item		SD	D	NS	A	SA
5.The CEFR has impact on the coursebooks used for teaching English in our school.	f	1	6	16	8	5
	%	2.8	16.7	44.4	22.2	13.9

6.The CEFR has impact on the tests used in our school.	f	5	10	17	4	0
	%	13.9	27.8	47.2	33.3	0
7.The CEFR has impact on language teaching techniques used in our school.	f	2	11	18	5	0
	%	5.6	30.6	50	13.9	0
8.The teaching program practiced in our institution is CEFR specific.	f	5	14	15	2	0
	%	1	6	16	8	5
9.It is necessary that the CEFR and the ELP be incorporated into English language teaching programme in our school.	f	2.8	16.7	44.4	22.2	13.9
	%	5	10	17	4	0

Looking at the table, 36.1% of the instructors agree that the CEFR has an impact on the coursebook they use; however, nearly half of them feels neutral about this item. 41.7 % of the instructors doesn't agree that the CEFR has impact on the tests used in their school. 33.3 % of the teachers agree on this item and nearly half of them feels neutral about the impact of CEFR on their tests and on language teaching techniques used in their schools. 36.2 % of the instructors doesn't agree that their teaching practices are related with CEFR. 52.8 % of the instructors doesn't think that their program is a CEFR- specific and nearly half of them feels neutral about it. Lastly, 36.1 % of the instructors agree that CEFR and ELP should be incorporated into ELT program in their school and nearly half of them feels neutral about it. These findings support Kınsız and Aydın (2008) study, despite their belief in CEFR instructors at state universities do not practice CEFR-based curriculum.

3.3. Analysis of question 2a

Table 3. Perceptions about the CEFR at the private university.

Item		SD	D	NS	A	SA
1.I know about the CEFR (Common European Framework).	f	0	0	1	6	11
	%	0	0	5.6	33.3	61.1
2. I can understand the contents of European documents (e.g., the CEFR, the European Language Portfolio) and I can adapt them to my teaching	f	0	1	1	9	7
	%	0	5.6	5.6	50	38.9
3.I took a course / got education concerning the CEFR or the CEFR related subjects.	f	2	4	2	6	4
	%	11.1	22.2	11.1	33.3	22.2
4.I have sufficient amount of knowledge with respect to the CEFR.	f	0	2	2	8	6
	%	0	11.1	11.4	44.4	33.3
10.I can plan and organize an interdisciplinary project work by myself or by with other teachers.	f	0	0	4	7	7
	%	0	0	22.2	38.9	38.9

The table indicates that the instructors in the private university are aware of the CEFR and they received education on it, meaning that education may have contributed to their awareness. The question with the highest frequency on the agree range is the second one. The instructors can easily understand and use CEFR documents in their teaching. Similar to Hişmanoğlu (2013) and Sülü & Kır (2014)`s studies, these results reveal that in-service training have a positive role on instructors` CEFR perceptions.

3.4. Analysis of question 2b

Table 4. Perceptions about the CEFR-based curriculum at the private university.

Item		SD	D	NS	A	SA
5.The CEFR has impact on the coursebooks used for teaching English in our school.	f	0	0	3	10	5
	%	0	0	16.7	55.6	27.8

6.The CEFR has impact on the tests used in our school.	f	1	1	4	6	6
	%	5.6	5.6	22.2	33.3	33.3
7.The CEFR has impact on language teaching techniques used in our school.	f	1	0	2	12	3
	%	5.6	0	11.1	66.7	16.7
8.The teaching program practiced in our institution is CEFR specific.	f	1	1	4	9	3
	%	5.6	5.6	22.2	50	16.7
9.It is necessary that the CEFR and the ELP be incorporated into English language teaching programme in our school.	f	1	1	3	10	3
	%	5.6	5.6	16.7	55.6	16.7

As seen from the table, most of the instructors fall into the agree scale for each question, thereby leading to the conclusion that CEFR has projections on the curriculum used. This is because the private university bases its curriculum on CEFR (informal interviews with the teachers). The 7th question got the highest number of agree scores, implying that the program used and the teaching techniques used in the school are resting upon CEFR. Sülü & Kır (2014) indicates that in-service training has a tremendous effect on the beliefs and practices of teachers. However, the instructors just uses product portfolio for the assessment, not the other ones. The awareness level of the instructors needs to be raised on that CEFR is not only rely on product portfolio.

3.5. Analysis of question 3a

Table 5. The perception of instructors working at a state university CEFR based curriculum development.

Item		CE	NAU	NVU	RU	VU
a. How useful would the CEFR be in curriculum/syllabus development?	f	10	1	3	18	4
	%	27.8	2.8	8.3	50	11.1
b. How useful would the CEFR be in in-service teacher training?	f	14	3	1	13	5
	%	38.9	8.3	2.8	36.1	13.9
c.How useful would the CEFR be in testing/assessment?	f	8	1	4	13	10
	%	22.2	2.8	11.1	36.1	27.8
d. How useful would the CEFR be in textbook writing/ production of educational materials?	f	9	1	3	13	10
	%	25	2.8	8.3	36.1	27.8
e. How useful would the CEFR be outside class/in other contexts?	f	14	1	2	13	6
	%	38.9	2.8	5.6	36.1	16.7

The findings of the study show that nearly half and slightly more than half of the instructors fall into the very useful/rather useful scale for each question. This reveals that instructors would like to try incorporating the CEFR into their curriculum. However, still about a quarter of them cannot estimate the usefulness of the CEFR, which is similar to Arslan & Coskun (2013) and Gökdemir (2010)`s studies.

3.6. Analysis of question 3b

Table 6. The perception of instructors working at a private university CEFR based curriculum development.

Item		CE	NAU	NVU	RU	VU
a. How useful would the CEFR be in curriculum/syllabus development?	f	0	0	4	5	9
	%	0	0	22.2	27.8	50.0
b. How useful would the CEFR be in in-service teacher training?	f	0	1	1	7	9
	%	0	5.6	5.6	38.9	50
c.How useful would the CEFR be in	f	0	0	3	6	9

testing/assessment?	%	0	0	16.7	33.3	50
d. How useful would the CEFR be in textbook writing/ production of educational materials?	f	0	0	0	7	11
	%	0	0	0	38.9	61.1
e. How useful would the CEFR be outside class/in other contexts?	f	0	0	1	12	5
	%	0	0	5.6	66.7	27.8

The table puts it clearly that almost all of the instructors working at a private institution agree on the usefulness of the CEFR in curriculum development. This may be taking its source from the training they received on CEFR which is again in line with Sülü & Kır (2014)`s study`s findings.

4. Conclusion

Teachers are an indispensible member of a curriculum; that`s why, their knowledge, understanding and values are key point in providing effective education. Pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, definitely, provide quality and assurance of enhancement and CEFR based curriculum is no exception. All the steps should be taken and shared with the teachers and teacher training should be stressed in the process. The teachers should be on the same wavelength with the curriculum and tests developers, material and course books designers about the implications of the CEFR.

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