HOW DO SCHOOL TEACHERS IN TURKEY PERCEIVE AND USE THE CEFR?

Research Article

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Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is used in Turkey by teachers, administrators and researchers to support English language teaching and learning. This paper discusses the knowledge and use of the CEFR by a group of teachers. Eight teachers were interviewed about the CEFR and carried out an assessment task. Findings show that the teachers knew of the CEFR, had a positive view of its contribution to English Language teaching in Turkey, used CEFR-related practices such as self-assessment in class and could use CEFR tables to successfully assess sample performances. On the other hand, findings also show that the teachers had received little or no training about the CEFR, they had difficulty in applying the CEFR to their classroom assessment practices and they showed that they have only a vague idea of the CEFR proficiency levels for assessment. After reading CEFR tables they say that the language used in the CEFR is generally suitable for teachers to use, but they feel that the level of the language used in the English version of the tables is too high for their learners to benefit from.

Keywords: CEFR, school teachers, knowledge, experience

1. Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was developed through forty years of work by the Council of Europe and is now used all over the world along with changes in pedagogy, curricula and testing. The CEFR supports an 'action-oriented' approach (Europe, 2001, p. 9) to pedagogy and focuses on learners, teaching and testing as linked concepts (Faez, Majhanovich, Taylor, Smith, & Crowley, 2011) and promotes the use of self-assessment to develop learners' awareness of skills and knowledge. was developed by the Council of Europe, with the CEFR, aimed to to 'provide a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations and textbooks across Europe' (Europe, 2001, p. 1). The CEFR describes language learning and the abilities required for learners to be effective, communicative users of a language. There is extensive use of 'Can Do Statements' for second language proficiency in five skills (reading, writing, listening, spoken production and spoken interaction) and six levels (C2, C1, B2, B1, A2, A1). The CEFR provides statements known as descriptors that describe what learners 'can do' at different levels, the focus is not on what learners cannot do. In this way, the CEFR aims to be practical and user-friendly. The influence of the CEFR on foreign language education is widespread in Europe and elsewhere in the world. The CEFR is used in a variety of ways in different contexts, and this study aims to contribute to our understanding of how school teachers understand and use the CEFR.

It has been two decades since the first introduction in Turkey of the CEFR and European Language Portfolio (ELP). Turkey stated its support for the goals and objectives of the

European Union (EU) for language education with the adoption of the CEFR as a reference document for foreign language teaching (Demirel, 2005). There were pilot projects that involved 20 schools in two towns in the academic year 2001-2002. Subsequently, the Ministry of National Education or *Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı* (MEB) extended the pilot projects to ten towns in total for the academic year 2006-2007 (Sahinkarakas, Yumru, & Inozu, 2009). However, further in-service training programmes in more schools for more teachers were not provided comprehensively in the years that followed. As a result, most teachers knowledge, understanding and experience of the CEFR is not clear. This study aims to look at the extent to which teachers are familiar with the CEFR and how they view the application of CEFR principles and practice.

The CEFR has influenced teachers' views on language teaching, testing and curriculum design in Turkey, and the MEB adapted its educational policy according to the CEFR. The CEFR seeks to be a comprehensive document that guides the teaching of different languages in various learning situations. Whilst it aims to be as transparent as possible, the content is complex in some parts. The CEFR can act as a guide for decisions made by any teacher of foreign languages (Goullier, 2007). However, to gain a full understanding of the CEFR and its potential for application in testing and in class, several readings may be necessary and some writers have raised questions of whether some parts of the CEFR are clear enough for all users (Piccardo, Berchoud, Cignatta, Mentz, & Pamula, 2011) and some researchers have observed implementation problems. If language teachers do not know and use the CEFR it can not affect classroom practice for teaching and assessment and the benefits for teachers will be reduced.

The CEFR influences curriculum and standards in Turkey in different ways. The common reference levels appear in Turkey's foreign language curriculum. For example, the current foreign language curriculum for 2nd-8th grades aims to adhere to CEFR levels, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Model English Language Curriculum (2018)*

Levels [CEFR] (Hours / Week)	Grades	Skill focus	Main activities / Strategies
1 **[A1]** **(2)**	2	Listening and Speaking	TPR / Arts and crafts/Drama
	3	Listening and Speaking Very Limited Reading and Writing	
	4	Listening and Speaking Very Limited Reading and Writing	
2 **[A1]** **(3)**	5	Listening and Speaking Limited Reading Very Limited Writing	Drama / Role-play
	6	Listening and Speaking Limited Reading Limited Writing	
3 **[A2]** **(4)**	7	**Primary:** Listening and Speaking **Secondary:** Reading and Writing	Theme-based
	8	**Primary:** Listening and Speaking **Secondary:** Reading and Writing	

(MEB, 2018a, p. 10)

This paper reports on a study that aimed to investigate teachers' knowledge, understanding and application of the CEFR and ELP (Tosun, 2019). The study looked at how teachers understood and applied the language used in three tables of the CEFR (Europe, 2001, pp. 24-29) and what the CEFR means to teachers. The study discusses the effects of this understanding on the implementation of the CEFR in Turkey. It does so by taking the example of a group of EFL teachers in a small province in Central Western Anatolia.

In early studies, students were reluctant to use the ELP without teacher support (Glover, Mirici, & Aksu, 2005) or found it difficult to monitor their learning progress (Sert, 2006). These studies indicated the need for a significant role for teaching, teacher support or training in the application of the CEFR. In view of these earlier findings, this study aimed to ascertain whether there were any differences in current views and knowledge of English teachers in Isparta about the experience and use of the CEFR and how teachers saw CEFR levels now.

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What do these English language teachers know about the CEFR?
2. How do these teachers use the CEFR?
3. How does teachers' knowledge affect their teaching?

This study is limited to eight EFL teachers teaching in a local area. The responses of the participants are genuine and sincere, but findings may not be generalizable because of the small number of participants. The opinions of the respondents that are revealed by the current study are limited to the spoken production sections of the CEFR tables and level descriptors only and cannot be considered as representative of all language competencies defined by the CEFR.

The researcher obtained informed consent from the participants and collected background information before the interviews. The related information included gender, age, educational background, department of graduation and teaching experience. There were five female and three male participants, all in their thirties with between six and thirteen years of teaching experience.

The data for the study consist of recorded interviews with each teacher supported by field notes. The data were elicited through a semi-structured interview in two parts. In the first part, participants answered eight questions about the CEFR. They then watched a video recording of a sample Key English Test (KET) speaking test (CambridgeESOL, Accessed 2017) and assessed the level of the two students. They then read the CEFR self-assessment and spoken language use grids (Europe, 2001, pp. 26-29) and reassessed the samples. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

2. Findings

In part one of the interview the first interview question was 'Have you received training concerning the CEFR? If you have, what kind of training was that (pre-service training, in-service training, etc.)?' Six of the participants said that they knew little about the CEFR and one reported reading the CEFR herself without receiving any training. Two of the participants reported receiving in-service training about the CEFR. Most of the teachers said that they had neither pre-service nor in-service training. Earlier studies found comparable results regarding English teachers' viewpoints, perceptions and knowledge and their in-service and pre-service training for the CEFR (Sülü & Kır, 2014; Yakışık & Gürocak, 2018).

The second interview question was 'How do you use the CEFR in your teaching?' Relating their teaching to the CEFR, several teachers referred specifically to self-assessment checklists that appear in coursebooks, and CEFR levels required in the MEB curriculum. The teachers know that both curriculum and coursebooks have been designed following the CEFR, for

example, references to 'self-assessment', 'e-portfolio', 'checklists' or 'Can Do Statements'. The participants stated that they believed many activities were inspired or implied by the CEFR, such as role-play, listening to real conversations, dialogue practices, pair and group work and question-answer drills presented in the coursebooks.

The third interview question asked: 'Can you give specific examples of the CEFR influence on the coursebooks you use for teaching in your school?' Most participants' responses indicate awareness that the CEFR has influenced the new coursebooks that were introduced containing self-assessment and portfolio tasks. These practices were seen as applying communicative teaching approaches expected by the CEFR in the foreign languages curriculum. Many activity types presented in the coursebooks provide learners with a topic to talk, write, listen to or read about. Teachers felt that these activities reflected the requirements of communicative language activities within the coursebook design. Teachers said that they were also aware that the curriculum identifies CEFR levels for each grade.

The fourth interview question asked: 'How do you integrate the CEFR into the tests or exams that you use in your school?' The answers varied and involved a range of activities such as self-assessment, portfolios, checklists or performance tasks. For portfolio activities, some teachers said that they check the students' use of the portfolio, but others said that portfolios were not done thoroughly due to the unwillingness of some students to assess themselves, the students' inability to make correct judgements about their progress without help and some learners always describing themselves as good, even when they were not. One teacher said she felt that there were no connections between the CEFR and classroom testing. Other teachers pointed to practical difficulties such as class size and difficulties with including listening, writing and speaking activities in classroom achievement tests when national high-stakes exams only have multiple-choice comprehension questions. The respondents agreed on the availability of self- and peer-assessment tasks in the coursebooks enabling learners to manage, assess and take responsibility for their learning, but could not see the portfolio related to formal tests or exams when they have to give points to students. Some teachers pointed out that their tests were predominantly summative (apart from in the second and third grades) whereas the self-assessment activities implied a formative approach to testing MEB curriculum requirements suggest a combination of different approaches to classroom testing: 'The theoretical frame of testing, assessment and evaluation processes is primarily based on the CEFR, in which various types of assessment and evaluation techniques are emphasized' (MEB, 2018b, p. 6).

The fifth question was: 'Should the CEFR influence the teaching methods, coursebooks and exams?' Although many teachers indicated that they did not know much about the CEFR before the interviews, after discussing the CEFR and coursebooks all of them expressed approval of CEFR influence on language teaching. The reasons that they gave for their approval related to positive influences on teaching and testing procedures that could improve traditional state exams (multiple-choice reading comprehension) and formal teaching methods as well as the practical use of English and attention to the skills of speaking, listening and writing. Most teachers viewed changes to traditional tests positively, although there was caution about student self-assessments influencing summative assessments by the teacher.

The sixth interview question was 'How do your students assess themselves using the CEFR?' Most teachers referred to projects, portfolio work and self-assessment activities. Several teachers voiced caution about the objectivity of the students' self-assessments. Most of the teachers felt that the self-assessment activities could be carried out effectively with teacher support. The responses to the sixth question illustrate that both the curriculum and coursebooks allow students to assess themselves through unit-based self-assessment tools at

the end of each unit, which is a sign of the alignment of the current foreign language programme with the CEFR.

The seventh interview question was 'How do you describe the language used in the CEFR?' and most teachers initially said that they could not answer this question because they did not know the CEFR text. After looking at the CEFR tables in the assessment task, however, the teachers said that the language of the CEFR was accessible to them, but not accessible to the students because of the difficulty of the language. The 'can-do' statements and checklists in the coursebooks, on the other hand, were seen as appropriate for the level of students, although certain unknown words may appear at times and the teacher needed to help, or the students used a dictionary.

The eighth interview question asked: 'Do you think learning English is important?' All the teachers said that they thought learning is important, and provided different personal and practical reasons. Some of the teachers stressed that English is important for personal development because it broadens horizons and expands learning possibilities. Most referred to the role of English as a global *lingua franca* that is needed for travel and business. One pointed out that the students are likely to encounter English anywhere in their daily life, for example, to play games on the computer. One referred to the benefits of learning other foreign languages, not just English. Several noted the value of English for learning other cultures and perspectives, and for explaining one's culture. Some teachers noted that not everyone shared their regard for learning English, as other teachers, parents and students may have other priorities. Some felt that not enough importance was attached to speaking and listening, mainly because of the examination system, and also because class size made paying attention to these skills in class problematic.

The teachers prepared for the second part of the interview by watching a recording of an A2 level Cambridge exam (KET) taken from the internet. The teachers were asked to assess these performances. There was considerable uncertainty amongst most of the teachers about the level of the students in the recording. Two of the eight teachers assessed the performances at B1 level. The others wavered between A1 and A2 level. Two thought that the level was A1 at the start of the exam but A2 at the end. Two teachers thought that the students in the recording were different levels. In the end, half of the performances were correctly assessed at A2 by the teachers.

The teachers then read the CEFR self-assessment grid and spoken language use criteria (Europe, 2001, pp. 26-29) and assessed the performances again. This time the teachers were much more confident about their assessments and all but one of the teachers correctly identified the level as A2, and one teacher thought that one of the two students should be assessed at A1. The number and quality of the language used by the teachers to justify their assessment illustrate how the CEFR table supported the teachers in assessing the students' performances. The teachers used a total of 217 words the first time that they assessed, and 343 words the second time. For the first assessment, most teachers just stated the level that they thought the performance was at or used words such as 'basic level', 'simple' or 'more fluent', or else compared the two students as 'better' or 'lower'. For the second assessment using the tables, the teachers became more confident referring to the topics and complexity of the questions and answers in the exam.

The teachers were then asked: 'How do you find the language used in the tables?' most of the teachers said they found the language clear and comprehensible for teachers to understand, but two felt they were not clear without examples, or needed to be in simpler language for teachers. Two teachers pointed out that the language in the tables was too difficult for beginner

level learners, but one thought that A2 level students would be able to understand the tables with help from a teacher.

The interviews show that the teachers held largely positive opinions about the CEFR and its application, and several showed enthusiasm for teaching a wider range of skills. The teachers also identified several practical difficulties relating to the numbers of children in the class and students' expectations. The teachers raised questions about how skills-based formative assessment practices such as self-assessment can be integrated with classroom achievement tests of grammar and vocabulary which tend to be summative.

3. Conclusions

The study aimed to investigate teachers' knowledge and use of the CEFR and its influences on their classroom practices. The interviews indicated that most teachers know little about the CEFR, but they do use CEFR-related practices such as student self-assessment, portfolios or performance tasks in their teaching because these practices are present in the coursebooks. Most teachers recognised influences of the CEFR on the school curriculum and generally approved of these influences. In recent years different studies have investigated the use of the CEFR in Turkey and the findings of this study are similar to several.

This study found that teachers can see that the CEFR is important and valuable and has connections with classroom practices. They noted and welcomed CEFR influences on the curriculum and coursebooks. These teachers are motivated and they believe that the study of English is valuable for their students. However, most of the teachers in this study received little or no CEFR training and felt that they do not know the CEFR. Other studies have found that state school teachers have little knowledge of the CEFR (Celik, 2013), whereas private school teachers have more knowledge as a result of in-service training (Çağatay & Gürocak, 2016).

Despite this lack of training, teachers can see influences of the CEFR in the activity types in their coursebooks. In recent years there has been an observable attempt to encourage more learner-centred, communicative activities. These attempts derive from the MEB curriculum and coursebooks, and also from the teachers' willingness to apply practices such as self-assessment, portfolios and performance work. It has been observed that CEFR practices are applied in the MEB curricula both for primary (Arıkan, 2015) and secondary education (M. Galip Zorba & Arikan, 2016).

This study found that teachers felt the language used in the CEFR was accessible to teachers. ELT department students were also found to be able to use CEFR common reference level tables such as SAG and SLU to assess speaking (Glover, 2011). However, the teachers in this study felt that they do not know how to integrate the levels into their classroom testing procedures, which compares with other studies that found student teachers felt that coursebooks did not give enough support for successful use of the CEFR (Tüm & Emre, 2017), and teachers have pointed to practical problems occurring in the classroom such as lack of support from coursebooks and class size (Yüce & Mirici, 2019).

The use of the CEFR in Turkey is not an end in itself, but a tool for developing the teaching and learning of foreign languages, and it can be seen that the CEFR has potential to achieve these goals. Teachers in this study and other studies show that they have a positive view of CEFR and its practices that aim to promote communicative competence, for example, state school teachers (Celik, 2013), teachers in training at an ELT department (Güneş & Altıner, 2017; Hismanoglu, 2013; İlin, 2014) and postgraduate students (Mirici & Kavaklı, 2017). Achieving this potential for the development of teaching and learning using CEFR would benefit from more in-service training and guidance as to how the CEFR can be used for assessment.

4. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

5. Ethics Committee Approval

The authors confirm that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country.

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