

**The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Should Pacific and Pacific Rim countries get on board the bandwagon?**

**Winifred Crombie**

*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato* (University of Waikato)

Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand

[crombie@waikato.ac.nz]

**Abstract**

For many bureaucrats, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) has an almost irresistible appeal. All that users have to do, apparently, is read its approximately 200 pages (plus appendices) and they will “find . . . all [they] need to describe [their] objectives, methods and products” (Council of Europe (CoE), p. xii). Having done that, they will be in a position to “overcome the barriers to communication . . . arising from . . . different educational systems” and “facilitate . . . mobility through . . . mutual recognition of qualifications” (p. 1). The CEFR has some very influential advocates, both within and outside of Europe. Investment in it is extensive in some areas of the world. It emerges out of an organisation whose ethical credentials are beyond question, one that has been responsible for some interesting innovations in the area of language education. In such a context, it is not surprising that many countries outside of Europe, including Pacific and Pacific Rim countries, are developing an interest in it. On the basis of a close reading of the CEFR, this article concludes that it has considerably less to offer than it claims and, therefore, advises language educators in Pacific and Pacific Rim countries, particularly those involved in the teaching of indigenous languages, to be extremely cautious about adopting the approaches it recommends too readily.

**General introduction**

When I was first asked to provide an article for this issue of *He Puna Kōrero*, I had some difficulty in deciding what type of focus would be appropriate. *He Puna Kōrero* highlights issues associated with Māori and Pacific Development and the articles it has featured since its inception have covered many different topic areas. However, a recurring theme has been that of language teaching and learning. So far as many Pacific countries are concerned, an important aspect of development is the maintenance/ revival of indigenous languages, something that often necessarily involves teaching some of these languages in classroom settings. So far as many Pacific Rim countries are concerned, an important aspect of development, particularly economic development, is the teaching of languages that are widely used internationally. Although there are significant differences between these two situations, what they have in common is that the issues that need to be addressed often arise out of an overall context in which globalization (including widespread neoliberalism) is exerting a powerful influence.

There is a steady “shift towards the perception of language as a technical skill and marketable commodity . . . [that] is having a profound impact on language teaching and learning” (Heller, 2002, p. 47). People expect to get what they pay for. Since the cost of education is high, they expect the returns to be high. In other words, they tend to equate expected outcomes with financial input rather than with the input associated with intellectual effort. However, learning languages to any reasonable level of proficiency involves sustained effort over a long period of time. It is not something

that can be rushed and it is not something that can be accommodated readily in a context in which teaching and learning are so often 'chunked' into smaller and smaller packages that are assessed independently of one another. And yet this is what language teachers are almost obliged to do at a time when "[the] wider frameworks and disciplinary knowledges [are being] swept aside in favour of more pragmatic and fragmentary approaches to knowledge" (Graddol, 2006, p. 72). As Her (2007, p. 71) has noted:

In the context of ongoing dispute about the nature of the language syllabus, about methodology and materials, and with more and more areas competing for inclusion in the curriculum, there is, inevitably, a climate of confusion among language educators . . . and a tendency towards greater and greater specialization which can result in curriculum fragmentation. This can, in itself, lead to a loss of that essential core which is characteristic of language education as opposed to language training.

Kubota (2001, p. 13) has observed that "[while] globalization projects the image of diversity, it also implies cultural homogenization by global standardization". Ramirez and Boli (1987) have referred to the pervasive influence of 'mass curricula' and Benavot, Cha, Kamens, Meyer and Wong (1991, p. 97) have noted that such curricula are "directly defined and prescribed through the influence of international organizations [and]. . . through the models provided by dominant nation-states". So far as language teaching is concerned, there is increasing pressure throughout the world to conform to the same standards, procedures and practices, generally ones that are recommended by the small group of academics who effectively control much of the publication and dissemination of language-related research and language teaching materials. Although Canagarajah (2005, p. 9) has noted that "[the] local has negotiated, modified, and absorbed the global in its own way", it may have often done so at considerable cost.

To make matters even more complex, although there have in recent years been "frequent paradigm shifts in the field of second and foreign language teaching [they] have not resulted in significant progress in language learning" (Sheen, 1994, p. 127). Canagarajah (2006) has observed that although "we now have a plethora of theoretical positions and philosophical assumptions" (p. 28) and although "[scholars] may sometimes have fun with this plurality of assumptions and practices . . . teachers . . . want to know what options these new trends suggest for teaching on Monday morning" (p. 29).

The pressures on language teachers are in many ways similar to those experienced by teachers of other subjects. These include problems associated with the commodification and fragmentation of knowledge, the centralization of the curriculum and the increasingly high expectations of students and other stakeholders. For language teachers, these problems are, however, compounded by the fact that externally imposed orthodoxies to which they are often expected to conform may sometimes be subject to the phenomenon of 'semantic drift', that is, they may be subject to a bewildering array of different interpretations by different people at different times.

It is in this context that it is important to consider the impact of the work of the Council of Europe in the area of the teaching and learning of languages, particularly as that impact is no longer confined to Europe but can be detected in a wide range of Pacific and Pacific Rim countries.

### **Introduction to the *European Framework of Reference for Languages***

Readers of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) (CoE, 2001) are assured that they will find in that document “all [they] need to describe [their] objectives, methods and products” (p. xii), and, having done so, will be in a position to “overcome the barriers to communication . . . arising from . . . different educational systems” and “facilitate . . . mobility through . . . mutual recognition of qualifications” (p. 1). It is therefore hardly surprising that, in a context in which the neoliberal agenda pervades education, the CEFR appears to have such an irresistible appeal for educational bureaucrats around the world, not only those operating from within Europe (see Alderson, 2007, p. 662; Trim in Saville, 2004, p. 282). This, together with the fact that so many billions of euros (and, of course, pounds, dollars, yuan, etc.) have already been spent, both directly and indirectly, on issues associated with the CEFR, means that any fundamental criticism of it tends to be ignored or rejected. Thus, for example, Little (2007, p. 650), notes that scepticism about the European Language Portfolio is particularly in evidence in the case of those “who are unfamiliar with pedagogical approaches calculated to develop learner autonomy” and, in doing so, effectively undermines critics of the Portfolio. This may be one of the reasons why there has been comparatively little fundamental criticism of the CEFR in published books and articles. This does not, of course, mean that there has been no criticism of the CEFR. However, with some notable exceptions, much of that criticism has been couched in a way that suggests that the problems identified are not fundamental ones. Thus, for example, although even some of those who are generally positive about the CEFR have admitted that it is neither transparent nor user-friendly, it has sometimes been suggested that this is really simply a matter of failure on the part of the authors to adjust to the needs of their readers, something that can be resolved through further explanation (see, for example, Morrow, 2004). The implication is that the CEFR is, perhaps, too sophisticated for the average palate. The argument here, based largely on a close reading of the CEFR itself, is that the CEFR actually lacks sophistication and, in particular, lacks definitional adequacy in some critical areas and therefore (as a result of its opacity, inconsistency, incoherence and lack of necessary elaboration) cannot deliver on its claims and should be approached with caution.

### **Is the CEFR transparent, consistent, coherent and comprehensive?**

It is noted near the beginning of the CEFR that it “aims to be not only comprehensive, transparent and coherent, but also open, dynamic and non-dogmatic” (CoE, 2001, p. 18). What is meant, in the context of the CEFR, by transparency, coherence and comprehensiveness? This is what the CEFR itself has to say about the first two (CoE, 2001, p. 7):

By ‘transparent’ is meant that information must be clearly formulated and explicit, available and readily comprehensible to users.

By ‘coherent’ is meant that the description is free from internal contradictions. With regard to educational systems, coherence requires that there is a harmonious relation among their components.

So far as comprehensiveness is concerned, the following passage occurs in the body of the text (CoE, 2001, p. 7):

By ‘comprehensive’ is meant that the Common European Framework should attempt to specify as full a range of language knowledge, skills and use as possible . . . and that all users should be able to describe their objectives, etc., by reference to it.

In *Notes for the user* (CoE, 2001, p. xii), we find:

A further word may be useful in respect of ‘comprehensive’. This means that you should find in it all you need to describe your objectives, methods and products.

Also in the user notes, comprehensiveness is contrasted with exhaustiveness (CoE, 2001, p. xiii):

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.

These claims have not escaped criticism, particularly in so far as the wording of many of the descriptors included in the CEFR is concerned (see, for example, Weir, 2005, pp. 1 & 282). In focusing at this point on some of these descriptors, I am not claiming to add anything particularly new. I do, however, believe that it is necessary to begin by demonstrating some of the problems associated with these descriptors because these problems inevitably have implications for the CEFR project as a whole.

First, I would like to focus on descriptors that appear under the heading of ‘coherence’ in *Table 3* of the CEFR.

- A1 : Can link words or groups of words with *very basic linear* connectors like ‘and’ or ‘then’.
- A2 : Can link groups of words with *simple connectors like ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘because’*.
- B1 : Can link a series of *shorter, discrete simple elements* into a connected, *linear sequence* of points.
- B2 : Can use *a limited number of* cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse though there may be some ‘*jumpiness*’ in a long contribution.
- C1 : Can produce clear, *smoothly flowing*, well-structured speech showing controlled used of organisational patterns, *connectors and cohesive devices*.
- C2 : Can create coherent and cohesive discourse making full and appropriate use of a variety of organisational patterns and a wide range of *connectors and other cohesive devices*. [italics added]

Although there is a great deal that could be said about these particular descriptors, I shall confine myself here to a few observations.

Although the descriptors in the CEFR are intended to be applicable to languages in general rather than to any particular language, there are repeated references in the descriptors to English, as in the case of the inclusion of ‘and’, ‘then’, ‘but’ and ‘because’ in the descriptors above. Furthermore, although they can be used as simple additive or contrastive markers, ‘and’ and ‘but’ (described respectively as ‘very basic’ and ‘simple’ connectors) are two of the most complex conjunctions in English, both structurally and functionally. Indeed, their multi-functionality means that each of them can occur in a wide range of very different contexts. A similar point could be made with reference to ‘then’ and ‘because’. ‘Then’ is generally (but not always) a marker of chronological sequence and ‘because’ of reason. Typically associated with each are particular tense/ aspect sequences. ‘Then’ is introduced here at Common Reference Level A1. However, the global descriptor for that level (CoE, 2001, p.24) does not indicate a context in which the use of ‘then’ would be likely to be appropriate:

Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

One possible use of ‘then’ that would be broadly consistent with this global descriptor is in the context of sequential instructions (e.g. *Do X and then do Y*). However, although reference is made to questions and answers in the A1 global descriptor, there is no reference to instructions. What we have here is an issue that relates not only to transparency, but also to coherence and, specifically, to internal consistency. With reference to this, it is relevant to point out that the descriptors in focus at this point appear under the heading of ‘coherence’ rather than ‘cohesion’ and so we would expect the emphasis to be on coherence (e.g. additive or contrastive meanings) rather than on cohesive devices such as conjunctions.

The terminological confusion does not end there. The C1 descriptor above refers to ‘connectors *and* cohesive devices’; the C2 descriptor refers to ‘connectors *and other* cohesive devices’. The first suggests that connectors are not themselves cohesive devices; the second clearly indicates that they are.

Add to all of this the fact that the B1 descriptor makes little sense as it is currently worded and the difficulty of determining what might be intended by the inclusion of the word ‘linear’ in the A1 descriptor, ‘jumpiness’ in the B2 descriptor and ‘organisational patterns’ in the C2 descriptor, and it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the CEFR is not as transparent as it claims to be.

Problems associated with the descriptors in Table 3 of the CEFR that appear under the heading of ‘coherence’ are compounded when we compare them with descriptors that appear under the sub-heading of ‘coherence and cohesion’ in a table that occurs under the general heading of ‘pragmatic competences’ (CoE, 2001, p. 125). The two sets of descriptors are listed side-by-side in *Table 1* below:

**Table 1:** Comparison of a Table and a segment of a Table that occur in the CEFR

	<i>Extract from Table 3 (qualitative aspects of spoken language use – coherence) (CEFR, pp. 28-29)</i>	<i>Table occurring under the heading of ‘pragmatic competences’ and the sub-heading of ‘coherence and cohesion’ (CEFR, p. 125)</i>
A1	Can link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors like ‘and’ or ‘then’.	Can link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors like ‘and’ or ‘then’.
A2	Can link groups of words with simple connectors like ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘because’.	Can link words or groups of words with simple connectors like ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘because’.
		Can use the most frequently occurring connectors to link simple sentences in order to tell a story or describe something as a simple list of points.
B1	Can link a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points.	Can link a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points.
B2	Can use a limited number of cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse though there may be some ‘jumpiness’ in a long contribution.	Can use a limited number of cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse, though there may be some ‘jumpiness’ in a long contribution.
		Can use a variety of linking words efficiently to mark clearly the relationships between ideas.
C1	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured speech showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured speech, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
C2	Can create coherent and cohesive discourse making full and appropriate use of a variety of organisational patterns and a wide range of connectors and other cohesive devices.	Can create coherent and cohesive text making full and appropriate use of a variety of organisational patterns and a wide range of cohesive devices.

The only difference between the entries in the two sides of the table above is that two descriptors have been added in the right hand column (presumably representing A2+ and B2+ or ‘good’ A2 and B2 performances). This raises some significant questions, including the following:

- Why are what are essentially the same descriptors treated under the heading of ‘coherence’ (under the general heading of ‘qualitative aspects of spoken language use’) in one case and ‘coherence and cohesion’ (under the general heading of ‘pragmatic competences’) in another?
- Why, in both cases, are conjunctions in English singled out for special mention in some of the descriptors?
- Why, in particular, do what are referred to as ‘connectors and cohesive devices’ appear under the heading of ‘coherence’ (where one might expect the emphasis to be on, for example, textual relations)?

Printed below are two extracts from the CEFR. The first appears in a section dealing with assessment (CoE, p. 181); the second in an appendix (p. 206):

[It] is a weakness of the majority of existing scales that the descriptors are often negatively worded at lower levels. . . . They also make purely verbal distinctions between levels by replacing one or two words in adjacent descriptions which then have little meaning outside the co-text of the scale.

[S]ince the 1940s, it has been a principle that distinctions between steps on a scale should not be dependent on replacing a qualifier like ‘some’ or ‘a few’ with ‘many’ or ‘most’ or by replacing ‘fairly broad’ with ‘very broad’ or ‘moderate’ with ‘good’ at the next level up.

Do the authors of the CEFR avoid problems such as this, problems that are inevitably associated with issues of transparency? Some of the descriptors relating to ‘accuracy’ in Table 3 of the CEFR (CoE, 2001, pp. 28 & 29) are listed below (with italics added to indicate sections that are particularly relevant to the discussion at this point):

- A1 : Shows *only limited control* of *a few simple* grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorised repertoire.
- A2 : Uses *some simple structures* correctly, but still *systematically makes basic mistakes*.
- B1: Uses *reasonably accurately* a repertoire of frequently used ‘routines’ and patterns associated with more predictable situations.
- B2 : Shows *a relatively high degree of grammatical control*. Does not make errors which cause misunderstanding, and can correct most of his/her mistakes.

There are here instances of what might be regarded as negative wording. There are also quantifiers that lack specificity: *limited* control; *some simple* structures; *reasonably accurately*; *a relatively high* degree of grammatical control. There are other problems associated with these descriptors. Is reference to a ‘memorised repertoire’ in A1 intended to indicate that use is made *only* of memorised chunks of language? Apparently not in that reference is made under the heading of ‘fluency’ in Table 3 (A1) to ‘*mainly* pre-packaged utterances’. This being the case, the distinction between ‘a few’ (A1) and ‘some’ (A2) appears to be critical.

Is there intended to be a difference between ‘mistakes’ (referred to in A2 and B2) and ‘errors’ (referred to in B2)? In a later section of the CEFR (CoE, 2001, p. 155), ‘errors’ are said to involve “a simplified or distorted representation of the target competence” that have “characteristics different from L2 norms”. Mistakes, on the other hand, are said to “occur in performance when a user/learner (as might be the case with a native speaker) does not bring his competences properly into action”. Bearing in mind these definitions, it is odd that the word ‘systematically’ is associated with ‘mistakes’ in the A2 descriptor above.

Finally, is it true that learners at the level represented by B2 do not typically make ‘errors that cause misunderstanding’?

At this point, it is useful to examine some other descriptors. A number of illustrative tables are provided under the heading of what are referred to as ‘productive activities and strategies’. Once again, the descriptors included in these tables raise a number of issues and questions. For example, in the table headed ‘sustained monologue:

describing experience’ (CoE, 2001, p. 59), the descriptors for C1 and C2 are as follows:

**C1:** Can give clear, detailed description of complex subjects.

Can give elaborate descriptions and narratives, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.

**C2:** Can give clear, smoothly flowing, elaborate and often memorable descriptions.

The distinction between these two descriptors appears to rest on the inclusion of ‘smoothly flowing’ and ‘often memorable’ in C2. It is, however, difficult to see why memorability is considered to be relevant in this context, especially as what one person might regard as memorable, another might regard as trite. Furthermore, there are occasions on which a sustained monologue may be more effective as a result of calculated pauses, pauses that are designed to disrupt the flow of speech so as to encourage listeners to focus on specific aspects of what is being presented. We are, after all, talking about the highest level, C2, at this point.

Comparing the descriptors to which reference has just been made (with one addition) with those for A1, C1 and C2 in the table headed ‘creative writing’ (CoE, 2001, p. 62) reveals some further issues associated with transparency and coherence. The two sets of descriptors are presented side-by-side in *Table 2* below.

**Table 2:** Comparison of descriptors that appear under two different headings in the CEFR<sup>1</sup>

	<i>Extract from a table headed ‘sustained monologue: describing experience’ (under the general heading ‘productive activities and strategies’) (CEFR, p. 59)</i>	<i>Extract from a table headed ‘creative writing’ (under the general heading ‘written production’) (CEFR, p. 62)</i>
A1	Can describe him/herself, what he/she does and where he/she lives.	Can write simple phrases and sentences about themselves and imaginary people, where they live and what they do.
C1	Can give clear, detailed description of complex subjects.  Can give elaborate descriptions and narratives, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	Can write clear, detailed, well-structured and developed descriptions and imaginative texts in an assured, personal, natural style appropriate to the reader in mind.
C2	Can give clear, smoothly flowing, elaborate and often memorable descriptions.	Can write clear, smoothly flowing and fully engrossing stories and descriptions of experience in a style appropriate to the genre adopted.

It is only the inclusion of the word ‘imaginary’ in the A1 descriptor relating to ‘creative writing’ that differentiates it from the A1 descriptor headed ‘sustained monologue: describing experience’ (and, for that matter from several other A1 descriptors). This raises the question of redundancy. More importantly, in terms of relevant competences, it is relevant to note that it matters little, if at all, whether

learners describe actual people or imaginary ones, the reference here to ‘imaginary people’ appearing therefore to have little function other than to fill out what would otherwise be a gap in the descriptors.

In the case of the C1 ‘creative writing’ descriptor, the only ‘creative’ aspect is a reference to ‘imaginative’ texts. After all, ‘an assured, personal, natural style appropriate to the reader in mind’ (whatever a ‘natural style’ is) surely need not necessarily be associated with creative writing. There are also other aspects of this descriptor that do not bear close examination. What, after all, is a ‘developed’ description? If a user of a language somehow less competent if he or she lacks imagination? Doesn’t all of this simply divert attention from the core business of language teaching and learning?

It has already been observed with reference to the C2 descriptor relating to ‘sustained monologue: describing experience’ that the interpretation of the word ‘memorable’ is problematic. The same could be said with reference to ‘fully engrossing’ in the C2 descriptor relating to ‘creative writing’.

In the case of both C2 descriptors, one referring to speech, the other to writing, we encounter the phrase ‘smoothly flowing’, a phrase that is even more difficult to interpret when applied to writing. It may be intended to relate in some way to coherence and/or cohesion. It is simply not possible to tell.

It is noted in the CEFR that “[entries] at each level describe selectively what is seen as salient or new at that level” (CoE, 2001, p. 37). The C1 descriptor relating to ‘creative writing’ makes reference to ‘a style . . . appropriate to the readers in mind’; the C2 descriptor makes reference to ‘a style appropriate to the genre adopted’. Presumably, therefore, ‘genre’ is intended to be salient in the case of the C2 descriptor. There are at least two problems here. First, the word ‘genre’ can be interpreted in a variety of different ways. Secondly, however we interpret the word ‘genre’, it is difficult to imagine a text being appropriate to ‘the readers in mind’ that is not also appropriate in terms of genre.

So far as recent research literature is concerned, there are two main uses of the word ‘genre’. One relates to what have been termed ‘social genres’ (Swales, 1990); the other relates to what have been termed ‘elemental genres’ (Hyland, 2007) or ‘cognitive genres’ (Bruce, 2003). Both are clearly relevant from the very early stages of language learning. Both are fundamental to the concept of an appropriate style. Inclusion of the word ‘genre’ in the C2 descriptor does not therefore provide a useful way of discriminating between C1 and C2 in the case of ‘creative writing’.

In connection with the few examples of descriptors to which reference has been made, it is relevant to draw attention to the following extract from the CEFR (CoE, 2001, p.1):

The taxonomic nature of the Framework inevitably means trying to handle the great complexity of human language by breaking language competence down into separate components. *This confronts us with psychological and pedagogical problems of some depth* [emphasis added].

In view of the problems associated with the descriptors to which reference has already been made, the second sentence of the extract above seems to be something of an under-statement.

It was noted above that the word ‘genre’ can be used in a number of different ways. This is relevant to the treatment of what are referred to as ‘microfunctions’ and ‘macrofunctions’ (treated in the CEFR under the heading of ‘communicative language competences’ and the sub-heading of ‘functional competences’). Microfunctions and macrofunctions are defined in the CEFR as follows (CoE, 2001, pp. 125 & 126):

Microfunctions are categories for the functional use of single (usually short) utterances, usually as turns in an interaction.

Macrofunctions are categories for the functional use of spoken discourse or written text consisting of a (sometimes extended) sequence of sentences.

The segments in parentheses are generally true but largely unhelpful in definitional terms. What of the other aspects of these definitions? Anyone who is familiar with literature on genre and speech act theory, is likely to have a problem with them. Why, for example, are microfunctions associated particularly with turns in an interaction? Why is reference made to ‘utterances’ in the first definition and to ‘sentences’ in the second? The implication seems to be that microfunctions are confined to spoken discourses, something that is certainly not the case (unless we are referring to that particular category of microfunction that is related to turn-taking (see, for example, Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Coulthard & Brazil, 1981)).

So far as ‘macrofunctions’ are concerned, the following list is supplied: *description; narration; exposition; exegesis, explanation, demonstration, instruction, argumentation, persuasion, etc.* (CoE, 2001, p.126). This list includes some categories that could be said to be representative of elemental or cognitive genres (e.g. *description, narration, explanation* and *argumentation*).<sup>2</sup> However, it also includes items that seem to be different in kind. Thus, for example, ‘persuasion’ would not generally be recognized as a cognitive or elemental genre (which appears to be what is meant in the context of the CEFR by ‘macrofunctions’). After all, specific instances of a number of different cognitive/elemental genres may or may not be intended to be persuasive. Why, then, is persuasion included in the list?

Another issue arises out of the occurrence of *etc.* at the end of the list of ‘macrofunctions’. It is noted in the CEFR that “[if] users of the Framework wish to exploit the descriptor bank, they will need to take a view on the question of what to do about gaps in the descriptors provided (CoE, 2001, p. 37). This is certainly true. However, they will also need to need to take a view on confusing definitions and on lists that appear to be made up of items that do not necessarily belong together and are, in any case, incomplete. Even if the term ‘macrofunction’ were clearly defined and followed by an appropriate list (whose membership was explained and justified), it would be somewhat optimistic to maintain that that list could make much contribution to the provision of “all that [we] need to describe [our] objectives, methods and products” (CoE, 2001, p. xii). If it were to do so, it would need to be accompanied by a clear and detailed discussion of cognitive genre and its impact on

linguistic selection as well as an indication of how this information could contribute to the teaching and learning of languages.

Bearing all of this in mind, it would be difficult not to agree with Alderson's (2007, p. 661) judgment that the CEFR is "all too frequently couched in language that is not easy to understand, often vague, undefined, and imprecise".

### **Is the CEFR open and non-dogmatic?**

The CEFR makes a virtue of what it presents as its open and flexible positioning (CoE, 2001, p. 18):

In accordance with the basic principles of pluralist democracy, the Framework aims to be not only comprehensive, transparent and coherent, but also open, dynamic and non-dogmatic. For that reason *it cannot take up a position on one side or another of current theoretical disputes on the nature of language acquisition and its relation to language learning . . .* [emphasis added]

The extract above suggests that the reason why the CEFR does not (apparently) position itself theoretically is that it cannot afford to do so for political reasons. This would appear to be in conflict with a later extract in which a very different reason is provided (CoE, 2001, p. 21):

The description needs to be based on theories of language competence. This is difficult to achieve *because the available theory and research is inadequate to provide a basis for such a description. Nevertheless, the categorization and description needs to be theoretically grounded.* In addition, whilst relating to theory, *the description must also remain user-friendly – accessible to practitioners.* It should encourage them to think further about what competence means in their context. [italics added]

It is interesting to speculate on how a work can 'relate to theory' and be 'theoretically grounded' at the same time as being absent of theoretical positioning. Closer inspection, however, raises doubts about the CEFR's claim not to take a position on one side or the other of current theoretical disputes.

Before looking in more detail at the CEFR's claim to theoretical neutrality, it is relevant to explore its claim to adopt a neutral stance on methodology. It is noted in the CEFR (CoE, 2001, p. 142) that "[t]he approach to the methodology of learning and teaching has to be comprehensive, presenting all options in an explicit and transparent way and avoiding advocacy and dogmatism". Nevertheless, readers are left in no doubt about the authors' stance. They are advised (CoE, p. 142) that:

For many years the Council of Europe has promoted an approach based on the communicative needs of learners and the use of materials and methods that will enable learners to satisfy these needs and which are appropriate to their characteristics as learners.

Even so, practitioners are invited to challenge this stance, if, that is, they have the temerity to challenge what is presented as being 'current orthodoxy' and are open to the possibility of what is referred to as 'lively debate' (CoE, 2001, p.142):

If there are practitioners who upon reflection are convinced that the objectives appropriate to the learners towards whom they have responsibilities are best pursued by methods other than those advocated elsewhere by the Council of Europe, then we should like them to say so, to tell us and others of the methods they use and the objectives they pursue. This might lead to a wider understanding of the complex diversity of the world of language education, or to lively debate, which is always preferable to simple acceptance if a current orthodoxy merely because it is an orthodoxy.

In a section headed *How do learners learn?* (CEFR, 6.2, pp. 139-140), the CEFR addresses the processes of language learning. In that section, there is a very brief account (approximately half a page in length) of what are presented as two ‘polar extremes’ between which can be located, according to the authors, the more ‘eclectic practices’ that are associated with “most ‘mainstream’ learners, teachers and their support services” (pp. 139 - 140):

Some theorists believe that the human information-processing abilities are strong enough for it to be sufficient for a human being to be exposed to sufficient understandable language for him/her to acquire the language . . . Others believe that in addition to exposure to comprehensible input, active participation in communicative interaction is a necessary and sufficient condition for language development. They, too, consider that explicit teaching or study of the language is irrelevant. At the other extreme, some believe that students who have learnt the necessary rules of grammar and learnt a vocabulary will be able to understand and use the language in the light of their previous experience and common sense without any need to rehearse. Between these polar extremes, most ‘mainstream’ learners, teachers and their support services will follow more eclectic practices, recognising that learners do not necessarily learn what teachers teach and that they require substantial contextualized and intelligible language input as well as opportunities to use language interactively, but that learning is facilitated, especially under artificial classroom conditions, by a combination of conscious learning and sufficient practice to reduce or eliminate the conscious attention paid to low-level physical skills of speaking and writing as well as to morphological and syntactic accuracy, thus freeing the mind for high-level strategies of communication. Some (many fewer than previously) believe that this aim may be achieved by drilling to the point of over-learning.

Readers are not provided with any details of what are presented here as two polar extremes or with any indication of why certain beliefs are now generally regarded as being untenable. Furthermore, the second of these ‘polar extremes’, which is often associated with drilling, is instead associated here with the absence of a need to rehearse. About the favoured approach, the one that is described as being ‘eclectic’, little of substance is actually communicated, the primary function of the passage appearing to be to ensure that the CEFR is presented as occupying some middle ground between extremes. The reality is, however, that the CEFR is by no means a neutral taxonomy of possibilities. Its theoretical agenda is presented elsewhere (CoE, p. 9):

[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*. [italics added]

**Is the approach advocated in the CEFR one that is consistent the construction of a framework intended to be applicable in a wide range of language learning contexts?**

The origins of the CEFR lie in early work of the Council of Europe on the development of a ‘unit-credit’ system that would enable adult learners to gain credit for studying units of work with immediate practical application (see Morrow, 2004b, p. 5). In relation to the development of a unit credit system, a situational approach had initially been favoured by some (Saville, 2005, p. 276). In fact, the overall approach adopted in the CEFR is broadly consistent with this in that it highlights the accomplishment of tasks *in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action*. What does this entail in terms of objectives setting? It is noted in the CEFR (CoE, 2001, pp. 179 & 137) that objectives may be expressed as “a Common Reference Level (e.g. B1)” or “a specific constellation of activities, skills and competences”. It is also noted that “[tasks] are normally focused within a given domain and considered as objectives to be achieved in relation to that domain” (p. 137). This is broadly consistent with what Widdowson (1983, p. 18) has referred to as ‘language training’ (involving a focus on the application of skills/functional capacity in particular domains) as opposed to ‘language education’ (where the emphasis is on the development of abilities that allow for transfer across domains). From this perspective, it might be expected that the CEFR would be particularly relevant in the context of courses that focus on ‘language for specific purposes’ (LSP) or even ‘restricted repertoire language’ (RRL). However, as Alderson (2007, p.662) has observed, the nature of its descriptors is such that the CEFR is, in fact, not well adapted to specific purposes contexts. However, it does not appear that the CEFR is particularly well adapted to general purpose language courses either, particularly those intended for young learners.

The CEFR was clearly not designed with young learners in mind (as witnessed by the nature of some of its descriptors). However, a project relating to the languages of school education is now under way. As North (2007, p. 658) has indicated, because the language of schooling “would need to situate the development of language competence within the overall cognitive and social development of the children concerned”, most of the descriptive scales in the CEFR could prove to be unsuitable. Nevertheless, the authors of the CEFR seem to have raised no objections to attempts to draw on it in a fairly direct way in the design of national curricula for schools. In fact, the following extract from the CEFR (CoE, pp. 168 - 169) would appear to endorse its use in the context of schooling:

It is generally the case that language teaching in schools has to a large extent tended to stress objectives concerned with either the individual’s *general competence* (especially at primary school level) or *communicative language competence* (particularly for those aged between 11 and 16), while courses for adults (students or people already working) formulate objectives in terms of specific *language activities* or functional ability in a particular *domain*. This emphasis, in the case of the former on the construction and development of

competences, and in the latter case on optimal preparation for activities concerned with functioning in a specific context, corresponds no doubt to the distinct roles of general initial education on the one hand, and specialised and continuing education on the other. In this context, rather than treating these as opposites, the common framework of reference can help to relate these different practices to one another and show that they should in fact be complementary”.

There are, according to the CEFR, three types of competence: general competences, communicative language competences and cultural competences (for the last of which there are no descriptors). The development of communicative language competences “which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means” (CoE, p. 9), is clearly “a central, indispensable aspect of language learning” (p. 149). So far as the authors of the CEFR are concerned, courses designed for learners in schools will focus on communicative language competence in a general sense whereas courses designed for adults may not do so. Instead, they may be based on objectives/activities that are domain-specific. If domain-specific objectives are not applicable in the case of school-based language courses, how should objectives for language teaching in schools be formulated? This is what the CEFR (CoE, 2001, p. 131) has to say on the matter:

When charting the progress of students through the earlier stages of their general education, at a time when their future career needs cannot be foreseen, or indeed when an overall assessment has to be made of a learner’s language proficiency, it may be most helpful and practical to combine a number of . . . categories into a single summary characterization of language ability, as, for instance, in Table 1 presented in Chapter 3.

It would appear, then, that what we are left with is simply those few lines at each ‘level’ that constitute the global descriptors. It is interesting to speculate on how curriculum designers operating at a national level are intended to relate these to language specifics. On the other hand, perhaps they need not concern themselves with this particular thorny issue. After all, it is noted in the CEFR (CoE, 20021, p. 141) that:

Authorities, when drawing up curricular guidelines or formulating syllabuses, may concentrate on the specification of learning objectives. In doing so, they may specify only higher-level objectives . . . They are not obliged, although they may wish to do so, to specify in detail the vocabulary, grammar and function/notional repertoires which will enable learners to perform the tasks and treat the themes.

The option of avoiding the issue of how to relate objectives to language specifics may be available to ‘authorities’. It is, however, an option that is not available to language teachers.

This leads to one of the most significant issues so far as the CEFR is concerned. It is certainly the case that language learners and language users are social agents with tasks to accomplish. Does it necessarily follow from this that particular ‘tasks’, ‘circumstances’, ‘environments’ and ‘fields of action’ should play a central role in the

formulation of a framework of reference for the learning, teaching and assessment of languages? If it does, that framework would certainly need to be open-ended and flexible (as the authors of the CEFR claim that it is). However, can an open ended and flexible framework really provide “all [we] need to describe [our] objectives, methods and products” (CoE, 2001, p. xii)? As Hulstijn (2007, p. 666) has noted, “[it] is high time that researchers of SLA, researchers of language assessment, and corpus linguists paid attention to each other’s work and engaged in collaborative research, testing the linguistic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic assumptions on which the CEFR rests”.

What became the CEFR began as a relatively small-scale project with realistic aims. However, small-scale projects do not necessarily transform readily into large-scale ones, especially in the absence of any fundamental re-conceptualization. If we really do need a framework, perhaps it should be a framework of a very different kind, one, for example, that starts from a consideration of those meanings and textual relations that have cross-linguistic applicability (e.g. possibility, intentionality and temporal sequence)? After all, it *is* possible to relate these to a range of language-specific realizations.

### **Conclusion**

The primary aims of the CEFR, as outlined in the document itself, are to provide readers with “all [they] need to describe [their] objectives, methods and products” (p. xii), and to “overcome the barriers to communication . . . arising from . . . different educational systems” and “facilitate . . . mobility through . . . mutual recognition of qualifications” (p. 1). A few of the reasons why we should be sceptical about its capacity to achieve these aims have been discussed here. Language professionals in Pacific and Pacific Rim countries have much to gain, in general terms, from the CEFR. However, they should think very carefully before adopting it as a framework for the development of curricula.

### **Endnotes**

1. Tables 1 and 2 here also indicate just how repetitive the CEFR descriptors frequently are.
2. These could be linked either to the four categories, based on ‘family resemblances’, that Quinn (1993, pp. 34-35) identified through an analysis of the needs of students learning academic writing and/ or to the four categories identified by Biber (1989, pp. 34-35) as being typical of academic prose.

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