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The CEFR and reading: A document analysis

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Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) aims to provide a theoretical as well as practical basis for developing foreign language teaching curricula, materials, and methods of assessment. Although much has been written about many aspects of it, analyses that focus on specific language skills in regards to how they are treated in the Framework are needed especially when specific locales such as Turkey are considered. In this study, all dimensions of reading, as they appear in the Framework, are examined to understand the theoretical as well as practical issues related with them. To do that, the Framework is carefully examined through multiple readings of it from a critical perspective in a way to examine the overall nature of the Framework, attributes given in the Framework to reading and its practical applications along with those notes on assessing students' performance. Results of this particular study show that because the Framework has an action-oriented design, all sorts of activities, materials, and tasks can be used in classrooms regardless of their previous associations with former methods or approaches as long as their content and delivery abide with the principles of the Framework. Hence, this article aims to articulate the nature of the activities, materials, and tasks that are harmonious with the givens of the Framework in a way to make practitioners feel comfortable in using them in their foreign language teaching classrooms.

1. Introduction

According to University of Cambridge (2011: p. 8), The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (hereafter the CEFR) is based on the centrality of language activity in its model and a language activity is defined as "the observable performance on a speaking, writing, reading or

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listening task (a real-world task, or a classroom task)." Similarly, it is also claimed that "the CEFR is neither language nor context specific and "it does not attempt to list specific language features (grammatical rules, vocabulary, etc.) and cannot be used as a curriculum or checklist of learning points. Hence, users need to adapt its use to fit the language they are working with and their specific context" especially through "language-specific Reference Level Descriptions" (p. 4).

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2. Methods

In this particular study, the Framework is carefully examined through multiple readings of it from a critical perspective in a way to examine the overall nature of the Framework, attributes given in the Framework to reading and its practical applications.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the CEFR as a document in relation to the reading skill revealed four major themes. These major themes and their sub-themes are named and explained below.

3.1. Goals

The CEFR (no date: p. 174) aims to educate learners in a way to make them have communicative, plurilingual and pluricultural competence all of which, especially the latter two, "may happen through family experience and learning, history and contacts between generations, travel, expatriation, emigration, and more generally belonging to a multilingual and multicultural environment or moving from one environment to another, but also through reading and through the media." As can be seen in this description, reading is allocated a special place as a means of reaching the general goals of the CEFR. Reviewing this information while considering the case of Turkey and Turkish learners of English, we can see that such reading materials should include information that develops plurilingual and pluricultural competence of learners. Hence, in order for a reading passage to be considered as acceptable from the perspective of the Framework, increasing the plurilingual and pluricultural competence of the learners for whom the text is prepared should be an important goal. When the prerequisite of textual authenticity is considered, the difficulty of achieving this task becomes more obvious.

3.2. Methodological issues

Four sub-themes emerge under the theme of methodological issues, namely, the question of how learners learn a second or foreign language, the use of the communicative method, the use of more mechanical (out of favor) techniques and strategies and being open to all second or foreign language teaching methods. Reading "unmodified, ungraded, authentic written texts such as newspapers, magazines, stories, novels, public signs and notices" is counted as a way through which learners can learn a second or foreign language since such type of reading means having direct exposure to authentic use of language (p. 143).

As stated in the Framework, "the more mechanical meaning-preserving activities (repetition, dictation, reading aloud, phonetic transcription) are currently out of favor in communication-oriented language teaching owing to their artificiality and what are seen as undesirable backwash effects…. In any case, the advantage of examining all possible combinations of categories in taxonomic sets is not only that it enables experience to be ordered, but also that it reveals gaps and suggests new possibilities" (pp. 99-100). As these suggest, curriculum planners and teachers should make use of all activities, techniques, strategies or tasks that were popularly used in previous methods or

approaches so as to achieve the goals of the Framework. Thus, there is nothing to be called "passé" in curriculum design and delivery when the issue of applying the Framework into practice is considered. Furthermore, activities such as "lip-reading" is advised to be a part of the repertoire of a teachers' in way to be inclusive since "the exploitation of residual hearing and phonetic training have enabled the severely deaf to achieve a high level of speech communication in a second or foreign language" (p. 94).

According to the Framework, the connection of strategies, tasks and texts depends on the nature of the task. There are two main ways of putting the givens of the Framework into practice. First, such a connection can either be "primarily language-related" such as those language activities and the strategies (e.g. reading and commenting on a text, completing a 'fill in the gaps'-type exercise, giving a lecture, taking notes during a presentation). It may include a language component, i.e. where language activities form only part of what is required and where the strategies applied relate also or primarily to other activities (e.g. cooking by following a recipe).

3.3. Value of reading

According to the Framework, reading is not a mere information gathering or comprehension activity because "imaginative and artistic uses of language are important both educationally and in their own right" and "aesthetic activities may be productive, receptive, interactive or mediating and may be oral or written" (p. 56). As cited in the Framework, such activities include reading imaginative texts (stories, rhymes, etc.), performing scripted or unscripted plays, and the production, reception and performance of literary texts such as short stories, novels or poetry (p. 56). By means of employing these rather more affective activities, "acquaintance with more formal or more familiar registers is likely to come over a period of time, perhaps through the reading of different text-types, particularly novels, at first as a receptive competence" (p. 120).

Similar to the importance of the use of imaginative and artistic use of language, developing reading through communicative activities is significantly important since such activities should be regarded as interactive activities in which "the participants alternate as producers and receivers, often with several turns" (p. 57). Reading can easily be integrated with speaking (especially oral production) through such activities like addressing audiences through speeches at public meetings, lectures, entertainment, sports commentaries, presentations, or simply by reading a written text aloud (p. 58). These, of course, are relatively new activities in comparison to more traditional reading activities such as reading for general orientation, detailed understanding or implications, reading for information and gist, reading and following instructions, and reading for pleasure all of which are also mentioned as viable reading activities.

3.4. Text-related issues

As reviewed by University of Cambridge (2011), in the CEFR, communicative language activities and strategies are categorized as follows:
1. Productive activities and strategies
2. Receptive activities and strategies
3. Interactive activities and strategies
4. Mediation activities and strategies
5. Non-verbal communication

When the above mentioned list is reviewed, we can see that along with productive, receptive, and interactive activities and strategies, two other activities and strategies are emphasized which are related with mediation and non-verbal communication. In the Framework, mediation is described through "translating and interpreting" (p. 136). Hence, mediation activities can easily be connected with non-verbal communication activities such as verbalizing non-verbal messages. It is also noteworthy that the Framework advises to use translation as a main group of activities and strategies. It should also be kept in mind that these types of activities which have often been associated with traditional classroom activities can easily be used in classrooms that are designed in consideration of

the Framework as long as they go hand in hand with the goals of the Framework. Among these activities, dictation is known to be one of the most traditional ones that is mentioned as a usable activity in the Framework.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

According to Harmer (1991), the main task of language teachers has two requisites: showing learners what the language means and how it is used. As the 'correct' usage is regarded as native speakers' language use, the most appropriate way to teach a foreign language is accepted to be "presenting language in context" (Arikan, 2009a; p. 90). As it is in the majority of contexts where English is taught as a foreign language, exposure to English almost always happens through the help of coursebooks, especially for elementary level students (Arikan, 2009b; p. 5). Hence, coursebooks produced and used in Turkish elementary level schools should be studied in research by considering to what extent they match with the givens of the Framework.

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