EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES: CONSISTENCY AND INCONSISTENCY

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Abstract

Our article makes an evaluation of the impact that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) has on academic professional training in Romania and its relevance for the teaching and learning process of applied languages at university level. Our research brings forward a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of language level of the first year students in the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, the faculty of Finance, Insurance, Banks and Stock Exchange and its consequences on applied language instruction. Our case-study aims at raising awareness and finding solutions to improve the quality of applied language teaching and learning at university level, as a key factor for further educational, professional and social performance of the graduates. It suggests some easy-to-take solutions that might improve students and teachers' motivation and learning outcomes.

Key words: CEFRL, language competencies, applied language instruction, formal assessment vs. self-assessment, learning outcomes

Introductory study

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) has acquired the status of a universal instrument to measure and evaluate linguistic competences in all European member states, but also to rate European cohesion policies and build up European citizenship due to its efficiency, flexibility and transparency. It is the result of the 20 years studies and research framed by the European Council project which was named "Language Learning for European Citizenship" and developed from 1989 to 1996. Hundreds of linguists, sociologists, and psychologists from representative European universities brought their contribution for making CEFRL the efficient tool for the formal assessment and self-assessment of the linguistic and communication skills for the graduates of any language course. The project aimed at "broadening learning horizons and making them better understand people from other countries and cultures", having, as a consequence, liberal education of which "citizenship is a part" (Byram: 1992). The practical document education effects were to be noticed particularly at

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national and European levels: the National Curriculum for foreign languages, the extension of LINGUA project[2] .

Although the project brought in critics on potential limitations or uniformity of language teaching policies of the member countries, (Nuffield Languages Programme, 2002) CEFRL proves its universal instrumental capacity for the flexible and efficient management of language teaching instruction. (Nuffield Languages Programme. 2002; Jones&Saville, 2009) The novelty that it brings in is the unique scale of independent evaluation for any language skills from professional, cultural, political and social specificity which made it an option even for non-European countries[3] . Globalization proves to be a reality which cannot be ignored, in need for instrumental institutional and equidistant standards for language instruction to produce the needed knowledge and communication benefits. (Alderson, 2007:661) However, CEFRL has developed extensive connotations of the language teaching activity, which does not recommend it for different approaches with distinct instruments making language learning/teaching philosophy different.[4]

CEFRL has six grades of the language skill, as it follows: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 which are described graphically so that they can be easily used for the evaluation and self-evaluation of the four language skills. The instrumentality of the CEFRL is also used to the

-   settlement of learning and teaching goals
-   evaluation of the syllabus
-   development of learning/teaching materials
-   settlement of the language skills for further educational and professional goals, etc
-   CEFRL provides advanced perspectives on specific language environment use which makes possible the development of new teaching and learning solutions. Specific competences language environment analysis drives practitioners to define learning objectives taking into consideration the learners' needs and their individual sources. (Vereș-Catau, 2015:111)

The mandatory quantitative and qualitative measurement of language competences of learners at their graduation cycles (Coste, 2009) makes possible the development of specialized databasis of local and extended communities which can be used for reports and comparative studies, as the use and application of the CEFRL is legally bound to the national and European policies for language instruction, multilingualism and citizenship. (Ord. 1804/4469/2012)[5] It also develops the local and specific learning and teaching environment, according to the students' needs and capacities and also to the job market requirements.

Our study goes further to the analysis of its specific operation with language competencies assessment of the first year students in economics at the Academy of Economic Studies in

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[2] https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-91-1088_en.htm?locale=en
[3] http://hopkins.ph/publications/news/227-asean-using-cefr-toeic (retrieved on 6/25/2019)
[4] We make reference to the pragmatic integrative language instruction making use of language skills acquired from the first language learnt by the learner. (Vereș-Catau, 2015:111)
[5] http://www.mmuncii.ro/pub/imagemanager/images/file/Legislatie/ORDINE/O1804-4469-2012.pdf

Bucharest, as a formal vs. personal assessment of language level, which is subject of fair consideration.

CEFRL: from formal institutional assessment to self-assessment

Our research takes into consideration the specific authoritative role that CEFRL scale plays for the evaluation of the institutional language learning results reached by the high school graduates in Romania and its impact on further language instruction of the non-philological students, developed by academic programmes.

The following case-study focuses on some inconsistencies of the mainstream language instruction graduates' results when compared to their personal language assessment results which shows difficulties to make further academic programmes consistent. Our concern for the appropriateness of language professional background is matched by the exploratory capacity of the CEFRL tool to set a realistic standard for specific context of the economic career. We consider the descriptive framework of the CEFRL as a facility to profile, not to level down students' language proficiency which targets higher level of skills in priority areas, by assisting learning progress and examination. (North, 2007)

The small-scale and specific quantitative and qualitative investigation carried out by our research aims at the assessment of unequivocal and verifiable learning results of the high school graduates to become the fresh students of the faculty of Finance, Insurance Banks and Stock Exchange in the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. The survey was carried out for three academic years in a row, 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19, at the first seminar of the academic year, before the language placement tests. It was designed to spot any possible gaps of the resulting formal CEFRL grades of the high school graduates and their sincere ones to make possible the establishment of language learning goals and teaching strategies, the selection and tailoring of the teaching materials, the assessment instruments.

The practice of placement surveys proves its usefulness for small-size research as they bring about specific and efficient solutions for group class activity. They can also be used as a basis for further wide scale research and studies. The emerging statistical analysis of the surveys of our case study leads to unproductive CEFRL formal grades of the students, which shows the need to re-assess their real grades, i.e. their real language knowledge and linguistic competencies to groundwork further academic language education.

The analysis of our experiment questionnaire encourages planning teaching activity (goals, materials, rate of difficulty, methodology, etc) according to the students' self-assessment, but not to the students' CEFRL degrees awarded formally. We limit our small-sized investigation to the question no 4 and 5 of our survey which reveals clear-cut differences between the formal language assessments results and the students' self-evaluation of their language skills acquired in high school. The questions takes into consideration only English which can be either the first or the second option for their former high school study.

4. Specify your CEFRL grade mentioned on your graduation linguistic certificate.

Language A	Language B
A1-A2	A1-A2
A2-B1	A2-B1
B1-B2	B1-B2
B2-C1	B2-C1

5.   Which is the English CEFRL grade you consider to have reached in high school?

| Language A	Language B
A1-A2	A1-A2
A2-B1	A2-B1
B1-B2	B1-B2
B2-C1	B2-C1

As the questionnaire entry shows, the four options take into consideration the low CEFRL degrees, but not the high ones , i.e. C2 which is difficult to get, and can make the questionnaire irrelevant.

The following quantitative analysis of the students' answers shows the self evaluation of the first year students of three academic years in a row. The following table makes a comparative analysis of the students answers to the 5th question. The results do not show a high degree of oscillation for the three years evaluated.

|	2016-17			2017-18			2018-19		
	No of students	251	%	No of students	238	%	No of students	272	%
A1-A2	88		35	76		31	98		36
A2-B1	78		32	85		35	91		33
B1-B2	64		25	71		29	68		25
B2-C1	21		8	6		5	15		6

The following diagram shows graphically the same information provided by the table:
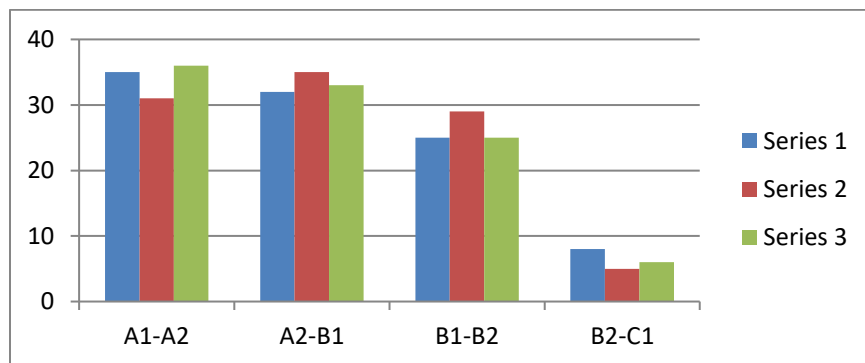
The investigation of the students' answers to the 4th question, makes the same information different, as shown in the following table:

	2016-17			2017-18			2018-19		
	No of students	251	%	No of students	238	%	No of students	272	%
A1-A2	34		13	29		12	32		11
A2-B1	38		15	32		13	38		14
B1-B2	98		39	101		43	108		40
B2-C1	81		33	76		32	94		35

Graphically, the numerical information looks substantially different .
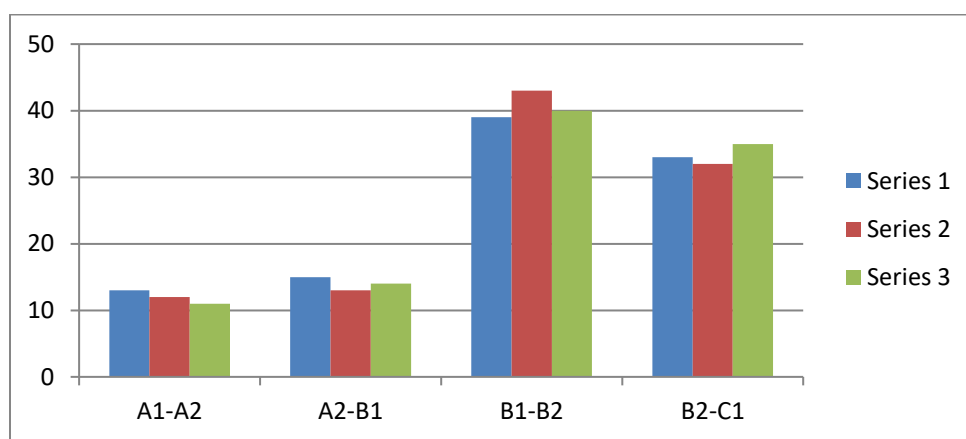
The substantial contrasting results between the two tables show that the reality of self-evaluation does not comply with the formal results of the institutional CEFRL degrees, which makes further language programmes discontinue. The coherence and consistency of an academic language learning plan is endangered by differences between the answers shown by the two parallel question-session in the survey. What should a language teacher do to plan coherently his/her CEFRL level for the applied language academic programme? Formally, he/she can take into consideration the students institutional CEFRL level, but does it match the reality of the students language knowledge level? We consider that the teacher should rely on the students self evaluation test that can provide a legitimate language learning environment for a down-to-earth language programme plan and its reasonable achievement.

The information provided by the self-assessment questionnaire indicates students, teachers, job providers, how successfully students are expected to acquire English for their domain of application. It also provides guidance to faculty and academic departments for improving instruction, course content, and curricular structure. Self-evaluation will serve the critical improvement of student learning, faculty and institutions for their analysis of individual outcome assessments to provide prospective students, parents, college administrators, employers, accreditation bodies, and legislators that a program of study produces competent graduates (Banta, 2000).

Conclusion

The consistency of the specific language learning goes hand in hand with the development of professional skills which makes graduates challenge a high standard national and global job market. Our case-study proves the transparent capacity of the CEFRL tool to make possible the settlement of realistic standards for applied language instruction specifically to the economic career. The descriptive framework of the CEFRL facilitates the student's pragmatic, realistic profile of the students' language proficiency and target higher level of their skills in priority areas, by assisting learning progress and examination. The small-scale and specific quantitative and qualitative investigation carried out by our research provided the assessment of unequivocal and verifiable learning results of the high school graduates and the freshers of the faculty of Finance, Insurance Banks and Stock Exchange in the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. The gaps of the resulting formal CEFRL grades of the high school graduates and their sincere ones made possible the establishment of their language learning goals and teaching strategies, the selection and tailoring of the teaching materials, the specific assessment instruments. The resulting assumption of a wide spread situation cannot be suspected of inconsistency as long as the experiment was carried out for three years in a row with similar extended results.

Our case-study suggests the difficulties of the first year students of non-philological academic studies and their openness to develop and accommodate their language skills to their specific professional needs. Its focus on students' self-assessment compared to the formal institutional CEFRL grades reveals the heterogeneousness of the students groups which makes teaching/learning process inefficient. The results of the analysis indicate indirectly, low motivation for students learning and teachers' activity which results in poor language learning results.

The improvement of learning results can be achieved only by grouping students on CEFRL self assessment levels and comply with their correspondent learning needs and adequate teaching strategies. The practice of placement surveys proves its usefulness for small-size research as they bring about specific and efficient solutions for group class activity, but they can also be used as basis for further wide scale research and studies.

The emerged statistical analysis of the surveys lead to the awareness of unproductive CEFRL formal grades of the students, showing the need to re-assess their real grades, i.e. their real language knowledge and linguistic competencies as a groundwork for further academic language education.

The analysis of our experiment questionnaire encourages teaching planning (goals, materials, rate of difficulty, methodology, etc) according to the students' self-assessment, but not to the students' CEFRL degrees awarded formally. Our small-sized investigation was confined to the formality of the institutional language assessments and the need of realistic self-evaluation of the language skills acquired in high school by learners.

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