



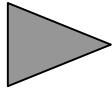
**ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE CERF
ACTION-BASED APPROACH**

Mihaela IVAN

Abstract

This article aims to underline the influence that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has had upon the evaluation process. The performance-based action-oriented assessment, which is made through task completion activities, allows students to measure their own progress in “real life” terms. The detailed descriptors the CEFR provides for each of the six levels represent a constant and reliable frame of reference, a guarantee for transparency and objectivity.

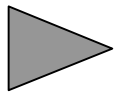
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CEFR and its action-oriented approach

The “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment”, a document issued several years ago by the Council of Europe, represents nowadays the basis of linguistic policies within the European Union, and also beyond it. Increasingly, countries worldwide are using the framework for language teaching and grading within their own specific national contexts.

As its title clearly states, CEFR has implications upon all the aspects of the language teaching/learning process: its action-oriented approach to the description of language use and language learning implies a close relation between curriculum, goals and materials used during the language skills acquisition process and the assessment criteria. Foreign language users are seen as “social agents”, members of a community, of a “real world” and they need/use certain communicative language competences in order to accomplish a task “in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action”. (CEFR: 15) The use of “task” as a key concept for the language learning process has influenced the design of the curriculum, the course content, and the evaluation scales.



CEFR and assessment

The changes brought by the action-oriented approach and by the integration of task in language teaching resulted in a new type of assessment, as this final part of the learning process had to keep pace with the new methods, requirements and needs.

1. Oriented to process

According to CEFR

...all assessment is a form of evaluation, but in a language programme a number of things are evaluated other than learner proficiency”, as the action-based approach “also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent. (CEFR: 9)

This is not only an action-oriented approach, but also a student-centred one. Its two main features are performance and authenticity. It focuses on measuring student performance, which is either directly observable or observable through a product called outcome, which are not necessarily of a linguistic nature. Students may be

asked to create, produce, or do something, often in settings that involve real-world application of knowledge and skills. For instance, when listening to an audio sequence or reading a document giving instructions on how to draw a chart or on how to assemble a device, the task is fulfilled if the chart is correctly drawn or the device assembled.

This is also known as authentic assessment, as it aims to assess students' language skills in "real life" contexts. It focuses on their analytical skills, on their creativity and values their ability to integrate what they have learnt and actually use this knowledge to "do" things.

Therefore, one of the changes brought by the CEFR is that both learning and assessment objectives are increasingly defined in functional terms, expressing what the students "can do", their ability to fulfil certain tasks using the foreign language.

2. Contextualized communicative tasks

Jane Willis (1996) defined task as an activity "where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome." Language is used as a tool for completing tasks, it is not longer "being learned as an end in itself; it is being learned as a means," as White (1995) puts it. Thus, language activities stop being a goal in themselves; they form a part of a wider context; they become meaningful, as they allow learners to acquire the means to enable them to get along in a real life situation. Of course, task solving is only an opportunity to use the foreign language with a communicative purpose and it is up to the teacher both to adapt the tasks to the students' level and needs and to emphasise the relation between form and meaning. Language teaching experts have long argued for the use of meaning-focused activities, leaving aside the form-focused activities. Nunan for instance defined task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (Nunan, 1989: 59). However, recent studies (Skehan, 1996; Lightbown, 1998) show the importance of the integration of form-focused activities; while simulating real life communicative situations, attention should also be directed towards "linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in the lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning and on communication." (Long, 1991: 45)

3. Continuous long-term assessment

Continuous long-term assessment is integrated into the course and the cumulated results are taken into account at the final assessment.

Apart from marking homework and occasional or regular short achievement tests to reinforce learning, continuous assessment may take the form of checklists/grids completed by teachers and/or learners, assessment in a series of focused tasks,

formal assessment of coursework, and/or the establishment of a portfolio of samples of work, possibly in differing stages of drafting, and/or at different stages in the course. (CEFR: 185)

One of the major advantages of this type of assessment is its transparency. It helps everyone to see where they stand and to track progress during the language acquisition process, since the levels are based on criteria that remain constant. The six levels are becoming widely accepted as the common standard for grading an individual's language proficiency and assessment results are focused on documenting student growth over time rather than on comparing students with one another.

While

...fixed point assessment assures that people can still do things that might have been on the syllabus two years ago [...] continuous assessment allows more account to be taken of creativity and different strengths, but is very much dependent on the teacher's capacity to be objective. It can, if taken to an extreme, turn life into one long never-ending test for the learner and a bureaucratic nightmare for the teacher. (CEFR: 185)

4. Formative assessment

Formative assessment is a performance-based assessment, which is similar to summative assessment, as it focuses on achievement – completion of the given task. This form of assessment requires students to perform certain communicative tasks, such as writing an invitation card or passing an order over the phone. The results provide feedback on student's work and are not necessarily used for grading purposes.

As we have already mentioned, it is an ongoing form of evaluation, constantly checking on students' progress, but also providing feedback on the teaching methods and techniques used. The advantage of any type of formative assessment is that its main goal is to improve learning. However, there is also a weak point which has its origin in the concept of feedback.

*Feedback only works if the recipient is in a position (a) **to notice**, i.e. is attentive, motivated and familiar with the form in which the information is coming, (b) **to receive**, i.e. is not swamped with information, has a way of recording, organising and personalising it; (c) **to interpret**, i.e. has sufficient pre-knowledge and awareness to understand the point at issue, and not to take counterproductive action and (d) **to integrate** the information, i.e. has the time, orientation and relevant resources to reflect on, integrate and so remember the new information.” (CEFR: 186)*

This implies that students need to be taught how to interpret the feedback, how to use the results and to monitor their learning.

5. Criterion-referenced scores

Criterion-referencing implies the mapping of the continuum of proficiency (vertical) and range of relevant domains (horizontal) so that individual results on a test can be situated in relation to the total criterion space. This involves (a) the definition of the relevant domain(s) covered by the particular test/module, and (b) the identification of 'cut-off points': the score(s) on the test deemed necessary to meet the proficiency standard set. (CEFR: 184)

Although this type of assessment requires “students to engage in some sort of behaviour which stimulates, with as much fidelity as possible, goal-oriented target language use outside the language test situation”, performances on these tasks being evaluated “according to pre-determined, real-world criterion elements (i.e., task processes and outcomes) and criterion levels (i.e., authentic standards related to task success)” (Brown, Hudson, Norris, & Bonk, 2002: 21, after Brown on [http://www.hawaii.edu/sls/uhwpepl/22\(2\)/Brown.doc](http://www.hawaii.edu/sls/uhwpepl/22(2)/Brown.doc)), we have to bear in mind that they are language tests and they are supposed to result in establishing the students’ linguistic level. Therefore, they use tasks as a tool to elicit students’ abilities to write or speak, being afterwards scored in terms of the learner’s linguistic skills. According to Long-Norris, task-based assessment does not simply use the real-world task as a means for eliciting particular components of the language system which are then measured or assessed; on the contrary, the construct of interest in task-based assessment is performance of the task itself. (cf. Long - Norris, 2001)

An important aspect of the way results are expressed is positiveness. That means defining performance standards in sufficiently broad terms or in ways that emphasize growth, in other words what the learners can do and not what they cannot do. It is a common thing within the assessment process, especially at lower levels to express students’ proficiency in terms of what they cannot do rather than in terms of what they can do. “But if levels of proficiency are to serve as objectives rather than just as an instrument for screening candidates, then positive formulation is desirable.” Students’ strengths – what they know and can do with language – are emphasized over their weaknesses. For instance, we can say that an A2 level user “has sufficient vocabulary to conduct routine, everyday transactions involving familiar situations and topics” rather than use terms such as “frequent break downs”, “misunderstandings” or “ narrow language repertoire”, “limited vocabulary” that “hinder communication.” (cf. CEFR)

6. *Intrinsic motivation*

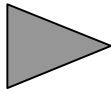
Within this approach, the students' intrinsic motivation can be stimulated by two factors:

a) the meaningfulness of the task, the sense of usefulness of the communicative activity performed.

Finding a good assessment task means also identifying a meaningful outcome. This does not only increase motivation, but reduces the stress on linguistic forms. Students focus on task completion and are allowed to use other resources, besides their linguistic skills in order to solve the given task.

b) students' participation in the learning process

Firstly, one of the principles of the action-oriented approach is organizing language courses and developing the curricula in accordance with learners' needs. Secondly, the constant check up on their progress allows them to reflect upon their performance, to "participate in modifying or replanning the upcoming classes" (cf. Banchman – Palmer, 1996). Thirdly, CEFR also includes self-assessment scales that can be used as complement to the classical teacher assessments, offering students the opportunity to appreciate and become aware of their strong or weak points and to organize their efforts more effectively. "Accuracy in self-assessment is increased (a) when assessment is in relation to clear descriptors defining standards of proficiency and/or (b) when assessment is related to a specific experience." (CEFR: 191)



Conclusions

What the CEFR offers us as language teachers is not only a clearer scale that would help us establish more precisely our students' level, but also a new vision both on the learning/teaching and on the evaluation process. The use of the task/performance-based, authentic and meaningful assessment that involves students in selecting their needs and reflecting on the development of their language skills gives teachers/assessors more opportunities and a lot more evidence on the progress learners make on the path of becoming competent language users.

This framework has, of course, a lot of drawbacks, one of them being that it solely refers to the general use of a foreign language, ignoring the specific purposes, an increasingly demanded field in the languages industry.

Although it is being criticized as much as it is praised, the CEFR remains what it was conceived to be – a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, an extremely influential tool for promoting plurilinguism in Europe, a pillar for syllabus design, curriculum planning, and language examinations, a framework that needs improvement, broadening and deepening.

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The author

Mihaela Ivan is a Lecturer at the Department of Romance Languages and Business Communication of the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, where she teaches Business French. Currently she is a PhD student with the Linguistics Institute "Iorgu Iordan – Al. Rosetti" within the Romanian Academy, writing a thesis on financial terminology and specialized discourse. She is the co-author of the French Grammar Synthesis and Workbook designed to help high school students prepare for the entrance exam at the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. She also participated in a number of national and international conferences with papers on language teaching, French for specific purposes, intercultural communication and specialized discourse.