APPLYING THE CEFR DESCRIPTORS FOR ONLINE INTERACTION AND MEDIATION FOR THE DESIGN OF MOODLE BASED TEFL MATERIALS

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Abstract: *In 2017 the Council of Europe, Education Department published CEFR- Companion Volume with New Descriptors. The publication concluded a long process of calibrating, validating and designing descriptors, including the new set for mediation and online interaction. The consultations phase took place (2015-2016) in various educational institutions, including the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, where the author supervised the workshops. The article presents the case study which participates in the CEFR implementation programme. The author addresses the questions as to the role of "new" descriptors in the process of designing online materials for TEFL, the criteria for evaluating the new 21st century skills, and the shift to the interdisciplinary perspective of effective (online) communication.*

Keywords: CEFR, online interaction, mediation, Moodle, authorial materials, TEFL

INTRODUCTION

Year 2013 marks the beginning of the four-year-process of calibrating, validating and designing descriptors, including the new set for mediation and online interaction, run by the Council of Europe and managed by Brian North from Eurocentres. The consultations phase (incl. the qualitative and quantitative validation) took place (2015-2016) in various educational institutions, including the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, Poland.

As part of the consultation phase carried out in the institution, the author supervised the workshops participated by 14 distinguished academic experts and professionals who specialize in language education.

The original CEFR descriptors were published in 2001, and the document did not include the set of descriptors on mediation.

> The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) was published in 2001 (European Year of Languages) after a comprehensive process of drafting, piloting and consultation undertaken by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Available in 40 languages, the CEFR is one of the best known and most used Council of Europe policy instruments and has been the subject of Recommendations by its Committee of Ministers and Parliamentary Assembly. The CEFR has also been adopted by the European Commission, including in their EUROPASS project and the project to establish a European Indicator of Language Competence. (Bergan and Qiriari qtd in 2017: Council of Europe, "Foreword")

Finally, in 2017 the Council of Europe, Education Department published *COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES: Learning, Teaching, Assessment - Companion Volume with New Descriptors.*

The problem worth addressing is the role the CEFR descriptors as specified in *the Companion Volume* play in designing authorial and online materials for TEFL, in evaluating the new 21st century skills, and in providing a shift to the interdisciplinary perspective of effective communication. However, first it is essential to find out how the CEFR descriptors can be used to profile a 21st century learner in the integrated skills framework with a particular focus on his/her mediation and online interaction skills. Finally, the provided research sample presents a practical experiment that involves the role of "new" descriptors in the process of designing authorial online materials for Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The main purpose of the experiment was to put the "new" descriptors into practice, to motivate teacher trainees with the "learning by doing" approach, to make them aware of the theoretical and practical aspects of mediation and online interaction in TEFL and, finally, to gain feedback on the application of the "new" descriptors in learning, teaching and assessment also from the perspective of the 21st current learner and future teacher.

1. USING THE CEFR DESCRIPTORS TO PROFILE A LEARNER

The CEFR provides the tools for learning, teaching and assessment (North: "In that order." (2018: min. 3:19) in the form of illustrative descriptors that profile a foreign language user in terms of his/her overall language proficiency: aspects of competence (Communicative Language Competencies i.e. linguistic,

sociolinguistic and pragmatic) as well as communicative activities (reception, production, interaction and mediation) (North 2018).

The levels now range from Pre A1 (with A1 beginner) to C2 (near native speaker) with the trend towards: more "Integrated skills approach" and authentic language use (North).

The role of the language user has been also redefined with a shift from a learner (or speaker) "mobilizing linguistic resources" from the 1960s to 1980s, to a 21st century social agent (involved in negotiation of meaning and co- construction of meaning "mobilizing general and linguistic competences", including pluricultural and plurilingual competences, by using "purposeful, collaborative tasks whose primary focus is not the language" (North, 2018: min. 15:38- 20:14). North (2018) also claims that treating learners as social agents includes "involving them in the learning process, recognizing the social nature of language learning and use" (2018: min. 18:12). Therefore, the tasks should involve: the integrated skills approach, collaboration, processing and mediating the text (North, 2018: min. 21:15).

2. APPLYING THE NEW DESCRIPTORS FOR MEDIATION AND ONLINE INTERACTION

2.1 General principles

As mentioned before the original set of CEFR descriptors did not include the descriptors for mediation as well as for online interaction, reactions to creative text (including literature), plurilingual and pluricultural competence. Moreover, the old scales have been updated (for example, the old phonological scale has been replaced and pre-A1 level defined - to name only a few changes).

For Polish native speakers, the term "to mediate" means facilitating/enabling the communication between two opposing parties, often managing the tension. The concept of "mediation" as defined in the new CEFR Companion Volume involves not only mediating communication but also ideas/concepts and texts. The new descriptors define all three types of mediation. By "mediating communication," the Companion Volume's authors mean not only disputes but also "facilitating pluricultural space." (North, 2018: min. 26:13)

> In both receptive and productive modes, the written and/or oral activities of mediation make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly. Translation or interpretation, a paraphrase, summary or record, provides for a third party a (re)formulation of a source text to which this third party does not have a direct access. Mediation

> language activities, (re)processing existing text, occupy an important place in the normal linguistic functioning of our societies. (North, 2014)

All types of mediation-based activities should, therefore, include "collaborative interaction with the peers" (North). For successful mediation, then, specific strategies must be applied (for example: adapting the text to the user's needs). The CEFR authors had to update the framework by including "other scales related to mediation," such as: online conversation and discussion, goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration, plus: plurilingual and pluricultural competences (North).

2.2 Case study - a practical experiment

At present, two years after the publication of the volume, the SWPS University participates in the case study proposal/project whose main aim is to implement the new CEFR descriptors. The Council of Europe encouraged the participants to design their own cases that would aim at the implementation of the new CEFR descriptors and submit them for their evaluation. Twenty two students of the class Methods and Techniques of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (3rd year B.A. studies, English Philology groups, i.e. FL teacher trainees) designed (February 2019 - May 2019) their own modules on the SWPS University (Moodle) e-learning platform. The objectives of the course included preparing, uploading and managing the authorial materials for teaching/ learning EFL with a particular focus on using different categories of mediation and online interaction.

The students were divided into two groups and given access to the Moodle platform with the temporary status of Teachers. They had had a five-semester experience as users of the Moodle platform, i.e. students, in the variety of online courses offered by SWPS University (some in the blended mode and some meant for self-study). Moreover, they had spent the previous semester as Teachers designing online materials as part of the 1st semester course requirements. Therefore, it could be assumed that these digital natives with distinctive experience in designing and using online materials and knowledge of the methodology of TEFL, CALL, etc. were well prepared and eager to engage in the planned activities. Their task was to invent the topic for their ca. 60-minute module and the appropriate online activities. Teacher trainees were asked to design their own modules using appropriate (mostly B1/B1+, B2/B2+, C1) CEFR descriptors for the Communicative Language Competences, Mediation and Online Interaction i.e. "building skills for "online conversation and discussion, goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration" (North, 2017). Follow up activities included class and online discussion on the design and implementation of the CEFR descriptors on the Moodle platform, class micro-teaching sessions, course and self-evaluation.

The post-project reflections have made the author question the original idea of providing students with the theory on mediation and the new descriptors first and then giving them the total freedom of designing their own module content. It proved a challenging task as many claimed (in the post-project student self-evaluation comments) that the tasks seemed very difficult first. It took more time than expected to explain the very abstract idea of mediation. It seems that giving concrete examples of mediation-based activities, selecting and distributing concrete descriptors and assigning them to individual students would have been much less time consuming and more effective particularly for the weaker students. On the other hand, however, the used approach—boosted creativity and motivation.

The primary aim of the project was to address the questions as to the role of "new" descriptors in the process of designing online materials for Teaching English as a Foreign Language, to motivate teacher trainees, to shift to the interdisciplinary perspective of effective (online) communication. The students chose a variety of topics, ranging from lifestyle, travel to psychology, media, British and American culture and literature. Some students (mainly foreigners) chose topics requiring the focus on cross cultural issues, e.g. one of the Chinese students prepared a very interesting set of activities to mediate a short literary text from Chinese to English. In the mentioned module, the student trainee focused on the descriptors for such aspects as: text processing, translating the written text, responding to the literary text. Asked to discuss the chosen image first (on the online forum), students engage the strategies for mediating concepts, and collaborate to construct the meaning of some ideas. This activity can be also adapted for the class usage (traditional classroom teaching mode). "Collaborating to construct a meaning is concerned with stimulating and developing ideas as a member of a group. It is particularly relevant to collaborative work in problem-solving, brainstorming, concept development and project work" (North & Piccardo, 2016: p. 29).

3. THE NEW DESCRIPTORS FOR ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION IN PRACTICE

As it can be seen, student tasks in the project concerned a variety of descriptors (for mediation: text summarizing, note taking while listening, mediating concepts), with a particular focus on:

ONLINE CONVERSATION AND DISCUSSION

- − Can engage in online exchanges, linking his/her contributions to previous ones in the thread, understanding cultural implications and reacting appropriately. (C1)

- − Can participate actively in an online discussion, stating and responding to opinions on topics of interest at some length,

> provided contributors avoid unusual or complex language and
> allow time for responses (B2) (2017: Council of Europe p. 97)

According to the 2017 CEFR framework, the scale has been designed to reflect the nature of the online interaction, which is different from face-to-face interaction in many aspects (more redundancy, confirmation of correct understanding, reformulation to facilitate comprehension, management of emotions (Council of Europe, 2017: p. 96).

> Online conversation and discussion focuses on conversation and
> discussion online as a multi-modal phenomenon, with an
> emphasis on how interlocutors communicate online to handle
> both serious issues and social exchanges in an open-ended way.
> (Council of Europe, 2017: p. 96)

The detailed explanation and the corresponding descriptors for a particular level can be found in the 2017 CEFR document (pages 96-98). As far as the progression from Pre-A1 to C2 is concerned,

> … the move towards higher levels expands from basic
> transactions and information exchange at the A levels towards
> more sophisticated collaborative project work that is goal-
> oriented. This can be seen as a progression from filling in
> predictable online forms at Pre-A1, to solving various
> problems in order for the transaction to take place at the B
> levels, through to being able to participate in, and ultimately
> coordinate, group project work online at the C levels." (2017:
> Council of Europe, p. 98)

The document also specifies "Goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration," with such skills mentioned as: "Can engage in online collaborative or transactional exchanges that require simple clarification or explanation of relevant details, such as registering for a course, tour, event or applying for membership" (B1) or more advanced " Can deal effectively with communication problems and cultural issues that arise in an online collaborative or transactional exchange by reformulating, clarifying and exemplifying through media (visual, audio, graphic) (C1) (Council of Europe, 2017: p. 97).

In the presented case, students learnt the concept of mediation and online interaction by experiencing the process of designing particular activities with appropriate instruction, level, etc. adapted to the needs analysis. Moreover, students, by being the member of the community of practice, learnt through doing things and exchanging feedback with their peers (both online and offline, in the computer lab and outside the school premises). The chosen topics were especially useful for the CALL rather than traditional classroom. In fact, some of the above

activities were adapted and delivered later with the use of the Interactive Whiteboard. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Adapting Moodle based activities to the IWB usage in the classroom (the Author/Teacher trainee performing micro/peer-teaching activities).
Source: Author's own materials, 2019

For example, one of the course participants commented in the self-evaluation section that "The descriptors for mediation proved to be very useful in order to design new activities. Mediation descriptors boosted my own creativity in designing activities and helped students communicate with each other" (Rybak, 2019). In fact, this opinion was shared by other participants. She also acknowledged some areas of future improvement (the students were asked to refer to the EPOSTL document), such as: time management and learner autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Applying the new CEFR descriptors in the CALL context, i.e. the Moodle platform and the IWB, boosted student/teacher creativity, helped to understand how descriptors reflect the complex nature of the concept of mediation and the corresponding strategies. Moreover, it forced one of the aims mentioned by North (2018) i.e. "purposeful, collaborative tasks whose primary focus is not the language." (min. 20:54) Students and the teacher built a community of practice, which was based on collaboration, exchange of information, application of instant peer feedback, peer support and teacher mentoring. In effect,

student-teachers in the course designed digital materials aimed at FL practice but which were structured on the basis of the topics of their own interest, often connected with their hobbies and outside school activities. In fact, many group members were foreigners (Spanish, Ukrainian, Turkish, Chinese) who incorporated the elements of their own culture into the FL teaching context. It resulted in shaping the intercultural competence of the group members.

> Authentic materials stimulate, facilitate and entertain. In addition, the approach based on the provided food for thought (reading materials, discussion questions, video materials) guarantees that the students have something to write about and are forced to use appropriate vocabulary and formulate their own opinions. (Gadomska & Krajka, 2017: pp. 188-189)

Therefore, this approach promotes effective communication. The "learning by doing" oriented experiment proved successful as students (authors of their own online materials) have understood the nature of online communication in the foreign language, action oriented learning, the need to employ the connections between the real world and the tasks, to recognize priorities (North) and above all, the need to adapt to the 21st century technological challenges and "the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of our societies" (Bergan and Qiriari qtd in 2017: Council of Europe, "Foreword"). The author intends to continue the evaluation of the research method and its role in the application of the CEFR descriptors in the further stages of the study. The presented case study is part of a larger project designed in accordance with the CEFR implementation programme requirements (run under the supervision of the Council of Europe experts).

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