

5 Academic Perspectives from Germany

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Introduction

From the very beginning, the *CEFR* both challenged and changed the teaching and learning of languages in Germany in school contexts and beyond. Its influence became even stronger with the passage of the regulations on education standards for the first foreign language (English/French) by the Kultusministerkonferenz (The organisation of all ministers of education of the 16 federal states of the Federal Republic of Germany – KMK) in 2003 (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2003) since this document adopted the skills of the *CEFR* to a large extent. What was not originally intended by the authors of the *CEFR* took place: the reference levels were used for the description of standards and therefore gained even more normative weight. If one looks today at foreign language textbooks, at recently introduced comparisons of test results, at surveys of standards of learning, at language certificates or tests, the levels A1-C2 are present everywhere and determine the ideas of many teachers concerning language learning processes.

This development is all the more surprising in that, in the scientific community of those concerned with foreign language teaching and research, the *CEFR* is controversial and has been received critically and with some ambivalence. The same was the case with respect to the introduction of the education standards by the KMK, an event which also stimulated serious debates about its meaning and purpose and the consequences of such a development in educational policy. Two things become clear from this development: the tension between local concepts in language education, stemming from a specific cultural history, and the dynamics of neo-liberal, international, political-economic developments, not least in the education sector. At the same time, the implementation process reveals the power relationships and the various interests that influence educational institutions: economics, politics and science. At the moment, science has a critical but also to a large extent legitimising and supporting role.

In the first part of this chapter I will consider the relatively critical early reception of the *CEFR* in the scientific methodology of foreign language teaching. In the second part I will show how and why, despite the contentions of the scientific community, the *CEFR* was so quickly and fundamentally introduced into the practice of foreign language teaching. In the third part I will address some themes which underlie the discussion of a competence-orientated foreign language teaching: the problems involved in taking over the reference levels as standards, the question of intercultural competences and the question of the languages of migration. I will conclude with some considerations concerning the hegemony of a specific neo-liberal educational discourse, and plead for a multiplicity of discourses and alternative visions.

The Early Reception of the *CEFR* in German Foreign Language Teaching

In March 2002, shortly after the appearance of the German translation of the *CEFR*, the '22nd Spring Conference on Research into Foreign Language Teaching and Learning' was devoted exclusively to a discussion of the *CEFR*. The main emphases were its underlying concept of language, its approach to language acquisition and/or foreign language theory, the descriptors and their role in the future of assessment and/or curriculum development work, and the consequences for research in foreign language teaching (Bausch *et al.*, 2003: 7). Twenty-two well-known foreign language experts in German universities presented their views on the *CEFR* in the conference. The proceedings of this conference can thus be seen as a significant account of the early reception of the *CEFR* in Germany.

First, the positive aspects. There was a general welcome for the fact that the *CEFR* had led to a fundamental discussion of the teaching and learning of languages. It was clearly accepted as a stimulus to rethinking traditions and to considering in innovative ways the principles of language learning and teaching (cf. Barkowski, 2003: 22; Bausch, 2003: 29). Many also saw the potential for international transparency and comparison in a positive light, especially with respect to processes of assessment (e.g. Vollmer, 2003). The concept of pluricultural plurilingualism, which is developed in particular in Chapter 1 of the *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001: 17), was readily accepted, as was the constructively positive development of the 'can-do descriptors' (instead of the usual deficit-orientated judgements made hitherto). The especially constructive potential of the language portfolio was also noted, since this was linked to the hope of making possible complex, individually tailored descriptions of language levels (Gogolin, 2003: 89).

On the other hand there were many aspects that were criticised, the most frequent and important of which were:

- The underlying concept of language was considered to be one-sidedly instrumental-functional; the aesthetic, affective, creative, moral and cultural dimensions of language and language learning seemed underdeveloped to many people (e.g. Barkowski, 2003: 23; Krumm, 2003: 125; for criticism of a trivial concept of reading competence see Bredella, 2003).
- The concept of pluricultural plurilingualism, first developed in the *CEFR* and which was judged very positively, was thought not to be carried through consistently; in the scales, on the other hand, there were isolated partial competences in a traditional native speaker combination of first and foreign languages (cf. Barkowski, 2003; Bausch, 2003; Christ, 2003; Krumm, 2003); scales for intercultural and plurilingual competences were missing; and the languages of migration as first languages seemed to be neglected (Legutke, 2003: 132).
- The concept of communicative action was criticised on the one hand for being instrumental (without consideration of mutuality and understanding) (Bredella, 2003: 45), and as idealistic on the other since it took no account of politico-linguistic power and relationships of inequality (Barkowski, 2003: 23f.).
- *Processes* of language learning seemed to be underemphasised; by contrast it seemed that the question of assessment was foregrounded, despite the subtitle 'learning, teaching, assessment' (Tönshoff, 2003: 183).
- The needs, interests and aims of learners seemed to be neglected (Königs, 2003: 115).
- The danger of the Macdonaldisation of foreign language research was raised: language learning and teaching was being taken only from the viewpoint of efficiency, predictability, calculability and control measures (Schwerdtfeger, 2003: 178).
- The descriptors seemed to many people to be unsystematic and insufficiently precise (e.g. Quetz, 2003).

Many authors also expressed prognoses about the future influence of the *CEFR*, and for most of them the main worry was that there would be undesirable effects. There was a fear of a strong norm-setting influence, even though this was explicitly not the intention of the authors of the *CEFR*. It was thought that there was a danger in the schematic representation of language development of submission to a compulsory system (Christ,

2003: 62). There would be 'no escape' because of the close-meshed can-do definitions (Krumm, 2003: 124), and individuality and variety would be abandoned in favour of transregional processes of standardisation (Krumm, 2003: 125). There was also fear about the increase in a trend to certification and quality control, which considers learning processes from the point of view of assessment (Königs, 2003: 115).

In summary, the enormous significance of the *CEFR* for the development of foreign language teaching was duly recognised and predicted. There were certainly hopes, but worries and fears were also expressed. The main concern was about the reductionist, one-sided instrumental-functional concept of language learning, which ignores educational dimensions (inter-cultural, aesthetic, critical and creative). The high-value of pluricultural plurilingual language development and its requirements appeared only as 'decoration' (Quetz, 2003: 145), since the scales did not include the characteristic competences of plurilingual people (transfer, reference to internationalisms, code-switching, maintenance of communication with the help of other languages). There seemed to be a danger that individual learners with their own interests and purposes would not be taken seriously.

Given this thoroughly critical reception, the rate at and 'vehemence' (Quetz, 2003: 150) with which the *CEFR* was implemented in the German school system is all the more surprising, as is the fact that it now determines thinking about language learning in decisive ways in many places.

The History of the Implementation of the *CEFR* in Germany

The fact that the *CEFR* could develop such a strong dynamic in the practice of language teaching and learning and change foreign language teaching so fundamentally was due to the coincidence of two simultaneous developments in educational policy. First there was the European initiative for a common educational space, which included – alongside other initiatives such as the so-called Bologna process – the *CEFR*. A second decisive factor, which is at least indirectly connected to the first, was in the OECD studies, in particular the PISA study (Deutsches PISA-Konsortium, 2001). The discrepancy revealed by these comparative studies of proficiency between the claims of the German education system and the actual results obtained led not only to a general shock (the 'PISA shock'), but also to a reform agenda in educational policy which was expected to lead to an improvement in the proficiency of German pupils in international comparisons (cf. Klieme & Leutner, 2006: 876). The education standards which were

produced by the KMK in 2003 for the subjects of mathematics, German and the first foreign language form the heart of the envisaged general strategy for education policy. The Institute for Educational Progress (IQB), founded by the KMK in 2001, had the task of further developing education standards and of implementing and verifying them (cf. for the first foreign language, Tesch *et al.*, 2008). The plan in the medium and the long term was to establish for the whole education system, schools and universities, aims for every subject in the form of competence-orientated and assessable catalogues of expectations.

The overall strategy of the KMK (cf. Sekretariat der Ständigen Konferenz der Kultusminister, 2006: 6) included: the establishment of education standards; regular participation in international investigations of school achievement; central testing of the attainment of education standards in a comparison across the German federal states; comparative studies linked with the education standards in testing nationally or across federal states; the efficiency of all schools; and a common form of educational reporting at a national and federal state level. The aim of this major education policy project is 'evidence-based policy and practice' (Klieme & Leutner, 2006: 877) (i.e. learning results are to be surveyed on a wide scale by evaluation agencies on a regular basis, compared and, according to need, reported back to schools, federal states or countries). The heart of this kind of system of monitoring is a so-called 'output orientation' instead of the 'input' hitherto common in Germany (i.e. the content-orientated curricula are to be replaced by an orientation to 'output', namely the assessable competences of pupils at various stages).

When the KMK decided on the basis of the PISA results to implement education standards, foreign languages were a special case insofar as a system of levels already existed from the CEFR. Since there were no other empirically based models of competence development in foreign languages, it was not surprising that, under strong political pressure for action, this existing work was taken up without hesitation, and the B1 level used as the basis for the expected level at the end of lower secondary school. Though not intended by its authors as a norm-setting document, the CEFR now acquired, having been transformed into education standards, a high normative significance. The framework curricula provided for the first time in the federal German system for the whole country could be developed in ways specific to each federal state, but the link to the defined areas of competence and above all the levels was nonetheless obligatory. Thus through the coincidence with the results of the PISA study, the CEFR became a central part of a radical reorientation of education policy in Germany.

Some Fundamental Issues

It is clear that, after the appearance of the education standards for the first foreign language, the critics did not remain quiet, with the view that the problems already identified in the CEFR were now being definitively implemented in teaching practice. At the same time, after the PISA results it was also increasingly recognised that there was a need for a redirection, with the result that the new political strategy now appeared to be promising for many people (cf. Bausch *et al.*, 2005). In addition, there was an immense wave of research funding in the area of empirical educational research, for work on the development of empirically founded models of competence structures and competence development. Similarly, research on tests and test development was strongly emphasised. Competence orientation became the central concept or buzzword, not least for the teaching and learning of languages.

The major project of competence orientation is driven forward on many levels (research, test theories, teacher education, in-service teacher education, development of textbooks and tasks). As before, there remains much controversy and the earlier expressed critical points are still relevant (cf. Hu, 2008). Positions range from euphoric recommendation of the new paradigm (some people do in fact speak of a paradigm shift in this context, see for example Helbig-Reuter, 2006) to, on the other hand, fundamental doubters about the new direction, not only with respect to teaching but also education itself. Many authors express their increasing discomfort at current ways of thinking and speaking about education as a consequence of the Bologna process and in the context of school policy. This discourse about education, as for example Simons and Masschelein (2006: 19) argue, is producing a 'culture of performativity', which does not take into consideration many aspects of learning and education. The learning subject who is created by this discourse is an enterprising individual, with an objectifying attitude towards him/herself (Simons & Masschelein, 2006: 82f). At the heart of the criticism there is the observed tendency to industrialisation, capitalisation and economisation of knowledge. Teaching and learning processes and the relationships between teachers and learners, understood as human capital, are thereby becoming calculating and calculable, functionalised and capitalised.

According to these authors, what is significant in these processes of economisation is the rhetoric with which learning and teaching processes are addressed. According to Liessmann (2006: 174), the current dominant metaphors of *quality, competence, modularisation, autonomy, evaluation, standardisation, efficiency, knowledge management* and so on are developing a

normative power which is leading to a 'desire for affirmation' that scarcely anyone can resist without being considered a denier, a refuser, a troublemaker, an antediluvian or a ditherer. On the other hand, there is the 'admiration for rankings', which is corrupting serious thinking (a very similar argument can be found in Rizvi & Lingard, 2010 and in Block & Cameron, 2004).

Alongside this fundamental criticism of contemporary currents in education policy, there are also individual areas in foreign language research that are under critical consideration; these do, however, more often target the education standards for the first foreign language rather than the CEFR itself. For example, Vogt and Quetz criticise the inconsistency of the descriptors and above all the sudden and uncritical adoption of them for the standards. In their eyes, the reference levels develop into 'travelling concepts', which, bereft of their theoretical basis, are being used in the competition for market share (2009: 66; see also Harsch, 2007).

Intercultural competences, included in the CEFR and in the education standards, are another unresolved problem. The debate whether intercultural competences are scalable or assessable or whether they should better be dealt with and reflected upon in autobiographical portfolios still continues (Hu & Byram, 2008). With a strong emphasis on testing and a rather functional-pragmatic concept of language and communication in the CEFR and the education standards, there remains the danger that precisely these educationally relevant aspects of language learning are underdeveloped in teaching.

A further important theme is the question of languages of migration in relationship to languages taught at school and/or the question of plurilingual competences. This is an issue that is being vigorously addressed in many parts of the world as a consequence of globalisation and mobility (cf. Hu 2003, 2010). There is a need for further development with respect to research on and recognition of specific plurilingual competencies on the one hand, and with respect to research into processes of transfer in plurilingual constellations on the other, particularly in the context of typologically distant languages (cf. the Hamburg research project Linguistic Diversity Management in Urban Areas (LiMA) where inter alia these questions are being addressed).

Conclusion

If one considers the German development in the wider context of the globalisation of education systems and education policies, and the linear processes and phases of policy implementation as described for example by

Rizvi and Lingard (2010: 9), the German case seems to be prototypical. On the one hand, the critical discussion reflects the conflict between long-established, culturally-anchored beliefs about the purpose and aims of language education and the spreading of neo-liberal 'social imaginaries', which are being established economically and politically. On the other hand, the extent to which the global project of the economisation of education has gained a footing in Germany and is being established on many levels is equally clear. It is desirable that in spite of the obvious power of a specific globally functioning education discourse, alternative discourses can be pursued which, besides economic viewpoints, also emphasise and include cultural, ethical, identity-related and ecological aspects of language education and human communication (cf. Block & Cameron, 2004; Heller, 2004). The further development of the *Common European Framework of Reference* should take these aspects into consideration and deal with them seriously.

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