

Does the Common European Framework require different materials or teaching?

I should begin by saying that I'm no expert on the Common European Framework (CEFR), but I have actually read the big blue book, so can at least claim to be speaking with some degree of authority here. In my experience, attitudes towards the CEFR tend to fall into one of five camps:

1 Ignorance

What is the CEFR? Is it something to do with Mad Cow Disease?

2 Paranoia

If the DOS (Director of Studies) doesn't get me, then the CEFR will!
It'll undermine me. It's out to get me.

3 Worship

All hail the CEFR! It'll deliver us from all evil.
You may think I'm exaggerating here, but I did once meet someone who knew by heart ALL of the different descriptors. He clearly needed to get out a bit more!

4 Anger / Annoyance

My classes are fine as they are!
Leave me alone.

This feeling in turn then leads to:

5 Cynicism or complacency

Personally, I feel these attitudes are particularly apparent among publishers. One dominant emotion seems to be a voice whispering softly, saying: You don't have to change anything! The CEFR simply means calling things by a different name. Just say A1 instead of Elementary and everything else will be fine.

As an example of the kind of complacency I'm talking about here, let's look briefly at some examples of how publishers have tried to map the CEFR onto exercises in coursebooks. Now, I should make it clear here that I'm NOT blaming authors for these things. Teachers demand coursebooks with CEFR mappings, so publishers frantically provide them.

The first example is a classic example of complacency and cynicism. It's from the companion booklet to a well-known Pre-Intermediate (or A2!) coursebook and is mapped onto an exercise presenting GOING TO + verb. The context is a rock star on the verge of the big time: I'm going to . . . break through / go on tour / have a Number 1 hit – and so on.

The mapping looks like this:

- Uses some simple structures correctly, but still makes basic mistakes, for example tends to mix up tenses and forget to mark agreement; nevertheless, it is usually clear what they are trying to say.

As you can see, they've basically mixed up descriptors of level of achievement with what the exercises actually aim to do and to teach! There's not even an attempt at a CAN-DO statement here. There's no reference to syllabus either; just a seemingly fairly random mapping going on!

The second quote shown below is similar. It's from a companion booklet that goes with a different coursebook, Elementary / A1 level, and the exercise referred to (or not!) looks at I CAN – I can . . . touch my nose with my tongue, I can walk backwards in a straight line, etc. Here's what the booklet tells us:

- Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently-used 'routines' and patterns associated with more predictable situations.

Now, in many ways, the CEFR itself exacerbates these problems. This extract below comes quite early on in the book:

One thing should be made clear right away. We have NOT set out to tell practitioners what to do or how to do it. We are raising questions, not answering them. It is not the function of the CEF to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they should employ.

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And from this, you can see why you get such differing responses. The CEFR DOESN'T tell people what to do or how to do it. As such, people seem to end up fixating on the descriptors, despite the fact that they actually only make up two chapters of the book as a whole.

So, does the CEFR DEMAND different methods and materials?

Clearly, the answer has to be no.

However, as the CEFR also says, it DOES set out to raise questions, particularly for coursebook writers, but also, by extension, for teachers, as we are all the end-product users of coursebook writers' products. Below are some questions the book raises. You might like to stop and think about how you'd answer the first two questions below yourself:

- On which theory of grammar have they based their work?
- What are the assumptions as to the nature of the learning process are the coursebooks based on?
- What language will the learner need / be equipped / be required to (a) recognise and understand (b) use?

So, we're asked to specify the theory of grammar our work is based on, which of course doesn't always happen. I once saw the co-author of a well-known series present the Elementary level of the course at a conference and I the presentation he said "It's got the same grammar you'd expect in it, as no-one else has thought of another way of doing things"! A depressing and slightly lazy way of looking at things, in my opinion.

The third question above is also interesting in that it asks about what LANGUAGE – not what GRAMMAR, but what vocabulary and grammar combined – and what skills students need to be provided with in order to progress.

These questions are good ones and these issues need to be discussed. The point is, the CEFR DOES offer us a framework. It may say it's not recommending anything, but it IS a political organisation with political goals and I think it's worth exploring what these goals are.

Have a look at the extract below. You might like to stop and consider the degree to which you agree with these goals – and what you think their implication may be.

Underlying political goals...

To ensure ... that **all sections** of [the CEFR's] populations have access to **effective means** of acquiring a knowledge of languages...as well as skills in the use of those languages that will enable them to **satisfy their communicative needs** and in particular:

- To deal with the business of **everyday life**...;
- To exchange information and ideas ...and **communicate their thoughts and feelings** ...

To promote, encourage and support the efforts of teachers and learners at all levels...

- by **basin language teaching** and learning on the **needs, motivations, characteristics** and resources of learners
- by defining **worthwhile and realistic objectives** as **explicitly** as possible
- by developing **appropriate methods and materials**

There are some interesting points to make about these goals, I feel. Firstly, there's the idea of ALL SECTIONS OF THE POPULATION. This must surely mean not only all classes and income levels (which in itself remains a distant dream in ELT), as well all ages, with the range of interests and communicative goals this implies, but also non-academic types of learners of the kind currently excluded by grammar- / rule-based teaching.

Then there's the idea of SATISFYING STUDENTS' COMUNICATIVE NEEDS, which suggest we need to think about what these needs might be. The CEFR suggests these needs might include COMMUNICATING THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS, which means social / interactional language as well as the more purely functional / transactional language needed to DEAL WITH THE BUSINESS OF EVERYDAY LIFE.

There's then an irony in the notion that teachers and learners should DEFINE WORTHWHILE AND REALISTIC OBJECTIVES EXPLICITLY. The irony lies in the fact that the CEFR certainly DOESN'T do this yet and that's where coursebooks and teachers come into play. As such, we really need to ask ourselves whether, say, learning the present perfect is either worthwhile enough or explicit enough and what particular communicative goals we believe such study might assist!

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Next, there's mention of DEVELOPING APPROPRIATE METHODS AND MATERIALS. It is not made clear what exactly these methods and materials are supposed to help students do, of course, though interestingly, the use of the word DEVELOP does suggest that such methods and materials maybe aren't yet in existence!

So does the CEFR require different materials and teaching?
Well, suddenly it's getting a bit harder to give a definite no, isn't it.

As the CEFR says, we need to consider the needs, motivations, characteristics and resources of our learners. For me, the first point here the CEFR makes here is actually slightly too narrow, as NEEDS only tells us half of the story. Take my sister-in-law, Amparo, who's a nurse in a Spanish hospital. In raw terms, she only NEEDS to read journals on her own, and to achieve these needs, she just has to use a dictionary and keep a record of new language. However, her WANTS stretch far beyond this. She wants to chat at conferences, to network, to sometimes watch films in English, and so on. We would do well to bear in mind not only an analysis of needs, but also pay some thought to possible wants and desires through English to ensure motivation.

This is important when thinking about what sort of people our students are, because as I've already said, they won't all be academic or interested in language as anything other than as a means of communication. Students are usually busy people, and the fact that they've set time aside to come to class often means that this is the ONLY time they have available to study. As such, it is worth asking another question implicit in the CEFR: why do students come to class? Why not study elsewhere?

It's also worth looking at what students actually get when they do come to class – and to consider the degree to which this might meet their possible needs and wants (or be geared explicitly towards communicative goals and outcomes). Well, let's look at some titles from Elementary / A! coursebooks. Consider what the focus of each unit might be. What conversations might these units help students have? And how far are these likely to be made explicit? Let's see, shall we?

Some Elementary unit titles ...

- You
- People
- Time off
- Work
- Relatively famous
- Pretty woman
- Have a good trip
- Food
- Sea
- How terribly clever!
- Mind and body
- Bigger and better
- Future plans
- World records
- Can you speak English?
- Neighbours from hell

Are these units helping students with 'the business of everyday life' or to 'communicate their thoughts and feelings', as the CEFR requires? Well, in some cases, the titles do suggest a hesitant 'Maybe!' HAVE A GOOD TRIP or FOOD, perhaps, though even those are hardly explicit. What, though, are we to make of RELATIVELY FAMOUS or PRETTY WOMAN? And what on earth would an Elementary student want or need to say about SEA? I do also sometimes wonder what BIGGER AND BETTER could be about! WORLD RECORDS, however, is clearly only there to present superlatives!

Now, in many of these books, the natural, social interactional English is often sidelined, and placed at the end of units – under headings such as EVERYDAY ENGLISH or SOCIAL ENGLISH.

So where does all this come from? What's the underlying theory of grammar and language?

Something like this, I would suggest:

- Grammar and words are separate.
- Students can learn a canon of grammar rules (and, as with all canons, it's limited and narrow. In essence, little more than Raymond Murphy's English Grammar In use!) and grammar is seen as being generative.
- Words slot in to the grammar structures.

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- Grammar needs to be taught in a particular order (the present simple, then the present continuous then the past simple regular verbs, and so on!).
- Natural usage is relatively unimportant.

This last claim may sound surprising, but check out what actually happens in many coursebooks. You don't have to look far for evidence of the fact that grammar-driven courses invariably inflict poor examples of usage on students. Below are some examples. The first five are from low-level courses, but as you can see after that, the madness continues at higher levels!

Angela's running.
I'm not wearing a jacket, I'm wearing a jumper.
Did people drive cars one hundred years ago?
Are you going to wash your hair?
Can you walk backwards in a straight line?
Never will I forget holding him for the first time.

Sadly, it's not only grammar that is twisted and misrepresented, but also the idea of words just slotting into grammar also makes life harder for students. Here's an example of a question from an exercise in an Advanced book I once used:

Explain the difference between these words: shack / hut / hovel / shed

Even if students can actually do this test of obscure vocabulary (mine certainly couldn't!), how does this help them actually USE these words in their different contexts and with their different collocates? What communicative goals does this time spent in class help them achieve?

Sadly, the same questions can be asked of most of those MATCH THE WORDS TO THEIR DEFINITIONS / SYNONYMS types of exercises as well. Too little support given, not enough thought paid to usage, context and communicative end points.

However, it gets even worse than this. Grammar-driven courses also result in restructured examples of natural conversation. Conversation is messier than grammar rules. In natural conversation, grammar is everywhere. Yet look at even the really common questions below and you'll see questions you generally don't find in coursebooks.

I did a survey recently to find out how many times the most useful, common questions in the language appeared in a range of different Elementary-level coursebooks, and the results were shocking!

WHAT DO YOU DO? appears three times in one Elementary book, with weird answers – not at all in others.

WHAT'RE YOU DOING LATER? – again, in one book you get WHAT'RE YOU DOING AT THE WEEKEND? – in the rest, nothing!

WHAT DID YOU DO LAST NIGHT? also appears ONCE in one book.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO . . . ? appears in two Elementary books, with one example in each.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU . . . ? appears in not a single Elementary book at all.

How can this be?

Well, WHAT DO YOU DO? comes out in most books as WHAT IS YOUR JOB? or WHAT IS YOUR OCCUPATION? I think this is because the verb TO BE is taught first and as this is the verb that's used in the answers (I'm a doctor, He's a teacher, etc.) writers are scared of confusing students by showing a question using the DO auxiliary, and so invent odd questions that also use BE instead! WHAT'RE YOU DOING LATER? is left out because it's present continuous for future use – and the students have to do John is walking, Michelle is washing her hair and all kinds of other irrelevant examples first – and also because the answers potentially use a range of different tenses (I might just stay in; I'm going to go and watch a movie; I think I'll probably go out for dinner somewhere, etc.). WHAT DID YOU DO LAST NIGHT? I think gets ignored because it's somehow not past enough. It seems like the past simple is only usually presented in the COMPLETELY finished past, like a hundred years ago or King Henry the Eighth's time! HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO . . . ? is ignored

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because writers want to include all the other examples at the same time (Have you ever ridden a horse / slept in a park, etc.). HOW LONG HAVE YOU . . . ? I assume is left out because of the problem with the present perfect simple versus continuous (How long have you been here? / How long have you been doing that?) and possibly because there's a fear that the answers will be tricky because of FOR and SINCE (despite the fact that in reality most of the time when we answer such questions we just say TEN MONTHS NOW or THREE YEARS!!)

As a result of all of this, natural conversations based around natural questions – and let's face it, none of the questions above are exactly difficult to understand – are absent from class and instead students get lessons based around the presentation of grammar rules, one by one by one. Then, at Pre-Intermediate level, they're suddenly supposed to know the difference between the present perfect simple and the past simple and between going to and will – and yet they STILL don't get to see examples of common sentences! I then get Upper-Intermediate students coming to me who still can't ask WHAT'RE YOU DOING THIS WEEKEND? and instead try WHAT WIL YOU DO AT WEEKEND? It's crazy!

So . . . that's one theory of grammar, and if you really believe it's better and helps you produce worthwhile goals and explicit lessons and helps your students become more able to deal with the business of everyday life, then that's fine because . . . the CEFR is NOT prescriptive!

However, the CEFR does suggest a number of ways in which students' needs and wants can be described. They suggest DOMAINS – areas in which students might use their language, or reasons why they might use their language – and the CEFR breaks this down in a loose way into SITUATIONS and TOPICS, though of course doesn't provide any specific syllabus.

However, I think the CEFR also implies that we need to pursue these ideas of CONTEXTS OF USE further and that doing so may well imply taking a different view of how language works – and certainly of how materials work.

So, to summarise the main thrust of my argument thus far: I'm suggesting that the prevailing view of language as consisting of grammar plus words makes it far more difficult to construct materials that meet the goals of the CEFR and that an alternative approach might be needed. I'm going to move on to explore some ways of meeting CEFR goals by coming from an alternative perspective.

Firstly, I think we need to START by thinking about typical topics of conversation. We need to think about what people talk about, what students might need to do in English – and then work back from there. We need to imagine and actually WRITE these conversations, thinking about who's talking, who to, and why. This will help us construct the kinds of models that students need if they're to become more fluent; it helps match input to output more closely than it currently the case.

We then need to write exercises that help students see the patterns with those conversations; we need to help students see fixed language, but also to see variations; and we also need to give them the chance to personalise the language. We obviously also have to select and grade the conversations and tasks according to level. This is very much the process we went through when writing INNOVATIONS and parts of OUTCOMES.

Underlying these ideas is an alternative theory of language in which grammar and vocabulary are inter-dependent and in which we can't really attempt to teach one without also teaching the other. Think, for instance, of the problems my students at Upper-Intermediate level had recently answering the question HOW'RE YOU FINDING LONDON SO FAR? The problem stemmed from the fact they'd studied the present continuous and learned the verb **find** – with the meaning of finding something you'd been looking for – and yet none of this study had equipped them with the language needed to have the conversation I was trying to engage them, where they needed to be able say things like:

It's great. I'm really enjoying it, but I'm still not really used to the weather here.
It's going OK, I guess. I felt a bit homesick to begin with, but it's getting a bit easier.
It's great, but I haven't really been out anywhere much yet.

and so on.

Grammar + words will never help them have such conversations. Only direct experience of the specific conversations will.

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A further belief here is that students can learn and use grammaticalised chunks before they learn the underlying structures, so they can handle HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING THAT? or HAVE YOU BEEN TO ...? as expressions or fixed sentences / chunks before they later get to study in more depth the present perfect continuous or simple!

I also believe that grammar and lexis are learned only through repeat exposure over time to natural examples – and that learners need access to patterns outside the canon, meanings items like SO + ADJECTIVE + CLAUSE to express cause and result in spoken English (as in It was so hot in there I thought I was going to die!).

One final way in which the CEFR raises important questions is by asking in what ways learners should be expected or required to develop vocabulary.

Here's a suggested list. Have a read through and consider the degree to which YOU think each approach is useful.

- Simple exposure in authentic texts?
- Learner elicitation or dictionary - look up / teach as needed?
- In context in texts and subsequent recycling in exercises?
- With visuals - pictures, mime, realia, etc?
- By memorisation of word lists? - with translations?
- Through semantic fields and mind maps?
- By dictionary training?
- By training in the application of lexical structure?
- What distinction, if any, is made between learning for recognition and learning for productive use?

My own thoughts, very briefly, are that authentic texts often suffer from poor grading and usually contain language that is not recycled in class as well as culturally specific baggage. They may be a desirable end-point, but they are not the route there!

With learner elicitation and dictionaries, there obviously does need to be some space for the teacher to reformulate – and how you reformulate students' output obviously depends on your theory of language (i.e: are you only correcting grammar errors or are you giving students whole expressions / sentences that are ways of saying what they've been trying say in better English?) There does also need to be space in materials for freer speaking.

In context in texts and with recycling? A big YES from me, and good coursebooks should consciously recycle stuff too – both implicitly and explicitly. This is something we've put a lot of thought into with our own coursebooks!

With visuals – pictures and realia? I guess this can be useful, though it depends very much on the level and on the words being taught. It does also somewhat imply a single word fixation – and surely we all know by now that co-text is at least as important and that it also helps to consolidate meaning.

Memorisation of word lists? With translations? This is a dodgy idea if it really is just WORDS. Of course learners need to memorise lots of language, but really it has to be collocations, chunks and whole sentences – which are also much easier to translate as well.

Semantic fields and mind maps? So beloved of many a writer and yet often problematic, especially when the semantic field leads to the teaching in isolation of words like KNIFE, FORK and SPOON or ten phrasal verbs using GET – without any thought paid to usage or context.

Dictionary training? Well, on what? I concede that we do probably need to briefly teach students how to use dictionaries, but we should also believe that we as teachers are better than dictionaries and offer more than they ever can!

Training in the application of lexical structure, I guess, means word building. I think we'd do well to avoid over-generalising the generativeness of suffixed and prefixed and think we also need to be aware of the often very different semantic / lexical connections between different forms of words – think of the wildly different ways BLACK and BLACKEN are used, for instance, or even RETURN and RETURNS! I feel it's usually better to simply just deal with words in context rather than to try and teach all their varying forms at once.

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Finally, the question of what distinction – if any – is made between learning for recognition and learning for productive use is an important one. I believe that at any level there should be some language taught that students can't yet produce (and shouldn't be expected to), some language that's taught for productive purposes and some that's revision and recycling of previously taught language.

Right, to round off, let's look at some supposedly 'non-prescriptive' key words from CEFR can-do statements. As we've seen already, the CEFR is not prescriptive and doesn't automatically exclude different theories of language, but – luckily for me! – it does actually fit in with what I've been saying. It frequently mentions all of the following with regard to language:

- memorised
- stock phrases
- patterns (rather than grammar, though of course including grammar!)
- non-canonical
- repertoires and routines (I understand this to mean that things like being able to have conversations about how you're finding things becomes a routine once you're good at it, and you slowly build up a repertoire or such routines)
- familiar
- general topics – everyday things, even at C1 level (NOT sea or pretty woman!)
- range (meaning – at higher levels – both journalese and much more colloquial language)

To me, this seems like a profoundly lexical view of how language works.

To conclude, my own attitude to the CEFR used to be one of cautious optimism, but on further reflection I've ended up downgrading this to depressed pessimism, quite simply because most people don't actually do any more with the CEFR than to read the descriptors.

Maybe you can now go away and help change things – and bring some of that optimism back!