

Make Languages Work for You – leading the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages at Queen Mary

The debate over which qualifications to trust is rarely out of the headlines as the future of A-Levels continues to be questioned in the UK. The HE sector has its own similar debate with Bologna, the plan to make degree qualifications uniform across all European institutions, and in a timely manner the School of Modern Languages explored another approach along the lines of a mutual recognition of qualifications and communication of language teaching and learning in a conference at Queen Mary last November.



The Common Framework of Reference for modern languages across Europe (CEFR) is an initiative devised by the Council of Europe to provide a means of developing language teaching in Europe, by finding a way to compare the objectives and learning outcomes in different international contexts. So students applying for a language qualification in Italian should obtain a grade which could be recognised by a potential employer in Sweden. This is similar to the Bologna process, a European wide initiative to make degree levels recognisable to all member states. But throughout CEFR is restricted to modern languages

courses and the qualifications apply at all levels, from basic to advanced. The scheme is a prescriptive framework which has been implemented at non-academic level across the EU nations, and which universities are gradually starting to accept. Queen Mary is one of the first UK institutions to implement the framework. The School of Modern Languages has gradually introduced the new marking guidelines over the past year. The move should make Queen Mary courses more attractive to continental students looking for a qualification they can take home and use. It is also invaluable to students on exchange programmes

such as Erasmus, twin university schemes and partnerships.

The CEFR is not a new undertaking. In the 1950s the Foreign Service Institute developed a scale for use by the American Military. However that is part of the problem, as there are different scales for different countries and no universal one. For example, the USA, Britain and Spain each have their own systems, leading to confusion amongst potential employers of people who have trained overseas. A European solution was first conceived in the 1970s when the CEFR was initially proposed and the idea has persisted, despite receiving a mixed reception. Over the years the idea has gradually taken shape, the threshold levels were first published in the 1980s and republished in the 1990s. Today much of Europe has introduced the scheme at some level. The delay in implementation across the board is due to criticisms such as the framework is “failing learners”, which makes a discussion about its chances and challenges even more relevant to everyday language teaching. Language teachers are worried that results will become a matter of reaching ‘targets’ rather than actually mastering language, so failing aspiring linguists.

The *Guardian* summed up the opposition in a recent article on the CEFR: “For teachers the main danger is that they are beginning to believe that the CEFR scales represent an

acquisitional hierarchy. That the language of the descriptors actually relates to the sequence of how and what learners learn. For the users of language tests, the danger is that any test that does not report scores in terms of CEFR levels will be seen as "invalid" and hence not "recognised". Even more erroneous would be for users to compare scores across different tests that are "linked" to the CEFR. For many producers of tests, the danger lies in the desire to claim a link between scores on their tests and what those scores mean in terms of CEFR levels, simply to get "recognition" within Europe."

The University of Leicester's Dr Glenn Fulcher and the University of Illinois' Professor Fred Davidson, two leading experts in the field of test development and design, linked the CEFR back to the area of assessment, a crucial topic for Higher Education Institutions, and analysed the implications this has for how we deal with the CEFR along the lines of test design and validation.

In a bid to be at the forefront of this exciting and controversial enterprise Queen Mary ran an event entitled 'The Implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in UK Higher Education Institutions — Chances and Challenges' which aimed to analyse the significance and practicality of CEFR in terms of language teaching at higher education level and at offering a forum for discussion among colleagues in the UK.

The conference was also designed to place the School of Modern Languages at the head of a discussion that will have wide-ranging implications in the area of language acquisition and proficiency and it was agreed that a forum should be set up by Queen Mary for the language teaching community to continue to explore this area.

Other outcomes included a promise by the School to present a series of events that cover both theoretical and practical issues of the topic in the future in recognition of the demand for more conferences and workshops for language teachers in higher education institutions.

The importance of this area was reflected in the unexpectedly large number of participants from all parts of the UK, Ireland, Belgium and the United States. Representatives also attended from organisations such as the Department for Education and Skills, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Association of Languages Teachers in Europe.

The conference programme, which included some theoretical guidance on the nature of the CEFR by Dr Alan Dobson and two hands-on reports by practitioners from other international institutions such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Goethe-Institute, explored the question whether this framework could be a useful tool for setting clear-cut

standards in the language learning process and could offer both educational and occupational mobility for speakers of foreign languages in an open European market. They explored the questions of whether universities and other higher education institutions could take advantage of the European Language Portfolio as a marketing strategy to attract more students to study languages and provide them with an internationally recognised certificate of proficiency.

The event was organised by Dr Falco Pfalzgraf and Susanne Frane from the German Department. Through organising a forum to debate this issue Queen Mary's involvement in this exciting and controversial area places the College at the vanguard of the modern languages discussion and reflects the ongoing debate across the entire education sector on how to give students genuine recognisable skills which are of use in their own right and to potential employers.

For further information please see the Conference website:

www.modernlanguages.qmul.ac.uk/events/cefr2006.html

If you want to join in the debate, please login to the discussion forum:

<http://cefr.myfastforum.org/>

The *Guardian* article can be found here: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/tefl/story/0,,1170569,00.html>

