Framing the Framework: Four Decades of Change in Language Teaching (and the Long March of ELF)

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Abstract   This paper offers a reflection on changes in language use over more than four decades, which have led to a revisited version of the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR), the *Companion Volume* published in 2018, and which in turn is likely to lead to further changes in approaches to language teaching and assessment for years to come. They include acknowledgement of the massive rise in online communication, and the consequent blurring of spoken and written forms, and more comprehensive criteria for the teaching and learning of pronunciation, particularly in the case of English as a lingua franca; changes which can be seen as themselves providing a framework for Carmel's forty-year long career in educational linguistics.

Keywords   CEFR. English Lingua Franca (ELF). Plurilingualism. Phonology. Online interaction.

Summary   1 The Speed of Language Change and the CEFR. – 2 What the Framework Is, What It Is Not, and the Need for an Update. – 3 Plurilingualism, Mediation, and the Thrust for Inclusion. – 4 Abandoning the Native Speaker: The New Phonology Descriptors. – 5 Technological Change and Online Interaction.

1   The Speed of Language Change and the CEFR

Language changes to reflect the times we live in, and it changes quickly. In particular, new words, or new meanings for old words, jostle for space in the lexicon to help us keep abreast of technologi-

cal development, altered lifestyles, and emergency situations, such as wars and global pandemics. At the same time, new means of communication fuelled by technological change and social media have developed to transmit this brave new lexicon, and to forge new linguistic relationships, between written and spoken language, between formal and informal registers, between remote and face to face connections; and when these changed circumstances co-occur, language teachers, inevitably, find themselves at the interface.

This (more or less) was the reflection made by Carmel in the garden of Ca' Bembo in September 2021 when called to look back on four decades of research into language teaching. The speed of change, she reflected, can be breath-taking, and for teachers in the front line of change, very demanding. The pandemic, in one fell swoop, brought with it changes in lifestyle, technology, and language. Teachers were called on to adapt to the emergency more or less overnight, by teaching remotely and by using new technology. Language teachers, perhaps more than colleagues in other disciplines, found themselves facing new challenges, to promote interaction, understanding, and plurilingualism, all at a distance, often with just a list of names staring at them from the screen of a computer.

What then, has changed for language teachers over those forty years since Carmel began her career as a teacher of English in the 1980s? And what lies ahead for those just starting out in the profession now? The heady days of the so-called communicative revolution of the 1990s may now seem a long way off, but they provided the context for what has turned out to be the most authoritative institutional description of what it means to know a language, a description which has informed the work of language planners, course designers, testing agencies, teacher trainers, and language teachers for more than four decades: the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR). With the first level, B1, appearing in 1975, initially known as the 'threshold level', the complete volume describing the six macro levels in 2001, and a major overhaul (known as the *Companion Volume*) in 2018, the Framework has spanned the career of an entire generation of teachers and academics, providing a roadmap, and sometimes illumination, for all language professionals. In this paper, I offer a reflection on how the Framework has shaped our working lives over that period; and how, with its latest, significant, corrections and additions in the revised version, it has attempted to keep abreast of the changes in international communication which globalisation is forcing upon us all.

2   What the Framework Is, What It Is Not, and the Need for an Update

The Framework was, of course, always intended as work in progress and not as a definitive statement, or even less, a syllabus. The first edition makes this clear, and the same word of warning is repeated verbatim in the introduction to the *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe 2018), underlining that the objectives remain the same:

> 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 Common European Framework to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they should employ. (Council of Europe 2018, 26)

The function of the Framework, then, is descriptive, rather than prescriptive. It posits the learner as a *user* of the language, and the innovative *can do* statements (valid for users of any language) are intended to indicate 'communicative ability in real life'. They offer "a clear shared roadmap for learning", which (in a somewhat ideological reflection, consonant with the aims of the Council of Europe) "can promote democratic citizenship, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue" (Council of Europe 2018, 25). More practically, the Framework has provided a generation of language teaching professionals with a metalanguage for sharing experiences across language teaching contexts, and a basis for the mutual recognition of qualifications. As well as the *can do* statements, the Framework has given us a reclassification of macro-skills, so that *production*, *reception*, *interaction* and *mediation* have replaced the traditional four skills (*listening*, *speaking*, *reading*, *writing*), and the ambiguous terminology relating to levels (*beginner*, *false beginner*, *intermediate*, and so on) has given way to the now familiar six level scale from A1 to C2. For most teachers, this metalanguage corresponds to the psychological realities of language learning and acquisition, thereby providing them with a useful descriptive tool. Simons and Colpaert (2015), for example, in a survey of 188 teachers from a variety of backgrounds in both secondary and higher education, found that for more than 85% of them the CEFR 'helped them in their jobs'. More noticeably, the CEFR has been used to inform international language tests. The publication of the original document led to a scramble to adjust existing tests to the level descriptions, or to create new tests based on the descriptions. Indeed, Little (2006) suggests that the CEFR has had a far greater effect on language assessment than it has had on curriculum design. The focus in the Framework on *Spoken interaction*, for example, has undoubtedly contributed to the development

of paired speaking tasks which have become a standard feature of many tests, while the *Companion Volume* takes on a self congratulatory tone when it comes to writing tasks. Whereas, it suggests, the construct of written interaction 'did not meet with much public recognition', the separation between written production and written interaction now seems particularly relevant in the light of the rapid development of online communication in the form of emails, texting and social media, showing that the CEFR "was very forward-looking for its time" (Council of Europe 2018, 32).

But the relationship with the language testing community has not been straightforward, since the Framework does not attempt to engage with fundamental constructs of proficiency – what it means to know a language – but skims across the surface of 1970's communicative thinking with its functional approach and performance descriptors. As McNamara (2014, 228) puts it, the "overwhelmingly administrative and policy-oriented character of the CEFR [is] the very point that language testers seem least capable of engaging with productively".

Another critique of the 2001 Framework comes from a sociolinguistic perspective. Seidlhofer (2011, 185) notes that the CEFR:

> despite its overall objective of furthering composite plurilingualism in which individuals' partial competences in various domains should be a desirable learning goal, persists in its orientation towards native speaker norms.

The implication here is that today most users of English are non native speakers trying to communicate in an international, plurilingual context, in which none of the participants are native speakers. If this is so, reference to native speaker norms as a learning objective may be counterproductive; rather, successful communication is likely to result from accommodation, lexical creativity, and collaborative interaction.

The unprecedented growth of English as a lingua franca since the publication of the CEFR, which Seidlhofer is referring to, is in stark contrast with the 'communicative revolution' of the 1970s, of which, we suggested, the Framework is a product. The communicative approach was theorised especially by British applied linguists, drawing on notions of 'authenticity', informed by the appearance of the first corpus-based dictionaries, and assuming a context of interaction between non native and native speakers. The (optimistic) aim of the teacher – of any language, but English was in the forefront – was to get learners to speak like native speakers, in their pronunciation, in their discourse patterns, and in lexical appropriateness.

Today, for many teachers, those objectives are likely to have shifted, at least in the context of English language teaching. Communicating with native speakers is no longer seen as the primary aim of

English language teaching; a more realistic aim for teachers today in a European educational setting could be to get students to harness a range of resources which might be available to them, including digital media and the Internet, to promote intelligibility and to co-construct meaning in an increasingly globalised world. This aim sits well with the Council of Europe's declared objectives of 'social cohesion' and 'intercultural dialogue', and it has been addressed in the revised approaches to plurilingualism, pronunciation, and online interaction which are a strong feature of the *Companion Volume*. The special role of English as a catalyst of change for the revised CEFR is made explicit in Piccardo (2016, 6), commenting on the need to revise the 'grey area' of phonology descriptors:

> a new sensibility has been emerging in the applied linguists' scholarly community when it comes to re-evaluating the traditional idea of the 'native speaker' as a model or perception of the norm in pronunciation. This is especially visible in English considering the movement towards 'global Englishes' or 'English as a Lingua Franca', but similar considerations have been applied to all languages.

We turn now to consider three areas of 'new sensibility' which have emerged over the last two decades, and which together constitute the most important changes in the revised Framework, all of which have been informed by the acknowledged role of English as a lingua franca: plurilingualism, phonology, and online interaction.

3 Plurilingualism, Mediation, and the Thrust for Inclusion

One of the stated aims of the revised Framework is the promotion of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism (Council of Europe 2018, 22). Plurilingualism – the linguistic repertoire of an individual which might be brought into play in communicative interaction, as opposed to multilingualism, the distribution of languages across a given territory – has long been identified as a means of facilitating inclusion and is central to Council of Europe policy.[1] Many teachers across Europe will have direct experience of this in their own increasingly multicultural classes; in particular, they may have been able to harness the linguistic resources of immigrant pupils to their own teaching aims, and to enhance pupils' awareness of language convergence as well as language diversity, thereby contributing to the integration of children into their classes.

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[1] From linguistic diversity to plurilingual education see Council of Europe 2007.

In the *Companion Volume*, plurilingualism comes to the fore in the macro competence of *mediation*. The original Framework merely sketched in the notion of mediation as "to act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly – normally (but not exclusively) speakers of different languages" (Council of Europe 2001, 87); but it offered no scaled descriptors. In the *Companion Volume*, 26 pages are devoted to mediation, with numerous new scales of mediation skills ranging from the more obviously plurilingual or translanguaging skills such as translating spoken or written text and note taking, to intralingual mediation such as 'Encouraging conceptual talk' or 'Facilitating communication in delicate situations'. It is beyond the scope of this paper to look in detail at this major revision of the Framework, but what is perhaps most striking is that it reads like a celebration of plurilingualism, in all its forms, across languages and registers, and across a range of soft skills. The inclusion of sign languages in the Framework can also be seen from this perspective, since "linguistic research has provided ample evidence that sign languages are human languages in their own right that display all features, means, rules and restrictions found in spoken language" (Council of Europe 2018, 53). The new CEFR has ten pages devoted to linguistic and pragmatic scales of signing competences. This inclusion can be seen as a response to the growing recognition – and visibility – of sign languages, and is particularly relevant to Italy, where Italian Sign Language (LIS, *Lingua Italiana dei Segni*) was officially recognised by act of parliament in May 2021.[2] Indeed, much of the thrust for recognition of LIS has come from colleagues in Carmel's own department at Ca' Foscari, where LIS has been taught for the past twenty years.

These two decades have also seen two major shifts of focus in research into ELF, running parallel to the consolidation of an inclusive, plurilingual approach which distinguishes the *Companion Volume*. When ELF research began in earnest at the turn of the millennium, its main focus was to find linguistic commonalities in non native speaker interaction. Grammatical features such as default relative pronoun *which*, omission of 3rd person marker *s*, or non standard prepositions (see Seidlhofer 2004) or phonological features such as /t/ and /d/ to replace interdental fricatives (see Jenkins 2000) were presented, in a context of ELF, not so much as *learner* errors as shared resources for communication for *users* of the language. This approach, however, soon gave way to a second phase of research, the identification of strategies such as accommodation, linguistic crea-

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2 https://www.ens.it/notizie/148-primo-piano/9545-e-un-giorno-storico-la-repubblica-riconosce-la-lingua-dei-segni-italiana.

tivity, and linguistic transparency to promote communication.[3] Function, rather than form, was key to understanding the success of ELF communication, and this fitted well with the approach of the 2001 Framework (Council of Europe 2001).

But the relentless march of globalisation, and the fact that behind any given ELF interaction there will be different personal repertoires which might encompass not just the speakers' L1 but also their knowledge of other languages, has led Jenkins (2015) to 'reposition' English as a *multilingua franca*. What needs to be acknowledged, she suggests, is that in ELF interaction, speakers bring to bear shared linguistic resources other than their knowledge of English. For example, in an Italian context, a conversation in ELF might have recourse to Italian terms and phrases which, for both participants, form part of their everyday experience. The reconceptualization of ELF as a *multilingua franca*,[4] for Jenkins, is endorsed by Larsen Freeman's proposal to move language planning priorities from "second language acquisition" to "plurilingual or multilingual development" (quoted in Garton, Kubota 2015, 240); in short, what may once have been seen as 'interference' or 'negative transfer' from other languages has acquired a new lease of life as a potential plurilingual (or multilingual) communicative resource.

This repositioning of ELF resonates closely with the promotion of plurilingualism in the *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe 2018, 28), and the list of competences which it encompasses, such as "switching from one language to another" or "calling upon the knowledge of a number of languages".

At the same time, the monoglot native speaker is no longer seen as a default model for learners, a change of approach which is most evident in the revised and expanded descriptors for phonology, to which we now turn.

4 Abandoning the Native Speaker: The New Phonology Descriptors

In the original CEFR phonology gets scant attention, reflecting the 'marginalisation' of pronunciation teaching (Derwing, Munro 2005), and a corresponding low profile in initial teacher training courses (reported in Henderson et al. 2012). In the 'communicative' approach, which, as we said, underwrites the Framework, pronunciation typical-

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3 For a comprehensive account of ELF strategies observed in interaction between international students and teachers at Venice International University see Basso 2012.

4 Jenkins uses the composite term *multi/plurilingual*, seeing them as interchangeable, but preferring *multilingual*.

ly got side-lined to five-minute fillers at the end of a lesson; in English language coursebooks from the 1980s onwards, phonology slots focussed on perceived difficulties for acquiring a native-like pronunciation (such as weak forms, stress timing, interdental fricatives, liaisons, etc.), but which in contrast did not necessarily hinder intelligibility.

In keeping with this approach, the Framework (Council of Europe 2001, 117) offers a single, rickety scale for 'phonological control'. 'Foreign accent' is stigmatised as a negative feature of L2 pronunciation, while the lowest level (A1) is described in the following terms:

> Pronunciation of a very limited repertoire of learnt words and phrases can be understood with some effort by native speakers used to dealing with speakers of his/her language group.

In other words, success is measured by the (lack of) effort made by the native speaker listener to understand their interlocutor. The scale refers primarily to suprasegmental features such as intonation, while the term 'natural' is used for B2 level, without any indication of what 'natural' refers to in a context of phonology. In any case, this level ("Has acquired a clear, natural, pronunciation and intonation") reads like the top end of the scale, and in fact there is no descriptor for C2 level (Council of Europe 2001, 117).

The inadequacy of this phonological scale led to the commissioning of the 2016 report by Piccardo on the revision process, which we have quoted above, and the need for new parameters for the teaching and testing of pronunciation. The 'natural' pronunciation for B2 level, Piccardo suggests, has been (mistakenly) taken to instil "the unrealistic expectation that users/learners at the C level would not have any accent" (2016, 21), and goes on:

> research has demonstrated that that accent remains a feature of the speech of many people with even a very high level of language proficiency. It is not the 'naturalness' of native speakerness that is essential: it is intelligibility, which is not necessarily the same thing. (Piccardo 2016, 21-2)

The revised Framework (Council of Europe 2018, 136) thus removes all references to the 'native speaker' and also to 'foreign accent', which is replaced by a less stigmatising (and with a nod in the direction of plurilingualism) 'accent retained from other language(s)'. There are three new scales, for 'overall phonological control' 'sound articulation' and 'prosodic features'; and the new buzz word is *intelligibility*. The terms *intelligibility* and *intelligible* feature no fewer than fifteen times in the new scales, sending a clear reminder that the interlocutor is key in any interaction, but not because he or she is a native speaker (Council of Europe 2018, 136). Here, too, the influence of

ELF on the revised CEFR is evident. Given the number of speakers of English in the world today (Crystal 2008 makes a tentative estimate of 2 billion), and the fact that most of them are non native speakers, it seems reasonable to assume that most interactions in English today involve non native speakers. The urgent need in such contexts is not for speakers to emulate natïve speaker accent (and here it should be remembered that most native speakers of English have regional accents); rather, it is to make oneself understood.

5 Technological Change and Online Interaction

But perhaps the most timely update in the revised CEFR is the introduction of new descriptor scales for online interaction: 'Online conversation and discussion' and 'Goal oriented online transactions and collaboration' (Council of Europe 2018, 96-9). Timely, because just as the revised framework began to circulate, Europe, along with many other parts of the world, was sinking into lockdown as a result of the global COVID-19 epidemic. Almost overnight a generation of school-children and students found themselves at the other end of an Internet connection facing their teachers on smartphones or a computer screen, while the teachers had to grapple with the mysteries of GMeet, Zoom, or other, similar, platforms in a context which rapidly acquired the label *Emergency Remote Teaching* (ERT) and which is currently spawning a burgeoning literature.[5] One of the most characteristic features of online interaction is the grey area in which oral and written language meet; written texts delivered in real time may replace oral interaction but retain syntactical features reminiscent of spoken language, or they may be available as a back up to oral interaction (such as the chat feature on teaching platforms). It is noticeable that the first scale, *Online conversation and discussion* (Council of Europe 2018, 97), uses verbs such as *write* or *post* in its descriptors:

> Can write very simple messages […] as a series of very short sentences. [A1]

> Can post online accounts of social events, experience and activities referring to embedded links and media and sharing personal feelings. [B1]

But the descriptors do not have a lot to say about the nature of this kind of written text, such as simplified forms, lack of capitalisation and

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5 See for example the special section on ERT in *ELTJ* 76/1 January 2022 (`https://academic.oup.com/eltj/issue/76/1#1334617-6408428`).

apostrophes, abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons, memes, or lexical creativity. Where are the communicative strengths, and where are the potential weaknesses (in the sense that they might compromise communication) in this hybrid use of language? Rather, the descriptors seem more about handling exchanges and managing groups, as in:

> Can introduce him/herself and manage simple exchanges online. [A2]

> Can engage in online exchanges between several participants effectively linking his/her contributions to previous ones in the thread [...]. (B2)

The second scale, *Goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration* (Council of Europe 2018, 99) seems even more focussed on group management and cooperation, and will ring a familiar bell for teachers who, during the pandemic, divided (or tried to divide) large classes into virtual breakout rooms with each group assigned a collaborative task. Again, managerial skills, and willingness to cooperate, are seen as fundamental, and are scalable: "Simple collaborative tasks appear at A2+, with a cooperative interlocutor, with small group project work from B1 and the ability to take a lead role in collaborative work from B2+" (Council of Europe 2018, 98). But the Revised Framework treads carefully through the multimedia minefield, recognising that online communication will never be the same as in person interaction, and that misunderstandings are more likely to go unnoticed. Successful communication in this environment, it warns, requires a range of skills and strategies, such as adding redundancy to messages, checking comprehension, reformulating and paraphrasing; all of which, once again, as with the other updates we have looked at, resonate with the profile of a successful communicator in ELF. Of the use of technology, however, the new CEFR has nothing to say. How to cope in a crisis, when a connection fails, or indeed drawing up a list of preliminary notions, such as how to set parameters and protocols for language teaching within an online environment, are obviously beyond its remit. As with its predecessor, the new volume is more of a point of departure than a definitive statement. Its usefulness lies in the fact that it will provide input for further research and experimentation, it will inform choices made by language planners and textbook writers, and above all, it is an opportune reminder that language is always on the move to reflect changes in society and technological development, and that language teaching has to adapt accordingly.

The point of departure is also a point of arrival, for Carmel as well as for the Framework. As we wish her a long, happy, and active retirement, it is worth reflecting that her career has framed – and been framed by – the Framework, from its conception in the 1970s to its revision forty year later; and if Carmel, like the original CEFR, is her-

self a child of the communicative revolution, so the revised Framework is a child of the steady and painstaking research carried out by Carmel and hundreds of colleagues across Europe over those four challenging but fruitful decades.

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