Importing Language Assessment?
The Reception of the Common European Framework of Reference in Australian Universities

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Introduction

Since 2001, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been recognised as a fundamental resource for the development of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines and testing. However, its implementation outside Europe is hotly debated around the world: the CEFR is sometimes considered as an efficient way of achieving forced harmonisation, particularly in assessment fields (Krumm 2007), but is also sometimes construed as a marketing tool or, worse still, as "another instance of linguistic imperialism" (McBeath 2011). While the CEFR is now a clear example of the globalization of education policy (Byram 2012), it has gained little ground in Australia. In regards to specific language policies in force in this country (Lo Bianco 2004), could the CEFR be used as an effective and reliable reference to develop both strategic language policy documents and practical teaching and assessment material? In this paper, the analysis of the potential role of the CEFR in the Australian tertiary sector is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected from academics and students who responded to a nationwide online survey. By bringing to light and discussing some of the more controversial positions, our aim is to contribute to both local and international debates on the CEFR as a universal framework.

The implementation of the CEFR outside Europe: an international debate

Today, the CEFR is recognised as emblematic of the globalization of education policy (Byram 2012). As of 2013, thirty-nine language versions were available, including not only various European languages, but also Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian, French Sign Language, just to name a few. In Europe, as shown in the latest extensive survey done by the Council of Europe in 2007, the CEFR has been adopted and adapted in 30 of the 47 Member-States. In the report documenting this survey and presented during the Intergovernemental Policy Forum held the same year (Martyniuk and Noijons 2007), it was reiterated that the CEFR is a reference tool designed to coordinate educational goals at all levels. This framework is useful in developing both strategic language policy guidelines and practical teaching material. In Europe, it remains the most reliable reference for curriculum planning, and contributes to greater transparency and coherency across the educational sector in general.

As clearly stated in the introduction, the CEFR provides "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (Council of Europe 200, p.1). The Framework is a descriptive scheme, which combines general competences (such as knowledge, skills, existential competence, and learning ability) with communicative language competences (at a linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural level). Overall, thirty-four illustrative scales are summarized in a global scale composed of six levels (from A1 for "basic user/beginner" level, to C2, for "proficient user/mastery" level). It is important to note that the CEFR is "action-oriented" and language independent, and its designers insist that it be considered as a non-prescriptive and flexible framework. Among them, Brian North uses a musical metaphor to describe it as "a concertina-like reference tool, not an instrument to be applied" (2007, p.656).

Nevertheless, soon after its publication, the CEFR received severe criticism, both on the theoretical and political aspects of its implementation. In 2004, a debate was launched in the Guardian by Glen Fulcher, a respected linguist in Great Britain who argued that the implementation of the CEFR could lead European countries to build

tests from an "unsafe" framework due to the lack of relevance and validity of level descriptors in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The Dutch CEF Construct Project (Alderson et al. 2006) subsequently pointed out that the descriptors provided in the CEFR are limited and should only serve as a starting point for specifying test content. In response to criticism from experts in the SLA field (Hulstijn 2007) concerning the validity and reliability of scales used in the development processes of assessment systems, a report was published by the Council of Europe in 2007 to "rectify imbalances in interpretation and use" (Byram 2012, p.5). Nonetheless, the CEFR is still valued as an efficient way of achieving forced harmonization inside and outside Europe, particularly in the field of assessment (Weir 2005), despite sometimes being perceived as "another instance of linguistic imperialism" (McBeath 2011). In addition to the challenges linked to the inadequacy of level descriptors in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) context (Little 2007) or for migrant populations (Krumm 2007), other cases of misuse have also been reported, such as irrelevant recruitment assessment practices seen in corporate outsourcing in India and the Philippines (Lockwood 2012).

In this controversial situation, the authors of the CEFR and their supporters constantly rally against misinterpretation and misuse of the Framework by highlighting its flexibility (North 2004; Coste 2007; Little 2007). Fleming (2006) reports that "Can do" statements are often viewed by critics of the CEFR as too narrow, functionalist, and even behaviourist. Nevertheless, Fleming concedes that "competence frameworks have the potential to focus on the importance of use and purpose, implying a more dynamic rather than static concept of language" (2006, p.54). Moreover, in 2007 Davidson and Fulcher developed a specific descriptor for service encounter specification from the generic model on offer at Level A1 in the CEFR, and found it "a valuable starting point for language test development" (2007, p.231). Jones and Saville later conducted a project called Asset Languages in the UK which called for "the need to develop contextualized, practical ways of realizing the CEFR's potential as a framework for teaching and learning" (2009, p. 51). These pragmatic findings of the potential and necessary contextualization of the CEFR point to ways of addressing criticism and scepticism concerning the validity of the Framework. Similarly, it is important to regularly reiterate the aims of the project launched by the Council of Europe, and, as Trim (2012) reminds us, the CEFR was conceived to promote language learning not as an end in itself but to support methods that strengthen democratic practices by developing the learner's independence of thought and action, and by increasing one's sense of social responsibility. According to all the experts involved in the project, the teaching of language should be available to everyone on a lifelong basis, and should meet the needs of the learner, rather than being teacher- or subject-oriented. Trim declares that "the Framework should be flexible, open, dynamic and non-dogmatic, since the aim was not to prescribe how languages should be learnt, taught and assessed, but to raise awareness, stimulate reflection and improve communication among practitioners" (2012, pp.29-30).

The CEFR around the world

Today, the growing influence of the CEFR beyond Europe is being increasingly documented. Various papers and books describe the impact of the Framework wherever it has been officially adopted through governmental agencies, or more commonly, incorporated by policy makers and institutions in specific contexts. Numerous case studies and language policy analyses have clearly demonstrated the

impact of the CEFR throughout Asia or in the Americas. Many reports have come out of China (Fu 2010; Bel and Yan 2011; Zou 2012), from Japan (Nishiyama 2009; Chevalier 2011; Himeta 2011; O'Dwyer and Nagai 2011), Korea (Finch 2009; Park 2011), or Taiwan (Wu and Wu 2007; Cheung 2012; Wu 2012). The American continent offers many case studies: from Argentina (Porto 2012), Canada (Vandergrift 2006; Faez et al. 2011; Wernicke and Bournot-Trites 2011), Colombia (Lopez and Janssen 2010; de Meijia 2012), Mexico (Despagne 2011), and the USA (Byrnes 2012). Conversely, the Middle-East offers only a few papers: from Turkey (Glover 2010; Üstünlüoğlu 2012), and Iran (Normand-Marconnet 2009), although there doesn't seem to be any documentary evidence from Africa.

The situation in Australia

Australia is a country characterized by a high degree of multilingualism and multiculturalism, with a long and chequered history of language policy (LP). In this context, Lo Bianco (2004) identifies five LP areas. The first one is *Britishism*, which promotes English only and is modelled on Southern British norms. Prestige foreign languages, typically those found in British Public schools, (especially Latin, premised on the idea of "mental training" and classical literature, as well as French, followed by German and Italian) assert only a very limited presence. The repression of immigrant and indigenous languages was a feature of the deployment of this discourse. Unsurprisingly, then, *Australianism* was a nationalist reaction to British English, especially in folk literature, and was favoured by those of Australian or Irish birth, and other immigrant groups seeking to promote Australian norms of English and a newfound openness to indigenous languages. *Multiculturalism* originated in the second generation of predominately Australian-born children following massive World War II immigration. During the 1970s, this discourse became the dominant paradigm of LP, where "foreign" language teaching was discouraged in favour of local immigrant and indigenous community languages. It transformed primary schools into sites of language study and saw a huge expansion of languages offered. *Asianism* has a longer history and strongly emerged following the admission of the UK into the European Common Market in the mid 1970s. "Asian Literacy" grew rapidly and became dominant in the late 1980s-1990s, both for commercial and strategic reasons. In 1994, it was reduced to four "priority languages": Mandarin Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, and Korean, although in 2012, Korean was replaced by Hindi. Finally, *Economism* appeared during the nineties. Both sides of politics adopted neo-liberalist and globalisation principles in education, which began to be considered as a saleable commodity. Australian universities – with schools rapidly following suit – became major providers of education, albeit in English, to the Asian market, whilst promoting English and commercially viable foreign languages.

The available academic literature on the reception of the CEFR in Australia is still very limited. In light of the LP discourses currently in force, it is interesting to consider the often negative opinions and reactions expressed by researchers and experts in the field of education, who argue that standards in general impose uniformity and globalization, and that the CEFR in particular "has emerged as a mechanism for control of foreign language education throughout every level of the educational system" (McNamara and Elder 2010, p.197). Moreover, the proficiency orientation and the absolute scale on which the CEFR is based do not take into account the context in which a language is acquired, unlike achievement orientation currently promoted in Australia for Asian languages (Scarino 2012). These kinds of

reactions stem from a combination of Australianist reasoning (i.e. the country should have its own distinctive assessment systems designed for its particular needs) and are influenced by both multiculturalist and Asianist discourses. On the other hand, the increasing influence of the CEFR on the English testing sector in Australia has been reported as an unavoidable phenomenon, as revealed in an official report on English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) published in 2007 (Elder and O'Loughlin 2007). This trend was confirmed in an interview with Dr Miloanovic, the Chief Executive of IELTS (co-owners of Cambridge ESOL) which appeared in The Australian newspaper in August 2011.

Our survey: an overview of students' and academics' perceptions

Design and methodology

This survey expands a collaborative project involving all language programs in the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University. As a first step, the learning outcomes of Monash language programs were aligned with those of the CEFR in 2011 and an interactive website was developed in 2012. In addition, one short online questionnaire was designed to collect feedback on this implementation through "Survey Monkey" software, which relied on data collated from both staff and students at Monash University. Then in mid-2012, to reach a broader audience, an invitation to participate in the online survey was sent through the Language and Cultures Network for Australian Universities to its 600 affiliated members in Australia. The purpose of this survey was to gauge the current perception of the CEFR in the Australian tertiary sector, and using this preliminary overview as a starting point, we plan to conduct further investigation across the sector (policy makers, educational authorities, etc.) in the near future.

In this paper, the following research questions are addressed: i) What reception does the CEFR enjoy in Australia compared to the current situation in other non-European countries? ii) How do Australian students and academic staff react to the CEFR?

For this, the questionnaire consisted of eleven items, including closed and open-ended questions, as well as statement-type items on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1, *strongly agree,* to 5, *strongly disagree*). Additional comments were encouraged by leaving appropriate sections for open-ended responses. The quantitative data were collected and analysed using tools provided by Survey Monkey (i.e. Excel tables), and the qualitative data were converted using both Survey Monkey and Nvivo10 software in order to enable discourse analysis.

Overall, 135 respondents contributed to this survey. In keeping with the Human Ethics Certificate Approval granted by Monash University, the survey ensures complete anonymity and no details regarding the institution of the respondents were requested (except for those from Monash University who participated in the first survey).

Quantitative results

The results of the first three questions have been summarized in Table 1, and show that among the 73 students and the 62 staff members who participated in the online survey, 66% were familiar with the CEFR, and 60% were aware of the Common Reference Levels (from A1 for Basic User to C2 for Proficient User). Overall, it seems that academics were better informed than students.

Table 1

Do you know:	Total responses		Academics		Students	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
The CEFR	88	46	51	9	36	37
The Six Levels Scale	81	54	48	13	32	41

In the following question, which allowed for various options, respondents were asked how they heard about the CEFR and the Six Levels Scale. As shown in Table 2, most of them selected the categories *scientific literature* and *material used in class*, which suggests they had had more opportunities to learn about the Framework mainly during research activities or through professional practices. Furthermore, the additional data provided by the open-ended responses to this question show that opportunities for finding out about the CEFR were the result of personal collaboration with colleagues rather than through institutional promotion.

Table 2

Answer Options	n	%
In class, during language studies	18	16%
Through material used in language classes	23	20%
Through scientific literature	25	22%
By visiting the Monash website	15	13%
Other	27	23%
Total	116	100%
Other:		
previous position	7	26%
through colleagues	8	30%
professional dev	4	15%
websites	4	15%
survey	2	7%
other	2	7%
Total	27	100%

In the next question, two-thirds of participants recognized that the use of the CEFR within their institution was or could be useful (36% responded *Absolutely*, 29% *Somewhat*). While a large proportion were hesitant (30% replied with *Don't know*), it was mainly academic staff who disagreed with this statement (5% of the total answers).

Regarding the perceived benefits of the CEFR, the results from the Likert-scale items show that our participants equally acknowledged the CEFR as providing both academic and professional benefits. The overall consensus is illustrated by a close rating average for academic (2.09) and professional (2.11) benefits, while the rating average was 3.73 for the *No benefit* response, although one-third of the respondents stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed.

To elaborate on the positive impact of the CEFR on the institutions, a series of five Likert-scale items was also included. According to the rating average and the grouping of *strongly agree/agree* categories in percentages, our participants were more likely to acknowledge that incorporating the CEFR would be particularly useful as it evaluates outcomes against an international standard (rate of 1.95 and 74% of positive answers). The fact that the CEFR provides a means of aligning assessment

with proficiency level and promotes better curriculum design across languages was also well recognised (rate of 2.08 with respectively 73% and 70% of positive answers). To a lesser degree, the positive impact of the CEFR is linked to the easiness of "can do" descriptors used to map language levels (rate of 2.09 and 68% of positive answers), and to the CEFR's implementation all around the world (rate of 2.18 and 64% of positive answers).

The question that followed sought to clarify the perceived rejection of the CEFR. 42% of the participants recognized that the negative perception of the CEFR and the Six Levels Scale in Australia was in fact largely due to limited knowledge within the Australian education system (rate of 2.72). Furthermore, the reasons given for the limited uptake of the CEFR in Australia were not because it was too complicated (rate of 3.54) or didn't provide a clear picture of language proficiency (rate of 3.44). Almost half (42%) disagreed too with the suggestion that standardisation and harmonisation meant less flexibility and reduced diversity in language programs (rate of 3.22). Finally, there seemed to be a high level of indecision regarding the fact that the CEFR is not streamlined to the Australian context (rate of 3.07 and 40% of *Neither agree nor disagree* responses).

For the two last questions, 74% of our respondents agreed with the idea that their institution should not only promote the use of the CEFR, but should also organize training sessions prior to its implementation. It is particularly noteworthy that the strongest opposition to these statements came from academics (80% of the negative responses), whereas the need for training was mostly expressed by students (60% of the positive responses).

Qualitative analysis

As previously mentioned, the researchers found it useful to undertake a qualitative analysis based on the comments collected from the questionnaire's open-ended responses, and coded them according to the institution (MU for Monash University; OU for other universities) and their category (A for students, B for staff). The 67 additional remarks were grouped into three main categories (22 quotes in the *No idea* category, 14 quotes in the *Cons* category and 31 in the *Pros* category). These three categories were then divided into subcategories according to the different clusters which emerged. Where possible, we selected representative quotes to illustrate the main findings from our corpus.

In the first of these three categories, the majority of comments were simple quotes such as "don't know" and "no idea". Nevertheless, some elaborated on this, stating, for example, "I am not actually sure about the question of CEFR in the Australian context...about it not being adapted for Australia. So I put neutral. And I don't have personal knowledge of whether the CEFR is well known in Australia or not" (staff MU71). Others added they would like more information, such as student MU65: "Have never heard about this, perhaps it would be good to promote/explain a bit more about what it is in class or via email, etc."

Although limited in number, the comments provided by 14 of our respondents (13 academics and one student) grouped into the *'cons'* category nevertheless illustrate the variety of criticisms to be found in the academic literature. Four clusters were identified: the applicability of the CEFR in a non-European context; the limitations of the CEFR in terms of assessment and curriculum design; the risks of benchmarking, and finally, its relevance compared to other existing standards. Not surprisingly, the

main source of doubt and negative opinions from six of our respondents focused on the applicability of the CEFR and the Six Levels Scale to non-European languages, especially Asian languages, for example: "I doubt if it can measure script-based Asian language proficiency correctly" (staff MU75); "there is an assumption that CEFR suits all languages - it is totally impractical for non-European languages and this needs to be more widely acknowledged and recognised. Until this happens, many in the non-European language sector will continue to feel excluded and sick and tired of saying 'It is different for character languages.' The European context is different, that does not [mean] that it cannot be used in Australia but it does mean that it doesn't suit as well as the European context" (staff OU6).

Others pointed out the limitations of the CEFR in terms of assessment or curriculum design, sometimes quite vigorously: "A level description is not a test against which an outcome can be measured – saying a curriculum has a level does not mean the students have been measured against the levels. They can perceive by self-assessing how close or how far they may be but it is NOT a reliable measure in ANY WAY" (staff OU8). Another academic explained the risks linked to the use of the CEFR as a benchmarking tool as follows: "One major problem in Australian unis [universities] is the ongoing reduction in teaching hours per subject at each level (1st/2nd/3rd-year). In attaching the CEFR to outcomes for subjects, it becomes clearly obvious which programs are achieving (or say that they achieve) certain levels of competency. Reduction in face-to-face hours generally means lower levels of achievement according to the CEFR. As the decisions to reduce hours are based solely on economic bases, and not on proficiency/outcomes, the CEFR could serve as a means to prove the teaching/learning case for a minimum of contact hours" (OU50). Finally, the relevance of the CEFR in Australia compared to other international standards was also questioned: "It is unclear to me why CEFR has been chosen among all systems to be the standard. For example, why haven't we chosen the system used by the U.S. State Department or other? These are equally as recognisable outside of Europe" (OU21).

The *'pros'* category is composed of 31 comments divided into the following five sub-categories: the support in implementing the CEFR, the positive reception of the CEFR in general, the positive impact on curriculum and assessment, additional fields of implementation, and the necessary adjustments in terms of professional development. In the first sub-category, respondents clearly supported the successful implementation of the CEFR into their institution: "We have used the CEFR in the Spanish Program at [our university] for more than five years now, with great success." (staff OU38) and spoke of it enthusiastically: "I am a fan of the European Reference Framework and in this day and age of globalisation, the more 'international' education is, the better!" (staff OU19). In the second sub-category, we grouped together the positive comments of the CEFR such as: "self-explanatory" (staff OU32); "incorporates intercultural and socio-cultural features" (staff OU41); or "promotes academic mobility" (staff OU42 and OU52). We included also the positive reaction to the CEFR in terms of curriculum design and assessment by these two students: "The actual framework itself makes a lot of sense and is easy to understand at first glance. I think it would be a good thing to know if you're a (for example) level B2 in reading & listening, but only a B1 in writing & speaking. Perhaps then a grade of Credit would make a bit more sense (rather than thinking you are just mediocre overall)" (student MU44); "Best part about [this] system is that it provides clear goals/guidelines that must be met by students and set by assessors as to reach the next 'level' " (student

MU70). Other comments focused on the potential extension across the sector for international students (staff OU3), and even to promote cohesion between secondary and tertiary levels: "I'd like to think we could adapt this to secondary level and promote a cohesive approach across Australia. Unity=strength" (staff OU24). Finally, some participants recognized the potential and the positive impact of the CEFR on their institution, provided that a review of the programs (staff OU29) and some professional development activities were included in the implementation process of the Framework and the Six Levels Scale: "I would be very interested in running some PD for teachers in how to implement the framework reference and combine this with state and national descriptors" (staff OU3).

The future of the CEFR in Australia?

In the context of Australian LP history and the provision of languages, what are the prospects for adoption, modification, or outright rejection of the CEFR?
To better evaluate these eventualities, we examined data showing the reactions and views of those most concerned, that is, academics, language teachers and students. However, the literature on policy borrowing suggests that other actors are involved in determining how and to what extent external innovations are transferred and taken up in any given context.
It is likely that the current lack of enthusiasm and close-mindedness towards the CEFR will change in Australia given current developments in LP at the macro level, as the government appears to be moving towards a more standardised national language provision. Another possible avenue for the adoption of the CEFR are second language teachers in schools, many of whom appear to have a different attitude and are more open-minded towards its potential. These are just two potential areas which may bring about change, although the pace of this change will be unpredictable. Undoubtedly, there is a need for further analyses to evaluate the impact that the contextualization of the CEFR will have on language assessment in Australia.

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