

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF FIELD EDUCATION



English Teachers' Opinions About Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

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ABSTRACT

Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is prescribed to member states for implementation by the Council of Europe. As a result, it is now clearly mainstream for people who are involved in language learning, teaching, and testing. One of the member states, Turkey, has developed and adjusted its language learning and teaching curriculum in accordance with the CEFR standards. Additionally, language teachers play a part in the implementation of the CEFR. According to Finch (2009), the CEFR offers a standard framework for the development of curriculum and exams that allow teacher educators and trainees to evaluate their language use in the context of their target audience. However, in the context of Turkey, the thoughts and opinions of language teachers have not generally been contested. This study intends to outline the opinions of teachers who work at a private institution in the southern region of Turkey, in particular one with a sizable population of migrant pupils. A semi-structured form that was created in accordance with the CEFR and used to gather data was examined using the content analysis method. Accordingly, the study found that language teachers lack the knowledge of the CEFR's aims, definition, and content.

ARTICLE INFO

Key Words:CEFR, English teacher, private primary school, secondary school

Received: 12.03.2023
Published online:
11.08.2023

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İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin Avrupa Ortak Ölçüt Çerçeve Programı (CEFR) Hakkındaki Görüşleri

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ÖZET

Avrupa Ortak Ölçüt Çerçeve Programı (CEFR), Avrupa Konseyi tarafından uygulanmak üzere üye devletlere önerilmiştir. CEFR, dil öğrenimi, öğretimi ve testine dahil olan insanlar için açıkça ana akım haline gelmiştir. Üye devletlerden biri olan Türkiye, dil öğrenimi ve öğretimi müfredatını CEFR standartlarına uygun olarak geliştirmiş ve düzenlemiştir. Ek olarak, dil öğretmenleri CEFR'nin uygulanmasında rol oynar. Finch'e (2009) göre CEFR, öğretmen eğitimcilerinin ve kursiyerlerin dil kullanımlarını hedef kitle bağlamında değerlendirmelerine olanak tanıyan müfredat ve sınavların geliştirilmesi için standart bir çerçeve sunar. Ancak, Türkiye bağlamında, dil öğretmenlerinin düşünceleri ve görüşleri genel olarak tartışılmamıştır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin güney bölgesinde, özellikle de önemli bir göçmen öğrenci nüfusuna sahip özel bir kurumda çalışan öğretmenlerin görüşlerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. CEFR'ye uygun olarak oluşturulan ve veri toplamak için kullanılan yarı yapılandırılmış bir form içerik analizi yöntemiyle analiz edilmiştir. Buna göre çalışma, dil öğretmenlerinin CEFR'nin amaçları, tanımı ve içeriği hakkında bilgi sahibi olmadıklarını ortaya çıkarmıştır.

MAKALE BİLGİSİ

Alınma

Tarihi:12.03.2023

Çevrimiçi yayınlanma

tarihi:11.08.2023

Anahtar Kelimeler: CEFR, İngilizce öğretmeni, özel ilkökul, ortaokul

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Introduction

Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages is an attempt to standardize the achievements of the learners in the areas of assessing, learning and teaching. Since English language is lingua franca, with an attempt to standardize its instruction and learning, CEFR is a significant attempt to lead both the learners and teachers. As a result, the nations that have adopted the aforementioned ruling have attempted to implement new laws, and the Turkish Ministry of Education has revised its language-learning and teaching curricula to conform to CEFR standards. With this purpose in mind, as the curriculum implementers, teachers' beliefs and opinions over understanding the philosophy behind the CEFR along with the curricula based on CEFR could be subjected to delineation. It is mostly accepted that teaching and learning could be affected by the belief systems. Teachers' opinions have their shares in teaching attitude, policies, methods and the developments of learners.

In the Turkish setting, the views of the teachers on the CEFR have not been substantially questioned. The primary goal of this study is to describe the views of the teachers who work with primary and secondary school students. According to Finch (2009), the CEFR offers a standard framework for the development of curriculum and exams that allow teacher educators and trainees to evaluate their language use in the context of their target group. In this respect, North et al. (2010) argue that CEFR is a tool that educational professionals can incorporate into their contexts according to the needs while choosing activities and skills. In a system based on CEFR, the students are expected to achieve detailed and general comprehension of what they read, write, listen and speak in tandem with the level (A1, A2, B1, B2, etc.) they hold. The focus is not on what students can't accomplish; rather, the CEFR offers statements known as descriptors that define what students can do at various levels. On the part of the teachers, they are expected to accord their instruction to the level of the learners in a way which the input is one step further than the current level of the acquired competence (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), which may be problematic. Therefore, in-service training programs for teachers were offered at schools in a comprehensive manner; however, this does not mean that they were carried out completely. Whether it is written or oral, mediating the instruction of input to the one step ahead of the current level of the learners could be formidable. An English teacher should know what stages students will go through in the language learning process, from the beginner level to the most advanced level (Paker, 2012). The teacher knows that every student will go through an inter language process and what kind of mistakes he will make in this process. In this context, the language used in the classroom should be original leading to meaningful communication. If the learner is confronted with sufficient intelligible input, he enters the process of acquiring the language

and speaking gradually occurs over time. The teacher should strive to create meaning and to provide meaningful input. Mediating the instruction to the right level could work well for an efficient language learning and teaching process. That process could be enriched and strengthened through loud and clear understanding of CEFR on the part of the English course teachers, indirectly the learners.

Common European Framework of References (CEFR) appeared at a conference by the Council of Europe in the early years of 1990s. Finch (2009) states that the Council of Europe created the framework as the main part of a project called Language Learning for European Citizenship. In this respect, it attempts to promote learning more than one language fronting the importance of multilingualism and multiculturalism in Europe (Güler, 2005). In addition, it procures a common infrastructure for the elaboration of curriculum guidelines, examinations, materials allowing the stakeholders (deciding authorities, teachers, teacher trainers and trainees) to reflect on their practice considering the learners (Finch, 2009). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which has introduced standardization, transparency, and consistency to language instruction, is a comprehensive manual for teachers regarding the planning, learning, teaching, and assessment processes (Çağatay & Gürocak, 2016). In other words, CEFR could be the tool facilitating the transfer of theoretical knowledge to teaching. By this way, it could be commented that CEFR could facilitate in diminishing the gap between theory and practice on the part of the teachers. Little (2002) states that CEFR is a precious program for reflective teaching. From this point of view, CEFR could enable a deliberate language learning and teaching period, thus it has been in effect in Turkish context for almost a decade. In this respect, ranging from public and private schools to public and private language centers, language curricula, materials for the courses are designed and regulated referring to CEFR. What is more, program suggestions for listening, reading, writing and speaking have emerged through master-PhD dissertations or other written articles based on the certain proficiency levels included in CEFR. In other words, engagement in and familiarization with CEFR have been gradually increasing on the part of the curriculum shifts and modifications of materials skipping the opinions and beliefs of the teachers as the bottom-up subjects who are the implementers. There is satisfactory evidence that, as a guide, teachers are the eventual starring actors and actresses of the endless film of education. Additionally, teachers are the experts of enhancing instruction (Sullivan & McDonough, 2002). In this regard, using language teachers' thoughts and combining those perspectives offers varied perspectives on issues and aids in the development of various suggestions. Benefiting from the experience and ideas of teachers contributes to the solution of encountered disruptions and problems with respect to the content, atmosphere and other social issues of language courses. All in all, most of the research studies having been conducted so far are mostly associated with the program, though few if any research studies concerning the teachers' thought.

Conducted Studies

Few research studies have been conducted over CEFR regarding the teachers in Turkish Context. One of those conducted studies belongs to Sahinkarakas, Yumru and Inozu (2009) and they carried out an action research with foreign language teachers in order to form

basis for the use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and Common Europe Framework of Reference in local state schools. The researchers, in the study, report on how they conducted the study focusing on two teachers' experiences of the ELP in practice. The findings of the study indicate that the ELP and CEFR should be introduced in the pre-service teacher education programs with an attempt to procure theoretical knowledge of the aforementioned concepts for transmitting knowledge in in-service teaching. Likewise, Faez et al. (2012) conducted a large scale research with the teachers related to the perception of CEFR in France. The findings of the research study indicated that the CEFR-informed instruction raised the motivational level of the students, self-confidence, authentic use of language along with learner autonomy. Furthermore, Kani (2011) conducted a master dissertation over the ELT teacher trainees' perceptions about teacher competencies identified by CEFR in relation with their current and desired competencies. According to the findings of the dissertation, the trainees found themselves to be competent in the required teacher competencies available in Common European Principles for teacher competencies and qualifications. Last but not least, Sülü and Kır (2014) conducted a study over what the teachers know about CEFR and how they apply the issues stated in this reference in the name of preparing an effective training program. Kavaklı (2018) conducted a study on CEFR oriented testing and assessment practices and found out that teachers have quite little knowledge about the criteria in CEFR.

Method

The purpose of the study is to uncover what the English teachers who work for private schools in the southern region of Turkey think about the Common European Framework. In this respect, the case study method was used to qualitative research. The case study was chosen as a research design because it focuses on a unit in-depth and accurately explains it in its context, and it will show how participants interpret the CEFR in terms of personal definitions and implementation aspects (Merriam, 2015).

The Study Group

In the present study, 13 in-service English course teachers chosen on the basis of purposive sampling took part.

Table 1.*The demographic information of the participants*

Gender	Age	Experience	Kademe	Department
Female	36	8	Secondary	English Language-and-Literature
Female	24	3	Primary	English-Language-Teaching
Female	34	6	Secondary	English-Language-Teaching
Female	37	13	Secondary	English-Language-Teaching
Female	48	20	Secondary	Linguistics
Female	30	7	Primary	English-Language-Teaching
Female	24	2	Secondary	English Language-and-Literature

Female	36	10	Secondary /High School	English-Language-Teaching
Male	26	2	Secondary /High School	English Language-and-Literature
Male	40	15	Secondary	English-Language-Teaching
Male	41	16	Secondary /High School	English-Language-Teaching
Female	28	5	Secondary	English Language-and-Literature
Female	31	10	Secondary	English-Language-Teaching

Ten female teachers and three male primary and secondary teachers took part in the study. Their duration of experience changes between 2 years and 20 years. Most teachers are graduates of English language teaching departments while a few of them are the graduates of English language and literature departments. Only one of the teachers is a graduate of the department of linguistics.

Data Collection

The target literature was initially examined with relation to the CEFR. After that, a form with open-ended questions was created to capture the views of the English course teachers on the CEFR. Later, the form was reduced and given its most recent version after an expert panel discussion with a professor who has published and is knowledgeable about the CEFR. According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), using a semi-structured interview guide enables researchers to provide interviewers with clear instructions while also collecting trustworthy and comparable qualitative data. In the meanwhile, the form includes open-ended questions on the specific information pertaining to the CEFR implementation. The questions on the teacher form are intended to capture the views of the English course teachers regarding the CEFR, from its goals to the assessments used to evaluate students. To be specific, the instrument attempts to unearth the opinions of the English course teachers in three phases which are definition and objectives of CEFR, harmonization of CEFR with the employed materials, and problems related to CEFR if available.

Data Analysis

Content analysis method for the open ended teacher form was used in the name of qualitative research. The researcher conducted content analysis method to form a descriptive framework along with describing and commenting on the findings part by part.

The present study aimed to illustrate the opinions of the instructors regarding the CEFR.

Research Question 1

What do primary school English teachers know regarding the CEFR?

definition of CEFR

objectives of CEFR

How do language teachers apply CEFR in their courses?

What are the encountered problems while applying a system based on CEFR?

Findings

The purpose of the study is to uncover what the English teachers who work for private schools in the southern region of Turkey think about the Common European Framework.

Table 2. *Teachers' responses over the definition of CEFR*

Definition of CEFR	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A common standard for language teaching in Europe	6	46
Qualification criteria related to language levels for learners	4	30
Some criteria defined in the context of language learning and teaching	3	24
Sum	13	100

The teachers participated in the study answered differently, accordingly 6 (46 %) of the teachers indicated that CEFR is “A common standard for language teaching in Europe”. Furthermore, 4 (30%) of the teachers state that CEFR is “Qualification criteria related to language levels for learners” while 3 (24%) contends that CEFR is “Some criteria defined in the context of language teaching”. It might be said that when the definitions are outlined, the teachers do not offer a precise definition of what the CEFR is. The teachers do, however, use definitions in relation to specific CEFR elements that were discussed in the introduction and literature review sections.

Table three displays the teachers' responses regarding the objectives of CEFR

Table 3. *Teachers' responses about the objectives of CEFR*

Objectives of CEFR	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Aim to develop a standard language passport along with transferability	5	38
Allow person's own language assessment and to move to a higher level	4	30
Combine cultures employing language as a tool	2	16
Aim to help teachers accord their instruction to the levels of the learners	2	16
Sum	13	100

The teachers' responses regarding the objectives of CEFR differ from one another. Accordingly, 5 (38%) of the teachers indicate that the objective of CEFR is to develop a

standard language passport along with transferability whereas 4 (30%) of the teachers state that it allows at person's own language assessment and moving to a higher level. In addition, 2 (16%) of the teachers suggest that CEFR aims to combine cultures employing language as a tool while the rest 2 (16%) state that it aims to help teachers accord their instruction to the levels of the learners. The objective which is to help teachers accord their instruction to the levels of the learners forms a different perspective on the part of the teachers. Besides that, the teachers' responses to the question whether those objectives are met and reached are intriguing. For instance, one of the teachers states that since Turkey is a context in which the target language is learnt as a foreign language, it is not that easy to reach those objectives and adds that teachers are concerned with being appointed rather than promoting teaching and learning the target language.

How do language teachers apply CEFR in their courses?

In order to better put forward the opinions of the teachers about the process, the question which is “do you think that CEFR helps you develop in enhancing four skills?” has been directed. In response to the question, most of the teachers reacted positively in that the CEFR helps in promoting four basic skills. In doing so, the teachers indicate that having a kind of pre-defined criteria for each level facilitates the language learning and teaching process in a planned way. On the other hand, a few of the teachers state that CEFR may have an inhibiting impact on learners since teachers treat the learners as if they were A2 even if one student is at B1 in speaking but A1 in listening. Nevertheless, those teachers admit that CEFR could increase autonomy but draw attention to the de-motivating impact in certain cases. Furthermore, the teachers indicated that they take CEFR into consideration sub-consciously but not consciously. In other words, the teachers do not expose their lesson plans directly to CEFR.

The teachers were also asked about the convenience of the employed materials, in this respect, the teachers indicated that the materials they employ have compliance with the CEFR and for instance add that the course books along with the printed copiable materials have been chosen based on CEFR.

What are the encountered problems while applying a system based on CEFR?

Table 4 illustrates the encountered problems regarding CEFR.

Table 4. *Teachers' responses about the encountered problems*

Problems	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
(Assessment) Inferiority of the module exams regarding the can-do statements in CEFR	9	70
Knowledge deficit regarding the content of CEFR	4	30
Sum	13	100

It could be suggested that assessment is in a vicious circle with the school outcomes in a system based on CEFR. Accordingly, regarding the examinations given to the learners at the end of the modules, most of the teachers (70 %) contend that the exams have little compliance with the criteria existing in CEFR. To make the matter clear, the teachers indicate that the exams are in line with the CEFR just in theory adding that the exams are actually one step backwards than the actual level in practice. Furthermore, the degree of difficulty with respect to the sections measuring basic skills is not distributed on equal basis. Moreover, 40 percent of the teachers put forward that there is a knowledge deficit regarding the content of CEFR. In this respect, the teachers address that the administration does not hold any meetings which depict the scope of CEFR.

Result and Discussion

Most of English course teachers have knowledge deficit regarding the content of CEFR along with definition and its objectives. The findings of the present study align with what they found in that little is known about the CEFR among teachers in schools (Çelik, 2013, Kavaklı, 2018). Putting aside the ongoing discussion whether language teachers know about the CEFR, on the part of the teachers it could be confusing and eye-opening not to have even a moderate knowledge about CEFR in a program whose objectives have been associated with the content of CEFR. Accordingly, the English course teachers hold the belief that those materials were designed in line with the CEFR and as a result adopted in the program. As for the self-adopted materials such as press clippings, lyrics of songs and sections of videos, English course teachers believe those are moderately suitable to the levels they lecture regarding CEFR. In addition, most English course teachers report that the exams have little compliance with the criteria existing in CEFR. Lastly, the administration does not hold any meetings introducing CEFR. It is indicated that There is evidence that in-service training has improved teachers' understanding (Çağatay & Gürocak, 2016). Those findings over the opinions of English course teachers could result from because of the fact that CEF is almost a new term in national curricula by ministry of education and teacher education needs for continuous guidance in transferring the principles into the practice (Şahinkarakas, Yumru & İnozu, 2009).

In conclusion, the present study on CEFR may contribute to teacher education in National curricula by emphasizing on opinions of the teachers about CEFR. Furthermore, it might gain favor in that the research results may encourage the educators and researchers to elicit the views of the teachers.

Recommendations

The teachers should be rendered professional development sessions and activities regarding CEFR. In literature, CEFR is of importance in mediating the language use of teachers in classroom delivery. Therefore, teachers should be informed about it particularly in in service.

Furthermore, the faculty courses should be enriched with the identification of CEFR on the part of pre-service English language teachers.

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