Significance of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:
For Co-operation among ELT Practitioners in Japan

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Abstract

The general proficiency level of English of the Japanese is often criticised, even today, despite the fact that many practitioners of ELT have certainly "improved" their practices. In this connection, Tanaka (1999) indicates that virtually all the innovations in ELT that have been made are fragmentary, and concludes that the problem is really lack of correlation. He argues that what should be done now is to develop a firm system to support a fundamental concept, which encourages collaboration across the entire spectrum of ELT practices. Adopting such a point of view, in this paper we investigate the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF), which contains comprehensive descriptions of various concepts and elements relevant to language education. This framework encourages practitioners of ELT in Europe to situate, co-ordinate and differentiate their practices, and also to explain their practices to other practitioners. The aim of this paper is to clarify the significance of this common framework, with particular focus on its functions, and to suggest some implications for the reform of ELT in Japan. Although CEF itself is in the process of implementation in Europe, these functions, namely: (1) to help the users make choices, (2) to help the users inform other users of their practices, have been widely accepted for the purpose of co-operation among practitioners.

1. Recognition of Problems in English Language Education in Japan

Recently, the Japanese government has been asserting more strongly than ever that
Japanese people should have better command of English in order to have close contact with foreign countries. This can be seen in the policy document presented in 2000, *The Vision of Japan in 21st Century (21 Seiki Nihon no Kousou)* in Japanese. The document states like the following.

Confronting this rapid globalization and progress in technology, we must equip ourselves to use English and utilize the new information technology in order to communicate and compete with the rest of the world. English here is not a mere foreign language, but an international language, which enables people to get wide range of information, express their ideas, make a trade, and collaborate with other workers in the world. Of course, we should keep our culture, traditions, and mother tongue, Japanese language, and also should be encouraged to study other foreign languages. However, there is no doubt that the ability to use English is one of the most important abilities in order to access the world. (*The Committee of 21 Seiki Nihon no Kousou*, 2000, Chap.1, IV 1 (2), translated by the writer)

This kind of general policy statement, which asserts the importance of English as an international language, is often heard. In many cases, it includes some indirect indication about the background and also the basis on which the criticism concerning the lack of proficiency level of English is made, and Japan is no exception. Let us consider the following quotation.

International comparison of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score shows that the average score of Japanese examinees is 493, and it is 197th among 214 countries where people take the TOEFL tests, and 24th among 27 Asian countries. . The fact is obvious from TOEFL score that Japan is one of the worst countries in the proficiency level of English. (*Koike, 1997, p. 24, translated by the writer*)

In fact, it has been doubted whether the average score of TOEFL can be simply generalized as the proficiency level of the people in a certain country. This doubt arises mainly from the diversity of examinees from country to country, in terms of their quality and quantity. Especially, in the case of Japan, it has often been pointed out that the low average score of TOEFL could be explained by the large numbers of examinees, including ordinary members of the public. Therefore it is often believed that the general English proficiency level of the Japanese is actually much better than the score. *Koike* (2000), however, argues that it seems to be a total fallacy to draw such a conclusion, because the ratio of the examinees to the overall population of Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries is much higher than that of Japan. This argument provides both an optimistic and a pessimistic view of the proficiency level, but it is
rather difficult to be satisfied with the optimistic position, because the general public in Japan almost unanimously shows a negative reaction to the practice of ELT.

2. Problem of the Practitioners?

Although practitioners of ELT in Japan (any persons who engage in language education, teaching and learning, including policy makers, curriculum developers, material developers, test developers, teachers, learners etc.) are often criticised, they have actually made a great deal of effort to improve the situation. First, we may point, for example, to the fact that the Course of Study (national standards for school curricula) in Japan has been revised to take account of the changes in Japanese society as a whole. The main features of revision are: (1) more emphasis on language use than grammar, and (2) more flexibility in the arrangement of language materials so that teachers can adapt their practices on the proficiency levels and contexts of students. Secondly, the general quality of teachers of English is improving, as Niizato (2000) reports, in that more and more teachers have reasonable command of English in terms of fluency and accuracy, and they are aware of changing attitude towards the Communicative Approach. Thirdly, Yoneyama (1996) points out that the textbooks adopted in junior high and high school show the shift towards the Communicative Approach which is partly characterized by an emphasis on notions and functions of language. Fourthly, Otani (1997) states that Center Test (a part of the entrance exam for university held at the national level) is now being revised, with a focus more on measuring “communicative competence”. Looking through the exams for the last fifteen years, Kanatani (1997) also admits the fact of changes in the Second Tests (held by each university). We can now hardly find any questions at all demanding skills like translation, which was very common in the past.

Several examples in the last paragraph show that it is not the case that practitioners of ELT have been complacent or lazy, or have ignored the criticism. Nevertheless, the reactions of the general public to ELT in Japan have not changed for decades and remain negative. Why is this? Tanaka (1999) provides an interesting point to deal with this question.

These days there are lots of proposals especially on English language education. Most of them are concerning methodology, teaching content, curriculum and so on. It is always concluded that those innovations do not work well because of the problems of the quality of teachers.

However, the malfunction of ELT in Japan is not caused only by the problems of methodology and the quality of people involved. We need discussion for the improvement of ELT and policy development, intending to reconsider the concept that enables ELT as a whole to function effectively and also to establish new system that supports the concept. (Tanaka, 1999, p. 46, translated by the writer)
He indicates that the innovations of ELT in Japan are fragmentary and that those innovative actions do not show enough coherence. This implies that we should not be content only with "patchwork" innovations (Yoshida, 2000) and should make up a fundamental conceptual framework of language education that enables all practitioners to improve their practices coherently. Ishizuka (2000) also argued for the necessity of developing a framework in order to develop co-operation among the practitioners engaged in English language education in Japan.

From this viewpoint, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) is certainly worth investigation, because the framework was made very carefully, in order to enable various practitioners in European countries to situate and co-ordinate their practices. In the following section, a brief overview of the process of the development is given before we move on to the outline of contents and functions.

3. The Development of Common European Framework of Reference

Since the 1970s in Europe, it has been widely thought that it is important to develop standards that ensure coherence in language education across Europe. In November 1991, according to the Council for Cultural Co-operation Education Committee (1996), an Intergovernmental Symposium was held in Rüschikon, Switzerland, on the initiative of Swiss Federal Government. The theme was "Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe, Objectives, Evaluation, Certification". This symposium officially gave a recommendation to the Education Committee of the Council for Cultural Cooperation (CDCC) to establish a comprehensive, coherent and transparent framework in line with the conclusion of the symposium.

In reaction to the Rüschikon Symposium, the secretariat invited experts and they held meetings to clarify the issues and make proposals for further action. The proposals emphasized the need for a descriptive framework, not a prescriptive one. The idea was to recognize the diversity of educational systems in Europe, and to provide a clear orientation, as much as possible, for the reform of ELT throughout Europe. The Modern Language Project Group (one of the project groups in CDCC) welcomed these proposals.

Then the Project Group set up the Working Party to develop the framework. In October 1993, the Working Party held its first meeting in Strasbourg, and made a small editing group to prepare the first draft of the Common European Framework of Reference. The draft was successively revised in accordance with the recommendations made by the Working Party and the Modern Language Project Group.

In March 1996, according to Council of Europe (1997), the first draft was distributed to numbers of the Project Group members and several institutions in member countries together with a questionnaire to elicit their reactions and proposals for modification. Reactions received before mid-May 1996 were carefully examined and incorporated into the second draft. The
second draft was presented to the Working Party and the Project Group, and introduced in the final conference. After some modification by the members of those groups, in 2001, finally, the framework was published as a book titled *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*.

4. Outline of the Contents of CEF

It is impossible to describe the entire contents of CEF in this section, nor is it necessary to do so. The aim of this section is to give a brief outline that will help readers to understand the functions of CEF, which will be considered in more detail in the following section.

The CEF includes at least two main parts. The first part is a descriptive scheme that enables us to describe a certain language use in a certain context and the second part is a level-by-level description of language proficiency at several stages.

Trim et al. (1998) explains that this framework must relate to a very general view of language use and learning. The approach adopted is action-oriented, which in principle considers a user or a learner of a language as a member of society who has a task (not exclusively language-oriented) to accomplish within a particular field of action in a given set of circumstances. In this framework ‘a task’ is understood as something to be accomplished by some kind of actions performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competencies. The action-oriented approach considers an individual as a social agent and takes full range of relevant and interrelated factors into account. These factors are identified by the provision of parameters involved in language use and learning (e.g. general competence, communicative language competence, conditions, constraints, language activities, language processes, texts, themes, domains, strategies, tasks). Taking into account such contextual features that governs performance like conditions and constraints is consistent with the current model developed in the field of language assessment (e.g. Bachman & Palmer 1996; McNamara 1996).

The level-by-level descriptions are given in a variety of sample skill areas. If we take aural reception (listening) as an example, we can find descriptions for overall listening comprehension, understanding conversation between native speakers, listening as a member of a live audience, listening to announcements and instructions, and listening to audio media and recordings. In each area, the descriptions are characteristically divided into six levels, which have a connection with the Waystage, Threshold, and Vantage Level proposed by the Council of Europe, and these six levels are grouped into three higher categories (A, B, and C). However, these level-by-level descriptions are designed for flexible use, so that practitioners in a certain situation of ELT can reorganize the levels within the categories of A, B, and C. In some cases, level A might be considered to consist of three different levels, but two levels in other cases. This enables us to set clearer achievement levels in various skill areas depending on the situations of ELT.
Providing the descriptive scheme of language use and level descriptions, CEF tries to facilitate the settings of clear objectives, contents of teaching and learning, and standards for the assessment of proficiency achieved.

5. The Functions of CEF

The aims of CEF are “to promote and facilitate co-operation among educational institutions [even] in different countries, to provide a sound basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, and to assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts.” (Council of Europe, 1996, p. 2)

To achieve these aims, CEF includes at least two important functions. CEF can be seen as an accumulation of meta-language, and as such it offers an opportunity for practitioners in the process of foreign language teaching and learning to “talk in the same language” in making choices and in informing one another of their choices and results.

It should be clear that one of the important functions of CEF is to help the users make choices. This is possible because CEF is made up from the whole range of necessary parameters and those are classified by higher categories for description. This provides practitioners with a tool for choice, which encourages them to notice some aspects of a certain learner’s competence and performance they have never given their attention to. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that learners themselves are not the exception as the subjects for making choices. Learners may also be assisted for developing their awareness of self-directed learning through the process of making choices.

The other important function of CEF is to help the users inform other users of their own practices. What should be noticed is that the word “other” here indicates at least three different contexts. First, the framework helps practitioners inform other practitioners in the same sector of their practice (e.g. secondary school teachers discussing methods, materials designers discussing syllabuses). Secondly, the framework helps practitioners inform practitioners in other sectors of their practice (e.g. primary school teachers and secondary school teachers discussing the continuity of subject matters, secondary school teachers and test developers discussing reform of exam). Thirdly, the framework helps practitioners inform practitioners in other countries of their practices (e.g. secondary school teachers in the Netherlands and Germany discussing school curriculum). This means that CEF is developed on the supposition that practitioners can exchange information of their practices even in cross-national contexts. The point is that practitioners in various sectors can situate and co-ordinate their practices clearly enough by referring to the common framework, and this makes it possible for the practitioners in several different sectors to closely co-operate in their practices. This kind of information exchange guided by a common framework will almost
inevitably promote deep reflections of practitioners, for example, by comparing one's own practices to the more detailed practices conducted by other practitioners. In short, the second function of CEF works both for the practitioners within the same sector and for the practitioners working in different sectors, and also works both for practitioners within a certain country and for those in different countries. In addition, this framework is not limited to ELT, but is also applicable for other foreign language education, and therefore it could also help to increase communication among practitioners of different foreign languages. These characteristics of CEF are of great value in Europe, since it encourages the mobility, communication, and co-operation of people across the continent, which corresponds to the policy of the EU.

6. Implications for the Innovations of English Language Education in Japan

In Section 2, we have seen some efforts made by practitioners in Japan to deal with the general criticisms concerning the inefficiency of English language education. However, the situation of ELT in Japan is expected to remain stagnant and negative. The following observation of Yoshida (2000) gives us a clue how to find the way out.

Junior high school English teachers complain that elementary school teachers do not teach students any bits of very basic grammar, and teachers in the elementary school grumble that even though they motivate their students for foreign language learning in elementary school, the teachers in junior high diminish their motivation. High school teachers say that junior high teachers do not teach students reading and writing sufficiently, and junior high teachers complain that high school teachers do not give any follow-up, even though they pay special attention to listening and speaking. High school teachers complain that they cannot but teach students grammar because of the university entrance examination, and university teachers retort that high school teachers do not know the realities that these days there are several ways to enter universities and lots of universities take the scores of TOEFL, TOEIC etc. into account, and moreover that there is no questions which place undue emphasis on grammar. University teachers say that even though they change the entrance examination, high school teachers do not change their method of teaching. (Yoshida, 2000, p. 37, translated by the writer)

Now it is almost clear that there is a serious communication gap among the practitioners in different educational sectors. One of the reasons is that there has been no common framework that helps practitioners inform one another about their practices. The Course of Study is a kind of common framework in Japan, but the language used there is too general and therefore it is not useful as a reference when practitioners explain their practices. Actually their practices are often
explained arbitrarily and in this stage they have lost the feature of “diversity” and instead become “solitary”. It is obvious that the need for such a framework is urgent to prevent the diversity of educational practices, which is one of the key features of current situation in education, from becoming isolated and deteriorating further.

Learners, course writers, teacher trainers, course designers, employers and evaluation specialists can situate and orient their options and explain them to one another (which it is essential to do) only if they have common or compatible instruments to help them take account of and exploit this diversity [of practices in Europe]. (Council for Cultural Co-operation Education Committee, 1996, p. 6, Round bracket in original)

This argument will lead us into the issue of the probability that such a framework as CEF can be accepted and function in Japan. The position of this paper is affirmative, because the present situation of ELT in Japan shares some background with that in Europe, where CEF has been developed.

First, CEF has been developed in the context of the Communicative Approach, which emphasizes the meaning and contexts in language use. This trend is now spreading throughout the world, and Japan is no exception. Yoneyama (1996) admits that most teaching methods currently adopted in the world including Japan are based on the Communicative Approach. Sano (1996) states that this approach aims to meet the various needs of learners, and does not have a single fixed method. Concerning this point, Ozasa (1997) also states that the nature of this approach leaves practitioners with choices to be made so that they can create their own practices, because there is no ready-made single set of materials and techniques, unlike the methods introduced by Palmer and Fries, which are highly regulated. It means that practitioners are not expected to be technical experts, who pursue the only effective way of language education, but to be creative agents of practices, who carefully make choices depending on the contexts, taking various concepts and elements into consideration relating to language education. In other words, the practitioners must be flexible in consideration of the needs of students and their parents, the needs of local communities, the characteristics of students, and so forth. In this process, they are inevitably expected to make choices about what kind of concepts and elements in language education should be considered more important than others, to what extent, and why. What we must remember now is that one of the functions of CEF is exactly to help the users make such choices, as we have seen in Section 5.

Secondly, we must consider the fact that the importance of the concept of accountability is growing in the field of education. It is useful to quote Furuya (2000) in order to explain what accountability is.

Accountability means the teachers’ responsibility to explain their beliefs about
education, how they develop curriculum and syllabus, and how they teach in class depending on the beliefs. They are also responsible for reporting the results students gained to students themselves, their parents, colleagues, employers and taxpayers and so on... This concept is not prevailing yet in Japan, but it will be very important in the future. Teachers are expected to think of their curriculum and syllabus carefully and improve their practices to meet their responsibilities. (Furuya, 2000, p. 25, translated by the writer)

Furuya (2000) mentions only teachers, but there is no doubt that other practitioners, such as textbook writers, examining bodies, teacher trainers and so on should also have accountability, since they are inevitably expected to make choices in their practice. It is imaginable that such a concept as accountability contributes to the establishment of close networks among practitioners in different sectors, but those networks will not work properly without such a common framework as CEF, which assists practitioners to inform other partners of their own practices. What we must remember now is that one of the functions of CEF is exactly to help the users inform other users of their practices, as we have seen in Section 5.

We can conclude that CEF is one of the suggestive frameworks we can refer to when we discuss the problematic situations in Japan: the lack of communication and co-operation among practitioners. Needless to say, it is too optimistic to suggest that the introduction of such a framework as CEF would immediately solve all the problems Japan has, and also that CEF itself can be simply imported to Japan, or more broadly, Asian regions without any critical analysis as a framework of foreign language education. However, the ignorance of this framework does not lead to further discussion on its significance, and therefore the existence of this kind of framework needs to be widely recognized among the practitioners of foreign language education.

7. Remaining Issues

This paper has clarified the general characteristics of CEF, relating to the problems of ELT in Japan, but the nature of this paper is introductory. CEF is now in the process of implementation in many European countries. For example, Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland are eager to promote the use of this framework for teacher training, assessment of proficiency levels both for students and teachers, and other educational activities. In the case of the Netherlands, language portfolio (taalportfolio in Dutch) based on CEF has been developed for four different educational sectors: 9+ (primary education), 12+ (lower stage of secondary education), 15+ (upper stage of secondary education), and BVE (vocational education after secondary education). These portfolios are expected to take a role for encouraging learners' autonomous language learning and also for realizing better
continuity between different sectors. This is one of the actions that should be investigated by a case study in order to obtain a more concrete vision of implementation. This kind of case studies focusing on the implementation of CEF in several European countries will make clear the advantages and disadvantages of using this framework and provide us with some issues for further discussion on how the framework can be best utilized and how it can be modified.

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