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### **Putting the Plurilingual/Pluricultural back into CEFR: Reflecting on Policy Reform in Thailand and Malaysia**

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#### **Introduction**

In recent years, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has spread far beyond the borders of Europe and become a point of reference for language teaching in a variety of contexts. It has seen particularly wide-spread use in Asia, with Malaysia and Thailand recently joining the already large number of nations using the framework. There are, however, often significant differences between the values of the Council of Europe (CoE) that CEFR was intended to represent and the values that underpin its uses in non-European contexts. In particular, while CEFR was intended to usher a new 'post-communicative' era in language teaching, centred on the promotion of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, Thai and Malaysian policy positions it as an instrument for reinforcing the existing 'communicative' orientation. The purpose of this paper is to consider the contrasts between the 'communicative' and 'post-communicative' educational philosophies and to outline an alternative, CEFR-compatible agenda for policy reform.

#### **Plurilingualism/Pluriculturalism and Language Education**

The twin concepts of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism (below: PP) made their first appearance with the publication of CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), with the framework positioning them as part of the overall language policy agenda pursued by its parent institution, the Council of Europe. In particular, the agenda in question is best read in the context of deepening economic, political and cultural mobility and integration in Europe in the 1990s, which foregrounded the need for a language policy focussed on meeting the challenges of such processes. Reflecting such goals, PP are intended to stress:

... the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. In different situations, a person can call flexibly upon

different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4)

The key guiding principle behind these two concepts is thus an integrationist view of communicative competence, one which attempts to avoid seeing language learning as an exercise of compartmentalising knowledge but instead of expanding an already existing pool of communicative resources (Piccardo, 2013). This is seen particularly to distinguish PP from multilingualism/multiculturalism, since these have often been conceptualised as ‘multiple monolingualisms/monoculturalisms’ in which languages and cultures are set alongside one another, with no overlap or integration (Heugh, 2003). Additionally, PP are seen to account for two further key characteristics of communicative competence, namely its dynamicity, which can be observed in the ways that an individual’s competence shifts and expands as they come into contact with different languages and cultures, and its unevenness, which is related to the asymmetric ways in which individuals naturally acquire new communicative resources, with particular elements of competence often being prioritised over others (for more detail, see Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 133-135). These features, while already described in the original CEFR, have been further elaborated in the recently released CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018), which also features newly created scales specifically related to PP competence.

Such a shift toward an integrative, dynamic and asymmetric view of communicative competence in particular challenges two axioms which have dominated language teaching theory and practice, in particular with regard to English. The first such axiom is centred on the notion of monolingualism, which continues to underpin much theory and practice in the field, including its conceptualization of how languages are learned, how they should be taught and how proficiency is best assessed. With regard to learning, it has for instance been observed (e.g., by Bhatt, 2014) that contemporary second language acquisition theories continue to largely refer to the idealized monolingual speaker as a learning target and as point of reference for acceptability judgments. Monolingualism is also the norm in language teaching practice, with influential ELT methodologies such as communicative language teaching (CLT) broadly disregarding the L1 as a useful resource (Cook, 2001) or even seeing it as a marker of outdated academic practice (e.g., ‘grammar-translation’) or of insufficient teacher or learner L2 proficiency. While the idea of a monolingual English classroom has been challenged by more recent literature (Corcoll López & González-Davies, 2016; Illman & Pietilä, 2018), it is important to note that the ability of grass-roots actors (such as teachers) to implement significant shifts in their classrooms is constrained by assessment practices, which generally continue to be “based exclusively on monolingual homogenous constructs [which] forbid any other languages to ‘smuggle in’ or ‘bloom.’” (Shohamy, 2011, p. 421).

The second language learning axiom challenged by PP is rigidity with regard to how communication and acquisition of communicative competence are conceptualized and enacted. CLT, which continues to be the dominant methodology of choice for English language teaching policy and practice, was groundbreaking in its time in the sense that it adopted an overtly practical rationale for language learning, communication. Its revolutionary nature has, however, been somewhat tempered by an often exceedingly static understanding of communication, often represented simply through sets of ‘functions’ and matching ‘expressions’, with little room allowed for the fluidity and creativity that characterises real-life communication (Leung, 2013). It is such fluidity that PP is intended to address, as argued by Piccardo (2010), who positions the ‘action-based approach’ contained within CEFR not as a ‘communicative’ but a ‘post-communicative’ orientation in language teaching. Moving from the former to the latter is seen to entail a paradigm shift in which the notions of competence and complexity take centre stage, with learners being educated to flexibly face the uncertainty of real-life situations (ibid.).

It is with regard to these points that critiques of PP have also been strongest, with Flores (2013) arguing that this focus on competence and flexibility mirrors the neoliberal vision of an endlessly adaptable workforce. PP has also been critiqued for broadly disregarding issues of inequality, since it largely avoids engaging with the issues of power that govern relations between ‘languages’ and ‘cultures’ (Kubota, 2014; see also Block, 2018). CEFR, as the key purported instrument of PP, has also faced

critique, with Shohamy (2011) for instance highlighting that the construct underlying its scales is as monolingual as that of most language tests – a concern partly addressed by the 2018 Companion Volume – and Leung (2013) pointing out how simplified the supposedly flexible picture of communication is in the framework. This highlights a broader policy-relevant issue, namely that using CEFR in any given policy context may not, in itself, lead to the implementation of PP in that context. Rather, these facts suggest that if the PP-driven ‘action-based approach’ is to be truly enacted, it must be backed up by consistent action at both the (macro) policy level and the (micro) classroom level.

### **CEFR Plus CLT Does Not Equal PP: Examples from Thai and Malaysian Language Policy**

The need for consistent action to successfully implement the philosophy behind CEFR is underlined by two recent examples of use of the framework in Thailand and Malaysia. These two nations have since 2014 made several moves to implement CEFR, particularly as an instrument of their English language education policy. In this regard, these two nations exhibit significant differences as a result of their history, Malaysia having been part of the British Empire (and thus having a close association with English) and Thailand having retained political independence during the colonial period (and thus having a more distant relationship with English). Examining how these nations are implementing CEFR thus not only provides insight into how the framework and PP, as its underlying concepts, are interpreted outside Europe but also how they are appropriated in the service of the teaching and learning of English in contexts where the language has historically played different roles.

The two nations have since their announced adoption of CEFR produced a comparable set of policies – each has produced a macro-level national education strategy, meso-level policies related to English (in the Malaysian case, an area-specific strategy, and in the Thai case, a local adaptation of CEFR) as well as micro-level documents, particularly CEFR-based manuals directed at teachers. An examination of these documents<sup>1</sup>, however, points to a lack of uptake by policymakers of the agenda described above in either context, with PP seeing no mention in any of these policies. In addition, the practical side of how these policy texts anticipate the implementation of the framework also differs from the philosophy described in the previous section. In particular, rather than being the carrier of a ‘post-communicative’ approach, CEFR is in both contexts closely aligned with CLT and its key tenets. Thus, an English-specific strategy adopted by the Malaysian government (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2015), while making some reference to the ‘action-oriented approach’, sets the objective of “training teachers in communicative language teaching” (p. 75). Similar objectives are also set by Thai policies, where practical examples of the CEFR-CLT marriage are also provided. For instance, manuals produced for teachers at primary and secondary level (Thailand Ministry of Education, 2015) juxtapose CEFR descriptors with CLT-like topics (e.g., ‘At the Market’), with key principles underlying the communicative approach, such as ‘teacher as facilitator’ (reference to learner-centredness) and ‘discovery / analysis / reflection’ (reference to inductive instruction methods) (here, the manual draws on Richards, 2006), and with examples of activities often relied on to generate so-called ‘information gaps’.

Such a CEFR-CLT marriage is not unexpected but indeed a natural consequence of how the framework has been integrated in the ELT field, particularly in the hands of major textbook publishers and test developers. However, some critique may also be directed at such a reading of the framework, relating in particular to the rather dubious level of success for CLT in Asian contexts (for a review, see Littlewood, 2007). Research in both Thailand (e.g., Nonthaisong, 2015; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2009) and Malaysia (e.g., Hardman and A-Rahman, 2014) has indicated that the implementation of CLT in both educational systems has been largely unsuccessful. These failures offer two paths for reform, the first of

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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the recontextualization of CEFR in these policies involved significant conceptual shifts as the framework was appropriated in as an instrument of local ideological agendas. This phenomenon will be explored in more detail in a future paper, which is currently under review.

which involves ‘doubling down’ and continuing to argue that CLT is an appropriate solution but has simply not yet been implemented successfully. Such rhetoric, which often shifts blame on to teachers for their lack of competence or unwillingness to adapt, may be found in the two examined contexts both at the policy level (e.g., Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2015) and at the level of practice (as pointed out by Franz & Teo, 2018). The alternative to this position is to accept that CLT may in fact not exclusively offer appropriate solutions and that instead other paths for reform may also be pursued. I review some possibilities for such reform in the following section.

### **An Alternative Agenda for PP-driven Use of CEFR in Pedagogical Practice**

The path to articulating an alternative agenda for reforming language education by using CEFR begins with repositioning the framework as an instrument of genuine reform. While the pro-CLT position taken by Thai and Malaysian policymakers sees CEFR primarily as a means of aligning local learning goals to global expectations, such an alternative orientation should instead argue that appropriating CEFR should also foster a broader re-think of how language learning is conceptualized. A crucial element of such a reconceptualization should be PP, the concepts foregrounded by the Council of Europe in the original CEFR but largely backgrounded in Thai and Malaysian appropriations of the framework. The following sub-sections provide examples of possible conceptual principles for and practical examples of how this might be done through a more ‘post-communicative’, PP-driven interpretation of CEFR.

### **Stimulating Reflection on PP in the Classroom**

The most obvious way to implement PP is to develop content and activities through which learners may reflect on how the concepts are relevant both to themselves as individuals and to the society they are part of. An example of how this may be achieved is provided by Galante (in press), who developed a series of tasks for the promotion of PP and studied their implementation alongside the regular curriculum in an English for Academic Purposes programme at a Canadian university. The tasks<sup>2</sup> were designed to stimulate reflection from the students on the diverse nature of societies and of their own backgrounds by, for instance, asking them to trace the languages and cultures they had come in contact with and creatively integrate them in a hand-drawn self-portrait. These tasks were compared to the more traditional (monolingual) curriculum by the use of a control group, which had no additional exposure to such tasks. To enable this comparison, questionnaires were developed based on the newly developed scales for PP competence included in the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018) while interviews and observation were also used. The results indicated an increase in the perceived levels of plurilingual and pluricultural competence on the part of the experimental group when compared to the control group. In particular, Galante reports that the PP-oriented tasks facilitated the development of a classroom environment inclusive to the different languages and cultures of their students and instructors.

Such an approach is of particular value in the ELT context, since learning English now entails not only acquiring a language but also entering into a highly complex and diverse global community of English speakers in which many traditional assumptions are being challenged. Most notably, the fluidity of Englishes presents difficulties for a structural analysis of language ‘as system’ (Canagarajah, 2018). In such a diverse environment, the kind of flexibility foregrounded by the ‘action-based approach’ (see above) is key since speakers must be able to successfully interact with interlocutors speaking an array of different Englishes. While this may, in part, be aided by explicitly teaching the types of communicative strategies that have been observed in *lingua franca* interaction in English (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 2010) or by targeting specific linguistic features that enhance intelligibility (as suggested by Jenkins, 2002), a key

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<sup>2</sup> The tasks are available online at their author’s website: <http://breakingtheinvisiblewall.com> (Accessed 19 October 2018)

element of socialising students into the global English community is to raise their awareness of its diversity, with the value of integrating such an orientation into ELT being illustrated by recent research (for a review, see Jindapitak, Teo, & Savski, 2018).

## **De-trivializing the English Learning Experience**

In addition to reconsidering what an ELT classroom should look like from a sociolinguistic perspective, such a PP-driven and action-based orientation to language instruction suggests that a re-evaluation of the role of content in ELT is also needed if genuinely meaningful interaction is to be achieved. Critics of CLT have pointed out the fact that commercial ELT textbooks derived from the approach often contain content unengaging to learners, with Pennycook (1994) attributing this to an overall tendency of CLT to trivialize the learning process. While the use of simplistic content in materials targeted at basic users may have a pedagogic rationale, namely that advances in language learning can be achieved more readily if the content offered in activities facilitates straightforward conceptual links, Gray's (2010) research on the practices of major publishers suggests that the triviality of content is also related to the need of a profit-oriented industry to produce socially, culturally and politically neutral materials acceptable to a broad market. The materials thus produced, while intending to be non-offensive, often simplify matters to the extent that they reproduce cultural stereotypes or mediate ideologies like neoliberalism (*ibid.*).

Various ways of counteracting such trivializing tendencies exist, with perhaps the most straightforward being the closer integration of language and content learning, an approach which has been referred to both as 'content-based instruction' (CBI) or 'content-and-language integrated learning' (CLIL). Since the distinction between the two is often unclear both in theory and practice (Cenoz, 2015), I will here refer to CBI/CLIL broadly as an approach which balances content- and language-learning goals, with the nature and exact balance between the two depending on a variety of factors. Among these are the learners' entry-level proficiency (lower levels may require a more explicit focus on language), teachers' qualifications (which may limit goals in both language or content) and on the curricular context of a particular CBI/CLIL class (what prior knowledge a teacher is able to draw on). If such factors are taken into account and suitable curriculum planning takes place, CBI/CLIL can be seen to inject into the learning process the kind of authenticity that CLT approaches may fail to bring (Pinner, 2013). This is, in turn, thought to lead to enhanced language learning, as Yang (2015) reports in her study of CLIL use at a Taiwanese university, where students in the experimental (CLIL) group significantly outperformed other (non-CLIL) students. A further benefit of the integration of language and content learning may be enhanced mobility and flexibility, in turn leading to better employability (Yang, 2017), in particular if the CBI/CLIL classroom incorporates the students' L1(s) (Lin, 2016).

From several perspectives, CBI/CLIL has the potential to support the values advanced by PP and the action-based approach. The clearest synergy is in the authenticity that CBI/CLIL attempts to instil into language learning, which matches up closely with how the action-based approach attempts to overcome the decontextualised triviality of CLT. At the same time, the flexibility of a CBI/CLIL classroom which allows for the use of different languages can be considered conducive to the development of the kind of PP competence that CEFR advocates (Council of Europe, 2018). CBI/CLIL should, however, not be seen as a universal solution, since its success or failure depends on a number of contextual factors. Classroom practice should be taken into account because of its potential influences, with Yang's (2015) results for instance suggesting that a teacher-centred approach in CLIL does little to develop learners' productive skills. Further, large-scale rollouts of CBI/CLIL can lead to increases in inequality, as shown by the abortive attempt in 2002-09 to use English as the language of instruction in mathematics and science classes in Malaysia. Gill (2014) reports that this temporary shift had the effect of widening existing gaps between urban and rural contexts due to disparities in resources and teachers' and students' English ability (see also Ali, Hamid, & Moni, 2011, Tan & Lan, 2011). The point which this case underlines is that while approaches CBI/CLIL undoubtedly have great potential as alternatives to CLT, their

implementation must also be flexible to take account of the disparities between different teaching/learning contexts in order to avoid endangering both language- and content-learning objectives (Bruton, 2011).

## Empowering Learners through the Action-based Approach

The two alternative directions for CEFR appropriation in Asia presented thus far have largely focussed on curriculum planning and how this may be shifted toward a post-CLT orientation. While such shifts are important, their focus is mostly on curriculum planners (policymakers at the macro-level and teachers at the micro-level), and they should thus be complemented by reforms which are centred on the agencies of individual learners. By this, I do not refer primarily to the idea of a learner-centred classroom but more to how language learning may be stimulated outside classrooms, where learners themselves may set objectives. CEFR has mainly been interpreted as a language standard in Asian contexts, a view which is generally testing-oriented and largely excludes learners from being able to interpret the framework. One key objective of the action-based approach described above, however, is to allow learners to use the framework to set their own learning objectives and for self-assessment (Little, 2005).

A practical example of how such a learner-centred orientation may be implemented while also taking into account the concepts of PP is the *Tándem* programme for cultural and linguistic exchange offered by the University of Sevilla in Spain<sup>3</sup>. In this programme, through which students are able to obtain part of the number of foreign language credits required by the university, two speakers of different first languages are paired up and asked to spend a semester learning each other's language through a variety of tasks. For instance, a local student, L1 speaker of Spanish, who wishes to learn German is paired up with an exchange student from Germany who wishes to learn Spanish. The two are provided with a number of tasks centred around learning about each other's culture, with the local cultural practices in the Sevilla region acting as a guide, but are also allowed to deviate from this curriculum and follow their own interests. The assessment also places the students centre-stage as they assess their own progress and that of their partner, with only a third of the grade coming from a tutor.

## Conclusions

In light of research findings suggesting that some of the key values underlying CEFR, in particular PP and the 'action-based orientation', have not been taken up by policymakers in Thailand and Malaysia, this paper has sought to present alternative ways that the framework may be used to reform ELT in Asian contexts. These alternatives have ranged from simply adding a PP-inspired focus to the ELT classroom to implementing more radical content- or learner-driven approaches. Indeed, what these possibilities underline is the diversity of how CEFR may be referred to in policy reform and how this can lead to the greater empowerment of actors at the local level, in particular teachers and learners. While the vagueness and open-endedness of CEFR has led to it being critiqued in fields where precision is needed (in particular language testing, see Alderson et al., 2006), it is precisely this quality which allows for the framework to be flexibly implemented according to local needs – if actors are enabled and encouraged to do so by policy.

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<sup>3</sup> The programme is described in more detail on the institution's website (in Spanish): <http://filologia.us.es/estudiantes/tandem/> (Accessed 22 October 2018).

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