Implementing CEFR in secondary education: impact on FL teachers’ educational and assessment practice

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In order to study the impact of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) on foreign language teachers’ teaching and assessment practice, a survey, interviews and case studies were carried out in Dutch secondary education. Teachers’ perceptions, their needs and plans, and the implementation of CEFR were studied. Results show that the use of CEFR is most widespread in the use of CEFR-related textbooks. The group of teachers that apply CEFR more extensively is relatively small. Schools differ considerably with respect to the application of CEFR for curriculum planning and for assessment and professional development. These results are discussed in the light of factors that foster the implementation of educational innovations, such as compatibility and adaptation at school and teacher level.

*Keywords:* CEFR, foreign language teaching, educational change, curriculum innovation

In het voortgezet onderwijs in Nederland is een onderzoek uitgevoerd naar de impact van het Europees Referentiekader voor taalvaardigheid (ERK) op de les-en toetspraktijk van mvt-docenten. Percepties, behoeften, plannen en implementatiepraktijk zijn onderzocht via vragenlijsten, interviews en casusbeschrijvingen. De resultaten maken duidelijk dat op de meeste scholen ‘werken met het ERK’ vooral betekent dat ERK-gerelateerde leergangen gebruikt worden. De groep docenten die het ERK intensiever gebruiken, is relatief klein. Er zijn grote verschillen tussen scholen waar het gaat om de toepassing van het ERK bij curriculumontwikkeling, toetsing en professionalisering. Deze resultaten worden in verband gebracht met factoren die de implementatie van curriculumvernieuwing beïnvloeden, zoals de toepasbaarheid en aanpasbaarheid op school- en docentniveau.

*Kernwoorden:* ERK, Europees Referentiekader, vreemdetalenonderwijs, docentprofessionalisering, curriculumvernieuwing
The impact of CEFR

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), published in 2001, aims to provide a set of common standards for levels of L2 proficiency, to be used in language learning and teaching. It consists of a descriptive scheme and a set of six common reference levels of target language proficiency (Little 2007). CEFR takes an action-oriented approach to foreign language education, with a focus on what a learner ‘can do’ in the L2. It does not prescribe specific pedagogical approaches (Council of Europe 2001). The Council of Europe has published a general guide for users of CEFR (Trim 2001) and additional guides on the application of CEFR in specific areas, such as the development of level descriptions in national or regional languages (Council of Europe 2005), the development of language education policies (Council of Europe 2007) and the alignment of tests to CEFR (Council of Europe 2009). In addition, to support teachers, curriculum developers and language testers, different types of materials have been developed, such as reference level descriptions for specific languages, guides and case studies (see http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/DNR_EN.asp).

So far, the impact of CEFR in different countries has been diverse and partial (Little 2011). Little (2006) distinguishes different domains in which CEFR has had an impact, such as assessment, teacher education, curriculum design and pedagogy. According to Hulstijn, Alderson and Schoonen (2010), CEFR has become an important reference framework in foreign language education, for example, in curriculum development and assessment. In addition, North (2007) observes that CEFR has provided professionals in the field of foreign language education with a common discourse. In 2005, a survey on the use of CEFR at an institutional level (Council of Europe 2005) revealed that it was mainly used in assessment and teacher training. A follow-up survey at national level (Martyniuk and Noyons 2007) showed that CEFR was frequently mentioned in official documents, such as national curricula or examination guidelines. In addition, a majority of respondents found CEFR useful for the development of curricula, syllabi, assessment and teacher training. Up till now, CEFR has had the strongest impact on assessment, even though it is difficult to align assessment with CEFR (Hulstijn et al. 2010; Little 2011). In addition, CEFR’s six global scales of common reference levels of language proficiency (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) are probably the most widely known elements of CEFR (Council of Europe 2005; Hulstijn, et al. 2010). Despite its impact on assessment, CEFR has had little substantial impact on L2 pedagogy (Byrnes 2007; Westhoff 2007; Little 2011). As Little (2011: 383) contends: ‘The overwhelming tendency to make only partial use of CEFR means that it has the least impact where it should make the greatest difference: in the L2 classroom’.

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Focus of the study

The study reported in the present paper focuses on changes in both teaching and assessment practice, and the perceptions, needs and plans of the teachers. This perspective may help to shed light on the contextual factors that foster or hinder the implementation of CEFR in the L2 classroom. In order to describe these factors, we shall draw on findings from studies on curriculum design (Van den Akker 2003) and educational change (Van den Branden 2009). Since CEFR aims to provide a ‘common basis’ for curriculum guidelines (Council of Europe 2001: 1), this literature may help to clarify the factors that contribute to the implementation of CEFR. Van den Akker (2003) presents two frameworks of curriculum design. The first framework distinguishes five levels of curriculum development. The supra level is the international level of curriculum development. The macro level refers to the national educational systems. The meso level is the level of individual schools or institutes. The micro level is the level of individual teachers and classrooms, and comprises of, for example, textbooks and lesson plans. The nano level, finally, refers to the pupils. The meso and micro level are the focus of this study. The second framework describes different ways in which a curriculum can be represented. At the meso level, the curriculum can be broken down into an ideal curriculum, such as a vision or a pedagogical philosophy, and a formal or written curriculum. At the micro level, the curriculum can be broken down into the perceived curriculum, as it is interpreted by, for example, teachers, and the operational curriculum, which refers to the daily practice of teaching and assessment.

Regarding the implementation of educational change in general, Hargreaves and Fink (2006, p. 1) observe that ‘Change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement and extraordinarily difficult to sustain’. Van den Branden (2009) discusses a number of factors that can either help or hinder teachers’ involvement in educational change: relative advantages and problem-orientedness; compatibility; complexity; trialability; observability; feasibility and concreteness. First, teachers should be convinced of the relative advantages of the innovation. This happens, for example, when an educational innovation is perceived as a solution to a specific problem. Second, the innovation should be compatible with the teachers’ current educational practice. Another important factor is complexity. The innovation should not be too complex, and teachers should be given time to try it out and experiment with the innovation in their classrooms. In addition, innovations that can be observed in the educational practice of fellow teachers are more likely to be adopted. And finally, teachers should have a concrete idea of what the innovation entails and should perceive the innovation as feasible.

Context of the study: CEFR in Dutch secondary education

Since its introduction, CEFR is increasingly known and used in Dutch secondary education. Drawing on Van Els and Tuin (2010), we shall present
a brief overview of Dutch secondary education as a context for CEFR implementation. Pupils enter secondary education at the age of 12. They choose between one of three types of secondary education: vmbo (junior secondary vocational education, 4 years), havo (higher general secondary education, 5 years) or vwo (pre-university education, 6 years). The main foreign languages that are taught are English, French and German. Depending on the type of education and lower or upper forms, there are substantial differences, such as the amount of time dedicated to teaching and whether the languages are compulsory or optional subjects. For the purpose of this paper it suffices to say that English is the most widely taught foreign language.

Directions for the levels of target language proficiency to be obtained are defined for each type of education. With respect to upper secondary education, the levels of target language proficiency to be obtained in the receptive and productive skills are expressed in CEFR levels. The final examinations consist of two parts, a centrally controlled reading examination, developed by the Dutch National Testing Institute (CITO), and school examinations, in which the other skills are assessed by the schools themselves. CEFR attainment levels are defined for the school examinations, and the national reading exams consist of items linked to different CEFR levels, according to a fixed percentage. Schools are relatively autonomous with respect to decisions regarding content and teaching methodology. This implies that the Dutch government cannot directly mandate top-down educational innovation at operational curricular levels.

In 2008, the Dutch Ministry of Education launched a national project (CEFR Master Plan, 2008–2011) to foster the implementation of CEFR in Dutch secondary education. It was a joint collaboration between various key institutes in the field of foreign language education in the Netherlands. The project consisted of a wide and diverse range of measures, products and activities in four broad areas:

- dissemination of information regarding CEFR;
- CEFR in assessment practice;
- CEFR in teaching practice; and
- teachers’ professional development regarding CEFR.

The implementation of the online Dutch version of the European Language Portfolio, launched in 2004, was not included in this plan, because it was already addressed in previous projects and evaluated separately.

An example of a product developed to disseminate information regarding CEFR is the Dutch website www.erk.nl, which aims to inform teachers, pupils, parents and school management alike. As regards the use of CEFR in assessment, CITO developed a range of tests that can be used to determine pupils’ CEFR level. The use of CEFR in teaching practice and teachers’
professional development was addressed at numerous conferences, at which good practice and examples of teaching materials were presented. Up to the beginning of 2012, the use of CEFR in Dutch secondary education was not regulated by law, except for the alignment of items in the national reading exams to CEFR.

Research questions

The goal of this paper is to examine the impact of the CEFR Master Plan on foreign language (FL) teachers’ teaching and assessment practice and on curriculum development. The research questions are as follows:

RQ 1: What is the impact of educational policy regarding the implementation of CEFR on FL teachers’
   RQ 1.1: perceptions regarding the use and the relevance of CEFR?
   RQ 1.2: teaching practice?
   RQ 1.3: assessment practice?
   RQ 1.4: needs and plans?

RQ 2: Which contextual factors foster the implementation of CEFR in schools, both at the meso and the micro level of curriculum development (Van den Akker 2003)?

Three studies were carried out. First, a large-scale survey study was conducted in the spring of 2010. Second, a follow-up series of interviews was carried out in the autumn of 2010, and third, in the spring of 2011, two case studies were conducted. Studies 2 and 3 build upon the results of the previous study. An analysis of the large-scale survey allowed us to distinguish between respondents with little or no experience with CEFR, with an average experience and with a broad experience with CEFR. Selected participants from these experience groups were addressed in the interviews and the case studies. Methodological triangulation was applied in order to increase the validity of the research project as a whole. If the three studies yield similar results, this can be seen as stronger evidence of the nature of the impact of CEFR in Dutch secondary education.

With the exception of the question regarding ‘perceptions’, which was not addressed in the survey, each study encompasses all research questions. Our discussion of the survey study shall focus on quantitative results regarding teachers’ knowledge of and experience with CEFR. With respect to the interviews, we shall focus on teachers’ use of CEFR in daily teaching and assessment practice. The case studies focus on the implementation of CEFR at the meso and micro level of curriculum development.
Study 1: large-scale survey

Method

Participants

A total of 373 teachers filled in the questionnaire: 141 teachers of English, 101 teachers of French and 131 teachers of German (response rate 33%). With respect to school type, 203 teachers taught classes in the upper forms of general secondary education and pre-university education, whereas the remaining 170 respondents only taught in the lower forms. As regards years of experience as an FL teacher, 35 respondents had worked less than five years as a teacher, 83 respondents had worked between five and 10 years as a teacher, and 254 respondents had more than 10 years of teaching experience. A total of 232 teachers were also heads of their foreign language departments.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire covered the four themes of the CEFR Master Plan: dissemination of information regarding CEFR, CEFR in assessment practice, CEFR in teaching practice and teachers’ professional development regarding CEFR. Each theme was broken down into sub themes regarding knowledge, use, perceived relevance and needs and plans (see Table 1). To gain insight into CEFR-related changes in the respondents’ teaching and assessment practice, a number of retrospective questions were included. Following Sprangers and Hoogstraten (1989), these questions focused on the situation two years before the survey was administered and required the participants to report whether they perceived any change in a specific domain. The retrospective questions concerned the need for (more) information on CEFR in their teaching and assessment practice, and the use of CEFR in the respondents’ educational practice.

The questionnaire was administered electronically and consisted of 43 questions that were to be answered by all respondents, and 19 additional questions that were directed at respondents with specific knowledge and experience. For example, if a respondent did not use a specific test type, it was not required to answer questions about the perceived value of that test. As shown in Table 1, some sub themes were not elaborated upon, because they were already covered in other parts of the survey or in one of the other studies.

Procedure

At the time of the study, there were 1,137 secondary schools in the Netherlands. Within each school, FL teachers are clustered in language
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
<th>Theme 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>Use</strong></td>
<td><strong>Perceived value</strong></td>
<td><strong>Needs and plans</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffusion of information regarding the CEFR</td>
<td>The CEFR in assessment practice</td>
<td>Relevance of test types and evaluation instruments for respondent’s educational practice</td>
<td>Need for information on the use of the CEFR in educational practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s knowledge of the CEFR</td>
<td></td>
<td>Relevance of test types and evaluation instruments related to the CEFR</td>
<td>Need for information on the use of the CEFR in teaching practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s knowledge of the CEFR compared to co-workers</td>
<td>Use of test types and evaluation instruments related to the CEFR</td>
<td></td>
<td>Needs and plans regarding professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of sources regarding the CEFR</td>
<td>Use of sources regarding the CEFR</td>
<td>Relevance of sources for respondent’s educational practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of sources regarding the CEFR</td>
<td>Use of test types and evaluation instruments related to the CEFR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived value</td>
<td>Relevance of sources for respondent’s educational practice</td>
<td>Relevance of test types and evaluation instruments related to the CEFR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs and plans</td>
<td>Need for information on the use of the CEFR in assessment practice</td>
<td>Need for information on the use of the CEFR in teaching practice</td>
<td>Needs and plans regarding professional development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the relevance of specific sources and instruments, because these were either language-specific or specific for the Dutch educational context.

*Teaching materials were broadly defined as any pedagogical materials used in the classroom.
specific departments. This means that (most) schools have a German, an English and a French department, each comprising a number of teachers, one of them being the head of the department. Taking into account province, schools were randomly distributed according to the foreign languages taught. A set of 399 foreign language departments was drawn up, one per school and equally distributed over the foreign languages. The department was asked to choose one of their teachers to fill in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered online and teachers received a gift voucher for participating. Due to a low return rate, even after sending reminders, each of the 1,137 schools was eventually addressed, eventually resulting in 373 respondents.

Results

Respondent characteristics

The departments were asked to choose one of their teachers to fill in the questionnaire. Since this could potentially bias the results, respondents were asked to compare their own knowledge of CEFR with the knowledge of their colleagues. Forty five per cent of the respondents estimated that their knowledge of CEFR was comparable with that of their colleagues, 34% responded that they knew more and 21% said they knew less or were not able to estimate this. Teachers who work in upper secondary education indicated significantly more often that they know more about CEFR than teachers who teach in lower secondary education.

RQ 1.2: the use of CEFR in teaching practice

A number of questions focused on the use of CEFR in the teachers’ daily educational practice. Forty two per cent of the respondents reported using a textbook related to CEFR. Table 2 shows respondents’ level of experience with CEFR in other aspects of foreign language teaching: selection and design of teaching materials, formative assessment of oral and written production, and formative assessment of listening and reading comprehension. Overall, a majority of about 75% reported a low or intermediate level of experience with CEFR in the formative assessment of learner performance and selection and design of teaching materials. In addition, teachers who taught in the upper school of secondary education had a higher level of experience with CEFR in these areas than teachers who only taught in the lower school of secondary education.

RQ 1.3: the use of CEFR in assessment practice

The use of CEFR in assessment practice was addressed in two ways. First, a number of questions focused on informal, formative, day-to-day assessment,
discussed above (see Table 2). Another part of the questionnaire focused on the use of internationally renowned, summative tests related to CEFR: Cambridge Certificates, Goethe-Zertifikate and Delf-Scolaire. Since the European language portfolio is based on an international instrument that can be used for self-assessment (see e.g. Little 2011), it was also included here. Table 3 shows a range of CEFR-related tests that can be used in Dutch secondary education, and the percentage of respondents that knew and/or used these tests. The results show that the majority of the teachers knew these tests, but did not use them. Similarly to the findings regarding teaching practice, teachers who taught in the upper school had more experience with these tests than teachers who only taught in the lower school.

Table 2. The use of the CEFR in teaching practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of experience with the CEFR</th>
<th>% no experience</th>
<th>% little experience</th>
<th>% medium experience</th>
<th>% much experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selecting materials that match the CEFR-levels of my pupils.</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using CEFR-criteria to design materials.</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing the CEFR-levels of my pupils’ oral production.</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing the CEFR-levels of my pupils’ reading comprehension.</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing the CEFR-levels of my pupils’ listening comprehension.</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing the CEFR-levels of my pupils’ written production.</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Teaching materials were broadly defined as any pedagogical materials used in the classroom.

Table 3. The use of internationally renowned CEFR-related tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>% used, at least once</th>
<th>% known, but not used</th>
<th>% not known</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European Language Portfolio</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge Certificate, English teachers (N = 141)</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goethe-Zertifikat, German teachers, (N = 131)</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delf-Scolaire, French teachers, (N = 101)</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ 1.4: needs and plans regarding the use of CEFR in teaching and assessment practice

Fifty nine per cent of the respondents plan to use CEFR more frequently in their teaching practice in the near future. Similarly, 58% of the respondents plan to use CEFR more frequently in their assessment practice in the near future. There are no differences between the needs and plans of teachers who work in the upper school versus those who work in the lower school of secondary education. The interviews and the case studies were used to gain more insight into the nature of the needs and plans of the teachers, and these results are reported in the corresponding sections of this paper.

Study 2: interviews

Method

Participants

The participants (N = 18) were randomly selected from those who had filled in the questionnaire and had indicated that they were interested in participating in follow-up research. The selection took into account the foreign language taught (French, English, German) and level of experience with CEFR (low, intermediate, high). Level of experience was based on their response to the questions in Table 3, regarding CEFR and selection and design of teaching materials and formative assessment. Since there was a high correlation between the six types of experience (Cronbach’s α = 0.95), for each respondent the mean score of the six questions was calculated. Based on these scores, respondents were categorized as having a low, intermediate or high level of experience with CEFR. Within each experience group, two German teachers, two French teachers and two English teachers were interviewed. Participants were contacted by e-mail to make an appointment for a telephone interview. If they did not reply or did not want to participate, another participant from the same language and experience group was randomly drawn and contacted. The teachers received a gift voucher for their participation.

Procedure

The interviews were held by one researcher and recorded with the participants’ permission. A semi-structured interview protocol was used, which elaborated upon the participant’s experiences reported in the questionnaire. Depending on the personal experiences of the participants, the interviews took between 10 and 30 minutes.
Analysis

The researcher who had also held the interviews wrote a portrait of each participant. To verify the quality of these portraits, six portraits were drawn, taking into account language and level of experience, and assigned to three researchers who were part of the project team (2 portraits each). Each researcher first listened to the corresponding recordings and used the interview protocol to summarize the essential parts of the portrait. The portraits of the first researcher were then compared with this list by a third researcher who had not previously heard it, to verify whether topics were overlooked. This analysis revealed that the portraits written by the first researcher were adequate. Agreement was reached for about 90% of the topics. The remaining topics concerned minor details, and did not involve contradictions. Second, a coding scheme was developed to analyse the content of the portraits. This scheme covered the themes of the research questions. Third, two raters used the coding scheme to analyse the 18 portraits. The raters were required to indicate which of the topics of the coding scheme were present in each portrait. Agreement was reached for 87% of the topics. In order to reach agreement on the remaining cases, these were discussed by the raters.

Results

RQ 1.1: perceptions regarding the use and relevance of CEFR

The respondents were asked about their associations related to applying CEFR in their educational context. Since this question raised a broad range of topics, we will focus on those that were mentioned by the majority of teachers. All teachers reported a neutral or positive attitude towards CEFR. Two positive aspects of CEFR were frequently mentioned by teachers from each experience group. First, they appreciated that CEFR makes it possible to compare FL proficiency across Europe. Second, they appreciated that CEFR provides insight into the required levels of target language proficiency. Teachers with an intermediate or high level of experience with CEFR also used this question to raise some critical points. All intermediate and highly CEFR-experienced teachers pointed out that it is difficult to apply CEFR in daily teaching practice. They also mentioned frequently that it was not very clear what working with CEFR entails.

RQ 1.2: the use of CEFR in teaching practice

The majority of teachers, of all experience levels, reported using a textbook related to CEFR. Other topics were only mentioned by teachers with an intermediate or high level of experience with CEFR. These teachers mainly
reported using CEFR in the practice of oral skills. Writing and listening were mentioned only incidentally, and reading was not mentioned at all. In addition, these teachers reported using CEFR mainly in the upper school, in comparison with the lower school. They explained that FL teaching in the upper school is more competence-based, and that in the upper school the exams draw nearer, making assessment more important. These teachers also frequently mentioned that they designed their own materials, and that they explained CEFR to their pupils.

The teachers were also asked whether CEFR had changed their pedagogy. This question was only answered by the teachers with intermediate and high levels of experience. The majority explained that they had moved towards a more, or even more, communicative and competence-based approach to foreign language teaching. They also reported an increased awareness of the levels of target language proficiency to be obtained by their pupils, for example, by differentiating between learners and relating CEFR-levels to the Dutch grading system.

RQ 1.3: the use of CEFR in assessment practice

The majority of intermediate and highly experienced teachers reported that CEFR was part of their schools’ examination programme, which presents an overview of the curriculum, including tests, exams and the required levels of target language proficiency. In addition, the majority reported using tests that were included in their textbooks, which are related to CEFR. A minority used the European language portfolio. A number of teachers referred to CEFR as a practical and/or potential tool to assess oral and writing skills.

RQ 1.4: needs and plans regarding CEFR

A minority of intermediate and highly experienced teachers reported that they did not have plans, explaining that they wanted to continue using CEFR as before. The other (highly) experienced teachers mentioned plans to move towards more communicative, competence-based teaching, with a focus on oral skills, plans to use CEFR in assessment, to relate teaching materials to CEFR and to discuss various aspects of using CEFR with colleagues. Most teachers with a low level of experience did not report plans to use CEFR. Finally, with respect to professional development, the respondents mentioned that they needed more examples of good practice in schools that use CEFR, more training on the use of the level descriptors, specifically in relation to the Dutch grading system, and more training on how to use CEFR in curriculum development.
RQ 2: the implementation of CEFR in schools

The schools of teachers with a low level of experience with CEFR differ from the schools of experienced teachers with respect to the implementation of CEFR. A minority of teachers, all with a low level of experience with CEFR, reported no increase or even a decrease of attention to CEFR. In addition, the school management teams of these teachers did not introduce CEFR into their FL policies, nor did they support the teachers in their use of CEFR. This does not necessarily imply a conscious decision to reject CEFR. It is more probable that the school management teams do not know CEFR. The majority of teachers, both of intermediate and high level of experience, reported that the use of CEFR had increased over the past two years (prior to the questionnaire). This was mainly due to the initiatives of individual teachers, who were relative experts on CEFR within their schools due to their specific interests or background. These teachers reported knowing more about CEFR than their colleagues. In addition, they also reported that their own foreign language department knew more about CEFR than the school’s other foreign language departments. CEFR was frequently discussed during their department meetings and their departments took the initiative to promote the use of CEFR in their schools. Teachers with an intermediate and high level of experience with CEFR also reported that their school management had taken initiatives to implement CEFR, for example, by supporting teachers to organize workshops on the use of CEFR.

Regardless of their experience group, the respondents mentioned a number of factors that could promote the use of CEFR in schools. First, they stressed that the foreign language departments and the school management team should work together to implement CEFR, for example by scheduling meetings or by following corporate training. Second, CEFR in its current form should be made more practical and ‘ready to use’, for example, by developing a range of teaching and assessment materials. And third, teachers need time to learn about CEFR and to explore how to use it in their daily teaching practice.

Study 3: case studies

Method

Participants

Two teachers were selected from among the respondents that were interviewed for the second study. They both had a high level of experience with CEFR and used CEFR regularly in their teaching and assessment practice. In addition, they reported that CEFR was used by all foreign language departments in their schools. After the interviews, these teachers were asked whether their schools would be willing to participate in a case
study on the implementation of CEFR, and both schools consented. They received a small remuneration for their participation.

School A offers a regular foreign language curriculum, and an ‘enhanced foreign language curriculum’, in which pupils receive extra lessons and take international exams, such as the Cambridge Certificates, the Goethe-Zertifikate and the Delf-Scolaire exams. Five experienced teachers of English, German and French were present during the group interview. In addition, the deputy headmaster of the lower forms, a former teacher of English, took part in the case study.

School B was founded in 2005 and CEFR was part of the foreign language curriculum from the start. Drawing on CEFR, FL teachers develop the foreign language syllabuses and tests themselves. Five experienced teachers of English, German and French took part in the group interview. One interview was held with the foreign languages co-ordinator, who was also the head of the English department.

Procedure

Each case study consisted of an interview with a member of the management team and a group interview with the foreign language teachers. Both interviews were held by two researchers and recorded with the participants’ permission. One researcher asked questions and the other took notes. Semi-structured interview protocols were used, which elaborated upon various sources of information about the school, such as the school’s website and the teachers’ experiences reported in the interviews. Depending on the personal experiences of the respondents, the interviews took between 60 and 90 minutes.

Analysis

One researcher used the recordings of the interviews to write a portrait of each school. The second researcher, who took notes during the interviews, read each portrait and concluded that they were an accurate reflection of the schools. In addition, the schools were offered the possibility of commenting on the case studies. In both cases, the schools agreed with the results and added some minor changes, such as the use of specific materials to practice listening skills. These changes did not detract from the results and were included in the final version of the case studies.

Results

We shall focus on a number of similarities in the way both schools use CEFR, for example, the factors that have led to the introduction of CEFR, the schools’
vision on education, and the leap from theory to practice. Differences between the schools are related to the specific ways in which each school uses CEFR within these general themes.

RQ 1.2 & 1.3: CEFR in teaching and assessment practice

Even though both schools have implemented CEFR, respondents point out that it can be quite difficult to turn theory into practice, as CEFR cannot be readily put to use in the classroom. In both schools, teachers took the initiative to discuss CEFR and to find out what working with CEFR meant to them. They were supported by the school management team. The results of this process bear similarities, but differ in some respects as well. The similarities relate to FL pedagogy. Teachers from both schools reported a shift towards an (even) more communicative approach to FL teaching, with a primary focus on language use and a more active role for the learner. In practice, in both schools this has led to more attention to practice and assessment of oral skills and a change in the approach to grammar. In the lower levels, the focus is more on communicative effectiveness than on grammatical accuracy, whereas accuracy becomes gradually more important as learners move towards higher CEFR levels. In addition, in both schools, the practical application of CEFR in daily teaching and assessment practice is work in progress. Both schools differ with respect to the extent to which they have implemented CEFR in the curriculum. In school A, CEFR remains an external tool that serves specific goals, such as offering ‘enhanced foreign language education’ for their more gifted pupils. School B, on the other hand, has used CEFR in all levels of curriculum development from the start.

RQ 2: the implementation of CEFR in the schools

Both schools introduced CEFR a number of years before the case studies took place. The respondents find it difficult to highlight specific circumstances that led to the introduction of CEFR. The factors mentioned are both from within and outside the schools and are both directly or indirectly related to CEFR. The schools differ with respect to the nature of these factors. Examples from school A are activities with respect to teachers’ professional development and competition with other schools, while some examples from school B were curriculum design and materials design. In addition, both schools find it difficult to determine causes and effects or to describe the exact chronological order of the events that led to the introduction of CEFR.

In both schools, there’s a match between CEFR and the school’s vision on (foreign language) education. The schools differ with respect to the specifics of their visions. For example, school A focuses on education for the highly gifted and aims to offer its pupils as wide a range of subjects as possible, whereas
school B focuses on competence-based forms of assessment. Despite these differences, in both cases, CEFR matches the school’s educational vision. This implies that, as a broad, general concept, CEFR lends itself to different interpretations and can be moulded to fit specific educational contexts and needs. The schools differ regarding the degree to which CEFR is formally embedded in the curriculum. While school A uses tests and teaching materials related to CEFR, CEFR is not formally included in the written programme of testing and exams. In school B, CEFR is present in both foreign language policy and daily teaching and assessment practice.

Discussion

Three studies examined the impact of CEFR on FL teachers’ teaching and assessment practice, their perceptions regarding CEFR, their needs and plans, and the implementation of CEFR in their schools. First, the large-scale survey focused on the use of CEFR in FL teachers’ educational and assessment practice. The majority of teachers use a textbook related to CEFR. About three quarters of the respondents report a low or intermediate level of experience with CEFR in the formative assessment of learner performance and selection and design of teaching materials. About 60% of the teachers know a range of internationally renowned CEFR-related tests, but only a minority have used these tests. About half of the respondents plan to use CEFR in their educational and assessment practice more often in the future.

Second, the interviews revealed that teachers appreciate that CEFR makes it possible to compare FL proficiency across Europe, and that CEFR provides insight into the required levels of target language proficiency. However, experienced teachers also mentioned that it can be difficult to use CEFR in daily teaching practice, because it is not always clear what working with CEFR entails. The majority of teachers use a textbook related to CEFR. Experienced teachers use CEFR in the practice and assessment of oral skills and, to a lesser extent, writing skills. CEFR changed their pedagogy towards a more communicative and competence-based approach to foreign language teaching. In most schools, the implementation of CEFR can be characterized as a bottom-up process. Initially, CEFR is the initiative of individual teachers. After a while, they manage to convince their own and other foreign language departments and their school management teams to use CEFR.

Third, two case studies were carried out. In both schools, teachers, supported by the school management team, took the initiative to discuss what working with CEFR meant to them. With respect to FL pedagogy, they shifted towards an (even) more communicative approach to FL teaching. Their approach to grammatical accuracy changed as well. In the lower levels, the focus is more on communicative effectiveness, whereas accuracy becomes gradually more important in the higher CEFR levels. In both schools, the implementation of CEFR was reported as work in progress. A range of
circumstances both from within and outside the schools and directly or indirectly related to CEFR have led to the introduction of CEFR in the schools. In both schools, there is a match between CEFR and the school’s vision on foreign language education. The schools differ with respect to the degree to which CEFR is formally embedded in the curriculum.

We shall now discuss these results in the light of findings from curriculum development and educational change. First, we shall focus on the micro curriculum level of individual teachers and their classrooms, making a distinction between the operational and the perceived curriculum (Van den Akker 2003). Then, we shall turn to the meso curriculum level of the school as a whole, and distinguish between the formal and the ideal curriculum. On both levels, compatibility and adaptation seem to be factors that determine the extent to which CEFR has an impact as educational innovation.

CEFR at the micro level of daily teaching and assessment practice

The interviews and case studies revealed that teachers recognize elements of their current and/or desired practice in CEFR. A substantial minority even say that CEFR presents nothing new, because they have always been working in that way. This raises a number of questions. First, regarding the operational curriculum: what does the teachers’ current practice look like? Second, with respect to the perceived curriculum: what type of FL pedagogy do teachers associate with CEFR? How do teachers perceive their own use of CEFR? In general, the current operational curriculum in the Netherlands can be characterized as a communicative approach to FL education (Van Els and Tuin 2010). Within this broad approach, some teachers tend towards a more grammar-oriented approach, whereas others adhere to a competence-based or task-based approach to foreign language teaching (Westhoff 2007). With respect to a perceived CEFR-based curriculum, it is important to note that, even though CEFR adopts an action-oriented approach to foreign language use, it does not prescribe a specific type of FL pedagogy (Council of Europe 2001). In addition, CEFR itself is a broad framework that does not offer language-specific materials or tests (Little 2007) or materials that can be readily put to use in the classroom (Alderson 2007). Our studies revealed that teachers seem to associate CEFR with a communicative, competence-based approach to foreign language teaching. More specifically, they perceive CEFR as an approach that facilitates their pupils to learn how to use the language in real life, instead of mere formal knowledge of the language.

In the Netherlands, schools and sometimes individual teachers are relatively free to choose their own pedagogical approaches (Thijs and Van den Akker 2009; Van Els and Tuin 2010). As a result, the operational curriculum differs considerably between schools and individual teachers, for example, with respect to the type and number of CEFR-related activities that are undertaken. In most schools the use of CEFR is limited to the use of CEFR-
related textbooks. Teachers who have a wider experience in working with CEFR point out that CEFR has had an impact on their FL pedagogy. Changes that were frequently mentioned were a more balanced approach to the different skills, increased attention to practice and assessment of oral skills, and increased attention to fluency over accuracy in the lower CEFR levels. In addition, teachers who want to move towards an (even) more communicative, competence-based pedagogy feel that CEFR provides them with support and justification along the way.

Another reason that the operational CEFR curriculum differs widely between and within schools is related to the finding that teachers adapt (elements of) CEFR to fit their own specific needs and context. Educational innovations often tend to be re-interpreted during the implementation process (Van den Branden 2009). It is well-known that CEFR requires adaptation and development before it can be put to use in the classroom (Byrnes 2007; Little 2011). Our studies revealed a number of ways in which teachers adapt CEFR. For example, foreign language departments often discuss and decide as a team what it means for them to work with CEFR, for example, by exploring issues related to the how, when and where of the use of CEFR. Other examples are teachers who design materials, for example, communicative tasks, with a certain CEFR level in mind, or teachers who select, adapt and apply rubrics to assess specific skills. It is important to bear in mind that too much adaptation may change an educational innovation altogether (Van den Branden 2009). This may lead to teachers who claim they use CEFR, whereas in fact they might have changed some essential features considerably.

In addition, there is a potential conflict between teaching and assessment. A shift toward a competence-based approach to foreign language teaching calls for a related approach to assessment (Van den Branden 2009). As pointed out by the teachers in the interviews and case studies, 50% of the pupils’ final score on a foreign language in the Dutch school system is determined by a compulsory reading exam, which has quite an impact on the foreign language curriculum. Experienced teachers frequently mention that for them working with CEFR means dedicating a more or less equal amount of time to the teaching of different skills. In practice, this implies paying more attention to oral skills. It is likely that this results in a teaching practice that may not be compatible with the current assessment practice. Since inconsistency between innovations and assessment practice can hinder the actual implementation of educational change (Thijs & Van den Akker 2009; Van den Branden 2009; Little 2011), this is an important factor to take into account.

The implementation of CEFR at the meso curriculum level of individual schools

The issue of compatibility also plays a role at the meso curriculum level of individual schools. It is important to note that the Dutch government does
not formally prescribe the use of CEFR. It is up to the schools to decide whether, and if so, how, they implement CEFR. Two factors seem to play a role here. First, the interviews and case studies revealed that, when schools decide to use CEFR extensively, it is generally because CEFR matches the school’s visions or ideal curriculum. This match can refer to the curriculum as a whole, or to specific elements. While a limited number of schools base the entire curriculum on CEFR, other schools restrict the use of CEFR to specific areas, such as the practice of oral skills or the use of international tests as benchmarks. Even though CEFR can be part of the school’s ideal curriculum, this does not necessarily imply that it is also part of the formal or written curriculum. In most schools, CEFR is a work in progress and its status can be more formal or informal. The second factor refers to the finding that most schools make only partial use of CEFR. Schools seem to take those elements from CEFR that they find advantageous and that seem to fit their specific context. While adaptation and local appropriation are characteristics of the use of CEFR (see e.g. North 2007; Little 2011), too much re-interpretation may lead to the use of a watered-down application of CEFR. In this case, schools may assume that they implement CEFR, whereas there is in fact a gap between the perceived and the operational curriculum.

Conclusion

The studies in this paper have shown that, generally, Dutch FL teachers have a basic understanding of CEFR and appreciate its utility as a tool to compare target language proficiency on an international level. However, its use in daily teaching and assessment practice is in most cases limited to the use of CEFR-related textbooks and preparation for national examinations aligned to CEFR. In a considerable number of cases, CEFR is used selectively, that is, it is applied for curriculum development, teaching and/or assessment to meet the specific needs or views of individual departments or teachers. The group of teachers or schools that apply CEFR more widely in their educational practice is relatively small. Given the intentions and plans reported by the respondents, however, it is to be expected that this group will gradually increase in the near future. In addition, schools differ with respect to the extent to which they include CEFR in the curriculum and the way teachers and management work with CEFR. Professional development activities for teacher teams, related to the application of CEFR in teaching and assessment, can enhance the implementation of CEFR. Such activities should take into account the degree to which CEFR is implemented in order to offer language teachers the support and focus that is most feasible for their professional context.
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