

Can Do and Cannot Do – CEFR inspired examination and assessment in a Swedish higher education context

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The focus in this paper is on the introduction and implementation of learning outcomes based on the descriptors in the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). It discusses reaction to the introduction by teacher educators as well as the influence on teacher assessment practice in courses for prospective teachers of English as a foreign language. The paper presents some of the results from a case study concerning changes made in connection with the Bologna process in a department of education within a university college in Sweden. The results show that the adoption of the CEFR descriptors was contested and had a minimal influence on assessment practice. The aim of the paper is to explore possible reasons for the lack of influence, something that was not developed fully in the original case study.

Keywords: Common European Framework of Reference, EFL learners, teacher education, teacher cognition, assessment, case study

1 Introduction

The communicative view of language learning behind the CEFR has influenced teacher training for EFL teachers in Sweden and how foreign languages are taught today in Swedish schools. However, its influence on higher education has been much less. As Little (2007) has shown, the CEFR has had limited use at university level and its impact on language testing ‘... far outweighs its impact on curriculum design and pedagogy’ (p. 648). Little (2010) has also acknowledged that the route from the CEFR to the language classroom is far from straightforward and direct and suggests that ‘an adequate implementation of the CEFR is still rare’ (p. 21). A number of studies are reported on the use and implementation of the CEFR (Elias, 2011; Faez, Majhanovich, Taylor, Smith, & Crowley, 2011; Hulstijn, 2007; Little, 2011; Westhoff, 2007), but few have investigated the influence of the CEFR on higher education practice. The study addresses the area of higher education and focuses on the influence on teacher practice of efforts to use the introduction of learning outcomes based on the

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CEFR descriptors as a way of bringing about a change in assessment practice in a university setting. The research questions in this article are as follows: firstly, what do teacher educators say about the introduction of learning outcomes connected to the CEFR as a starting point for organizing teaching and learning?; and secondly, what influence did the “can do” approach of the new assessment forms have on teacher assessment of students’ language proficiency?

The study highlights the complex reality of attempts to move away from traditional language teaching and assessment towards a greater focus on the communicative aspects of language use. There are significant differences between the more traditional university and more communicative language teaching approaches in terms of the view of what language is and what educational aims are. The traditions towards language teaching in higher education are outlined first in this article in order to situate the reader in the Swedish context. As the CEFR (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*) indicates we regard teaching, learning and assessment as interconnected concepts and a covering term including all three aspects of language education (Council of Europe, 2001). Then the scope and significance of the CEFR is introduced and discussed. We then give an account of the different changes introduced in the researched teacher education programme, followed by a discussion on how some of the different changes were received by the teachers. Finally, we will explore some of the possible reasons for how the changes were received, as well as some conclusions on the effects and possibilities of change in language teacher education.

2 English language teaching and teacher cognitions in teacher education

In language teaching theory and practice, the focus on language system or language use has been at the heart of discussion over the last 100 years. In fact, those different foci could be traced back as far as to the Classical era and onwards in history, focusing on one of three broad aims: the social (communication), the literary (creativity) or the philosophical (analytic) (Kelly, 1969). Bailey (1994) has described the traditional ways of language learning at the modern university as the liberal tradition, having the aim of instilling ‘an appreciation of foreign literature and language through a scholarly analysis of their content and structure’ (p. 41), which could be compared to the philosophical stance above. In addition, this has been a way of socializing new students into the discipline’s cultural discourse, where the ‘hidden curriculum’ describes the process where university teachers feel that they have the task of participating in the socialization of students into the community that they themselves have once been socialized into (Margolis, 2001). In contrast to the liberal tradition Quist (2000) uses the term of the Instrumental Paradigm to describe the other broad approach to language teaching and learning, in line with what Kelly (1969) names social. It is more typically found outside of higher education, for example in the area of English for special Purposes (ESP). According to Quist (2000) the instrumental approach to language learning aims ‘...to provide students with the ‘real-world’ skills which are valuable to employers, language classes are aimed at developing a communicative competence’ (p. 131). The communicative approach has a pragmatic view of language, focusing on real communicative tasks, the use of authentic material

and 'getting the message across', based on the descriptions of language use derived from Hymes' (1971) notion of communicative competence. However, it was also in focus during the renaissance, or with the words of Kelly (1969, p. 396): 'Old approaches return, but as their social and intellectual contexts are changed they seem entirely new'.

Compared to language teaching and learning at the university level described above, the communicative aim of language teaching in the Swedish secondary education curriculum was mentioned already in the School Commission of 1948 and has thus been emphasised on the official level for a long time (Apelgren, 2001). At the school level the debate has mainly concerned different approaches to teaching and learning, where the grammar-translation approach has been contrasted to the communicative one. For language teacher education, the different theoretical and ontological stance between language studies at secondary and tertiary level, might prove a problem. In short, communicative theories view language learning as an active cognitive process where the learner questions and reasons in an inductive way. It puts demands on the learner to engage in his or her learning; through experiences, through construing, through reflection and through reconstruction. Teaching in this sense means meeting the needs of the individual pupil and finding ways to guide that individual pupil, rather than teaching everyone the same sequential forms. In addition, the teacher education for 'subject teachers' in Sweden has changed during the past fifty years and follows the international trend particularly in the shift from a grammar-translation approach (philosophical) to a communicative (social) approach. Beach (1995), drawing on science teacher education, points out that the cognitive developmental perspective on learning has been more apparent in schools than in the education of subject teachers in Sweden. Thus, in teacher education, where the subject study has a strong position, the emphasis is often on coverage of huge classified and structured content through factual transmission.

The above has bearing on how language teachers in higher education view language teaching. In the research area of teacher cognition (e.g. Apelgren, 2001, Borg, 2006; Pajares, 1992) it is believed that thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and private theories that teachers have will affect the way they view teaching and how they teach. In teacher cognition research, teachers are regarded as active, contextually and constructive decision-makers drawing from earlier experiences. In addition, teacher change and development must be viewed as dynamic processes influenced by teachers' personal and professional identities (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2011). Not least the context has been pointed out as important to take into considerations when stated cognitions and practice diverge (Borg, 2006; Feryok, 2010). Borg (2003) mentions in particular prior language learning experiences which are deeply rooted and significant in cognitions about language learning and which may be challenging and sometimes not possible to change. Sometimes practice is changed without real cognitive change taken place due to strongly held beliefs, which lead to an incongruence between stated beliefs and actual practice. Thus, Borg (2006) proposes further research into core and peripheral constructs and how these interact in teachers' cognitions' systems.

3 Curriculum development through the means of the CEFR

The aim of the CEFR is to provide a reference work that can be applied to any European language and that would present language professionals a basis for language teaching and learning as well as assessment. The CEFR describes second language proficiency as the ability to use the language across five activities (listening, reading, writing, spoken interaction, and spoken production) at six levels: A1 and A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), and C1 and C2 (proficient user) (Council of Europe, 2001), with descriptors for each category as “Can Do” statements which describe what learners can do in their L2s at each proficiency level. The reference scales describe the cultural context in which each language is situated and defining different levels of the knowledge and command of the language in order to judge the learner's progress. The Can Do statements focus on what students know and are able to do using the language rather than what they do not know.

Although the CEFR is not intended to prescribe practice (Council of Europe, 2001), some supporters of the CEFR present it as a means of bringing about curriculum development.

According to North (2014) the CEFR is intended as a ‘heuristic to stimulate curriculum development and reform’ (p. 39). In an earlier paper, North (2004) argues that the function of the CEFR is to ‘stimulate reflection and discussion’ arguing that the aim of the CEFR is to (a) establish a common meta-language to talk about objectives and assessment; (b) encourage practitioners to reflect on their current practice, particularly in relation to analyzing practical language learning needs, setting objectives, and tracking progress; and (c) agree on common reference points. Little (2011) also points to the CEFR’s stated capacity of bringing curriculum, pedagogy and assessment into much closer inter-dependence, by providing a basis for setting learning objectives, developing activities and material, and designing assessment tasks.

Although the CEFR is very clear that it should not ‘embody any one particular approach to language teaching to the exclusion of all others’ (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 18), according to McNamara (2011), the can-do statements represent an ‘assumed view of language proficiency’ (p. 501), which would imply an underlying theoretical standpoint on how languages are learned. Fleming (2006, p. 54) argues that the CEFR has the potential ‘...to focus on the importance of use and purpose, implying a more dynamic rather than static concept of language’. This concept of language can be difficult for educators and course designers. Keddl (2004, p. 50) suggests that the communicative approach of the CEFR can create a perceived barrier for teachers and course designers to integrate can-do statements into existing syllabuses, especially those that foreground grammar progression.

Little (2009) argues that the CEFR points towards a task based approach, where the use of the target language is essential. Little (2010) sets out the stages for ‘implementing’ the CEFR:

- Explore the proficiency levels of the CEFR. Use a version of the CEFR that is faithful to the proficiency levels while taking into account the particularities of the (local) context.
- Explore the implications of the selected descriptors for linguistic content.

- Develop teaching and learning supports designed to encourage the adoption of task-based approaches to use the target language for classroom management and explanation.
- Design forms of assessments that reflect the communicative orientation of the CEFR so that teachers and learners can ensure a strong continuity from curriculum through pedagogy to assessment (p. 21).

As will be explained later in this paper, the stages proposed by Little (2010) above were used to guide the implementation of the CEFR into the courses that are the basis of this study.

The CEFR is used increasingly today in all levels of foreign language learning. It has become a key reference document for language test developers and serves as an instrument for the self-assessment of language ability via calibrated scales (Harsch & Rupp, 2011). A number of studies highlight the CEFR's successful use in both formal tests and other types of assessments, including rating learner performances (Council of Europe, 2001; European Commission, 2012; Huhta, Alanen, Tarnanen, Martin, & Hirvelä, 2014).

A number of criticisms have also been made of the CEFR, however. It has been criticized for using vague and imprecise language (Alderson, 2007) and for being difficult, or maybe even impossible, to use in language testing development (Weir, 2005). Because the hierarchy of difficulty represented by the increasing levels is largely based on difficulty judgments from language educators, Fulcher (2004) has suggested that the CEFR cannot be used to gauge proficiency, or provide any standardized language ability. The CEFR levels have been criticized for containing overlaps and inconsistencies and for being too general, language-independent, and based on impressionistic terminology (Alderson, 2007; Fulcher, 2012).

A number of studies have pointed out the difficulties of aligning language tests with the CEFR. Wu and Wu (2007) point to a lack of precision in can do statements for evaluating learners' performance, while Papp and Salamoura (2009) report that assessors found it difficult to map young language learners' performances and tasks against CEFR scales and descriptors. Leucht, Tiffin-Richards, Vock, Pant, & Köller (2012) in a study of how well teachers judged ninth graders in an English reading test by means of CEFR descriptors found that teacher level of accuracy was relatively low; with teachers both underestimating the averaged students' EFL proficiency compared to test results and overestimating the variance in the distribution of proficiency levels.

More generally, others, such as Westhoff (2007) have pointed to the difficulties of adapting the CEFR to an entire language programme, suggesting that teachers must share its basic philosophy and ideas. The potential problems that Westhoff identifies were found in research done in Canada by Faez et al. (2011) on teachers' perceptions of CEFR-informed instruction. The research found that the CEFR was found to be time consuming and the teachers using it found it difficult to understand and implement into their classroom teaching (Faez et al., 2011).

McNamara (2011) is critical to the use of the CEFR as it reduces local variation and do not take into consideration other sets of cultural values and goals of language education. Case studies show that implementation of the CEFR-based language curriculum reform is difficult, especially if it is forced top-down without much adaptation of the CEFR to the educational context. De

Mejía (2011), for example, has shown in a study looking at the adoption of the CEFR as a guiding document in a National Bilingual Program in Colombia, that implementation provoked resistance and dissatisfaction among teachers who considered that the policy was imposed on them from above, overwhelming them with additional work required for implementation.

Castellotti (2012) has spoken of the growing misuse or at least inappropriate use of the CEFR, suggesting that in many places there has been a ‘...“blind” application of the scales, and of excessive standardisation where there is no reflection on the modes of assessment and the necessary relative and situated nature of the competences in question’ (p. 50). In response to these criticisms, supporters of the CEFR highlight the inherent “flexibility” of the Framework and make clear the need for careful adherence to its intended uses, and warn against instances of misuse (Little 2007; North 2014).

4 The CEFR inspired changes made to the local level

In line with the Bologna process, the courses which are the focus of this case study were for the first time in 2008 organized around student learning outcomes. The learning outcomes were developed in a group made up of two teacher educators from the university, three teachers working in the Swedish secondary school system and three students from previous courses given for prospective teachers of English.

As all forms of assessment in the courses were to involve the use of the target language, English, learning outcomes needed to be developed to measure the students’ language proficiency. Inspired by the first stage for ‘implementing’ the CEFR outlined by Little (2010) (“Explore the proficiency levels of the CEFR”), the group decided to use descriptors in the CEFR as the learning outcomes for the teacher students’ language proficiency in English. More specifically, descriptors contained within the *National Language Standards* published in 2005 by CILT, the National Centre for Languages, were adapted for this purpose (www.cilt.org.uk/standards). The descriptors were seen by the group as already functioning learning outcomes that could be used to describe the desired language proficiency levels in examination tasks in the courses concerned. In this respect, the adoption of the CEFR descriptors was strongly influenced by the arguments put forward on the learning outcomes approach in Bologna policy documents; suggesting that it is possible to identify and measure achievement and learning through observable and measurable outcomes (Cedefop, 2008). The local introduction of the CEFR descriptors was inspired by the arguments put forward in Bologna policy documents suggesting that learning outcomes can be seen as the basis for curricular re-organisation. Adam (2008), for example, suggests learning outcomes produce

...an automatic focus on how learners learn and the design of effective learning environments. There is a cascade effect that links the use of learning outcomes, the selection of appropriate teaching strategies and the development of suitable assessment techniques. (Adam, 2008, p. 13)

As far as the group developing the learning outcomes was concerned, the arguments put forward by Adam appeared to resonate in some of the arguments put forward by some supporters of the CEFR, such as those mentioned by North

(2004) and Little (2009, 2010) above, suggesting that the CEFR can represent a means of bringing about curriculum development. As a result, the two teacher educators that were part of the group believed that the introduction of CEFR inspired learning outcomes represented a significant intervention into the normal planning procedure for the courses concerned.

A number of changes were made at the local level. Inspired by the task based approach suggested by Little (2009), a number of new examinations were introduced into the courses, based on a more active and communicative use of English. For example, in addition to the traditional sit-down written examination a student run grammar lesson to test the student's grammar knowledge was added for the first time. In addition, and inspired by the last stage for 'implementing' the CEFR outlined by Little (2010, p. 21); 'Design forms of assessments that reflect the communicative orientation of the CEFR' attempts were made to connect teacher assessment of language proficiency with the CEFR's 'can do' focus. Standard assessment forms were introduced which followed the wording of the language descriptors in the CEFR. This change was inspired by the arguments put forward that assessment should relate to the verbs that are used within learning outcomes (Rust, 2002).

The other two stages for 'implementing' the CEFR as set out by Little (2010, p. 21); 'Explore the implications of the selected descriptors for linguistic content' and 'Develop teaching and learning supports designed to encourage the adoption of task-based approaches to use the target language for classroom management and explanation' were not carried out in any systematic way. The only significant change in these respects was the introduction of a number of language and didactic workshops into the courses, which had the aim of giving the students general and individualised help needed to tackle the new learning outcomes. It is difficult to assess the influence of the adoption of the CEFR based learning outcomes on teaching practice generally as no data was produced from classroom interactions. However, course evaluations from students suggest that the workshop teachers did not always have the CEFR range of 'action-oriented' descriptors in mind during the workshops and that the focus was primarily on grammar and writing, with less focus given to oral production and oral interaction.

Due to time constraints connected to the introduction of the Bologna process, as well as the general lack of awareness of the potential problems of adapting the CEFR to a language programme, little or no support was arranged within the teacher educator group as far as the practical implementation of the CEFR descriptors was concerned. The CEFR user guide (Council of Europe, 2001) was not consulted and only one training session was carried out where assessment of an example student paper was to be connected to the CEFR descriptors.

In the results we will focus on teacher educator reactions to the changes as well as the influence of the changes on assessment and teacher feedback.

5 Method

5.1 *The case study environment*

The case study environment is a department of education within a university college in Sweden. The courses that are in focus are two 30 higher education credit (hec) courses within the teacher education programme. Each course

attracted around 20 students and each one is taught by a small group of teachers and who have been responsible for organising learning around either the subject (English) or the subject didactics part of the courses. Each course involved a school based period (practicum); both in a Swedish secondary school and in a school in an English speaking country.

For the first time, to pass assessment tasks which involved use of the target language, English, students were required to reach a minimum level of C1 on the CEFR scales. To reach these learning outcomes the students were, for example, required to show that they could:

- Express myself fluently and accurately in writing on a range of general, academic or professional topics, varying my vocabulary and style according to the context.
- Participate effectively in extended discussions on abstract and complex topics of a specialist nature in my academic or professional field.
- Give a detailed oral summary of long and complex topics relating to my area of study.
- Understand in detail highly specialised texts in my own academic or professional field, such as research reports or abstracts.
- Follow extended speech even when it is not clearly structured.

5.2 Data collection

This paper uses some of the data that was produced as part of a PhD thesis investigating how the learning outcomes aspect of the Bologna process was perceived at the micro level of policy implementation (Baldwin, 2013). One of the authors of this article was the course coordinator for both courses.

In this study data has been produced from teacher talk in planning meetings as well as discussions about the use of the CEFR descriptors as the learning outcomes for the teacher student language proficiency. In all the data comprises just over 60 hours of recorded teacher talk in 34 planning meetings and in written and verbal discussions. Six teacher educators, including the course-coordinator, taught in the courses concerned and took part in the planning meeting discussions which form part of the data produced in this case study. Three of the teachers taught the subject English, two of the teachers English subject didactics and one of the teachers taught both the subject English and English subject didactics. In addition, examples of teacher assessment of student work have also been used. Consent to use the data produced was obtained from all the participants involved.

5.3 Data analysis

In this paper an ‘interpretive-constructionist’ approach (Rubin & Rubin 2012) is used to try to understand the meanings and values behind the discussions about the use of the CEFR descriptors and their influence on teacher practice. Rather than testing pre-defined hypotheses (Gibson & Brown, 2009), a grounded theory approach is used to discuss the number of ‘issues’ which arose during teacher planning meetings and in discussions about the changes made to the courses in connection with the introduction of the CEFR descriptors. Stake (1995), describes ‘issues’ as ‘problems about which people disagree, complicated

problems within situations and contexts' (p. 133). Stake further suggests that 'Choosing issues helps us define data sources and data gathering activities' (p. 133). The issues raised in the discussions were coded in accordance with points found in the literature on the CEFR and the potential problems involved in implementing the CEFR into curriculum planning. Furthermore, and in order to better understand the values behind individual reactions to the changes, reference is made to other literature taken up in this paper concerning English language teaching traditions and teacher cognitions in teacher education.

The other form of data that has been produced is from an analysis of the comments made by teachers in a selection of assessment forms used to give feedback on examination papers written by students and uploaded to an online learning platform. Assessment forms for spoken production examinations were also used by the course teachers, but comments were given orally and face to face with students and not saved digitally on the university's learning management system. For these reasons assessment forms for oral production have not been used as data in this study. The aim of the analysis is to see if the "can do" approach of the new assessment forms led to teachers using more positive responses/feedback on students' language proficiency. The analysis is on the kind of feedback given by the teachers generally, rather than by individual teachers.

A total of twenty assessment forms were analysed and the forms selected from 5 different examination papers. The feedback on the forms was given by the three teachers who taught the subject English in the course. The first six assessment forms that have been analysed concern feedback given by the first of the teachers on a literature review paper. The next seven assessment forms concern feedback given by the second of the teachers on two papers; one about the English syllabus in Swedish schools and the other concerning ethical values and democracy in education. Finally, the last seven assessment forms concern feedback given by the third of the teachers on two other papers; a paper about the status of English in the world and another paper on classroom research.

6 Findings

As already mentioned, the two research questions in this article are: firstly, what do teacher educators say about the introduction of learning outcomes connected to the CEFR as a starting point for organizing teaching and learning; and secondly what influence did the "can do" approach of the new assessment forms have on teacher assessment of students' language proficiency. The findings presented in this section concern teacher trainer reaction to the introduction of the CEFR inspired learning outcomes as well as the influence of the CEFR descriptors on the examination and assessment of student work.

6.1 Reaction to the introduction of learning outcomes based on the CEFR descriptors

As has already been explained, the decision to introduce learning outcomes connected to the CEFR as a starting point for organizing teaching and learning in the course was taken outside of the teaching group. As a consequence, there were mixed opinions within the teaching group itself about using the CEFR descriptors. One teacher educator felt that the use of the descriptors was positive because

The Swedish students have gone to school where we have a communicative view (of language)...where the teacher is more of a guide

Another teacher educator said that they did not think using the Framework was a problem because the students

...are quite aware of this when I talk to them and some of them they already know it from secondary school. You have to explain and give them examples...that's very important

However, one of the teacher educators reacted against using the CEFR for purposes other than for which they felt it was intended. The teacher educator pointed out that the CEFR scale was designed originally '...for people themselves to say "I feel I can do this"...for people who are not language teachers'. The same person felt that the CEFR scales were "hypothetical" and thus should not be taken at face value. The teacher was openly critical of using the CEFR in the courses concerned, suggesting that

.... it's very difficult to specify exactly what the language proficiency is...the way they have tried to do it ...to bring them together and say this is a certain level ...it has to be a little hazy ..you have fuzzy edges. The Framework is a lot about communicating ...it's more about performing and experiencing from a subjective point of view...with insufficient focus on grammatical accuracy in the language learning outcomes for students.....the CEFR is very good at avoiding grammar; they sort of lump it together in one line ... it would be better to use another method to judge the students' language proficiency.....there should have been some kind of key, procedure, where everything anticipated is visible and measurable and you could have said so and so many percent, this that or the other; you know a sort of objective, quantifiable method

There were also disagreements in the teaching group concerning the inclusion of new forms of examination based on a more task based approach reflecting a more active and communicative use of English. One discussion concerned a new examination form which involved the introduction of a student run lesson to test the student's grammar knowledge. The teacher educators were generally positive to the new examination as it was felt planning the lesson was seen as a good pedagogic exercise for the students. However, one of the teacher educators expressed concerns that knowledge about the English language would not be covered adequately in the new teacher run lesson examination. The fear was that the learning outcome for knowledge about English grammar (that the student should be able to explain grammatical issues that are common problem areas for learners of English), meant that the students were not getting enough grammar study in the course. The teacher argued that "there is a risk that you end up doing a grammar exam that is suitable for grade 9 yourself and that your knowledge stops there...the (exam) didn't cover you know the more advanced issues...they need to have tougher grammar tests.

6.2 Connecting teacher assessment to the CEFR's 'can do' descriptors.

The main change made locally was the use of the CEFR descriptors as the learning outcomes for the teacher students' language proficiency. All of the teacher educators were responsible for assessing the students' language proficiency, and examinations were divided up between teacher educators, with one teacher educator responsible for assessing an individual task.

All the course teachers felt that it was difficult to apply the CEFR descriptors when assessing examples of student work. One teacher educator felt that

it has been in some cases hard to define whether someone who doesn't reach the C1 level is at the B1 or the B2 level However, the descriptors did help the assessment of students.....if you study them for a while you would find them

Some of the teacher educators expressed concern generally that students would have problems understanding the CEFR descriptors, as they 'were vague' and 'saying the same thing'. One teacher educator argued that

It's impossible to follow requirements for B1 and C1 when you sit there with a piece of writing and then say that this is exactly this or that, when they are doing individual pieces of work..... The descriptors had made assessment harder. That is the difficulty about introducing something which seems to be a real criterion instead of leaving it up to the teacher to mark according to norms and expectations

This teacher educator did not feel that the CEFR descriptors added value. They argued that level C1, the pass grade, was

...really another name for what we understand by a (pass), that we are sort of giving it a sort of hocus pocus name so that it sounds like we had really penetrated into the differences between a B2 and a C1I think both you and I will say this is C1 when we feel sort of happy about it and that there are not too many obvious mistakes...C1 is to me if it is acceptable at this level, which means there are some mistakes which you can accept... We have all been in the job for years; we have done a lot of studying. You can recognise when something is poor.

The same teacher educator questioned the value of the changes to assessment practice. They reacted against the assumption that the course teachers had not been explicit and consistent in their assessment and grading of student work in the past and insisted that there had been a system previously "based on knowledge of what was being studied at previous levels".

The changes were seen as unnecessary and towards the end of the case study research period, and as a result of teacher discussions, the assessment checklists used to give feedback on examination tasks were modified away from closely following the wording of the language descriptors in the CEFR towards more simplified descriptions and with more focus on grammatical accuracy.

As mentioned above, data has been collected to help gauge whether the "can do" approach of the new assessment forms led to teachers using more positive responses/feedback on students' language proficiency. The results in the table below show the positive and negative comments given by three teachers in response to the terms used on the assessment form. The first number is the total amount of responses/feedback given and the number in brackets refers to the total amount of words that were used in the assessment forms looked at:

Table 1. Assessment forms and teacher feedback.

Assessment form term	Positive feedback given	Negative feedback given
<i>Fluent and accurate</i>	6 (11 words)	17 (137 words)
<i>Varies vocabulary and style according to the context</i>	19 (22 words)	3 (38 words)
<i>Clear and well-structured</i>	16 (25 words)	6 (33 words)
<i>Uses tenses, aspects and moods of verbs correctly</i>	7 (8 words)	
<i>Uses sentence structures correctly</i>	12 (16 words)	11 (52 words)

The survey of assessment forms shows that teacher feedback was far more expansive when focusing on deficits in students' knowledge. Mistakes and errors were explained in more detail than positive examples of language use. The majority of these more expansive comments focused on grammar mistakes and errors and typical examples include the following teacher comments:

"A number of grammar errors; use of adjectives instead of adverbs, omission of articles, incorrect prepositions."

"Some errors-i.e. subject verb agreement errors, adjective/adverb errors."

"A number of word choice errors, incorrect prepositions, use of articles."

"A number of verb-subject agreement errors. Slight overuse of the progressive form."

Positive examples of language use were not only mentioned much less frequently, but in a non-expansive way (i.e. by using words like 'yes' or 'ok'). Very little if any of the feedback given focused on the extent to which learners had mastered the behaviour in question, with no connection made to the various levels on the CEFR.

Despite the intention of connecting assessment to the descriptors in the CEFR, and to give feedback of a "can do" nature, the analysis of the comments on the assessment forms suggests that the focus of teacher educator assessment was more likely to focus on grammatical errors rather than other aspects of language proficiency, such as sociolinguistic and strategic language competence and the general 'can do' approach of the learning outcomes connected to the CEFR. The main focus of assessment was on what is missing; what the learner doesn't know or cannot do.

7 Discussion

The aim of this study has been to investigate the influence of the introduction of learning outcomes based on the CEFR descriptors on assessment practice in a university setting. The research questions concern reaction by teacher educators to the introduction of learning outcomes connected to the CEFR as a starting point for organizing teaching and learning; as well as the influence that "can do"

based assessment forms had on teacher assessment of students' language proficiency.

The findings point to a number of tensions between the aims of the CEFR inspired changes and the teacher trainers' normal assessment practice. The findings show, for example, that there were mixed opinions within the teaching group about using the CEFR descriptors for assessment purposes. The CEFR scales were described by one teacher educator as being "hypothetical" and suggested that they should not be taken at face value. Another point of discussion was that the descriptors were felt to be vague and difficult to understand.

A further tension created by the introduction of the CEFR inspired assessment forms concerned the non-language specificity of the CEFR descriptors. Teacher educators did not feel that the descriptors were wide enough in scope to enable the detailed feedback on English language usage that they were used to giving. In particular, teacher educators felt that the communicative focus of the CEFR descriptors meant that there was insufficient attention paid to grammatical accuracy. Some of the teacher educators expressed the view that the changes meant that they could not carry out their job as they expected. The "can do" focus of the CEFR proved problematic, and as a result the assessment forms were subsequently modified away from the wording of the language descriptors in the CEFR towards more simplified descriptions and with more focus on grammatical accuracy.

The fact that the adoption of the descriptors connected to the CEFR had little influence on teacher assessment practice is not surprising. Research has questioned the suitability of the CEFR descriptors as a basis for assessment. Alderson (2007), for example, has criticised the CEFR for using vague and imprecise language, while Weir (2005) has pointed to the difficulties in using the CEFR for test development or comparability.

More generally, the local implementation of the CEFR did not follow all of the stages set out by Little (2010). The full implications of the selected descriptors for linguistic content and course organization were not fully appreciated. The changes were inspired by essentially "top down" arguments put forward in Bologna policy documents, as well as some on the CEFR, suggesting the CEFR inspired learning outcomes could be seen as the basis for curricular re-organisation. The introduction of the CEFR descriptors into course planning was made outside the scope of the main teaching group, which alienated some members of the group and led them to be suspicious about the whole process. The changes were contested; with some of the teacher educators critically assessing the authoritativeness and comprehensiveness of the CEFR descriptors and questioning the CEFRs theoretical foundations.

The "top down" approach to implementation led to changes being made without consideration of the local educational context. As McNamara (2011) has argued, the use of the CEFR reduces local variation and ignores other accounting systems, or sets of cultural values, or formulations of the goals of language education, which cannot be directly translated into the language of the CEFR. McNamara (2011) even suggests that by doing so the CEFR erases the 'historical and cultural complexity and specificity of language learning in particular settings, and the meaning of language learning in the lives of individuals' (p. 39).

In our results we can see that McNamara's apprehension above is precisely what the teachers indicate and have experienced. The changes made were seen as a threat to existing practices and the ability of teachers to make decisions about their practice based on their experience. The changes were seen to challenge and undermine traditional practices and the values, skills and knowledge they are founded on, their core values on teaching and learning being challenged (Borg, 2006). Some of the teacher educators felt that the changes meant that vital aspects of the discipline were not being covered. These arguments can also be seen as an expression of the liberal tradition of language teaching and learning outlined earlier in this paper (Bailey, 1994; Kelly, 1969; Quist, 2000) and a reaction against the attempt to move towards the instrumental paradigm represented by the CEFR descriptors.

Attempts were made to connect the assessment of students' language proficiency to the descriptors in the CEFR. However, little time was allocated to discussions on how the CEFR should be used as the starting point for assessing student work or how to use assessment diagnostically to guide learning. The findings reported in this article show that teacher assessment continued to reflect the traditions typical of modern language teaching at university; where the focus has traditionally been on written, rather than oral production, and where the main focus has been on language content and structure. Assessment was more likely to focus on grammatical errors rather than the general 'can do' approach of the learning outcomes connected to the CEFR. This is in line with previous research in Sweden on upper secondary language assessment (Apelgren, 2013).

The lack of adoption of the 'can do' approach in the CEFR descriptors in the assessment of student work can be seen as an expression of the cultural values and goals of the traditional approach to language teaching and learning at university level, which as Quist (2000) has shown are in strong contrast to those represented by the CEFR's communicative approach.

The reaction to the "top down" introduction of the CEFR inspired learning outcomes described in this article points to the importance of avoiding the misuse or inappropriate use of the CEFR in attempts to bring about language curriculum reform. The risks of such an approach have been outlined by Castellotti (2012, p. 50) who has warned of a '..."blind" application of the scales, and of excessive standardization'.

It would seem that to adapt the CEFR to an entire language programme, teachers must share its basic philosophy and ideas. This point is taken up by Westhoff (2007) who argues that this would mean a major shift for teachers who believe in more traditional language teaching and he concludes that 'for many European countries, such shifts would mean a small revolution.' (p. 678). The potential problems that Westhoff identifies were found in research done in Canada by Faez et al. (2011) on teachers' perceptions of CEFR-informed instruction. The research found that the two main challenges that teachers faced in implementing CEFR-informed instruction were: (a) time restriction related to viewing the CEFR as an additional component, and (b) lack of understanding the CEFR and its applicability in their classrooms. The study found that the majority of teachers who participated in the study indicated that 'the CEFR was viewed as an "add-on" rather than as an approach that could be used to cover various aspects of the curriculum' (Faez et al., 2011, p. 11).

In this case, the CEFR descriptors were not felt to be able to adequately describe the complexities of language use and learning or to provide any additional value to assessment practice. Teacher educators continued, to use intuition based on experience to inform assessments of achievement. Coupled with the fact that little or no regard was taken to the practical implementation of the CEFR, the influences of the CEFR descriptors were mainly symbolic and did little to alter existing pedagogic practice.

8 Conclusions

We conclude that it can be more difficult to introduce the CEFR into tertiary education than secondary due to the theoretical and ontological stance of language studies at university level. The traditions of language teaching and learning at university level are often in contrast to the communicative approach behind the CEFR. Attempts to change pedagogic practice will inevitably be mediated by the traditions of the local context and the individual teachers' personal and professional identities. "Top down" attempts to introduce the CEFR into course organization ignores teachers' cognitions' systems and thus amounts to an inappropriate use of the CEFR. Successful implementation requires that teachers share the CEFR's basic philosophy and ideas, and that measures are put in place to ensure careful adherence to the CEFR's intended uses.

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