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The relevance of the CEFR for the business world – Suzanne Vetter-M’Caw
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The objective of my workshop was to make teachers aware of the fact that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is more than the English level printed on the back of a textbook. It is an excellent tool for teachers and well worth the effort to get to know it better.

How well do you know the CEFR?

The CEFR, which defines what a language learner can do at various levels, has been part of our lives for quite a while now. Published by the Council of Europe in 2001, it has been translated into over 35 languages and is referred to in teaching, publishing and recruitment. The main message of the ‘can do’ statements is that reaching a communicative goal is more important than grammatical correctness. There are six levels: A1 and A2 are for basic users, B1 and B2 comprise independent users and C1 and C2 designate proficient users. Teachers who have read the global scales probably know that there are descriptors for each skill: speaking, reading, writing and listening. However, how many of these teachers have actually looked at the numerous descriptors that exist for specific situations, such as public announcements, informal discussions with friends, interviewing and being interviewed and so on? One may question the relevance of these descriptors for the classroom, but students are interested in knowing what skills are expected for a specific task at their target level.

Key words for the levels defined by the CEFR

When reading the various CEFR descriptors, certain key words jump off the page for each particular level. Being aware of the typical characteristics of each level means that teachers can internalise these keywords and can use this knowledge to actively monitor their students’ progress. My aim was to introduce these key words to the workshop participants and use the words to evaluate some oral exams. Ideally, after the workshop, participants would automatically associate certain terms with certain language levels.

The following key words were suggested and discussed in the workshop:

C2: with ease, effortless, natural, finer shades of meaning

C1: wide range, well-structured, precise, complex, spontaneous, almost effortless, implicit and explicit

B2: wide range, accurate, clear, detailed, fluent

B1: field of interest, straightforward, short, prepared

A2: everyday matters, familiar, simple exchanges, rehearsed

A1: basic, very simple, isolated phrases, needs help.

Giving presentations

English is needed in the business world to communicate in various ways: on the phone, by email, in meetings and for presentations. A short presentation is a task that is ideal for measuring students’ progress and so this was the next focus of the workshop. Before watching some videos of telc oral exams, we focussed on excerpts from the descriptor for addressing audiences, and concentrated on the levels that are most relevant for Business English students. The descriptors from the Council of Europe (2001) confirmed our selected key words.

Addressing audiences

C1 presenters can give a clear, well-structured presentation of a complex subject, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples.

B2 presenters can give a clear, systematically developed presentation, with highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting details.

B1 presenters can give a prepared straightforward presentation on a familiar topic within his or her field, which is clear enough to be followed without difficulty most of the time and in which the main points are explained with reasonable precision.

Using the CEFR to evaluate Business English students

The language test provider telc uses a presentation task in some oral exams to provide the candidates with an opportunity to demonstrate their language skills. The marking criteria are divided into two parts: task management and language. When teachers use a presentation to evaluate students in the classroom, this communicative approach should be adopted and the teacher should consider how well the student actually communicated his or her message instead of using the traditional approach, which is just counting the grammatical mistakes.

In the telc English B1-B2 Business dual-level exam, task sheets give a choice of two topics and provide pictures and two questions to give the candidates ideas for their presentation, for which they have twenty minutes of preparation time. Watching a video of sample candidates, the workshop participants could clearly recognise the B1 candidate, who gave a short, straightforward talk, using the pictures as a framework and using vocabulary limited to general fields of interest. The B2 candidate talked about the topic in detail, clearly and fluently gave examples, and was able to highlight significant points.

In the telc English B2-C1 Business dual-level exam, candidates are asked to prepare a three-minute presentation at home about their company or about a product or a process. In business life, a presentation is also prepared before the event and likewise, in the classroom, students can be given the task to prepare a short presentation as homework. To make sure the focus is on the candidate's English, no electronic aids are allowed, but the candidate may use a diagram or show an object.

Here again, the workshop participants were able to apply the CEFR key words to evaluate the candidates' language skills. The B2 candidates gave clear and fluent presentations but there was little evidence of a wide range of vocabulary and the complexity was lacking. The C1 candidates demonstrated a more competent handling of their topics and were able to expand and support points of view with subsidiary points and provide a wide range of examples.

Recommendation

In the business world, it is often necessary to inform managers of students' progress or help candidates prepare for a job interview in which a certain language level is expected. Applying the CEFR descriptors can assist both teachers and students in knowing exactly where they stand and what is still necessary to achieve the desired target.

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Reference

Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.