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A Synopsis of the Development of a Framework of Reference for English Language Education in Thailand (FRELE-TH)

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to address the need for a Framework of Reference for English Language Education in Thailand (FRELE-TH 2017) based on the Common Europe Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001 2018) which was first introduced and practiced among the European countries. CEFR framework has been adopted into language education systems of the majority of Asian countries as well as other parts of the world. As English is the working language of the ASEAN Economic Community people can cross borders to fulfil their social, economic and educational needs. However many Thais do not have the proficiency in English to compete in terms of English, thus hindering their mobility within the ASEAN context. By looking at the basic principles that would benefit the English language teaching and learning in Thailand using FRELE-TH and understanding the difficulties when adopting and modifying CEFR 'CAN Do' approach might be a more realistic solution to improving the standard of English in the Thai education system.

Keywords: CEFR, English language teaching and learning, assessment, FRELE-TH, Thailand education

Introduction

The basic principles of a Socio-cultural Theory and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

Historically, Vygotsky's 'Thought and Language' (1962) and later 'The Collective Works Vols 1-2' (1992) outlined the basic principles of a 'Socio-cultural Theory' seeing 'social tools' (people, family, teachers, friends, language, and other semiotic systems) as a 'mediation' in learning. This theory proposed that because cognitive construction cannot be separated from the social context, new learning takes place in a "Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of the learner. Each developing step is a stage between 'actual' (the capabilities that the child/learner possesses) and potential' (the next step that the child/learner is capable of completing) can be bridged by 'mediation' such as formal or informal instruction, teachers, parents, peer groups (Foley, 2013). ZPD can lead to a life-long learning process since the social context plays an important part at any age. In other words, the learning process moves from the inter-psychological (between the mind and actions of people) to the intra psychological stage, (within the individual's mind and actions that follow).

Applying the notion of ZPD to language teaching Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was developing drawing on the works of Firth, Halliday, from the linguistic approach, Hymes, Gumperz, and Labov from the sociolinguistic side, and Wersch and Bruner for the socio-psychological aspect (Daniels, 1996). Around this time, Wilkins (1972) proposed a communicative syllabus for language teaching within the context of Europe. Initially, this became the basic core of a set of specifications for a first-level communicative language. These 'threshold levels' with regard to the syllabus specifications (van Ek & Alexander, 1980) had a strong influence on what became the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was initiated by the Council of Europe in 1996 with the declared purpose of providing a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, across Europe (Little, 2006). It was designed to overcome the educational barriers and to be seen as a common currency in defining competency in European countries. The notion of competency involves among other issues is a longstanding distinction between what people 'can say' and what they actually 'do say'. People do not demonstrate their total linguistic ability in everyday's interactions. They simply do what is necessary to get the messages across successfully. Many studies, have supported the notion that people learn a language best when using it to do things rather than through studying how language works and practicing rules Gumperz and Hymes (1964), Slobin (1971), and Halliday's (1973). Language is a complex cognitive skill that has properties in common with other complex skills in terms of how information is stored and learned. Learning a language entails a stage-like progression from initial awareness and active manipulation of information and learning processes to full automaticity in language use (O'Malley & Chamot 1990). A number of criticisms of CEFR (2001) in terms of need analysis, validation of descriptors, the wording used in the descriptors, and the issue of maintaining a native norm were encountered (Foley, 2019). The aim was to establish standards for foreign language education (planning, teaching, learning, and assessing of languages) to be tailored to the needs of the learners. The Common European Framework was intended to overcome the barriers to communication among professionals working in the field of modern languages arising from the different educational systems in Europe. CEFR was updated in 2018. Besides from its focuses on plurilingualism and language as mediation, the new scales for language activities were added. These have been defined as plus level, pre-A1 level, and C levels. CEFR has now been adopted and used in many countries in Asia, such as, Thailand, Malaysia, Japan, Vietnam, and China which have mapped out the scoring systems and performance standards with CEFR (FRELE-TH in Thailand, CEFR-J in Japan, CEFR (M) CEFR-V in Vietnam, and China's Standards of English (CSE) (Foley, 2019).

CEFR viewed learners as language users and social agents and saw language as a vehicle of communication rather than as a subject to study. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, 2018 p. 27) CEFR is a

descriptive scheme which contains a vertical axis and a horizontal axis. The vertical axis provides “can do” descriptors representing progress in competency in 6 levels which are A1-A2 (a beginner level), B1-B2 (an intermediate level), and C1-C2 (advance level). A horizontal axis describes different activities and aspects of competence at each level. The goals of the CEFR (2018) in its current form are descriptive, not normative tool (North, 2014a), but in many contexts today, the CEFR descriptors are used in a normative way, as performance standards, or as labels to facilitate score transparency (Fulcher, 2012; O’Sullivan & Weir, 2011; Roever & MacNamara, 2006). As a result, such interpretation of score transparency could be the reason why most test developers rely on CEFR descriptors in developing the rating scale (2020). CEFR descriptors have also been criticized as unclear and inconsistent, both within and across levels (Alderson, 2007; Harsch & Rupp, 2011; Papageorgiou, 2010) and also on “descriptive inadequacy” (Fulcher, Davidson, & Kemp, 2011, Lekpetch 2020).

In order to partly solve some of these issues, CEFR (2018) outlined the concept of a European Language Portfolio (ELP) (Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2004) for possible inclusion in other variations of CEFR. The central aim was for all citizens to develop their intercultural competence to allow the lifelong pursuit of language learning, to contribute to the development and autonomy of the language learner, to promote the coherence and transparency in language programs, and to clearly identify qualifications to facilitate mobility. ELP was broken into two primary functions: pedagogic and reporting. As part of its *pedagogic objective*, the ELP encouraged the learning and communication in different languages and pursuit of plurilingual and intercultural experiences, as well, guiding students on learning strategies and goals related to their foreign language learning. In its *reporting capacity*, the Portfolio sought to provide a way for a user to document his or her language proficiency and experiences with the language in a comprehensive, informative, transparent and reliable way. The ELP was designed as a tool for the promotion of language-learning, plurilingualism, and mobility and organized into three sections: the Language Passport, Language Biography, and Working Dossier.

The *Language Passport* is a removable section of the Portfolio in which the user self-assesses and summarizes his or her ability and experience with his or her foreign language or languages. It also includes worksheets for users to summarize their language learning and intercultural experiences, such as their years of education and certificates/diplomas. The *Language Biography* guides learners through a process of summarizing their experiences with languages. It allows learners to track their progress, identify areas for improvement and formulate goals for future learning, while the *Working Dossier* is a space for users to gather samples of their work in their foreign language or languages (ELP, 2004).

The development of a Framework of Reference for English Language Education in Thailand (FRELE-TH)

English was made as compulsory subject for students beyond Grade 4 in 1921. Between 1977 and 1980, there were attempts to introduce various teaching approaches in teaching such as student-centred approach and communicative approach to English language teaching. At that time, British Council was involved in setting up training courses to help improve the teaching of English in the Thai education system. The student-centred instruction was not very successful because it was a common practice in Thailand for the teachers to be the centre of the class (Lekpetch, 2020). In the mid-90s English was made compulsory for all primary children from Grade 1. The approach to language teaching was described as functional-communicative with an eclectic orientation (Wiriyachitra, 2002). After Thailand's new constitution was adopted in 1997, the major reform in the English curriculum was introduced in 1999. The aim was to build language knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes towards English (Prapphal, 2008).

The role of English in Thailand was seen as of growing importance in international communication and recognised as part of a multilingua franca (Jenkins, 2015). More significantly, it is the working language of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Adopting of new technologies and increasing numbers of internet usage in fields such as business, education, science, and lifestyle have resulted in a high demand of proficiency in English. In 1986, the economic downturn in Thailand meant that a large number of Thai companies went through mergers, associations, and takeovers from foreign countries. As a result, the use of English became more widely used as the means to communicate, negotiate, and execute transactions between local and foreign partners.

In 2019, the English First Proficiency Index survey placed Thailand the third lowest among countries in Southeast Asia for English proficiency, behind Vietnam, which was ranked 52nd. Thailand was 74th with a score of 47.62, which is regarded as very low English proficiency. According to the EF Proficiency Index (2021), the level of English in Thailand was 22 out of 24 within the Asian region. Such level of English proficiency was in spite of an average number of years of schooling of 10-12, an internet penetration of 66.65% and a GNI per capita of \$4944.46 (EP EPI, 2021). Clearly, a higher level of English competence would be necessary for Thailand to become more competitive and more functional in global communication (Lamb, Maire & Doecke, 2017). According to Wiriyachitra (2002), the English curriculum in Thai universities did not meet the demands of English used in the workplace. The reasons mentioned were, firstly, most English lessons are aimed heavily on grammar studying. Since English is a foreign language and it was felt that having ability in grammar and vocabulary was not enough to be able to communicate properly and effectively. Secondly, Thai testing system failed to reform with the changes in the curriculum. Such changes became more urgent with globalization as Thai language learners needed to acquire a degree of competence in English be able to communicate successfully and effectively in a globalizing world. Globalization and the ensuing consequences were and are unavoidable which automatically affects the changes of economic, politic, and culture in society. The growth in media resources, especially television and the internet, opened up a world where information could be received and propagated. The consequence is that governments have to

reform their education systems including the teaching of sciences, technology and languages in order to maximize such benefits to the classroom. Also, as a result of globalization, wider testing has become an important instrument in assessing language competence. The degree of competence can have a significant effect on test takers' future, career and advancement, whereas, failure could have a negative washback. However, such changes required in the curriculum and assessment of what 'language competence' signifies does not mean producing patterns of native-like proficiency but rather a view of a system for communication which is fluid and flexible (Deyers, Gorp, & Demeester, 2018).

As English language became the working language of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), it was felt to be important to enhance English ability of Thai people so that with English, people could fulfil their social, economic, and education purposes across borders. In April 2014, the English Language Institute (ELI), a branch of the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced a policy of basing all aspects of English language curriculum reform on the CEFR (Foley, 2019, 2022). A local version of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages-Thailand, FRELE-TH was published (Hiranburana et al., 2017). This framework was based on CEFR's 2001 and a later 2018 version. Both these versions had basic tenet that CEFR does not offer ready-made solutions but must always be adapted to the requirements of particular contexts (Council of Europe, 2001). Also, to make sure that the derived frameworks was not too high for Thai learners/users and to achieve the performance required ('Can Do'). FRELE-TH followed the CEFR using the plus (+) levels (A1, A1+, A2, A2+, B1, B1+, B2, B2+) (Hiranburana et al., 2018). The descriptors in the global scale give an overview of the language proficiency of all levels while the illustrative scale consists of communicative activities, communicative strategies, and communicative competence. The communicative activities of the *Can Do* descriptors covered reception, interaction, production and mediation (North & Piccardo, 2019). FRELE-TH (2017) was an adaptation of CEFR (2001) for Thailand to make it more practical and understandable. That is making it more flexible allowing levels and categories to merge and sub-divide as appropriate (Foley, 2019). This reflects the CEFR's principle not to offer ready-made solutions but to be adapted to the requirements of particular contexts. (North, 2014, p. 62) In terms of educational reform what was required was a move from content -based learning and assessment to a competency-based approach in which learners were encouraged to do what they want or need to do in English with more practical outcomes. FRELE-TH (2017) collaborated with focus groups from a variety of professions so that FRELE-TH could be benchmarked as a useful tool for the development of a competency-based learning activities and consequent assessment in which learner's knowledge and skills and attitude can be used in the specified context. (Kulaporn, 2020, p. 69). The suggested levels of English skills based on FRELE-TH are illustrated on Table 1.

Table 1
Levels of English Skills based on FRELE-TH (adapted from Kulaporn, 2020)

Professional	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
Immigration officer	B1-B2+	B1-B2+	A2-B2+	A2-B1+
Teacher of English	B2+-C2	B2+-C1	C1	C1
Nurse	B1-B1+	B1+-B2	B1	B1
Taxi Driver	A2	A1+	A2	A1+
Hotel Waiter	A2-A2+	A2-A2+	A2-A2+	A2-A2+
Tourist Police	A2+-B1+	A2+-B1+	A2+-B1	A2+-B1
Flight attendant	B2+	C1	B2+	B2-B2+

FRELE-TH following the CEFR (2018) version refined a more action-oriented approach to include the concept of the user/learner as a social agent mobilising where required a more plurilingual repertoire. The CEFR descriptive scheme moved beyond the traditional four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) to include interaction and mediation as in the professions cited in Table 1. This shift opens to a more complex vision of the situated and integrated nature of language learning and language use. CEFR views learners as social agents who mobilise all their competences, including their general (personal, non-linguistic) competences, and strategies in the fulfilment of a task, with a commensurate improvement of those competences and strategies as a result. The Plurilingual focuses on the interrelationships between languages in the social agent's holistic, dynamic and integrated language repertoire, based on a notion of partial competences that emphasises Vygotsky's ZPD, that is to say not where you are but where you can be (North, Piccardo & Goodier, 2019). Language education does not happen in a vacuum, it is dependent on the particular context and the contextual societal vision of what characterizes language and language learning/teaching. In linguistically and culturally diverse societies, languages take shape both at the level of each individual and at the level of communities. Cultures and identities are composites, structured at different levels, as are languages (Byram & Wagner 2018).

As a consequence of globalization dynamic sociological landscapes where plurality and diversity are the norm, demands highlighting the need to reconceptualise language education. It is because of this that mediation was introduced as the fourth mode of communicative language activity in CEFR. Whereas production is concerned with self-expression, and interaction that involves the joint construction of discourse to reach mutual understanding, mediation introduces the construction of new meaning, in the sense of new understanding, new knowledge, new concepts (Piccardo, North & Goodier, 2019). Mediation, in contrast to production and interaction, language is not just a means of expression; it is primarily a vehicle to access the other, the new, and the unknown – or to help other people to do so. Thus, mediation can be cognitive – in school or a training course; it can be relational –

establishing the relationships; it can be crosslinguistic and/or cross-cultural. This is mainly achieved by articulating thoughts, frequently with others, in a process of ‘linguaging’ or, when all language resources are mobilised, plurilinguaging “a dynamic, never-ending process to make meaning using different linguistic and semiotic resources.” (Piccardo, 2017, p. 9) Mediation in the sense of mediating concepts has always been fundamental to the socio-cultural theory. (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014) “Vygotsky repeatedly emphasized the role of mediation in the development of reflexive self-determining human agency, or “active adaptation.” (Vygotsky 1981, pp. 151-152) Humans internalized their own evolution while securing change in their environment, remaking both their conditions of existence and themselves. (Marginson & Dang, 2017, p. 119) The CEFR’s emphasis on the interaction between the social and individual, in relation to both the user/learner’s internal competences and mental context and the external context of domain and situation also reflects a complex, ecological perspective (Van Lier, 2004), such as, mediating texts (including video, graphic etc. as well as spoken text), by relaying specific information, explaining data verbally, processing text or translating a written text for someone else (Piccardo, North & Goodier, 2019). Translanguaging as mediating in communication can involve acting informally as a linguistic intermediary between two parties, where research suggests that: “... lay interpreters can in fact achieve successful understanding in these situations, despite sometimes limited linguistic resources.” (Backus et al., 2013, p. 203)

Translanguaging in Teaching and Learning

Teachers using more than one language and accepting responses in more than one language are carrying out more mediated learning activities “challenging students to provide reasons, highlighting inconsistencies in student thinking, prompting students to focus on particular issues, and asking tentative questions to suggest alternative perspectives.” (Webb, 2009, p. 16) Translanguaging (Williams, 1996), as a mediating process has attracted considerable attention in the sphere of education. Garcia (2005, p. 45) believed that, translanguaging practice can help learners stimulate their learning potential, and on the other hand, it can change the way teachers help students learn. According to Williams (1996), translanguaging refers to the process that the information is input in one language but output in another. A thorough understanding is the premise for using this information successfully. Translanguaging theory can therefore, be described as individuals employing meaning production resources to reason and express themselves flexibly and smoothly (Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Li, 2018).

However, the focus of translanguaging is often based on the conflicts and tensions between school policy and classroom practices (Li & Martin, 2009), because multilanguage users alternate between different languages in daily interactions especially in classroom settings, such switching was regarded as a deficit or inappropriate interaction. If students use their mother tongue instead of the language instruction of the school, the teacher will likely be criticized for sabotaging the students’ learning. (Martin 2005, p. 76) The medium-of-instruction policy in many settings has come under strong criticism concerning the tensions

between practice and policy. Despite the efforts made by researchers and teachers to promote translanguaging as part of mediation, the tensions between flexible everyday interactions and language-of-instruction in schools continues to exist.

It can be argued that aspects of a plurilingual/translanguaging vision are supported in three theoretical domains. First, the psycho-cognitive perspective that studies language acquisition mechanisms regarded as a new connectionist paradigm which is an increasingly predominant function of the brain. (Bickes, 2004, p. 38) In this perspective, the brain of bi/multilinguals which is no longer seen as the sum of monolingual brains but rather considered as a complex and distinct system (Bialystok, 2001). Second, the sociocultural perspective which states that language acquisition occurs in the social sphere and is intrinsically linked to interaction and mediation between individuals who possess his or her own complex cultural system and all living within linguistically, culturally, and sociologically defined configurations (Lantolf, 2011). Lastly is the pedagogical perspective which suggests a new complex vision of language teaching methodology supported by the bi/multilingual movement. (García, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2001, quoted in Piccardo, 2013, p. 603) Part of this pedagogical perspective of CEFR, its variations can provide the ability to communicate through plurilingualism which is a springboard to personal growth, self-awareness, language awareness, intercultural awareness leading to professional competence (Piccardo & North, 2019). Plurilingual competence as explained in the CEFR (2018) involves the ability to call flexibly upon an inter-related, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire to move from one language or dialect (or variety) to another and express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety). Being able to mediate between individuals with no common language (or dialect, or variety), even with only a slight knowledge oneself, bringing the whole of one's linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression; exploit paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression) are among of the characteristics of a plurilingual person (Piccardo, North & Goodier, 2019).

Conclusion

As proposed in this article, the development of FRELE-TH in the Thai education system based on CEFR can accelerate the improvement of English as an international language, bringing learning and assessment close to real-world activities. For the learner/user of English a pathway can be clearly demarcated towards the levels needed or required in their special context as suggested for example in the (European Language Portfolio). The importance of life-long learning is reinforced with set goals ('Can Do') for their learning and self-development using learner/users plurilingual communicative abilities. The role of the teacher can then be seen as being more of an active participant together with the students to exploit the multilingual resources available to achieve their goals. However, one of the major weaknesses is the development of teachers of English. It is frustrating for students and their teachers when they cannot reach the target levels set for them. Other main challenges are the teachers' skills and their teaching approach together with out-dated forms of assessment. A

move from content based learning to competency-based learning would be a major step forward as advocated by FRELE-TH.

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