

Foreign Language Teaching in Higher Education in Europe: Implications for Turkey

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***Abstract:** Investigating the foreign languages teaching policies in higher education in Europe, it is realized that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) plays a key role in the planning and the implementation stages of these policies. In this paper, after an introduction to the CEFR, the reports about the CEFR-based foreign language teaching policies of some European Union countries, such as Luxembourg, Lithuania, Estonia, Austria, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia are summarized. Then, studies dealing with the CEFR and foreign language teaching in higher education in Turkey are reviewed. At the end of the paper, the implications of the CEFR in the foreign language teaching policy of the country are discussed.*

CEFR

Regarded as a useful framework applicable to all levels of foreign language teaching in Europe, the CEFR has been developed by the European Commission as the most recent standardized guideline for foreign language teaching programs, objectives, materials, course books and for the assessment of the foreign language learning process. As written in the CEFR report (CEFR: 2001: 1), the CEFR “provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc.” From a broader perspective, it would be true to state that the CEFR was developed in order to encourage people in Europe to learn more than one foreign language and to maintain multilingualism and multiculturalism in the European continent.

The common reference levels (A1, A2, B1, B2), used especially for the assessment of foreign language learners’ proficiency levels, are very important because the proficiency descriptors in the CEFR have a clear, comprehensible and standard structure giving us information about what the learners can do at each level, especially in listening, reading, writing, conversation and oral presentation skills. The CEFR reveals the realistic and ideal expectations from foreign language learners at different reference levels (Council of Europe, 2001: 18). The presence of these common reference levels also facilitates the comparison of foreign language teaching programs, objectives, materials, assessment tools and students’ performance in different contexts. It is a reality of today’s world that the mobility of learners has increased, which means that they move from one country to another, from one university to another or from one language school to another. Therefore, the common reference levels lead to cooperation among countries, universities or language schools offering foreign language teaching programs attended by language learners throughout their lives (Council of Europe, 2002: 39) and can be used as a

framework for various stakeholders ranging from foreign language teaching program developers to teachers (Council of Europe, 2001: 24).

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Due to the advantages of the use of the CEFR as the guideline for a more standardized foreign language teaching policy in Europe, many countries have arranged their policies on the basis of the CEFR. For instance, Luxembourg decided to investigate the activities of the European Commission in the first half of 2005 so that the foreign language teaching system and the assessment system of language skills could be improved. At the end of the investigations by a group of experts, it was realized that the CEFR should be taken as the framework to structure the foreign language teaching policy of the country. In addition, it was accepted that strategies, methods and techniques aiming to increase learners' communication skills should be applied into foreign language teaching classes. In other words, in the process of developing the content and the objectives of the foreign language programs, learners' communication-based needs in the society and in the academia should be prioritized. Finally, the modification of the assessment tools used to assess foreign language skills depending on the common reference levels were deemed necessary (Grand Duchy of Luxembourg Language Education Policy Profile, 2005-2006: 5-6). More specifically, the use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which was favored by the European Commission as a process-based self-assessment tool to help learners to follow their own progress, was considered to be essential for the improvement of the foreign language teaching policy of the country (Grand Duchy of Luxembourg Language Education Policy Profile, 2005-2006: 32-34). The ELP described by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe as a document, through which language learners can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences, includes three components: the European Language Passport (a self-evaluation grid used to describe language competences according to a common criteria accepted throughout Europe), the Language Biography (information on the learners' linguistic and cultural experiences in and outside the class), a Dossier (a selection of materials to document and illustrate personal achievements in language competences) (<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/>).

On the other hand, Lithuania, a member of the European Commission, emphasized the importance of boosting personal, social, communicational, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills while teaching a foreign language. Among these skills, communication skills were considered by the country as the most important. It was also thought that the activities meaningful for the learners increase not only learners' communication skills but also their linguistic and cultural abilities. The foreign language teaching program structured on the basis of the CEFR allows the life-long learning of foreign languages (Lithuania Country Report, 2003-2004: 36-62). In designing language teaching programs depending on the CEFR standards in the country, the focus on linguistic aspects of the language has been replaced by language skills and the motivation to learn a foreign language (Lithuania Country Report, 2003-2004: 64). The standardized common reference levels starting with A1 and ending with C2 are used in the assessment of learners' language proficiency in four basic skills (i.e., listening, reading, writing, and speaking) (Lithuania Country Report, 2003-2004: 65-68).

Another European Community member which has taken the CEFR as their foreign language teaching policy framework is Estonia. In the country, the language education programs are developed for French, German and Russian in addition to English. The objectives of all these foreign language teaching programs are to enable learners to solve problems independently in the natural language environment, to communicate with people from different cultures and to realize and accept the differences between their mother tongue and the target foreign language they are learning by making comparisons between these two languages. It was also emphasized that both the academic and the daily language needs of the learners should be considered before language teaching programs are designed. While preparing lesson plans to teach a foreign language, teachers make an effort to incorporate cultural features of the country where the target foreign language is spoken and subjects pertaining to different disciplines into their lesson plans (Estonia Country Report, 2008: 37-38). According to a report published in 2010, it was pointed out that learners graduating from a higher education are expected to be at the B2 common reference level and the assessment of learners' foreign language learning progress is done in line with the CEFR criteria (Estonia Language Education Policy Profile, 2010: 34-35).

In the language education policy report published by the Austrian authorities, it was emphasized that a language committee established in 1980 following the developments in the European language projects and in the education in general ensured the structuring of the foreign language education policy of the country in parallel with the developments in Europe. The language committee was actively involved in the process of revealing the foreign language learning needs of language learners in the country, designing the content of the language programs and setting instructions for the implementation of these programs. In addition, a center called "European Language Proficiency Center" was founded in the country in order to follow international education innovations, to support concrete innovations in foreign language teaching applied in Austrian schools and to successfully incorporate the European Language Portfolio into their foreign language teaching policy (Austria Language Education Policy Profile, 2008: 11-12; 29-30). It would be true to state that in designing foreign language teaching programs and in the assessment of language competencies, it was decided by Austria that the common reference levels should be strictly adhered to and not only the linguistic but also the cultural aspects of the languages should be included in teaching programs to enable life-long learning.

In Hungary, on the other hand, foreign language teaching programs in Higher Education are generally taught with a special focus on the specific vocational language needs of university students to increase graduates' chances of finding a job. From the policy profile of the country, it is realized that the purpose of vocational language education is to boost multilingualism. Besides, like Austria, Hungary has also successfully implemented the ELP in their foreign language teaching policy and structured their policy in accordance with the common reference levels of the CEFR (Hungary Language Education Policy Profile, 2002-2003). On the other hand, in Poland, which also has a national foreign language teaching program meeting the individual and academic needs of language learners in the country, the CEFR was taken as the guideline to determine foreign language teaching objectives, design teaching programs and to assess learners' language competencies (Poland Country Report, 2005: 28). In line with the common reference levels of the CEFR, Dialang was used as part of the assessment process for language proficiency in the country to determine learners' language proficiency before learners start attending a foreign language program where program objectives, content and the assessment

procedures are based on the CEFR criteria. It is also noteworthy that similar to Estonia, the expected proficiency level at the end of the university is B2 in Poland (Poland Language Education Policy Profile, 2005: 30-31).

In the country report published by Slovenia on the other hand, it is stated as in the report by Poland that it is important to have a national core program reflecting the country's language education policy. It can also be noticed that instead of the product-oriented structure-based curriculum, a process-based approach focusing on four basic language skills was perceived to be more favorable by the county authorities (Slovenia Country Report, 2003: 58). In the report, it was also indicated that the course books were also redesigned considering learner needs, factors affecting their motivation and the four basic language skills. On the other hand, the extra materials provided for the learners are expected to increase learners' motivation, accelerate the learning process and to give learners the feeling of responsibility for their own learning process, (Slovenia Country Report, 2003: 59). In the selection of the teaching materials (e.g., course books, additional sources) in the country, it is more preferable to select those prepared taking the CEFR criteria into account (Slovenia Language Education Policy Profile, 2010: 23).

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From the summarizes of the language reports by some of the EU countries which successfully implemented the CEFR especially in their higher education, it can easily be understood that foreign language teaching in these countries has a successful national core program reflecting their language education policy. Conversely, as for the arrangements made to solve the problem pertaining to teaching foreign languages in higher education in Turkey, it was asserted that these arrangements have not been successful so far and it was recommended by the Turkish Higher Education Council (HEC) that there is an urgent need to put forth stronger arguments and make more successful arrangements in the language education policies of the country (YÖK, 2007: 188). Related to the problems as for teaching foreign languages in higher education, Demirel (2008) holds the idea that the foreign language education in around 130 private or state universities in Turkey is not consistent with the CEFR. Demirel (2008) suggests that arranging teaching programs, course books and assessment procedures in line with the CEFR in Turkey paves the way for common foreign language teaching practices in both Turkish and in European universities. He also emphasizes the need for a CEFR-based revision of the teaching programs of the Turkish preparatory schools aiming to teach university students the foreign language they need to follow their departmental courses.

Similarly, in Kınısız and Aydın's (2008) study, the web-sites of Schools of Foreign Languages of state-run universities in Turkey were investigated and it was concluded that only six of the universities have preparatory programs in line with the CEFR. Their literature review also showed that no studies pertaining to the implementation of the CEFR in the foreign languages teaching policies and practices could be reached. They implied that the CEFR is not followed as a guideline in Turkish higher education as in Europe. Thus, it was recommended by the researchers that the foreign languages teaching programs and more specifically materials used at universities should be compatible with the CEFR criteria. It was also argued that materials prepared in line with the CEFR could lead to a more effective and efficient language instruction.

Furthermore, the investigation of the historical progress of the foreign language teaching progress at Turkish universities reveals principles that are contradictory to the CEFR criteria. For example, Gökdemir (2010) investigated the common challenges encountered by preparatory school students in five different universities in Turkey and found the following pitfalls: lessons at preparatory classes are mostly teacher-centered and students are mostly passive; not many opportunities are given to practice the language; students do not believe that these schools are the right places to learn English; students do not spend enough time and effort to learn the language; universities cannot provide the required classroom settings, facilities or equipment to learn the language; the program is taught too quickly to cover the planned material.

Another study carried out by Maden, Ere and Yiğit (2009) revealed that there are a lot of varieties among Turkish universities in terms of the assessment procedures applied in the foreign language teaching process, and there is no common approach among universities as for the selection of their assessment procedures and the criteria for success. In other words, different assessment practices and thus teaching practices are applied in different programs which actually aim to achieve the same goal of enabling students to be able to follow their departmental courses in a foreign language. For example, it was revealed that while tests of some preparatory school assess all basic four skills, some tests do not include writing or speaking sections. These findings were reached as a result of the investigation of 31 foreign language proficiency tests prepared to assess their students' proficiency at the end of the preparatory school. The tests available on the web-sites of 134 universities were compared in terms of their content. According to their findings, a standardized CEFR-based foreign language teaching policy is not present in Turkish higher education.

In conclusion, studies reviewed above indicate that the foreign language teaching objectives of the universities in Turkey are not clear and the teaching programs are not in line with the standardized reference levels of the CEFR and its basic principles, such as students-centeredness and learner autonomy.

Implications for Turkey

Considering the foreign language teaching policies in European countries and the reviewed studies regarding the foreign language teaching in higher education institutions in Turkey, some recommendations could be made. For instance, it would be fair to suggest that there is a need for the development of a common national foreign language teaching program at higher education. As in the case of many European countries, advisory boards, commissions and language centers led by experts specialized in English language teaching, the teaching of other languages and the CEFR should be assigned to investigate more deeply the foreign language teaching policies of other countries and restructure our policy accordingly. The first issue to be dealt with by such boards is to explore the interests and the needs of foreign language learners in higher education in Turkey.

In determining objectives for a foreign language teaching program, it should be kept in mind that the objectives of the program should be reachable and realistic so that the learning process can end up with success. Now that the common reference levels expected from learners when they complete higher education institutions in most of Europe is B2, universities in Turkey should take B2 as the ideal reference level rather than differing from one another when it comes to a

common reference level. Another mistake made by authorities in charge of programs aiming to teach a foreign language is that the A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 reference levels in the CEFR are allocated similar amounts of time in the program. To illustrate, at some universities, the time allocated to cover A1 may be exactly the same with the time allocated in the program to cover C2. In reality, the difficulty level of the grammar structures, lexical items and activities dealing with four skills in the A1 level increases while learners are progressing from A1 to C2, which means that the time to cover A2, for example, is supposed to be different from the time allocated to cover B2. Thus, it could be suggested that the number of hours for each reference level should be arranged so that an effective and smooth transition from one level to another could be made by the learners.

It can also be suggested that the Turkish Higher Education should restructure its foreign language teaching policy by involving learners actively in the learning process and enabling them to make sense of the knowledge by means of interaction with their social environment. Therefore, there is a need for a social constructivist, learner-centered, action-oriented and task-based learning and teaching environment in the foreign language classroom in Turkey. Finally, it could be recommended that universities in Turkey should continuously get involved in evaluation studies in order to improve the whole university-level foreign language education system in the country. Program evaluation described as “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about programs, improve the program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming” (Patton, 1997, p. 3) should be an integral part of the foreign language teaching programs at Turkish universities to redesign program objectives, assessment procedures, materials and the teaching process in line with the standardized reference levels and the general principles of the CEFR.

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