Is Chinese Eurocompatible? Is the Common Framework Common?
The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Facing Distant Languages

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Abstract

The CEFR's influence in the fields of course design, textbook writing, language teaching, testing, and training in all the languages taught in Europe is expanding amongst the 47 member states of the Council of Europe and beyond. At the same time, the CEFR is being integrated into the European curricula, and it is now time to assert that the CEFR is not a framework of reference for European languages, but rather for languages taught in Europe, to take into account the distance between users and languages, and to consider the contextualisation of the CEFR.

What are the factors needed to determine the distance between a mother tongue and a target language? Do these factors (in the fields of lexicon, or grammar, syntax, phonology, grapho-phonic gap, sociolinguistics, etc.) account for the gap between a user and a target language? What is the role of the individual profile in the distance to a target language? How to deal with the graphical distance, which is the greatest distance between languages? It is necessary to reconsider some of the didactical criteria, especially in the field of the written activities. The double challenge is to face in one part the major current of thought in China oriented from the eve of 20th century to the westernization of the Chinese language teaching, and to face in another part the current trend to standardize goals and approaches for all languages. Our paper proposes solutions to the problem of compatibility between the CEFR and non-alphabetic writing languages: firstly, precise thresholds of Chinese characters as prerequisites to achieve written language activity goals; secondly, the amount of time needed to attain a certain level according to the distance between different languages.

Facing a new era of promoting multilingual education policy and language standards on the basis of the communicative approach, Chinese language teaching cannot stay on the edge of the road, or in its current state of confusion which has been caused by the New HSK Chinese Proficiency Test and its relation to the CEFR levels. The Chinese language and other graphically-distant languages have to take up this new challenge.

Keywords: CEFR, distant language, Chinese as a second writing system language

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides a common practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. A European Union Council Resolution (November 2001) recommended the use of this instrument in setting up systems of validation of language competences. The CEFR's influence in the fields

of course design, textbook writing, language teaching, testing, and training of all the languages taught in Europe is expanding, amongst the 47 member states of the Council of Europe and beyond. Other frameworks and standards have been published, and at the same time, the value of the tests of language proficiency has been increasing to a great extent.

In Japan, China, and some Arabic-speaking countries, knowledge about the CEFR has been gaining ground these last years. To my knowledge, the Japanese version of CEFR was translated in 2004. I personally had a talk with a Japanese representative in Paris and I know that academic conferences have been held in Japan in recent years about this topic, which demonstrates the strong interest shown by Japanese colleagues (such as Nishiyama, Jean Noriyuki, University of Kyoto) regarding the contextualization of the CEFR.

The first Chinese version of the CEFR was published in Taiwan in 2007, and then another was published in mainland China at the end of 2008. The new version of the Chinese test of proficiency, the HSK, which came out in 2010 has shown so-called correspondence links with CEFR levels.

The problem which is surfacing is to know if the didactical foundations and statements of the CEFR are equidistant from any language or if they draw their lawfulness from the European languages.

The participants of the little Symposium of Rüschlikon in 1991 may not have had a full sense of what they were creating, in terms of the technical treatment of transparency problems between diverse European language assessments. A qualitative change was about to take place, widening the field of thinking from assessment to teaching and learning. Moreover, notions of "reference" and "framework" used to govern the general approach of the CEFR have given to this translanguage tool both the purpose of leading a common reflexion for a methodological convergent approach and also the purpose of creating a common space for discussion between pedagogical cultures, often very different even though the languages involved can be quite close. Therefore, as the pendulum swings, a new and necessary focus on assessment matters emerges. At the same time, questions about the very title of CEFR are changing, now shifting to a focus on the "common" aspect of the "common framework".

With the inclusion of the CEFR in European educational systems, new interpretations and even orientations have emerged, which are more prescriptive, normative or fossilized. One thing leading to another, a question that we have been raising since 2001 has been built as an academic questioning: as the CEFR is currently being integrated into the European curricula, it is now time to assert that the CEFR is not a framework of reference for European languages, but rather for languages taught in Europe. We need to take into account the distance between users and languages, and to consider the contextualisation of the CEFR.

What are the factors to be considered in measuring the distance between a mother tongue and a target language?

The distance for a French learner between French and other Romance languages such as Italian, Romanian, and Portuguese will be close (even if for Portuguese, the degree of the aural comprehension will be much lower than the degree of writing comprehension). The

distance will be greater for a learner trying to master Turkish or Finnish, and for the same learner, a long march will be necessary to master languages with distant writing systems, or what we call languages with a second writing system (Chinese, Japanese, or Arabic).

The linguistic specifications of distance are, for example:
- Isolating language vs agglutinative language
- Morphological richness vs poverty
- Use of measure words vs absence of measure words
- Subject proeminent vs theme proeminent
- Syntaxic fonction order : SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV, OVS
- Word order (determiner word/determined word)
- Place of interrogative words
- Phonological richness vs poverty
- Prosody (rhythmic accent, tonic accent, tone)
- Directional postpositions vs absense of directional postpositions

The more tangible and obvious distance items relate to vocabulary, as shown by the following word tables.

Do the specifications of this distance (in the fields of lexicon, grammar, syntax, phonology, grapho-phonic gap, sociolinguistics, etc.) account for the whole gap between a user and a target language?

In fact, part of the individual profile has an impact on the distance to a target language. Our research (Miao Lin-Zucker, 2006; Bellassen, Miao Lin-Zucker, 2010) has highlighted the impact of the visual cognitive style or verbal cognitive style on "intergraphie" (graphic errors)

How can we deal with the graphical distance, which is *the greatest one AMONGST all the distance measures between languages?*

It is now necessary to reconsider some of the didactical criteria, especially in the field of written language.

The challenge is twofold: on the one hand, there exists the predominant didactical trend in China oriented from the beginning of 20th century to the Westernization of Chinese language teaching; and on the other hand, there is the current trend to standardize goals and the approach taken for all languages. We need to take the following items into account.

-Take into account the identity of a given language.
-Remember the forgotten words of Saussure, the father of modern linguistics: "For the Chinese, writing is as a second language."
-Be discerning in the question of the time needed to reach the CEFR levels in a given language.
-Take a fresh look at written language activities in the cases of languages with second writing systems.

The contextualization of Chinese as a distant language comes at this price.

When it is applied and used, the CEFR must include the intrinsic specificities of each language, as well as the distance between languages.

For example, it must portray Chinese as: …
- A tonal language
- A theme prominent language
- An orthoepic competence prominent language
- A language with a logographic writing system

More precisely, the case of Chinese or Japanese poses in an acute way the problem of *orthoepic competence* (the ability to produce a correct pronunciation from a written form), owing to the specificity of the graphophonic relation in the sinographic system. This relation is more or less (more in German, Italian, less in Arabic or Hebrew) transparent in the alphabetic writing languages, so orthoepic competence plays a minor role in the CEFR. In Chinese, this relation is such that the transparency degree between graphy and phony is quite inconsequential from the point of view of the learner. This is the reason why the marking-scheme of the orthoepic competence is significant in the high school examination (Baccalauréat). Orthoepic elements include:

a) Knowledge of oralization of a character (syllable, tone)
b) Ability to memorize and write a sinogram (take down somebody's dictation or copy)
c) Ability to keyboard sinograms
d) Ability to consult a dictionary
e) Knowledge of sinography (as analysis of the graphic structure, stroke order, stroke orientation)
f) Ability to resolve the eventual polyphonic or semantic ambiguity of a character

In another part, describing the levels of written activities, the CEFR establishes a correspondence link between "short" (short postcard, short advertising, short announcement, short notice, advert) and "ease" of reading or writing. This obviously does not fit the specificity of Chinese writing, where a short advert can raise tremendous and frightening problems of reading comprehension, including the name of the person, address, etc. Imagine lonely hearts advertisement for a bride or groom!

The fast emergence of Chinese teaching has been accompanied by growth crisis issues. Among these issues, and beyond the necessity of training teachers or designing teaching materials, the most important is the current state of didactical confusion.

According to John Webb, an obscure English architect of the 17th century, Noah's Ark was supposed to reach China at the end of the flood. Since the Chinese language is supposed

to be the primitive language of humanity, Chinese people were not been affected by the Babel curse and avoided linguistic confusion… However, it is true that the question, long repressed, of the fundamental specificity of the Chinese writing system has led the didactics of Chinese language to a state of confusion, and is still a major debate in the new field of Chinese didactics.

The new HSK Chinese Proficiency Test was published by Hanban (PRC) at the end of 2009. Hanban claims that the new exam combines the advantages of the original HSK while taking into consideration recent trends in Chinese language training by conducting surveys and making use of the latest findings in international language testing. "The new HSK is an international standardized exam that tests and rates Chinese language proficiency. It assesses non-native Chinese speakers' abilities to use the Chinese language in their daily, academic, and professional lives." The new HSK consists of a writing test and a speaking test, which are independent of each other. There are six levels of writing tests (HSK levels I-VI) and three levels of speaking tests (HSK beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels).

Writing Test	Speaking Test
HSK (Level VI) HSK (Level V)	HSK (Advanced Level)
HSK (Level IV) HSK (Level III)	HSK (Intermediate Level)
HSK (Level II) HSK (Level I)	HSK (Beginner Level)

Niveau HSK level 等级	Niveau de compétence CEF Level of CEFR competence 欧洲语言框架	Nombre de mots Number of words 词汇量	Durée d'étude Study duration 学习时间	Durée de l'épreuve Test duration 考试时间	Score 合格/总分
1	A1	150	1 semestre 学期	35 min/分钟	120/200
2	A2	300	2 semestres 学期	55	120/200
3	B1	600	3 semestres 学期	1:25	180/300
4	B2	1200	4 semestres 学期	1:40	180/300
5	C1	2500	>4 semestres 学期	2:05	180/300
6	C2	5000		2:20	180/300

The new HSK claims in one part that it follows the principle of "test-teaching correlation," meaning that it is closely related to textbooks and that the purpose of the test is to "promote training through testing" and "promote learning through testing." In an obvious contradiction, however, the former HSK claimed that it is equidistant to any textbook and any pedagogical method. In the presentation of the new HSK, it is saying that the different levels of the new HSK are similar to some of the levels of the *Chinese Language Proficiency Scales for Speakers of Other Languages (CLPS)* and the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)*, but on the contrary of any language proficiency test, the main goal of this new test is said to be a strong motivator for students of Chinese. "The purpose of the test is to promote training through testing" and "to promote learning through testing" (Preface,《新汉语水平考试大纲》, 2009). On this basis, the damage is done! So we agree with the "Statement of the Association of Chinese Teachers in German Speaking Countries" (June 1, 2010) and deny a link between the new HSK levels, as set out in the official HSK documents, and those of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR):

At present, the vocabulary size required for level A1 in all foreign languages is about 500 lexical units. For A2, the figure is about 1,000, and for level B1 it is about 2,000. The new HSK suggests that just one-third of this vocabulary size would be needed to achieve the same levels of proficiency. The official data given by Hanban is based on the assumption that level B2 (HSK 4) will be reached after just 2 years of learning with 2-4 hours of lessons per week (160-320 hours). These figures are out of the question, even for European languages. In this context, we would like to refer once again to the resolution of Fachverband in 2005, according to which we estimated that between 1,200 and 1,600 hours of instruction (+ private study time) are required to attain oral and written proficiency in Chinese that is comparable to level B2.

In order to achieve proficiency levels as defined by the CEFR for Chinese, considerably broader skills than those stipulated by the new HSK are needed. Based on our experience of teaching Chinese in schools and universities over many decades, we at the Fachverband Chinesisch make the case for a different correspondence between the CEFR and the levels of the new HSK:

New HSK levels	Size of vocabulary	CEFR levels according to HANBAN	Effective CEFR levels
New HSK level 1	150 words	(A1)	None
New HSK level 2	300 words	(A2)	A1.1 (writing comp null)
New HSK level 3	600 words	(B1)	A1-A2
New HSK level 4	1,200 words	(B2)	A2
New HSK level 5	2,500 lexical units	(C1)	B1
New HSK level 6	Over 5,000 words	(C2)	B2-C1 ?

In another part, we have to point out that the term used for the writing part is 书写 *shuxie* ("writing" in the concrete sense), and not 写作 *xiezuo* or 作文 *zuowen* ("composition"), and

that this part of the new HSK is composed of artificial exercises, such as completing sentences, etc.

What can we say about ways of dealing with logographic writing systems and ways of dealing with the problem of inability to write what we can say? Here we propose the following ways to solve the problem of compatibility between the CEFR and non-alphabetic languages:

- Distinguish writing level and sinographic level; accept that from a didactical point of view, Chinese has two units: word and sinogram; accept that Chinese learning includes non-communicative content: sinography
- Establish precise thresholds of Chinese characters (sinographic steps) as prerequisites to the achievement of specific objectives in written activities (These steps are composed of characters selected on the basis of a combination of frequency and ability.)

Our proposal is as follows:

CEFR levels	Thresholds of Chinese characters	Size of vocabulary
C2	Up to 3,000 characters	…
C1	~2,200 characters	…
B2	~1,500 characters	over that 5,000 words
B1	~800 characters	2,500 words
A2	~500 characters	1,200 words
A1	~250 characters	500 words

- Consider the possibility of keyboarding during composing activities. Keyboarding transforms composition (by essence active) into an exercise which mobilizes the passive ability to recognize sinograms. An extension of the application of "partial competence" to Chinese: Distinguish handwriting activity and keyboarding activity. An active competence (writing) combined with a passive skill (recognizing the characters)

- Accept that greater distance between languages requires a greater amount of time, and different amounts of time are needed to attain a certain level of proficiency.

- Design contextualized tools (test, portfolio, language biography, etc.).

- Set cultural competence levels.

Facing a new era of promoting multilingual education policy and language standards on the basis of the communicative approach, Chinese language teaching cannot remain on the edge of the road, nor in the state of confusison caused by the New HSK Chinese Proficiency

Test and its relation to the CEFR levels. Educators of the Chinese language and other graphically distant languages will have to take up this new challenge.

The time has come to launch a common project based on the European Common Framework, the European Benchmarking Chinese Language that began in London in October 2010. The first act is launching these days: a survey on Chinese language teaching in universities in Europe as part of our EU co-funded project on Benchmarking Chinese Language (EBCL) with regard to the Common European Framework of Reference. Efforts are being led by the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (UK), University of Rennes 2 (France), Free University Berlin (Germany), and La Sapienza, University of Rome (Italy), with participation of advisors from INALCO and a number schools associated with these universities. The curtain is rising on the didactical contextualization of the CEFR to Chinese. Tomorrow is another day…

In a strict sense, the question is not whether or not to apply the CEFR, but whether or not to use it as reference. Language teaching is supposed to apply a syllabus comprising the content to be learned. So from the bottom up, the priority for those teaching foreign languages in Europe is to set up syllabus, because they don't yet really exist. Curricula without a syllabus and without competence goals and levels are like boats without destination and without a compass.

Using the CEFR as a reference means the strengthening of a goal-oriented approach, language teaching being structured on the basis of five languages activities and the measurement of associated levels.

So yes, it is possible to use CEFR as a reference, but we must (and particularly in the cases of distant languages) remember the Chinese proverb: "Suit the medicine to the case."

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