

# Canadian FSL Teachers' assessment practices and needs: Implications for the adoption of the CEFR in a Canadian context<sup>1</sup>

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**Résumé:** Depuis la fin des années 2000, les organismes académiques et gouvernementaux du Canada qui s'occupent de l'enseignement des langues ont fait des propositions visant le potentiel et la faisabilité du Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues (CEFR) pour les politiques et programmes d'études canadiens de l'enseignement des langues. Tandis que les concepts théoriques et sociétaux du CEFR montrent une affinité pour la pédagogie linguistique canadienne, une analyse attentive de ces textes et d'autres textes montre que l'on accorde peu de considération aux aspects pratiques, surtout à la voix des enseignants de langue. Cette étude vise à combler l'écart entre les facettes flexibles et abstraites du CEFR et les connaissances, expériences et besoins des enseignants en matière d'évaluation en classe, en examinant les défis du CEFR pour les enseignants, le rôle du CEFR dans un contexte canadien et les voix des enseignants de français langue seconde (FLS) qui ont participé à trois groupes de discussion en Ontario. Les résultats préliminaires indiquent que la transparence et la cohérence de l'évaluation et le plurilinguisme dans la salle de classe sont des préoccupations primordiales et contemporaines des enseignants du FLS qui devraient être prises en considération afin d'encourager ceux-ci à soutenir et à participer à l'adoption et à l'adaptation éventuelle du CEFR au Canada.

**Mots-clés:** Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues, contexte canadien, voix et agentivité des enseignants, plurilinguisme, transparence et cohérence de l'évaluation, français langue seconde

**Abstract:** Since the late 2000s, Canadian academic and governmental organizations concerned with language education have made proposals relating to the potential and feasibility of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for Canadian language education policies and curriculum. While theoretical and societal concepts underlying the CEFR demonstrate an affinity to Canadian linguistic pedagogy, careful analysis of these and other texts shows that practical aspects, especially voices from language teachers in classrooms, tend to be given little consideration. This study aims to bridge the gap between the CEFR's flexible and abstract facets and teachers' existing knowledge, experiences, and needs in classroom assessment by first examining teachers' challenges with the CEFR, the role of the CEFR in a Canadian context, and voices from French Second Language (FSL) teachers who participated in three focus groups in Ontario. Preliminary findings suggest that assessment transparency, consistency, and plurilingualism in the classroom are prominent and contemporary concerns of FSL teachers and should be considered in order to encourage teacher's support of and participation in the potential Canadian adoption and adaptation of the CEFR.

**Keywords:** Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Canadian Context, Teacher Agency and Voice, Plurilingualism, Assessment Transparency and Consistency, French Second Language

## 1. Introduction

Canada is one of the leading non-European countries considering adopting and adapting the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* (Council of Europe, 2001) to their unique educational context. Since the late 2000s, Canadian academic and governmental organizations concerned with language education have made proposals relating to the potential and feasibility of the CEFR for Canadian language education policies and curriculum<sup>2</sup>. In 2010, two key documents on the suitability of the CEFR for a Canadian linguistic and educational context were released: *Working with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the Canadian Context* by Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), and *Curriculum of Additional Languages* revised by British Columbia Ministry of Education with the reference to the CEFR. Both documents stress the potential for success in adapting the CEFR into language learning in Canada and highlight the CEFR's international currency. Although these proposals identify theoretical and societal concepts underlying the CEFR that demonstrate an affinity to Canadian linguistic pedagogy, careful analysis of these and other texts shows that practical aspects, especially voices from language teachers, tend to be given little consideration. This problematic lack of direction and teacher input has not only been observed in a Canadian context; European countries have experienced a variety of teachers' reactions, even resistance, to the adoption of the CEFR in their education systems (Council of Europe, 2005; Piccardo, 2010). This study aims to bridge the gap between the CEFR's flexible and abstract facets and teachers' existing knowledge, experiences, and needs in classroom assessment by first examining teachers' challenges with the CEFR, the role of the CEFR in a Canadian context, and voices from twelve teachers who participated in three focus groups in Ontario.

## 2. The CEFR: Teachers' challenges

One of the most frequently noted strengths of the CEFR is the common reference levels and the illustrative descriptors, which have a high level of validity for teachers concerned with consistency and clarity in language proficiency. Such relevancy is due in part to the fact that these references and descriptors were developed with practical input from teachers. "Groups of non-native and native-speaker teachers from a variety of educational sectors with very different profiles in terms of linguistic training and teaching experience" participated in refining the descriptors and identified their transparency, usefulness, and relevancy (Council of Europe, 2001: 30). Nonetheless, it has been reported that when the CEFR is introduced into individual educational contexts, teachers often encounter challenges in understanding and applying the abstract principles without concrete exemplars. A survey done in 2005 by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe highlighted the issue of the complexity of the CEFR. Teachers responded that the CEFR was too new, too broad, and too abstract to be adapted to classrooms in both theoretical and pragmatic senses (Council of Europe, 2005). The preliminary results of the Encouraging the Culture of Evaluation Among Professionals (ECEP) project show that teachers have distinct attitudes towards the use of the CEFR; while some are critical of the dense document, others find the framework valuable and useful. There also exist a group of teachers in the grey area, those still considering the CEFR's feasibility for their classroom (Piccardo, 2010).

Three possible reasons for teachers' challenges with the CEFR include: the abstract nature of the CEFR document, lack of research into school-based uses of the CEFR, and teachers' beliefs and cultures. First, the CEFR is a document that provides guidelines for

language policy, curriculum development, and language assessment. In other words, it is not a document of policy, curriculum, or assessment *per se*, but rather serves as a meta-document for such practices. As previously mentioned, this more abstract characteristic of the CEFR might lead teachers to confront difficulty with fully grasping the depth of the theoretical framework and in turn might lead to difficulties in actively applying its principles. Second, since its publication, research on the CEFR has primarily focused on descriptors and reference levels of the CEFR, including calibration of levels of established examinations and the CEFR levels (Figueras, 2007; Martyniuk & Noijons, 2007; North, 2008). As a result, research into school-based use has been relatively ignored. Recently, some scholars and practitioners have called for an expansion of the CEFR into the sphere of teacher training, textbook/teaching materials development, and curriculum design in an attempt to eliminate this disconnect between the concept and the classroom (Council of Europe, 2005; Figueras, 2007; Little, 2007, 2011; Martyniuk & Noijons, 2007; North, 2008; Westhoff, 2007). Lastly, teachers have their own beliefs on language, teaching, learning, assessment, and curriculum. According to Richards and Lockhart (1994), teacher beliefs are constructed by a variety of factors such as one's experiences of learning and teaching, established practices within a school or a school district, personality, and conventional principles about a theory. As a result, teacher beliefs might not be dramatically altered with the introduction of a new framework and would require time and effort to effectively implement. In this sense, changing teacher beliefs and adapting innovative procedures would accompany tensions and conflicts (Erben, Ban, & Summers, 2008; Sahinkarakas, Yumru, & Inozu, 2010). Accordingly, in order to successfully adopt and adapt a new teaching or assessment method, educators should not only provide teachers with practical tools but also analyze environmental constraints and needs (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

### 3. The CEFR in Canada

In Canada, the CEFR has the potential to be a valid national assessment tool due to its transparent and context-free nature that could "facilitate mutual recognition and cooperation of language qualification among ministries of education and among the educational, economic and cultural institutions across the country" (Vandergrift, 2008: 10). Based on his research of the application of the CEFR for Canada launched by the Department of Canadian Heritage (Vandergrift, 2006), Vandergrift (2008: 10) argues that the CEFR is well-situated for the Canadian context because:

First, it is grounded in a theory of communicative competence and language use, thereby providing a common terminology to describe language proficiency. Second, the proficiency descriptors have benefited from a rigorous validation process to ensure the fit of each descriptor with its level. Third, the descriptors are transparent, user-friendly, and meaningful to both teachers and to learners. Fourth, because it was designed to accommodate the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, the CEFR is sufficiently flexible and comprehensive for Canada's provinces and territories to relate their descriptors and frameworks to it. Finally, it has international currency, responding to the global outlook for learning in Canada.

Following Vandergrift's (2006) suggestion for adopting the CEFR, in September 2006, the Council of Ministries of Education, Canada (CMEC) agreed to form a working group to discuss strengths and weaknesses of the CEFR in details. In January 2010, the CMEC officially proposed that provinces and territories of Canada use the CEFR for teaching, learning, and assessment purposes. The CMEC concluded that the CEFR's "approach for teaching, learning, and assessment closely align with Canadian practices and curricula"

(CMEC, 2010: 27). To draw this conclusion, the working group not only analyzed the CEFR itself but also compared the European and Canadian contexts in terms of language status, social mobility, and language educational model. Recently, such efforts have made tangible outcomes in curriculum and assessment development. In 2010, the British Columbia Ministry of Education revised the elementary and secondary curriculum for additional languages based on the CEFR. The curriculum defines three levels of language learners' performances with six subdivisions and uses "can-do" statements for assessment. More importantly, the six languages taught (i.e. French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Mandarin, Punjabi) are incorporated in a single curriculum in order to develop plurilingual competence (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2010).

Along with governmental efforts, educators from different sectors have supported the adoption of the CEFR in Canada. In October 2005, a national workshop on the European language portfolio was held in Edmonton, Alberta in order to learn about the CEFR and the European Language Portfolio. Forty participants attended the event from provincial and territorial Departments of Education, federal Ministries, as well as Canadian organizations and universities (Rehorick & Lafargue, 2005). The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) is currently disseminating CEFR information kits, including fact sheets and video clips, to educators on a national scale and has sponsored pan-Canadian symposiums to encourage awareness of the CEFR (CASLT, 2008).

#### 4. Data collection procedures and overall results

In order to gain insight into the needs of Canadian language teachers, three focus groups were held in Ontario in 2010 with French Second Language (FSL) elementary and secondary school teachers (N=12) from a large urban area from three separate types of schools<sup>3</sup>. Hosting focus group interviews is a qualitative research method considered appropriate to brainstorm *collective* experiences and elicit *emerging* issues relating to research questions (Dörnyei, 2007). To elaborate on the focus groups that participated in this study, Focus Group A was held with four FSL teachers from a public elementary school offering both Core French and French Immersion programs<sup>4</sup>. The four participants taught a range of grade 4 through 8, with two Core French teachers and two French Immersion teachers. Focus Group B was held with four FSL teachers from an independent high school. The four participants taught Core French in grades 8 through 12 as part of an internationally accredited program. Focus Group C was held with four FSL teachers from a Catholic high school, all of whom taught Core French between grades 9 and 12. Both the public and Catholic schools followed the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum documents, while the independent school followed the curriculum of their accredited international program, yet guided by the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum. All participants had little to no knowledge of the CEFR. Focus group questions concentrated on the who, what, where, when, and how of the teachers' and schools' French language assessment practices, and participants were encouraged to share any additional thoughts. While the focus group questions were essentially adopted from the ECEP project<sup>5</sup>, they were theoretically grounded in research on classroom-based or teacher-based assessment (e.g., Davison & Leung, 2010). The interviews were conducted for almost one hour per each group. The focus groups recordings were transcribed, and then content analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) was used to find out meaningful themes within the domains shown in the Table 1. While the sample size is small and one of convenience, the transcribed data derived from the focus groups highlights the diversity within Ontario, and subsequently Canadian, FSL teaching and assessment practices (see Table 1).

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		Differences		
		Focus Group A	Focus Group B	Focus Group C
Assessment	Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher assessment preferred over peer- or self assessment</li> <li>- Summative is assessment type most frequently used</li> <li>- Assessment methods vary by grade</li> <li>- Emphasis on grammar and vocabulary in low grades</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Diagnostic test</li> <li>- Cognitively less difficult tests first: Oral test first, written test later; repetition first, summary task later</li> <li>- A variety of test types: structure (grammar) test, process-writing test, project-based test</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Formative at the end of unit</li> <li>- 100% of assessment done entirely in French</li> <li>- Oral test in all grades; written test in higher grades</li> <li>- More formative assessment in the lower grades</li> </ul>
	Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use of English in French assessment</li> <li>- Reliability, validity, practicality of peer- or self-assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dependency on teachers' experiences or intuitions</li> <li>- Tension between proficiency and achievement</li> <li>- Time constraints in assessment, marking, and reporting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time constraints</li> <li>- Assessing the communicative dimension of language</li> </ul>
	Needs		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exemplars for assessment</li> <li>- Collaboration with teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-assessment tool</li> <li>- Tool for communication with parents</li> </ul>
Curriculum	Practices		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ontario Ministry of Education FSL curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Internationally accredited curriculum guided by the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum</li> </ul>
	Concerns		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Vague and general: no clear and specific definitions of achievement levels</li> <li>- Use of jargon</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dogmatic and rigid curriculum leaves little room for flexibility</li> <li>- Conflicts between students goals and curriculum aims</li> </ul>
	Needs		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evolving, spiral structure of curriculum</li> <li>- Valid definition of levels</li> <li>- Holistic and systematic approach to language knowledge and use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consistency among teachers and schools</li> <li>- Tool for self-assessment of on-going development</li> </ul>

Table 1 provides an overview of the results of the focus groups. It is quite apparent from the diversity of responses in this table that the current realities and needs of FSL teachers differ not only between school boards, but also within schools themselves. However, it should be noted that results cannot be interpreted as reflecting the quality of practices in assessment and teaching per school board or grade level. Rather, what is worth noting is that these results emphasize that all schools and classrooms within those schools may have different cultures of teaching and assessment based on varying teachers' beliefs and experiences.

## **5. Major findings**

### **5.1. Transparency of the assessment process**

Transparency of the assessment process, specifically the degree to which the students are informed of the structure of their assessment, varied substantially across the focus groups. Both Focus Group B and C had set rubrics, tests, and routines that ensured students were aware of expectations. One participant from Focus Group C stated "we give them reference pages, the rubric, it is all given to them ahead of time<sup>6</sup>" so that students are completely aware of expectations. Feedback from Focus Group B mimicked this same mentality of necessary transparency, where one participant explained that for students in that school "the test is no surprise and [the students] know the format before they come in", all expectations were clear, familiar, and anticipated.

Conversely, in Focus Group A some participants complained of having to create the rubric after the fact. One teacher explained how "whenever you can assess you do. Whatever you get handed in you assess it as it is. You don't normally make full assessment formulas to figure out 'this is going to be assessed then'." While participants of Focus Group A demonstrated a desire to have more transparent assessment methods, some participants felt that time constraints and a vast spectrum of student abilities within one class prevented them from creating a more straightforward approach to assessing student knowledge and understanding. There was no time prior to assigning a task to create the rubric and the diversity in abilities and high concentration of learning disabilities made the process of creating a fair rubric challenging, if not impossible.

### **5.2. Consistency of assessment between teachers, schools, and across the province**

While one would believe that a standardized curriculum across Ontario would ensure consistency amongst grades across the province, each focus group voiced concerns over the lack of consistency within the province, school boards, and even within the same school in terms of content and assessment. Focus Group B demonstrated the most coherent and consistent methods, due largely to the prescriptive and dogmatic nature of the international accredited program. As one teacher noted, "I feel like I have a little bit control over what they've learned, and then when they go into the next year they, the teachers, know exactly what's been covered in the previous years." The consistency in curriculum covered per grade ensures stability throughout a student's time at the school. The participant continued by explaining the collaborative measures that ensured consistency: "I think partly because we have the [internationally accredited] program, each student is everybody's student, so the student that [another teacher] has this year, in two years will be my student. So we have to work together to make sure that we all

get them to the same spot.” Teaching each individual student becomes a team effort; each student’s success is the responsibility of all teachers and consistency in content and assessment supplies the necessary means by which teachers can mutually facilitate student learning.

Focus Group C demonstrated similar consistency within their school, due mainly to an environment of collaborative assessment. However, some noted that there lacked consistency between schools, even between schools of the same board. One participant described how consistency in content covered is mandated by the Ontario curriculum to ensure fluidity of student movement between boards, reiterating that “if a student goes from one school to the next they know that ‘yes in this grade level you will be covering this particular thing across the board at this particular level’.” But not all participants felt this policy was a reality. Immediately her colleague countered, explaining that schools and teachers are “supposed to do that, but I’ve had students that have come from other boards and other cities but they are totally not doing the same type of thing or the same type of curriculum.” While all participants in Focus Group C agreed that they maintained a high level of consistency in content and assessment due to the fact that they “talk to each other about everything”, inconsistency between schools was of great concern, both due to gaps in knowledge and degree of French proficiency.

Focus Group A raised the issue of inconsistency in assessment, stating that the Ministry rubric and levels (1 to 4) used to grade students are too unclear and subjective. As one participant pointed out, “we’re expected to have an idea of a standard of achievement, what a level 1, level 2 looks like, and we have nothing to base that on except our own experience.” Of the four Focus Group A participants, each teacher had a different perspective of what each grading level looked like. One considered task completeness, the degree to which students finished their work. Another participant perceived the levels to be the degree to which a student is able to meet and surpass pre-defined expectations, where level 4 is rare as the student needs to meet all expectations addressed and then exceed them independently. While there was disagreement as to what each level meant, there was general consensus that the system was far too subjective and undefined. Participants expressed a need for clearer and more distinct rubrics from the Ministry, paired with exemplars in French of what each level should look like. One participant explained how currently, “in terms of assessment guidelines I make everything because there are no examples there are some vague rubrics.” Without teachers having a clear understanding of expectations and levels, it becomes impossible to provide clear and consistent rubrics for assessment to the students.

### 5.3. Plurilingualism

During the course of the focus groups, participants were asked to what degree they allow the use of English, either to clarify expectations and instructions, or to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of French texts. The interviewers asked these questions, which had not been included in the profile of prepared focus group questions, because participants from all groups recurrently expressed concern over the use of English in FSL classrooms. Admittedly, plurilingualism underlying the CEFR is a theoretical approach to language use and teaching beyond the question of which languages should be taught and used in classrooms and how. However, this issue may deserve discussing under the theme of plurilingualism in the Canadian FSL context where the tradition of language

immersion is still prevalent. Moreover, teachers' voice about this issue may give a practical implication as to how plurilingualism can be applied in language classroom practices as a solution to this challenge and a method of French language education which aims to integrate a student's L1 as a tool in French language learning.

Across all schools there was a general unease towards the concept of integrating the judicious use of English into French programs in order to facilitate students' demonstration of their knowledge and understanding. Focus Group B was adamant that there was no room for English whatsoever in the French classroom. As one participant stated, there is "zero English tolerance" at the school, regardless of the grade or individual student's understanding. Another participant agreed, stating that "evaluation of their knowledge has to be produced to us in French". For another Focus Group B participant, the aversion to English was not based on a puritan view of the French program, but rather on her perception of the ineffectiveness of using English to facilitate French acquisition. She explained how "their English is also problematic, many of them have very limited experience with a lot of reading and they have a very limited vocabulary in English. I'll often say 'it's the same word in English' and they don't know the word in English." Without strong English skills, she felt that plurilingualism was an ineffective method to increase French proficiency.

Focus Group A and C were more lenient on the use of English in the French classroom. For Focus Group C, while one participant stated that "we don't encourage it", another participant explained that neither do they "stigmatize" the use of English, where part marks are still given for answers provided in English. Nonetheless, all teachers from Focus Group C agreed that the use of English to demonstrate knowledge in French would result in a loss of marks, that such answers could not be considered complete, and that French-English dictionaries were not allowed during tests. Focus Group A used English in a discretionary fashion, with one French Immersion teacher reserving the use of the language for those who are nearly failing, giving these students the opportunity to write about their understanding of a French text in English. The other French Immersion teacher agreed, stating that "it was only by giving them the full reign to write it in English what the stories about, I began to see [the students] didn't quite understand it". For her, the use of English allowed her to better understand student misconceptions. However, one of the Core French teachers of Focus Group A dismissed the use of English as "confusing" for the students and expressed the need to use French as much as possible in the time they had with the students.

## Conclusion

The CEFR's affinity for supporting diverse and dynamic classrooms, the clarity and global validity of the descriptors, as well as its role in facilitating teacher agency make the framework a feasible and sensible option to adopt for a Canadian language and teaching context. Nonetheless, teachers' voice, including their current practices and needs, should be considered in order to encourage teacher's support of and participation in any movement the country might make towards adapting the framework for Canadian educational and linguistic demands. Assessment transparency, consistency, and plurilingualism in language learning are all fundamental to the CEFR and currently found to varying degrees in pedagogical approaches of the participating teachers. However, such characteristics are not always viewed favourably or perceived as realistic. If Canada

is to move forth with the CEFR, utilizing teacher voice and perspective would ensure that the framework meets the expectations of contemporary Canadian classrooms and satisfies the demands of what is currently missing in Canadian language education.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper involves collecting data from the Canadian component of the project, Encouraging the Culture of Evaluation among Professionals (ECEP), supervised by Dr. Enrica Piccardo at the University of Toronto.

<sup>2</sup> In Canada, education is a provincial portfolio with each province and territory responsible for setting and regulating their own curriculum.

<sup>3</sup> Within an Ontarian context, there exist three dominant school systems: public, Catholic and independent. Both the public and Catholic school boards are provincially funded systems bound to the Ontario curriculum, while independent schools are privately funded and may choose to follow some of the Ontario curriculum. The Catholic school board system requires a certain degree of religious teaching, as do some independent schools that follow different religions, while the public school system functions outside of any religious teachings.

<sup>4</sup> Core French is a mandatory subject in Ontario English-language elementary schools for students in grades 4-8. The aim of Core French is to develop basic French communication skills. French Immersion is an optional program where 50%-100% of the language of instruction of all classes is in French typically starting in grade 1. The aim of French Immersion is to develop strong French communication skills.

<sup>5</sup> For the ECEP project, visit the website at <http://ecep.ecml.at/> or see Piccardo (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Although repeated or indiscernible parts of utterance were eliminated or revised in the course of transcription, the authors tried to keep participants' statements intact as much as possible. Thus, it should be noted that direct quotes in this paper retain the colloquial nature of the interaction.