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CEFR and Foreign Language Education at KU Leuven, Belgium, Sister University of OUFS

Antonio F. Smith

1. Introduction

As part of a larger research project regarding the Common European Framework of Reference, funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Osaka University of Foreign Studies (hereafter OUFS) sent nine staff members to sister universities in Europe to research how they do or do not use the CEFR in their foreign language education programs. The research is intended to inform OUFS as it implements its own CEFR-based achievement system.

Belgium, at the center of Europe and well known as a multi-lingual society, seemed an excellent place to investigate. As it turns out, Belgium, and more precisely Flanders, does indeed have world-class standards for language education and has incorporated the CEFR into its university and adult education curriculum.

This report explains the programs for language education both at the sister university of OUFS, KU Leuven, and also at a center for adult education in language associated with KU Leuven, the CLT. The report also suggests ways in which Japanese universities might benefit from emulating the aforementioned programs.

2. Descriptions of the institution (and related institutions and programs)

2.1. KU Leuven

KU Leuven, founded in 1425 is the oldest still active Catholic University

CEFR and Foreign Language Education at KU Leuven, Belgium, Sister University of OUPS in the world, conveniently located just 30 kilometers east of Brussels.

2. 1. 1. ILT:

Modern languages at KU Leuven are taught at the ILT, *Intitute voor Levende Talen*. The literal translation for this is “Institute for Living Languages,” but the official English name is “Interfaculty Institute of Modern Languages”. A great deal of information on the ILT can be found at its homepage, http://www.kuleuven.be/ilt/engels/e_index.htm.

The ILT is the language education institution for the entire university. Each Faculty specifies its particular objectives and the ILT delivers them. Attendance is mandated by the Faculties. A Faculty may request the ILT to teach just CEFR skills or language for a specific academic purpose. Currently on offer are: English, Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, Danish, German, French, Japanese, Swahili, Korean, Modern Greek, Norwegian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Czech, Turkish and Swedish.

2. 1. 2. CLT:

The CLT, *Centrum voor Levende Talen*, literally “Center for Living Languages” is a center for adult education in languages. The focus is just on CEFR.

2. 1. 3. Erasmus/Socrates:

These are programs by which students in the European Union can study in any member state. Foreign students from outside the E.U. with special student exchange agreements also deal with Erasmus/Socrates administrators. Two undergraduate degree programs are offered in English—one in Philosophy and one in Religion. About fifty M.A. classes are offered in English—taught mainly by Belgians—in both natural and social sciences. English majors from OUPS have participated in both the undergraduate and graduate programs and expressed very positive reviews.

3. Japanese Program at KU Leuven—Overview

The Japanese Program is a four-year course consisting of a 3-year BA and 1-year IMA (Initial Masters). There is no Entrance Exam (normal in Belgium), but the program is very challenging, and less than 50% of students continue to the second year. The CEFR is used and students go from true beginner to C1 in 4 years. However, not just the language is taught. There is collaboration with teachers of academic specializations, and ILT courses help prepare students for their academic specializations, such as Linguistics, History, Sociology etc. Students read academic papers in their specialization written in Japanese in 4th year.

ILT teachers and the regular faculty evaluate and adjust the language program periodically. ILT teachers handle virtually all language instruction. Professors with academic specializations teach very little language per se. It seems just one regular professor teaches one grammar class, with Japanese as the mode of instruction.

The program is rated number one in Belgium by outside evaluation. There is complete transparency which is achieved through a visiting day for parents and students, a visiting week in which to audit classes, a Q&A day with curriculum and objectives open to the public, and outside evaluation by specialists from Holland and other universities in Belgium every three years, which can affect the program's budget.

Some highlights of the program are that about half of the students who remain after 1st year study in Japan with scholarships and there is an effective system to make students reach C1 in all five CEFR skills + the ability to read academic papers in their specialization. Some details of the system follow.

Firstly, there are clear goals for each year. By the end of 1st year, students must reach low B1, 2nd year: low B2, 3rd year: low C1 (& all jo yoo kanji), 4th year: solid C1 and the ability to read academic papers in their specialization.

Then, to insure the goals are achieved, evaluation is strict: Students must pass oral and written exams to continue to the following year. Also, evidence of student CEFR levels is entered in their European Language Portfolio (ELP).

Finally, there are enough hours of language instruction to achieve the goals. In first year, students receive 13hrs/week, 2nd year 11hrs/week, 3rd year 8hrs/week and 4th year 6hrs/week; 1hr.=50 min.

C1 + the ability to read academic papers is attractive because upon graduation, students' language ability is good enough to pursue graduate studies in Japan, or elsewhere, or work at a company where they actually use their Japanese. About ½ of graduates enter such companies and ½ enter graduate schools.

4. ILT Philosophy and Teachers

ILT teachers use the target language as the mode of instruction, and for good reason. In the 1960's KU Leuven used the grammar-translation style for both living and dead languages, and students could not speak well. Then, the ILT was formed to teach living languages in a modern way. Now students receive much exposure to and practice in the L2 and perform well in all 5 CEFR skill areas.

ILT teachers are not normally research specialists, except sometimes in applied linguistics; they are language-teaching specialists. A Ph.D. is not required, and ILT teachers need not publish papers; instead, they teach more classes and develop their own teaching materials. They are proud of their job and enthusiastic, so the quality of their teaching is excellent. Some collaborate in research with the regular faculty.

Many if not most of the ILT teachers are non-native speakers of the target language, for various reasons. Non-native teachers understand the difficulties learners face, and how to overcome them. Non-native teachers are good role models: They are living proof that non-native speakers can use the target language effectively and naturally, in all 5 CEFR skill areas. Lastly, they rightly destroy

the misconception that non-native teachers must be perfect or even very native-like when using the target language, which helps students to relax and use the language more freely themselves.

Regarding ILT teachers teaching high-level classes for Faculties outside their specialization, Dr. Lut Baten reports that when teaching a C2 level English class for economics students, she needs a basic knowledge of the field, but she need not be an economist herself, as she is not teaching economics per se. Rather, she is helping students to develop their ability to perform high-level academic tasks in the target language, such as presentations and academic writing... plus finer points of pronunciation, intonation etc. When delivering presentations or writing papers on esoteric areas of their field, students often must introduce new high-level vocabulary to the teacher and/or class.

5. Implications for Japanese Universities

5. 1. Comparison and contrast

KU Leuven is a top-level university in Belgium, and as such, those responsible think it only proper that students specializing in a language there should reach advanced level in all skill areas—even in one of the most challenging languages in the world, Japanese. The same attitude applies in many other countries, including the U.S.A. To meet the world standard, top-level universities in Japan should also consistently produce graduates with advanced level, but they do not. Therefore, the root causes of the deficiency should be identified and rectified.

There are two ways in which language students at top Japanese universities and KU Leuven Japanese Studies majors are on par.

- While KU Leuven's Japanese Studies fails about ½ of 1st year students, good Japanese universities eliminate a large percentage of applicants with an entrance examination, so the level of students should be similar at both places.

- Both KU Leuven students of Japanese and Japanese students studying languages other than English start as true beginners.

In one way, however, Japanese students have an advantage.

- Because Kanji takes a long time to learn, the total study time for Belgians to reach C1 in Japanese should actually be *longer* than the total study time for Japanese to reach C1 in most languages.

On the other hand, KU Leuven students of Japanese have advantages over Japanese students of foreign languages in at least four areas: motivation, total hours of instruction, spoken interaction practice and systematic instruction.

1. Unlike KU Leuven students of Japanese, many Japanese students of foreign languages, especially languages other than English, do not expect to use their language in their career or for graduate school, so they may lack the motivation to strive for advanced level.
2. KU Leuven students of Japanese receive more hours of language instruction than Japanese students specializing in a foreign language, so Japanese students may have too few hours to consistently reach advanced level.
(Foot: Much thanks to Kono sensei for bringing up the two points above at the November Faculty Development meeting at OUF).
3. Foreign language instruction at the ILT is conducted in the target language, so students receive sufficient speaking and listening practice to reach C1 in listening, spoken production and spoken interaction. In contrast, foreign language instruction in Japan is mainly conducted in Japanese, so students often receive too little speaking and listening practice to reach C1 in those areas.
4. The ILT uses the CEFR to create meaningful targets, curriculum that efficiently

and transparently leads to the targets and means of evaluation that both prove the targets have been reached and indicate areas in which curriculum and/or instruction can be improved. Most Japanese universities do not have such a system.

5. 2. Solutions to weaknesses 1-4 above.

If Japanese universities want their students to consistently reach advanced level in all language skill areas, they will have to remedy the four above-mentioned weaknesses in student motivation, instruction hours, teaching approach/method and system of instruction and evaluation. Top language programs from around the world should be studied and their best features tried here in Japan.

For example, thus far, OUFS has decided to take one great step forward for language education in Japan by adopting the CEFR as the principal means of organizing its language education system. If this solves problem 4, above, and results in significant systematic improvement of language education at OUFS, then other universities in Japan can follow its example.

Nevertheless, 1-3 remain perennial problems in Japan. Therefore, language teachers, especially those who teach minor foreign languages, should research means of increasing students' motivation. For example, they should research both graduate school and career opportunities for those with advanced level in their language. They should also research opportunities for students to use the language for *real* communication in the target language, which provides a natural motivation to improve one's language skills. Some possibilities include videophone language exchange and live conversation partners.

As for paucity of instruction hours, very large universities with a large international population, like Osaka University, should consider using something like the T.A. system used at the University of California. There, one language course is worth 6 units, 1.5 times the units of a regular class, and meets five times

per week. Three periods per week are for grammar and vocabulary instruction by non-native speakers who are graduate students specializing in the target language, and two periods are for small-group conversation practice lead by a native speaker. Language laboratory hours are also assigned. A university with a sufficiently large international population could use a similar system, which serves the dual purpose of significantly increasing hours of instruction without significantly increasing cost *and* increasing on-campus employment for students.

To address Japanese students' weakness in listening, spoken production and spoken interaction, universities should offer means and incentives for the target language to be the primary language of the classroom. Universities should provide teachers with opportunities to learn how to use the target language as the mode of instruction by documenting the practice in other parts of the world and/or offering classes as part of FD. Universities could also offer extra pay to teachers who conduct classes in the target language, as they have extra work preparing for classes and students get the extra benefit of interacting in the target language.

English majors reaching C1 is a different matter. Problem 4, sufficient speaking and listening practice still applies, but problems 1 and 2, motivation and hours of instruction, do not. English majors at good universities in Japan should be eligible for jobs or graduate schools where they use English, so they should be highly motivated. Also, despite having fewer hours than the ILT students, English majors should be able to reach C1 because they tend to start at advanced beginner, low-intermediate or even higher levels. At K.U. Leuven, English majors reach C2.

6. CLT: Adult Language Education (<http://www.clt.be/home/indexen.htm>)

At the CLT, the teachers & philosophy are like those of the ILT, but at the CLT, there is not a focus on academic specializations. Enrolment has grown

rapidly since the introduction of CEFR, and enrolment is voluntary. Thus, it can be assumed that students enroll because they like the program and its features, such as concrete CEFR targets on a clearly specified schedule and curricula clearly designed to produce the targets.

6. 1. Volwassenenonderwijs:

It is the regulation book issued by the Flanders government specifying CEFR goals and times.

Niveau I (Breakthrough & Waystage, or A1-A2) :

Japanese, Chinese and Arabic: 480 hours over 4 years

Greek, Polish, Russian & Turkish: 360 hours over 3 years

Other languages: 240 hours over 2 years

Niveau II (Threshold & Vantage B1-B2) :

Japanese, Chinese and Arabic: 480 hrs./4 years

Greek, Polish, Russian & Turkish: 480 hrs./4 years

Other languages: 480 hrs./4 years

Niveau III (Strong Vantage & Effective Operational Proficiency, or B2+-C1) :

Japanese, Chinese and Arabic: Not offered

Greek, Polish, Russian & Turkish: Not offered

Other languages: 240 hours over 2 years

Niveau IV (Mastery or C2) :

Japanese, Chinese and Arabic: Not offered

Greek, Polish, Russian & Turkish: Not offered

Other languages: 240 hours over 2 years

6. 2. CLT Teachers' Manuals (available on CD)

Teachers of the various languages have published teachers' manuals linking the teaching of their particular language at CLT to the Volwassenenonderwijs and CEFR. One example is the Japanese manual written by Sakurai sensei and Werplancke sensei of the ILT Japanese Program. It ties the CEFR levels and associated abilities to specific language functions and vocabulary synthesized from several of the most popular Japanese textbooks. Other manuals are composed similarly.

Assistant Director of the CLT, Professor Gerda Mispelter, provided a CD containing drafts of teachers' manuals for the 13 languages taught at the CLT. Please contact me if you wish to have a copy of the CD. All that the CLT requests in exchange is feedback about their manuals so they can make them ever better. If you have feedback for the CLT, you can e-mail me at smithaf@osaka-gaidai.ac.jp and I can forward your feedback to the CLT's assistant director.

6. 3. CEFR “Year Plans”

To ensure Volwassenenonderwijs goals are achieved, each teacher must specify on a form what s/he will teach and when over the course of the academic year. The aforementioned teachers' manuals facilitate making the year plans. Each plan is submitted to the CLT coordinator for approval, returned to the teacher for revision if necessary, and then examined by official CEFR inspectors.

6. 4. Testing

The CLT uses in-house computer testing to establish that targets have been achieved. Based on test results, teaching materials are fine-tuned and FD is conducted.

7. Implications

Institutes for adult education in Japan might be able to virtually copy the CLT's system of language education. This is a great opportunity for Japanese institutes of adult education to reap the benefits of Belgium's research and development for free. It should not be ignored. Institutes of adult education and Mombukagakusho should examine the CLT's program carefully and decide if a pilot program should be started in Japan.

Universities in Japan that offer specializations in foreign languages and that are interested in the CEFR can also refer to the Volwassenenonderwijs and the CLT's teachers' manuals and year plans. However, because the pace of adult language education is slow compared to university education, and because students do not study the language needed for particular academic specializations, universities in Japan could use the same organizational principles as the CLT, but increase the pace and add an academic element, like the ILT.

The total hours of instruction stated in the Volwassenenonderwijs appear to be similar to the total hours needed at universities, and universities in Japan can consider the Volwassenenonderwijs' allocation of hours when arranging their own language programs. For example, a student of Arabic might need about 960 hours (each hour equals 50 minutes) of instruction to get firmly into B2 range, a student of Russian 840 hours and a student of Spanish 720 hours.

Students who have reached advanced beginner/beginning intermediate level in English upon starting university, as many OUFS English majors have, should need about 480 hours to reach solid B2 range. In fact, over 1st and 2nd year, English majors at OUFS get ten classes of 90 minutes meeting 28 times for a total equivalent to about 500 fifty-minute hours, and they are supposed to finish B2 in this time. An additional 240 hours should then allow students to complete C1. However, fewer hours than that should be enough to reach solid

C1 range.

Another corroborating example is that students studying Japanese at KU Leuven's ILT finish B2 and start C1 after about 900 hours of classroom instruction, which is very close to the Volwassenenonderwijs allocation of 960 hours of instruction to finish B2 in Japanese in adult education. The ILT simply finish the hours in far fewer years.

The CLT teachers' manuals can be used as a starting point for university language programs that are beginning to design CEFR-based curriculum. The manuals are concrete examples of how specific language functions and vocabulary can be tied to the CEFR levels. The manuals also show how those functions and vocabulary can be scheduled.

8. Conclusion

The success of both the ILT and the CLT with CEFR suggest the following:

- 1) Language education can benefit from, clear, meaningful goals, like CEFR levels.
- 2) To help students climb the CEFR levels efficiently, curriculum designers must consider sub-goals: the abilities that define the CEFR levels.
- 3) To show curriculum leads surely to CEFR targets, curriculum designers/ teachers should openly reveal how what is taught aims to bring about the CEFR abilities/levels in the time allotted (See Volwassenenonderwijs, teachers' manuals & year plans).
- 4) A system to prove the levels have been achieved, like the European Portfolio, and/or CLT-type computer tests, is required for credibility and feedback.
- 5) Based on Portfolio and/or testing results/feedback, curriculum and teaching materials should be modified and FD organized.
- 6) CEFR goals can complement academic goals, as shown at the ILT.

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