

Culture and the Common European Framework for Languages: A Comparative Corpus Analysis of 2001, 2018 and 2020 Texts

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Abstract:

In order to provide “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe”, The Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) was published in 2001 by the Council of Europe. It has affected the way languages are taught, learnt and assessed and also how foreign language proficiency levels are defined all around the world. The CEFR adopts an intercultural approach to foreign language, and the main purpose is to protect cultural diversity and to give importance to cultural activities rather than being a part of foreign language education. For this reason, culture is at the very core of the CEFR. In 2018 and 2020, two Companion Volumes were published to complement the CEFR. The present paper offers a comparative corpus analysis of these three texts focusing on the occurrences of culture-related items using n-gram tool of Sketch Engine (Lexical Computing, n. d.), which creates frequency lists of sequences of tokens. Based on the findings, it is suggested according to the CEFR that rather than focusing on the national culture of the native speakers of the target language, foreign language education should focus more on the “new culture” formed by the encounters of people coming from different cultures.

Key Words: CEFR, culture, corpus analysis

Introduction

The Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) provides a description of the knowledge and skills second language learners need to

acquire for effective communication along with “the cultural context in which language is set” (CoE, 2001, p.1). The intention behind the development of the CEFR was to eliminate the difficulties in the learning of foreign languages resulting from the differences between the educational systems adopted by different nations across Europe by supplying “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” (CoE, 2001, p.1). As these definitions and the name itself suggest very clearly, The Common European Framework for Languages was meant for Europe at the beginning. However, it has had a huge impact on the way languages are taught, learnt and assessed. Moreover, it has also defined foreign language proficiency levels currently used in most parts of the world since it was announced in 2001. Currently translated into more than 40 languages, the CEFR has been adopted by many educational systems in Europe and is widely used in other countries outside of Europe. According to the results of a survey conducted in 30 member countries of the European Union (Martyniuk & Noijons, 2007), it was found useful by many of the participating countries in program planning and development, preparation of exams and tests, and textbook preparation.

The CEFR adopts an intercultural approach to foreign language instruction seeking ways to enrich the learners’ experiences “of otherness in language and culture” (CoE, 2001, p.1). This approach results from the main objective of the CoE, which aims “to achieve greater unity among its members and to pursue this aim by the adoption of common action in the cultural field” (CoE, 2001, p.2). The Council for Cultural Co-operation of the CoE sets its processes on three basic principles, the very first of which is defined as follows (CoE, 2001, p.2):

“that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding;”

Plurilingualism is emphasized in many parts of the CEFR. Becoming competent in a second and third foreign language instead of just one foreign language is among the objectives of multinational Europe. It is also stated that trying to learn a second or third foreign language along with the cultures they belong to will not negatively affect people's competence in their mother tongue and culture, on the contrary, this new language and culture acquisition will enable people to have a more intellectual understanding in their language and cultural understanding. Accordingly, (CoE, 2001, p.43):

“The language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how. They enable the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences.”

These expressions in the purpose and objectives section of the CEFR show that the main purpose is to protect cultural diversity and to give importance to cultural activities rather than being a part of foreign language education. Culture is at the very core of the CEFR, and this study tries to define the importance of “culture” along with its related concepts within the CEFR by providing a historical perspective to the development of it.

Historical background

The CEFR was published in 2001, yet it has a much longer history dating back to the 1970s, and the events leading to it can even be traced back to a little earlier to post-war period (Kavakli & Mirici, 2019). The World War II (1939-1945) followed by the Cold War (1947-1991) resulting from the extreme nationalist tendencies damaged Europe at an extent beyond anyone could think of. The damage was not limited to economy, but felt almost in every arena, from international relations to social life, and even some basic freedoms, such as travelling or contacting with foreigners (Vallax, 2011). Having learnt their lesson, there was a drastic change in the way Europeans thought. Especially the need to exist in a post-war world economically among the emerging powers of the time in the globalizing world, Europeans came to believing that a united front was their only chance of survival internationally. And this unison required a mutual tolerance and respect to the diversity across Europe both culturally and linguistically (Vallax, 2011).

This way of thinking led to the establishment of the CoE in 1949 by the six statesmen from five European countries, who were defined as “men of dialogue, who had lived through two world wars and had first-hand experience of a number of European cultures, were the pioneers of a Europe of peace founded on the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law” (CoE, n. d.). Five years later, on December 19, 1954 European Cultural Convention was signed by the CoE member states in Paris, which was “designed to foster among the nationals of all members, and of such other European States as may accede thereto, the study of the languages, history and civilisation of the others and of the civilisation which is common to them all” (CoE, 1954). With Article 1 of this treaty, contracting European States agreed to “take appropriate measures to safeguard and to encourage the development of its national contribution to the common cultural heritage of Europe”, and Article 2 required that they “encourage the study by its own nationals of the languages, history and civilisation of the other Contracting Parties and grant facilities to those Parties to promote such studies in its territory” and “endeavour to promote the study of its language or languages, history and civilisation in the territory of the other Contracting Parties and grant facilities to the nationals of those Parties to pursue such studies in its territory” (CoE, 1954). The series of events that led to the CEFR were described by Trim (2001) in detail in the report published by the CoE titled “Modern Languages in the Council of

Europe 1954-1997". However, to cut the long story short, it was November 1991 that a decision was made on the introduction of the CEFR and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) in a symposium on language learning held in Rüschlikon, Switzerland. The ELP, which was a tool for promoting the development of plurilingualism and pluri-culturalism was piloted between 1998 and 2000 (Mirici, 2008), and in 2000 it was decided in Krakow, Poland that ELP came along with the CEFR (CoE, 2000). Eventually, the CEFR was published in 2001.

In 2018, the first Companion Volume to CEFR was published as a complement to the CEFR 2001 with new descriptors including plurilingual/pluricultural competence with an emphasis on "the promotion of plurilingualism and pluri-culturalism" (CoE, 2018). Two years later, a new Companion Volume was published in 2020, which was defined as an update to the CEFR 2001, yet the conceptual framework of 2001 version was reported to remain valid. The latest volume is meant to present a more user-friendly format along with key messages to the illustrative descriptors (CoE, 2020). As presented in a number of various ways above, culture has a central place in the development and organization of the CEFR. Promoting intercultural awareness is one of the main objectives of the CEFR. Companion Volume 2018 came along with new descriptors specific to the concepts of plurilingualism and pluri-culturalism. In the light of this information, the present paper tries to define the importance of "culture" within the CEFR along with its related concepts by providing a historical perspective to the development of it. Additionally, it tries to provide a comparison of the original text published in 2001 with the Companion Volumes published in 2018 and 2020 in terms of emphasis placed on culture related concepts with a corpus-based approach. With these purposes, the paper has two research questions:

1. How many occurrences of culture related concepts are there in 2001, 2018 and 2020 texts?
2. Has there been a change in the amount or the way the concept of "culture" is included within the CEFR in time?

Methodology

The present study provides a comparative corpus-analysis of the three CEFR documents. The data of the present study comprises of the three CEFR documents (2001, 2018, 2020), which were downloaded from the official website of the CoE. Three corpora were compiled with these three documents using Sketch Engine (Lexical Computing, n. d.), which is an online corpus analysis software used by linguists, lexicographers, translators, students and teachers. In order to analyse the texts, n-gram tool of Sketch Engine, which creates frequency lists of sequences of tokens, was utilized. On the word level, an n-gram pattern fundamentally foresees the occurrence of a word based on the preceding predefined word or words. N-grams are used in order to uncover

the language structure using a statistical perspective like *what word is expected or possible to follow the given one*. They are basically combinations of adjacent words that exist in source text or compilation of your texts called corpus. The frequency of lemmas including “cultur”, 2-gram items ending with “culture”, 2-gram items starting with “cultural”, 2-gram items starting with “pluricultural”, 2-gram items starting with “intercultural”, 2-gram items starting with “sociocultural”, and 3-gram items starting with “sociocultural and” were calculated, and concordance lines including these items were found out. The quantitative findings and some concordance lines were presented below.

Findings

Table 1 Number of items in each corpus

2001		2018		2020	
Tokens	121,296	Tokens	122,100	Tokens	134,848
Words	99,930	Words	103,992	Words	114,079
Sentences	3,632	Sentences	3,539	Sentences	4,126

Table 1 presents the size of each corpus. Accordingly, there are no significant differences between corpora in terms of size, especially between 2001 and 2018 texts taken the 17-year-difference between their publication.

Table 2 Lemmas including “cultur”

2001			2018			2020		
Item	Freq		Item	Freq		Item	Freq	
1 culture	68		1 cultural	109		1 cultural	119	
2 cultural	59		2 intercultural	72		2 intercultural	79	
3 pluricultural	35		3 pluricultural	68		3 pluricultural	73	
4 sociocultural	33		4 culture	56		4 culture	64	
5 intercultural	29		5 sociocultural	32		5 sociocultural	44	
6 pluriculturalism	5		6 multicultural	19		6 multicultural	18	
7 interculturality	2		7 pluriculturalism	8		7 culturally	10	
8 multicultural	2		8 culturally	6		8 cross-cultural	3	
9 cross-cultural	1		9 interculturalism	2		9 interculturalism	2	
10 socioculturally	1		10 cross-cultural	3		10 acculturation	1	
11 culture-related	1		11 culturally-specific	1		11 culture-specific	1	
12 acculturation	1		12 acculturation	1		SUM	422	
13 culture-specific	1		13 multiculturalism	1				
SUM	238		16 culturally-based	1				
			SUM	388				

As presented in Table 2 above, the highest frequency lemma including the root “cultur” is “culture” in 2001 text, while it is “cultural” in 2018 and 2020 texts. The item “cultural” ranks second in 2001 text. Other difference between 2001, 2018 and 2020 texts are the frequency of the items “intercultural”, “pluricultural” and “multicultural”. Additionally, although there is not much difference in terms of the frequencies across texts, another high frequency item on all three lists is “sociocultural”. These items are examined in more detail below through 2-gram items to have an opinion about the way they exist within three texts.

Table 3 2-gram items ending with “culture”

2001		2018		2020	
Item	Freq	Item	Freq	Item	Freq
foreign culture	5	communication culture	9	communication culture	9
target culture	4	own culture	4	democratic culture	7
another culture	4	another culture	3	own culture	4
				local culture	3

Table 3 presents 2-gram items ending with “culture” with minimum frequency of three occurrences to have an opinion of the phrases the item occurs in. Accordingly, 2001 text includes such usages as “foreign culture” and “target culture”, which are not included in 2018 and 2020 lists. Instead, the item “communication culture” has the highest frequency in both 2018 and 2020 texts with nine occurrences, which is followed by “own culture” in 2018 text and ranks third in 2020 texts with four occurrences. The second highest frequency item in 2020 text is “democratic culture” with seven occurrences. Below are some concordance lines including these items.

“Users of the Framework may wish to consider and where appropriate state: ... what awareness of the relation between home and target cultures the learner will need so as to develop an appropriate intercultural competence.” (CoE, 2001, p. 104)

“the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations;” (CoE, 2001, pp. 104-105)

“Can act as mediator in intercultural encounters, contributing to a shared communication culture by managing ambiguity offering advice and support, and heading off misunderstandings.” (CoE, 2018, p. 123)

“This is reflected in the Council of Europe’s recent initiative to develop competences for democratic culture, such as valuing cultural diversity and openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, worldviews and practices.” (CoE, 2020, p. 14)

Table 4 2-gram items starting with “cultural”

2001		2018		2020	
Item	Freq	Item	Freq	Item	Freq

cultural topics	6	cultural references	6	cultural repertoire	8
cultural intermediary	4	cultural repertoire	5	cultural references	7
cultural identity	3	cultural issues	5	cultural institute	7
cultural diversity	3	cultural institute	5	cultural diversity	6
		cultural cues	5	cultural artefacts	6
		cultural artefacts	5	cultural issues	5
		cultural topics	4	cultural cues	5
		cultural implications	4	cultural topics	4
		cultural diversity	4	cultural implications	4
		cultural backgrounds	4	cultural backgrounds	4
		cultural orientations	3	culturally determined	3
		cultural ones	3	cultural ones	3
		cultural conventions	3	cultural conventions	3
		cultural context	3	cultural context	3

Table 4 presents 2-gram items starting with “cultural” with minimum frequency of three occurrences to have an opinion of the phrases the item occurs in. The highest frequency item in 2001 list is “cultural topics” with six occurrences, which is followed by “cultural intermediary” with four occurrences. However, 2018 and 2020 texts include higher frequency items, such as “cultural repertoire” and “cultural references”. Some examples of these items within the texts, all coming from pages including descriptor tables are presented below.

“Can express thoughts on more abstract, cultural topics such as films, books, music etc.” (CoE, 2001, p.74)

“Can communicate fluently in (Language B) the sense of what is said in (Language A) on a wide range of subjects of personal, academic and professional interest, conveying significant information clearly and concisely as well as explaining cultural references.” (CoE, 2018)

“Sociolinguistic appropriateness and cultural repertoire” (CoE, 2020, p.153)

Table 5 2-gram items starting with “pluricultural”

2001		2018		2020	
Item	Freq	Item	Freq	Item	Freq
pluricultural competence	28	pluricultural competence	30	pluricultural competence	31
		pluricultural repertoire	18	pluricultural repertoire	18

pluricultural space	5	pluricultural space	10
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Table 5 presents 2-gram items starting with “pluricultural” with minimum frequency of three occurrences to have an opinion of the phrases the item occurs in. Accordingly, the item “pluricultural competence” is the highest frequency item in all three lists. Additionally, there are two more emerging items in 2018 and 2020 texts, which are “pluricultural repertoire” and “pluricultural space”. Some examples for the usages of these phrases from the texts are presented below.

“...they are compared, contrasted and actively interact to produce an enriched, integrated pluricultural competence, of which plurilingual competence is one component, again interacting with other components.” (CoE, 2001, p. 6)

“In the reality of today’s increasingly diverse societies, the construction of meaning may take place across languages and draw upon user/learners’ plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires.” (CoE, 2018, p. 27)

“The scale “Facilitating pluricultural space” is included in the section “Mediating communication”, rather than here, because it focuses on a more proactive role as an intercultural mediator.” (CoE, 2020, p. 124)

Table 6 2-gram items starting with “intercultural”

2001		2018		2020	
Item	Freq	Item	Freq	Item	Freq
intercultural awareness	6	intercultural encounters	10	intercultural education	20
intercultural skills	4	intercultural education	8	intercultural encounters	11
		intercultural competence	6	intercultural competence	8
		intercultural exchange	5	intercultural exchange	6
				intercultural dialogue	5

Table 6 presents 2-gram items starting with “intercultural” with minimum frequency of three occurrences to have an opinion of the phrases the item occurs in. The highest frequency item in 2001 list is “intercultural awareness”, which is not present in 2018 and 2020 lists. Instead, the highest frequency item in 2018 text is “intercultural encounters”, while it is “intercultural education” for 2020. Another emerging item in 2018 and 2020 lists is “intercultural competence”. Some examples from the texts are presented below.

“The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how.” (CoE, 2001, p.43)

“Can, in intercultural encounters, demonstrate appreciation of perspectives other than his/her own normal worldview, and express him/herself in a way appropriate to the context.” (CoE, 2018, p.123)

“... key notions of the CEFR as a vehicle for promoting quality in second/foreign language teaching and learning as well as in plurilingual and intercultural education.” (CoE, 2020, p.21)

“Neither pluriculturalism nor the notion of intercultural competence – referred to briefly in CEFR 2001 ...– is highly developed in the CEFR book.” (CoE, 2020, p.31)

Table 7 2-gram items starting with “sociocultural”

2001		2018		2020	
Item	Freq	Item	Freq	Item	Freq
sociocultural knowledge	7	sociocultural implications	10	sociocultural implications	10
sociocultural competence	3	sociocultural and	10	sociocultural and	10
sociocultural and	3	sociocultural cues	3	sociocultural norms	3
				sociocultural knowledge	3
				sociocultural cues	3
				sociocultural conventions	3
				sociocultural competence	3

Table 7 presents 2-gram items starting with “intercultural” with minimum frequency of three occurrences to have an opinion of the phrases the item occurs in. Accordingly, the highest frequency item in 2001 list is “sociocultural knowledge”, while it is “sociocultural implications” for 2018 and 2020. Some examples are presented below.

“Sociocultural knowledge: Strictly speaking, knowledge of the society and culture of the community or communities in which a language is spoken is one aspect of knowledge of the world.” (CoE, 2001, p.102)

“Can identify the sociocultural implications of most of the language used in colloquial discussions that take place at a natural speed.” (CoE, 2018, p.56)

Another emerging item present in the lists in Table 7 was “sociocultural and” with three occurrences in 2001 and ten occurrences in 2018 and 2020 lists. To have a better opinion about this item, 3-gram items starting with “sociocultural and” were listed and presented below.

Table 8 3-gram items starting with “sociocultural and”

2001		2018		2020	
Item	Freq	Item	Freq	Item	Freq
sociocultural and sociolinguistic	3	sociocultural and sociolinguistic	9	sociocultural and sociolinguistic	9

Table 8 presents 3-gram items starting with “sociocultural and” with minimum frequency of three occurrences to have an opinion of the phrases the item occurs in. Accordingly, one emerging item in all three lists is “sociocultural and sociolinguistic”. Some examples are presented below.

“For FL2 at this stage particular emphasis could be placed on the sociocultural and sociolinguistic elements as perceived through increasing familiarity with the media...” (CoE, 2001, p. 173)

“By C2, he/she can mediate effectively and naturally, taking account of sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences.” (CoE, 2018, p.122)

Table 9 2-gram items starting with “multicultural”

2018		2020	
Item	Freq	Item	Freq
multicultural educational	5	multicultural educational	4
multicultural community	4	multicultural community	4

The final item to be examined is the occurrences of “multicultural”, which is presented in Table 9. There are no phrases starting with “multicultural” in 2001 text. Two emerging items from 2018 and 2020 texts are “multicultural educational” and “multicultural community”, some examples of which are presented below.

“at a seminar in a multicultural educational setting” (all five occurrences are the same, from the descriptors tables) (CoE, 2018, pp.216-217)

“during a multicultural community meeting” (all occurrences are from descriptors tables) (CoE, 2020, p.237)

Discussion and Conclusion

The present paper offers a corpus analysis of the three CEFR documents published in 2001, 2018 and 2020 focusing on the concepts related to culture. According to the findings obtained from the analyses, one of the most important shifts can be observed in the way the culture to be taught or learnt is perceived. While there was an emphasis on such items as “target culture” or “foreign culture” in 2001 text, these cannot be found in Companion Volumes although they were specifically published as supplementary documents presenting new descriptors focusing on culture related elements, namely “plurilingual/pluricultural competence” as the two main aspects

focused in CEFR mentioned above. Instead of these, new concepts such as “communication culture” and “democratic culture” were introduced in 2018 and 2020 texts.

Another finding worth mentioning in this section is the significant increase in the use of the item “intercultural”. The terms “intercultural awareness” and “intercultural skills” in 2001 text were replaced by “intercultural competence” in addition to other items, such as “intercultural education”, “intercultural encounters”, “intercultural exchange”, “intercultural dialogue”.

Based on these findings and remembering that the CEFR is a framework for language education, it can be concluded that rather than focusing on the national culture of the native speakers of the target language, foreign language education should focus more on the “*new culture*” formed by the encounters of people coming from different cultures. Since many studies concentrate on the descriptors, levels and assessments, it is vitally important to integrate plurilingualism as well as plural culturalism to make the best use of the impact of the CEFR on the outcomes produced in educational context (Abidin & Hashim, 2021). Oltenau (2020) asserts that “multiculturalism is not observed where two or more cultures meet. Rather, multiculturalism is present in any dialogue where cultural elements are involved.” (p. 3) and warns that in its current place, multiculturalism makes sense by supposing that cultural and religious diversities are very likely to cause conflictual tension. Therefore, language educators should aim at assisting their students in gaining an intercultural competence rather than teaching a monocultural foreign language instruction.

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