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Aspects of the Intercultural in Three European Projects Related to the *Common European Framework of Reference*

Claire TARDIEU

Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, teaching, assessment for languages (henceforth *CEFR*) may be said to have been received with as much enthusiasm as defiance. On the one hand, it plays a harmonising role by setting a number of “competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes) which language users build up in the course of their experience of language use and which enable them to meet the challenges of communication across language and cultural boundaries ...” (CEFR xii)

On the other hand, it purports to promote diversity in various aspects:

- diversity of languages with the promotion of plurilingualism,
- diversity of methods with its non-dogmatic approach,
- diversity of users (learners, teachers, exam makers) even encouraging a critical reading: “As a user, you are invited to use the scaling system and associated descriptors critically.” (CEFR xiii)

Does that mean that the CEFR is pursuing contradictory objectives? One of uniting practices and references to language proficiency in Europe, and one of encouraging differences, particularities, and individualities?

When one comes across a project based on the framework and aiming at improving teaching practices in European countries, what should one have in mind: unity or diversity, common understanding or specific considerations? What role does intercultural communication play among teachers and teacher trainers striving to make the best use of the CEFR and improve their practices? This article will refer to three European projects (the Dutch CEFR grid, EBAFLS and CEF-ESTIM) and compare them to a theoretical frame on the concept of the intercultural.

How can people from different countries, from different teaching or testing cultures, work together efficiently using the same tool? What is at stake? What might be the outcome?

After a short description of the three projects, we will point at the limits of the intercultural in each of them. Then, we will reflect on the required conditions to

develop intercultural behaviour among foreign language teachers. Finally, we will consider whether the need for common understanding should not prevail over the need for being different or if, as Edgar Morin puts it, Europe can be anything but “a Complex”.

The Intercultural in Some European Projects

Since the CEFR was published, a lot of European projects have emerged, in relation to the assessment issue. Three of them will be analysed in terms of interculturality.

The Concept of Interculture

Daniel Coste has defined the concept of interculture, just as Pit Corder defined the concept of interlanguage in 1967 as referring to “unstable and transitional systems of representation, interpretation and production through which the cultural competence of a learner goes on changing, in the process of discovering a foreign culture.”¹ (Coste 127) Here we would like to suggest replacing the word ‘learner’ by the word ‘project participant’.

The very notion of the intercultural doesn’t only make sense for teaching and learning, but also for any domain in which an unstable, transitional zone of negotiation is involved. This zone can be defined as the place where one ceases to be totally oneself without becoming totally another.

The projects we have in mind are all connected with assessing the use of the different levels outlined in the CEFR descriptors, and all have had to deal with the same problem: how can I be sure that what I understand and do with the CEFR is what you understand and do with it? To what extent is your B1 my B1? In what respects and to what extent can my interpretation of the CEFR be modified by yours and vice-versa?

The Three Projects: A Brief Description

In this part, we will describe the aims and methodologies of the three projects as well as their outcomes. Furthermore, for each of them, we will consider the limits to the intercultural.

¹ Our translation for all quotes in this document.

The Dutch CEFR Project

Aims and Methodology

The purpose of the project funded by the Dutch government and led by Charles Alderson (Lancaster University) in 2003-4 was “to develop an instrument, based on the Council of Europe’s *Common European Framework of Reference ...* (Council of Europe) as far as possible, that would describe the construct of reading and listening, for English, French and German, that should underlie test items, tasks and whole tests at the six main levels of the Common European Framework of Reference” (Alderson et. al. 4).

A group of six language testing experts from the Netherlands, England, Finland, France, Germany and Spain was convened, representative of a range of different testing and assessment cultures across Europe, in order to identify potentially relevant documents, and to examine them for insights that could lead to the construction of a set of guidelines for test developers on how to construct both items and tests at the various levels of the CEFR” (Alderson et al.).

Outcomes

The project resulted in a number of major outcomes: a) an analysis and critique of the CEFR scales for reading and listening; b) a Grid for the analysis of test items, texts and tasks; c) detailed information on the amount of agreement among individual analysts using later versions of the Grid; d) a compilation of the analysis of test specifications at the different CEFR levels using the Grid. As a result of these outcomes, a final version of the Grid was produced, and a brief Users’ Guide and more extensive Training Grid, with sample analyses, were developed, together with an account of the usefulness of the Grid, and recommendations for its integration into empirical procedures for establishing CEFR levels of items and tasks. The Grid itself can be found at <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/grid/>.

The Limits to the Intercultural

As regards cultural differences, some discrepancies ought to be mentioned:

- Different types of items may be found according to the countries (French items are more grammar-focused, for instance), and a greater variety of item types using the multi-method design (Campbell and Fiske) may be noted in England and The Netherlands than in France.

- Opinions about the level of proficiency required to cope with a text or an item were often diverging with a tendency to overrate or underrate the level. Unanimous agreement rarely occurred although the consensus of a majority was always reached. That is why the report makes a recommendation in favour of practising group standard setting.
- Different sensibilities to the cognitive operations appeared when it came to choosing an operation among the following:

Recognize	Main idea/gist	From explicit information
Make inferences	Detail	From implicit information
Evaluate	Opinion	
	Speaker's/writer's attitude/mood	
	Conclusion	
	Communicative purpose	
	Text structure/connections between parts	

- Different ways of working and of reacting to e-mails (straight away or after several days) were noted too.

Of course it is difficult to draw any scientific conclusion on so small a sample without any serious analysis of the discussions or correspondence between the team members. Yet, and this is no scoop at all, the countries mainly influenced by Anglo-saxon pragmatism actually displayed less disagreement in the course of the project than countries in which foreign language teaching is more culture or text-oriented such as France and Germany. In the course of the project our certainties were certainly shattered as well as our identities, as Maddalena de Carlo puts it by quoting the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who links the notion of identity to the two Latin words *idem* and *ipse*. *Idem* expresses the permanence of the self through time, and *ipse* the faculty to meet the other and be consequently modified (14).

EBAFLS

The EBAFLS project (2004-7), funded by the Council of Europe and by institutions based in eight EU countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom (Scotland), Spain, Sweden), has investigated the possibility of producing banks of calibrated anchor items. The interest in an-

chor items was motivated by a decision taken by the European Council (March 2002) to develop a linguistic competence indicator for foreign language learning.

If anchors were available with a known CEFR level, each testing body could link these to their own tests and/or examinations and provide empirical evidence for the CEFR level of their foreign language certificates or diplomas. In this way it would be possible to take national statistics of language competence and describe these in terms of CEFR levels, but also to compare individual students' achievements throughout Europe. Language assessment could be made transparent, reliable and valid. And at the same time every country would be able to keep their traditional assessment methods.

This project is particularly interesting (even tricky!) as regards intercultural issues: its aim was actually to open the system enough to find common points but not to the extent of being obliged to change one's culture of assessment. It also assumed that a sufficient number of culturally independent items could be found for this anchor bank. The eight participating countries undertook to provide items which were to cover reading and listening comprehension in three foreign languages (English, French, German).

A pre-test was organised with the aim to determine item characteristics with sufficient precision. Because the bank was meant to be used in various countries, the pre-test had to make clear to which extent these item characteristics remained constant across countries. This required that the same items were administered in different countries. As a rule-of-thumb, it was decided to aim at a total of 1,500 observations per item, collected in four or five countries. The pre-test was administered in French, English and German in reading and listening comprehension in 8 countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Scotland, Spain, Sweden) to students aged 16-18.

Outcomes and the Limits of the Intercultural

A main difference appeared in the outcomes of the project. With the exception of listening items in English, the analyses reveal a substantial amount of Differential Item Functioning (henceforth DIF) which prevented concurrent scaling across countries. In other words, the same item does not behave in the same way according to different countries. This also means that a "B1 student" in one country is not equivalent to a "B1 student" in another country.

Other cultural differences appeared which could partly explain the difference in DIF, the students being used to the culture of assessment proper to their countries:

- In the choice of item types (already noted in the Dutch CEFR grid project): For example, we noted certain types of item were more frequent in some countries (selected answer vs. short answer for instance). Some countries also tend to use the same type of item within one task (e.g. Luxembourg, Scotland, France), whereas others prefer to mix several types of item within a task (e.g. The Netherlands, Sweden).
- In the use of instructions: During the selection it became clear that countries varied greatly in their use of instructions. For example, in some cases the instruction consisted of guidance on how to take the complete test, whereas other countries tended to give instructions for every single item (e.g. Luxemburg, The Netherlands), or both (e.g. Sweden, Scotland). Furthermore, instructions varied considerably in length. Still, almost all countries made a tremendous effort to keep the language of the instructions as simple as possible and made abundant use of common verbs.
- In the language used to administer the test: A major difference lay in the fact that France and UK (Scotland) did not administer their tests in the target language. “The project thus decided to organise a pilot in order to estimate the difference between items with or without non-target language. A design was agreed which offered one set of items assessing reading comprehension of French texts in two conditions, both administered in two countries. The pilot provided useful information about several other aspects as well. First, the marking showed that switching from the official language of the country administering the test to single use of the target language or the other way round produced many answers which were not foreseen in the original marking guidelines or their translation. It also became clear that the marking guidelines provided with the original material were of different types, e.g. exhaustive lists of correct answers, incorrect and borderline answers, or examples of correct answers only. Some harmonisation or careful presentation seemed to be advisable to avoid markers getting confused” (EBAFLS 5).

On the basis of the outcomes of the pilot it was decided to restrict language use in the items to the target language. This decision was taken not because the difference was not meaningful (both in terms of results and of problems of translation) but out of good sense: how were we to create an anchor bank of items if all items were administered in a different language? The instructions of both French and UK items were thus translated into the target language. There is no doubt that changing the language of the instruction has changed the character of the original items in an unpredictable way.

Were the French and the Scottish satisfied with the decision taken by the whole

group? This is another intercultural issue: Although they seem to have rallied to the common cause, to what extent did they feel they were renouncing one important trait of their culture of assessment, i.e. that using the target language in the items could induce a bias to the test. Their argument was that it was impossible to know whether a student failed to understand the text or the item, an argument which did not seem relevant for the other countries.

Noijons and Gille make the following comment: “Knowing the sources of DIF may be very important for future cross-cultural testing. Therefore, further research within this area is absolutely necessary. Especially background information and data on *educational practices, testing culture, focus in classroom and foreign language teaching, official curriculum and teaching practice* must be collected. All these factors may contribute to DIF” (Noijons and Gille 27).

One could refer here to Porcher (1986) and Zarate (1984), for whom, according to Coste, “the major obstacle to cultural comprehension and intercultural communication is the structured organisation that every member of a community internalises and incorporates, and which enables him to situate himself and act within the different social areas of cultural behaviours”². The authors conclude there is a ‘habitus’ (taking up Bourdieu’s word), “a true grammar book of cultural behaviours” (Coste 129).³

CEF-ESTIM

Aims and Methodology

This project (2008-2009) was part of the 2008-2011 ECML programme: “Empowering Language Professionals”. It aimed at disseminating the CEF level estimation grid known as the Dutch CEFR Grid among foreign language teachers in Europe.

The Dutch CEFR project was designed to evaluate two skills, namely oral and written comprehension, and a single type of user: testers and exam makers.

The CEF-ESTIM project assumes that other users such as teacher trainers and teachers could profit from the Dutch Grid in an adapted version. The CEF-ESTIM Grid could be used more generally, to estimate the level of a learner to cope with a

² “L’obstacle majeur à la compréhension culturelle et la communication interculturelle est l’organisation structurée que tout membre d’une communauté intériorise et incorpore et qui lui permet de se situer et d’agir à l’intérieur des différents champs sociaux des comportements culturels.”

³ “Une véritable grammaire des comportements culturels.”

class activity, thus adding receptive and interactive skills, in the ordinary context of teaching practices.

The project has been led through meetings between the four experts from Finland, France, Hungary and Luxembourg, and one workshop at the ECML in Graz in which 27 teachers or teacher trainers all from different countries in Europe took part.

Outcomes

The outcomes of the project are the publication of a CEF-ESTIM grid in both Word and Access formats to enable teachers to create personal or collective archives, or carry out their preparations using a description of text, language activities, communicative competences and strategies in relation to the CEFR descriptors when available, in order to estimate the approximate level of proficiency required to cope with the overall task.

Limits of the Intercultural

Some differences could be noticed between the teachers who were more or less familiar with the CEFR and the task-based approach. Thus the samples provided with the online grid are not exemplary: they are simply what teachers use in the real classroom. We decided to keep the samples as they were, thus following the spirit of the CEFR whose authors emphasise that the construction of a comprehensive, transparent and coherent framework for language learning and teaching does not imply the imposition of one single uniform system.

“On the contrary, the framework should be open and flexible, so that it can be applied, with such adaptations as prove necessary, to particular situations.” (CEFR 7)

Thus we see that all three projects have had to find compromises to achieve their cultural goal. Now, to what extent have we compromised? To what extent have we remained the same?

Towards An Intercultural Competence

All three projects using the CEFR aimed to provide a tool which could be of some help to language professionals throughout Europe, independently of the specific cultural traits.

The Free Zone of the Intercultural

The evolution of our contemporary world, with increasing exchanges and risks of conflict between peoples, makes the ‘protectionist’ option of preserving a monolithic culture shared by all the members of a given community rather obsolete. Let us quote in this respect what Maddalena de Carlo wrote: “It is precisely because it is impossible to maintain separate groups of people who live in permanent contact that it becomes necessary to build modes of negotiation and mediation of the common spaces (De Carlo 40)”.⁴

One could thus define the intercultural as a free zone between oneself and the others, whatever meaning⁵ can be conveyed to the different circles of the self (I, my family, my community, my country, my continent . . .) and of the other (you, your family, your community, your country, your continent . . .).

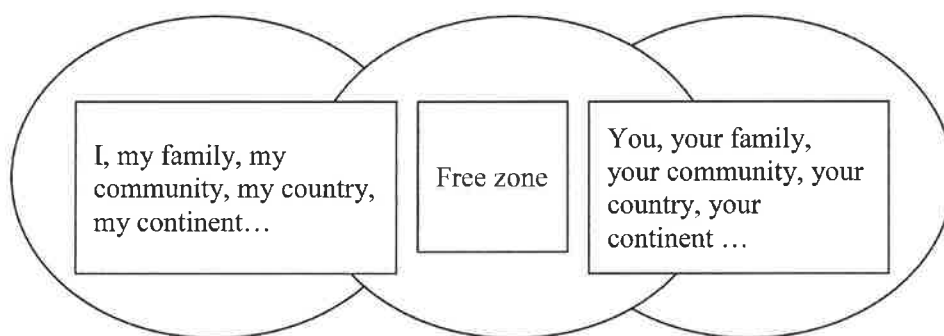


Figure 1: The ‘free zone’ of the intercultural (Tardieu 108)

In a sense, the CEFR doesn’t belong to any particular country: it is a transnational tool which can become the property of all. Thus it can be said to belong to this free zone into which one is bound to venture as soon as one leaves the security of his or her personal sphere to enter the interpersonal sphere. There, of course, a new knowledge but also new references and competences are needed. And it is only natural that teachers or teacher trainers should learn how to profit from the CEFR in their particular teaching context. More often than not, all that teachers learn about the framework is a presentation of the descriptors and of the overall

⁴ “C’est justement l’impossibilité de maintenir séparés des groupes qui vivent en contact constant qui entraîne la nécessité de construire des modalités de négociation et de médiation des espaces communs.”

⁵ “There are only degrees of strangeness between human beings” (cf Byram 40, quoting Christensen 37)

aims. If they gain some knowledge they are rarely given the chance to develop a real professional competence.

For Michael Byram, foreign language teaching and learning must include a socio-cultural competence and this competence should be taught and assessed. “Foreign Language Teaching should not attempt to provide representations of other cultures but should concentrate on equipping learners with the means of accessing and analysing any cultural practises and meanings they encounter, whatever their status in a society” (Byram 19). This is exactly what is required for teachers and teacher trainers who need to be equipped with some practical means of using the CEFR. Byram has established the following figure to represent interpersonal communicative competence including the intercultural dimension:

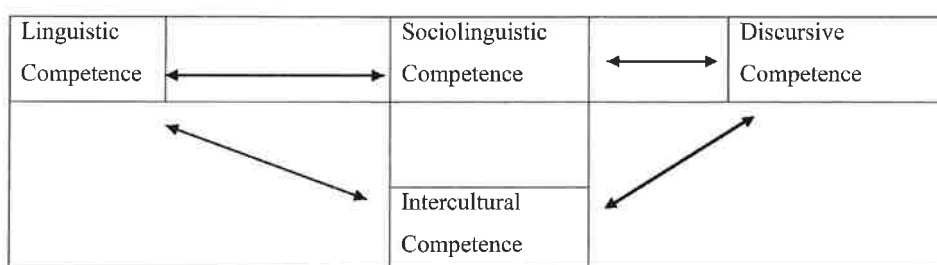


Figure 2: Intercultural communicative competence (Byram 51)

The intercultural competence is composed of several aspects: knowledge, ability to understand, ability to learn, skills and know-how, willingness to engage with others, existential competence (Byram 111).

If one applies Byram’s table of the intercultural communicative competence to the professional domain of foreign language teaching, the various skills mentioned above imply not only a theoretical but also a practical use of the CEFR; not only a monocultural interpretation of the CEFR but a pluricultural one. How do teachers from various European countries relate to it? In what ways has it changed their practice? What can I learn from their critical views of a European tool necessarily seeking a certain amount of consensus? This is why European projects are so seminal. They enable us to live in the free zone for a while – a zone where everyone has to leave some of his or her landmarks behind. They make us go from the cultural to the intercultural.

From the Cultural to the Intercultural

In fact, the reflection on the intercultural has transformed the very definition of culture. Geertz writes: “The concept of culture with which I agree is essentially

of semiotic order. Convinced as I am, like Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended to the threads of signification he has himself woven, I hold culture to be those threads, and, consequently, culture analysis to be less a form of experimental science looking for laws than an interpretative science seeking significations” (9, quoted by Byram 142). The idea of a weft, of a cloth or a fabric conveys the notion of thickness, of different layers being woven together, and undermines the representation of culture as a finished product, an object of its own. Consequently, teaching should not focus so much on cultural facts as on its networks of meanings, should not transmit a fixed image on the other but rather teach someone to handle the tools to investigate its complexity.

What one experiences in a European project is precisely the cultural thickness as well as the cultural thinness one is made of.

“The competence acquired by a native speaker in both his mother language and culture comes close to adhering to a system of landmarks which he is unaware of. The putting in place of this competence, in as much as it can be perceived, often looks like conditioning: the reproduction of acceptable behaviours for the community the native speaker happens to belong to without his choosing” (Cain, and Briane 11).⁶

The concept of nativisation forged by Andersen in order to stress the phenomenon of ‘acculturation’ to one’s own language seems particularly fruitful for what concerns us:

In all the settings where the learner already has a language when he begins to acquire another, the linguistic features of his earlier-acquired language(s) are relevant to the outcome of his acquisition of the additional language. [...] The input in all these settings is perceived and processed to a large extent in terms of the existing (or simultaneously acquired) languages the learner knows and uses (20).⁷

In the same way as plurilingualism can make you aware of your ‘addiction’ to one particular language (your mother tongue, for instance), pluriculturalism will

⁶ “La compétence acquise par un natif dans sa langue et dans sa culture maternelle relève de l’adhésion à un système de repères qui se fait à son insu. La mise en place de cette compétence, dans la mesure où elle est perçue, est souvent comme un conditionnement: la reproduction de comportements acceptables pour la communauté dans laquelle le natif se trouve inséré sans l’avoir choisi.”

⁷ “Dans tous les cadres où l’apprenant possède déjà un langage quand il commence à en acquérir un autre, les traits linguistiques du (des) langage(s) acquis antérieurement sont pertinents pour le résultat de l’acquisition dans le langage additionnel. Quoted by Muriel Grosbois in *Projet collectif de création d’une ressource numérique comme levier d’apprentissage de l’anglais*, thèse de doctorat dirigée par F. Demaizière, Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle, 17 octobre 2006, 15.”

help you become aware of your “addiction” to a certain type of reference. It is only through a regular use of “culture awareness” that we can really benefit from the intercultural. At least the three European projects gave us the opportunity to become aware of the differences, and to apply a holistic approach to the situation and see what our conceptions were.

How Does the Modification Operate?

For Rumelhart, learning operates according to three modes: accumulation, adjustment, and restructuring (Rumelhart 34, in Byram 143).

In the case of European projects, intercultural exchanges imply a modification of the cognitive structures in the participants’ minds. This modification starts with a phase of surprise as Zarate puts it: the meeting of two cultures can be described as “a process of defamiliarisation, the severing of a vision considered as obvious. The necessity to understand the other commands a new reading, a disclosing, or a renewed perception of what is familiar and what is exotic. First of all, this starts with a surprise which is worthwhile because it denotes those privileged but transient moments when we import categories which were built elsewhere. . . . Surprise is generally followed by prolonged efforts to minimize the severing, reduce the painful discrepancy and restore the original balance” (Kramsch).⁸

In the EBAFLS project for instance, the French were surprised to see how surprising their grammatical items looked to the other participants. For the French they were only ‘normal’ items. Conversely, some multiple matching items from the Netherlands or short-answers or gap-filling items from Scotland astonished them.

How can one go from simple juxtaposing of similarities and differences to integrating new data able to modify one’s identity, to create a sort of new space or new moment that Demorgon (2005) calls ‘interity or in-betweenness’, between identity and alterity? This is what Claire Kramsch calls ‘tensional truth’ taking up the expression coined by Paul Ricoeur in *La Métaphore vive*. The intercultural dimension lies precisely in both identity and alterity, in the way one ‘sees’ or ‘sees like’ someone else. Claire Kramsch goes even further: “If intercultural discourse

⁸ “Comme un processus de défamiliarisation, la rupture d’une vision prise comme allant de soi. La nécessité de comprendre l’autre impose une relecture, une mise à jour, une nouvelle perception du familier et de l’exotique. Celle-ci commence d’abord par un étonnement qui est précieux parce qu’il est révélateur de ces moments privilégiés mais fugitifs où l’on importe des catégories construites ailleurs. . . . L’étonnement est généralement suivi d’efforts prolongés pour minimiser la rupture, réduire l’écart douloureux et rétablir l’équilibre original.”

requires that one speaks using the terms of the other, how does this discursive translation operate – this imaginative jump which enables one not only to see the other by adopting his language but also by temporarily adopting his discourse”? (Kramsch 82).⁹ How can one adopt someone else’s speech? It is not enough to create means to enter intercultural levels, one has to measure the degree of mutual understanding, to fathom the depth of the mixed identity being born. To some extent this is precisely what the EBAFLS project refused to do from the start by looking for a way to allow all countries to benefit from a new European culture of assessment without changing their own. One may indeed wonder whether the need for common understanding should not prevail over the need to be different.

Looking for a Shared Common Sense

To what extent should we strive to eradicate differences in order to facilitate common work and research?

A Community of Speech

George-Elia Sarfati defines the linguistic common sense “as a community of knowledge, and, more precisely, as a sociolectal group which distinguishes itself as the specific knowledge of the actors of a community of discourse” (Sarfati 87).¹⁰ In the case of European projects employing experts of the same domains or teachers doing the same jobs, there definitely exists a community of speech with only a little dissonance. The interlocutors are at the same time actors and observers – actors and observers who share a great deal of professional culture. Thus it seems easier to establish a true dialogue in the sense the philosopher Martin Buber gave to this term. How to establish a true “I-You” relationship and not an “I-that one”? (Buber 97). How to start an exchange able to transform each participant’s common sense into a shared one?

⁹ “Si le discours interculturel requiert que l’on parle de l’un en termes de l’autre, comment s’opère cette translation discursive, ce saut de l’imagination qui permet non seulement de voir l’autre en adoptant son langage, mais de voir l’autre en adoptant temporairement son discours?”

¹⁰ “Comme une communauté de savoir, et, plus précisément comme une formation sociolectale qui se distingue comme le savoir propre aux acteurs d’une même communauté de discours.”

Demorgon's Six Levels of the Intercultural

Jacques Demorgon can indeed provide us, as it seems, with a theoretical frame adapted to the teaching of languages-cultures. The philosopher examines the cultural differences and similarities in a positive way: "Cultural differences and resemblances are not simply like many other events products of chance. On the contrary, they rather represent the results of an adaptive work of human beings to fight back chance and uncertainty" (Demorgon).¹¹

All three European projects have asked the participants to permanently adapt their beliefs and behaviours according to each other's in order to find a satisfactory point of certitude.

First Principle: Give Pre-eminence to the Relationship Over the Object Itself

First of all, Demorgon legitimates the exchange as the very place where the cultural and the intercultural are actually made to occur. Secondly, the main interest is not culture (academic or popular or mixed) as an object in itself, for culture as a pure object doesn't exist. It only exists through individuals in a situation of relationship. In an intercultural exchange, one will focus on the relationship, i.e. on the individual's point of view on his or her own culture and on that of the other.

During the Dutch CEFR project meetings, we could clearly dissociate what was common – for instance our analysis of the CEFR inconsistencies (same verbs found or not found at certain levels in the descriptors) or gaps (lack of precision for notions such as 'short', 'simple', 'long') from what was specific to each country: the way of discarding some item types (France tends to use multiple choice only) or to overrate the level of an item through complicating the cognitive operations involved.

Second Principle: A Matter of Going Deeper and Wider

The second principle concerns the mode of exchange proper. The intercultural exchange can be seen as taking place on two axes: a vertical axis or deepening movement and a horizontal axis or widening movement.

In the same book, Jacques Demorgon works out a paradigm of 7 intercultural levels which seem to confirm the idea of a vertical deepening as well as a horizontal widening of the relationship:

¹¹ "Différences et ressemblances culturelles ne sont pas simplement comme nombre d'autres événements des produits du hasard. Au contraire, elles représentent bien plutôt les résultats d'un travail adaptatif des humains pour s'opposer au hasard et à l'incertitude."

Aspects of the Intercultural in Three European Projects Related to the *CEFR*

- a) local, interpersonal, microsociologic intercultural of conviviality
- b) comparative intercultural in exteriority: inductive discovery of the other, the others
- c) intercultural of personal implication in the relationship to the other
- d) intercultural of personal change in the relationship to the other
- e) intercultural of understanding and explanation situating the interpersonal relationship in its frameworks: mononational, binational, plurinational
- f) the light of international issues in the intercultural
- g) globalisation: global informational and global intercultural (Demorgon 44–45).

In an ordinary interpersonal exchange, one may say that the first three intercultural levels are generally involved; the fourth one is slightly touched on when the interlocutors admit a change in their conceptions, a questioning of their mental habits. The intercultural exchange then represents a moving off centre, a partial alienation. But how can one be sure that this change will last longer than the exchange proper and that the mental habits will not take their former shapes back after a certain while or when they are called upon by stereotypes? The last three levels both require a deepening of the exchange, involving a greater risk and a widening of the sphere and of the themes discussed. Any European project goes beyond the personal dimension of the exchange, although this dimension remains and should not be denied. The Dutch CEFR grid project, as well as EBAFLS or CEF-ESTIM, are dealing with a plurinational intercultural dimension, or even an international or global one.

The main interest of these exchanges is that they may eventually give preeminence to the wider dimension over the personal attachments or national habitus. A good example of this result is a recent decision taken by the French “Département de l’Évaluation, de la Prospective et de la Performance” to administer the next national test in English, German and Spanish using instructions in the target language instead of the non-target one, at least for the 25% of new items related to the CEFR descriptors. This little revolution is a direct consequence of the EBAFLS project.

A New Definition of Culture

Culture is not a still life. It is alive and it generates life. Jacques Demorgon refers to this gift when he defines the adaptive process inherent to cultures:

As matrixes for selecting answers, cultures can never become but partially matrixes of conservation. They are as much and even to a greater extent matrixes for transforming former answers in order to recycle them once they have been modified and adapted to new contexts. . . . Cultures are a concentration of the adaptive process (16, 18).¹²

The problem for teachers is that culture also rhymes with future, and cannot be reduced to the remains of the past. Acculturation (a notion employed as early as 1880 by J.W. Powell taken up again by the anthropologist Claude Rivière in the nineties designates the influence of a culture on the members of another culture. In fact, Demorgon prefers to use the word ‘interculturalisation’ for, he says, the phenomenon of acculturation is never unilateral. (Demogron 25) According to him:

The intercultural competence is not instrumental such as the one which enables us to use a computer. It is rather a competence that takes shape and becomes present through meeting other human beings. Communication is the means by which intercultural competence can develop and express itself (Ibid.: 190).¹³

Would it be totally ludicrous to consider intercultural competence in terms of levels in the same way as communicative competence has been described? Of course one should have in mind that the two levels of ‘proficiency’ may not coincide in the same person. Here is some food for thought:

	Basic user (A1-A2): apprehend	Independent user (B1-B2): understand	Proficient user (C1-C2): integrate
Knowledge	Basic	Rather extended	Extended and complex
Skills	Know how to get information, recognize/say what is alike and what is different	Know how to exchange / discuss / compare / give an argument/ on similar or different cultural facts/traits . . .	Know how to adopt the other’s speech (Kramsch)

¹² “Matrices de sélection des réponses, les cultures ne peuvent jamais devenir que partiellement des matrices de conservation. Elles sont tout autant et même davantage des matrices de transformation des réponses antérieures afin de les réutiliser modifiées et réadaptées à de nouveaux contextes. . . . Les cultures sont une concentration du processus adaptatif.”

¹³ “La compétence interculturelle n’est pas une compétence instrumentale comme celle qui permet d’utiliser un ordinateur. Il s’agit d’une compétence qui se forme et s’actualise en rencontrant d’autres êtres humains. La communication est le moyen par lequel se développe et s’exprime la compétence interculturelle.”

Aspects of the Intercultural in Three European Projects Related to the *CEFR*

Existential competence	Be surprised Be able not to reject	Show respect Give value to different cultural traits	Live in someone else's shoes (Ricoeur – <i>idem et ipse</i>)
Ability to learn	Recognize stereotypes	Put stereotypes into perspective	Interpret complexity

Figure 3: Levels of intercultural competence

One may consider the second or third generation of immigrants as the most gifted in intercultural competence. They indeed seem to be familiar with intercultural issues and are used to living in the free zone, this intermediary space between two or more identities. Altai Manço¹⁴ defines three types of abilities the young people he works with have developed:

1. Negotiation: the ability to negotiate (acculturation seen as a negotiation of identity);
2. Heteropraxis: the ability to make different types of practices co-exist, to build heterogeneous modes of cultural expression;
3. Paradoxality: the ability to cope with or to assimilate the conflict of identities. (Manço)

These qualities certainly seem to denote a pragmatic vision of reality according to which contradictions are just seen as elements of human complexity.

Conclusion

This may be the way we should see the CEFR after all: Why should we choose between the need for common understanding and the need to be different? Why, for instance, should we consider that searching for a consensus in a European project necessarily implies, for some of us, abandoning our references to ideologies as “primarily cognitive, ideational phenomena” in order to embrace the consideration of ideologies “as material phenomena or practices” (Blommaert 161)? Blommaert writes: “Since discourse is intrinsically historical, it is intrinsically ideological” (160). If we become aware of those layers of history or ideology in our discourses, then we can adopt different points of view and use contradictions and paradoxes to a greater benefit. Thus we shall agree with Edgar Morin: “Europe is a *Complex* (complexus: what is woven together) whose characteristic is to

¹⁴ “Researcher at L’Institut de Recherche, Formation et Actions sur les Migrations, (IRFAM), Belgique.”

assemble the greatest forms of diversity without mixing them up and to associate the contraries in an inseparable way” (22).¹⁵

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¹⁵ “L'Europe est un *Complexe* (complexus: ce qui est tissé ensemble) dont le propre est d'assembler sans les confondre les plus grandes diversités et d'associer les contraires de façon non séparable.”

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