



The Common European Framework: time to move on!

The other day I came across a copy of an open letter published by *Le Monde* in June 2000. Signed by over 1'000 economics students and teachers in Paris, the letter complained about the monolithic approach to macroeconomics propagated in universities at that time. Here is an extract:

Parmi toutes les approches en présence, on ne nous en présente généralement qu'une seule, et elle est censée tout expliquer selon une démarche purement axiomatique, comme s'il s'agissait de LA vérité économique. Nous n'acceptons pas ce dogmatisme. Nous voulons un pluralisme des explications, adapté à la complexité des objets et à l'incertitude qui plane sur la plupart des grandes questions en économie...

This petition was rapidly taken up in other countries and the resulting movement became known as “*économie-post-autisme*”.¹

In a roundabout way the protest reminds me of some of the current debate around the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR):

“... *pluralisme des explications*, ...” reminds me of the intentions of the Council of Europe in developing the CEFR.

As Daniel Coste summarised at the Council of Europe Inter-governmental Language Policy Forum in 2007, its scope is intended to cover not only questions of levels, scales and assessment, “*mais aussi l'enseignement et l'apprentissage... sans aucun dogmatisme méthodologique*”.

“... *démarche purement axiomatique, comme s'il s'agissait de LA vérité...*” reminds me of the misuse of the CEFR: the current preoccupation of much of our field with making sure we arrange our activities along a scale of letters and numbers from A1 to C2.

In recent years, we have devoted a lot of energy and attention to structuring our efforts in language teaching according to the “vertical” dimension of the CEFR. Our attention to accountability has had its benefits and I do not want in any way to detract from the progress we have made. Educational sectors are beginning to realise that they can talk to each other. We are much more explicit about what we are aiming for with our learners. These aims are competence based and action oriented, rather than being couched purely in terms of mastery of language as a formal system. The recent development of descriptors for specific age groups has provided us with powerful instruments to help plan and assess language teaching and learning.

However, one of the more worrying developments has been an increasingly widespread tendency to regard the CEFR as merely a set of scales and to use these scales as prescriptive targets for school children and for migrants. The Council of Europe in turn is misrepresented as the controlling authority: the keeper of “*LA vérité linguistique*”. Thus, the CEFR is turned into a monolithic set of constraints, instead of the open, flexible platform for communication it was intended to be.

In order to move on to a, (dare I say it?) “*didactique des langues-post-autisme*”, the time has come to open up our empirical focus on levels and measurement, to broaden our approach to attend to the larger and deeper questions of language pedagogy, in short, to embrace the multi-dimensional potential of the CEFR.

As Coste concluded: “*C'est un instrument de référence et non un objet de révérence. On n'a pas à confondre les six niveaux avec les Dix commandements. Et il y a, heureusement, une vie en dehors du Cadre.*”



¹ See: <http://www.autisme-economie.org/> I am grateful to Andrew Littlejohn for introducing me to „post-autistic-economics“ and discussing with me the possible parallels to other disciplines.

* Head of Languages at the Coordination Office of the Club Schools in Zurich, he is member of the Foundation Languages and Cultures Council.