

The Globalization of the CEFR Reconsidered in a Socio-Cultural Context

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Abstract

Since its publication in 2001, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) has greatly influenced foreign language education and testing not only in Europe but in many parts of the world too. It has been emphasized that it is not language specific, and it should be used in a flexible way. That the CEFR needs to be both comparable between languages and yet flexibly adjusted to the language circumstances of each country continues to be a challenge with which each language and country in Europe and beyond is grappling. This paper describes the development of the CEFR in the globalizing world of which it is a part. From this, we consider the various ways that the CEFR has impacted foreign language teaching and testing in Hungary. Finally, the similar socio-cultural contexts and linguistic factors which hinder foreign language learning in both Japan and Hungary are compared, with suggestions for how the CEFR might be adapted for more effective use in these cultures.

1 Changing times

Like many university language teachers in Japan, I used to start looking for textbooks for my classes based on labels such as “Elementary”, “Intermediate”, and “Advanced”. However, they were often misleading because different publishers used them differently. Later, publishers started using TOEIC scores (Test of English for International Communication) to indicate the level of the textbook, which seemed to be more objective. As the TOEIC test only consists of listening and reading sections, it was assumed that students would have the same level in productive skills as well, although this may not always be the case. In the last few years, non-Japanese publications started to indicate the level of textbooks by using the six levels (A1-C2) of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, usually referred to as CEFR, or as CEF. Now, fresh from the press, as I am writing this paper, I have just received a copy of the first “CEFR-informed” textbook created and published in Japan, entitled in English as *Connections to thinking in English: The CEFR-informed EAP textbook series B1 (A2+) to B1+* (Naganuma, Nagai, & O'Dwyer, 2015). This suggests that the CEFR has really become global, not only within the EU, for which it was originally designed for, but also far beyond its borders. However, as the CEFR is described as non-language specific but “neutral”, its implementation for different languages may require considerable changes from language to language, and from culture to culture.

This paper aims to highlight some of the issues involved in implementing the CEFR in its present form in countries where the mother tongue is a non-Indo-European language. The

focus will be on Hungary, where the CEFR has already been used extensively in foreign language education and testing systems. Although the theme of this symposium is *Expansion of CEFR into non-EU countries; perspectives and problems*, our discussion will focus on Hungary, which is an EU country. One can learn important lessons from other countries in general, but in addition to that, there seem to be many socio-cultural similarities between Japan and Hungary. First of all, the Hungarian language is a non-Indo-European language just as Japanese is. Studying the situation in Hungary may serve as an example from which Japan may be able to draw some important conclusions.

2 The Globalization of the CEFR

2.1 A brief history of the CEFR

As a result of the increasing mobility within the European Union (EU) and the growing number of member states, it became essential that qualifications and knowledge should be comparable and clearly identifiable when moving from one country to another. Each country had their own educational systems and qualifications, and most of them used different languages. Although the Bologna Declaration, signed by 29 countries, in 1999 was a huge step in the direction of harmonization within the EU, it only effected the higher educational system, and mobility within that system. Transnational mobility in general largely depends on language skills. Clearly, a similar big step was needed in order to be able to compare and identify levels of communicative skills in foreign languages when work-force moved between countries.

Experts started working on what later resulted in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, usually referred to as the CEFR, as early as 1971 (Council of Europe, 2001, p. ix). The first publications based on this work, *Waystage* and *Threshold*, appeared in 1980, and were republished in 1991 by Cambridge University Press. *Vantage*, the third publication, describing a higher level than the previous two, was published in 2001. Finally, the Council of Europe published the CEFR in 2001, which incorporated the three previous publications in its 6 level system. The year 2001 was also declared as the European Year of Languages.

2.2 The global impact of the CEFR

2.2.1 Translating the CEFR

The aim of the CEFR is to provide “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). In order to serve as a basis, it explicitly strives to be “comprehensive, transparent and coherent” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. xii). The CEFR can only serve as a **common** base, if all member countries accept it and use it in the same way. To facilitate its use and implementation, first, it had to be translated. It has been translated into 39 languages¹, including Hungarian (2002) and various non-European languages, such as, in East Asia,

¹Source: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/list_cadre_traduc.doc retrieved on February, 10th, 2015

Chinese (2008), Korean (2007) and Japanese (2004). Translations certainly reach a much wider community of language teachers than the original English or French versions, thus making the circulation of ideas more powerful and much faster.

2.2.2 Developing Reference Level Descriptions

As the CEFR itself is not language specific, a language profile including *Reference Level Descriptions* has to be created for each language spoken and taught in the member countries. The English Profile, which is freely available on the internet, was the first to be created. The descriptions “provide detailed information about what learners 'can do' in English at each of the six levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), offering a clear benchmark for progress for English language learners” (“Welcome to English Profile,”). As European countries have been encouraged to create such references for their national and regional languages, it seems that most European languages will eventually have detailed descriptions created in different countries. Hungarian experts have been working on such descriptions, which will hopefully serve as an important support for the teaching of Hungarian as a foreign language. However, languages taught in Europe also include non-European languages, such as Chinese or Japanese. As Joël Bellassen points out, “the CEFR is not a framework of reference for European languages, but rather for languages taught in Europe” (2011, p. 24). That raises the problem of “Who is going to be in charge of creating descriptions for non-European languages?” In most cases, this means that the country where a particular language is spoken as a mother tongue creates the level description for that language. For example, the level description for Hungarian has been developed by experts in Hungary rather than teachers of Hungarian outside of Hungary.

2.2.3 National language policies and the CEFR

Each member country of the European Union has its own language policy, educational system and its own system for creating and conducting language examinations. By accepting the CEFR, a country’s educational goals for foreign languages at different stages of the educational system have to be re-determined in relation to the CEFR, and this has already been done to a certain extent in most countries. However, it is very difficult to make clear-cut and definitive decisions without more information and experience in the use of the CEFR-based system. However, the Reference Level Descriptions are not yet available for all the necessary languages. In fact, they are not finished even for English, which is the most widely taught foreign language. The seminar announcement of the Sixteenth English Profile Seminar (held in February 2015), mentions the “now completed English Grammar Profile” and the “ongoing work on assessing pronunciation” (“Welcome to English Profile,”). Judging from this announcement, it may well take a decade to have all the necessary profiles available for educational and testing reasons. However, language education and testing, both have to go on without any interruption.

Language examinations are needed both within the educational system and outside of it as well, in the form of state, or state accredited, examinations in order to be able to check whether goals set in language policies have been achieved or not. As each country has different needs and expectations regarding their workforce, the already existing national examinations have to be expressed in terms of, and adjusted to, the CEFR levels for reasons of transparency and transferability.

3 The CEFR in Hungary

3.1 Education and language learning in Hungary

3.1.1 The educational system

The Hungarian educational system used to be uniform, based on a (4+4)+4 system, where the first 8 years were considered as lower and upper elementary education. The changes in the compulsory educational system in Hungary were most spectacular in the upper elementary age group. These four years can now either be part of the old elementary school, or completely belong to the secondary school. In the second case, they are practically lower secondary classes, in Hungarian often known as “small secondary school”. The third option is a system of 6+6. While grades used to be numbered from 1-8 and then again from 1-4, with the new system this had to be changed to 1-12 in order to avoid confusion.

Higher education used to consist of four-year colleges offering a Bachelor’s degree, and 5-year universities leading directly to a Master’s degree without the possibility of getting a Bachelor’s degree at the university. Doctoral qualifications were divided into two levels. As a consequence of the Bologna Declaration of 1999, since 2003 Hungary has had the same system of qualifications as all other European countries that signed the Declaration. Thanks to this, younger generations of Hungarian graduates do not have to go into long explanations about their having a Master’s degree without a Bachelor’s, as older generations did. Thus, transparency and unification has helped, which suggests that the global application of the CEFR will probably result in similar benefits.

3.1.2 Language requirements in the educational system

All children in Hungary start learning the first foreign language in grade 4. They have a relatively wide choice of languages, in theory. In practice, it depends on what language teachers are available in a particular school or area. Students start their second foreign language in grade 9. By the end of compulsory education, all students have to reach B1 level of the CEFR in one foreign language, and students in an advanced language programme have to reach B2 (see Szabó, 2008).

Table 1 shows the matching of the old state language exam labels with the CEFR levels, and the educational goals. The transition from using the old expressions to using exclusively the CEFR levels has not yet been completed, and that will probably take considerable time. Even some of the current regulations still refer to “intermediate” or “advanced” level exams. In this paper, for ease of reading, the matching CEFR levels will be used even if the original document uses the old terms.

Table 1. Educational goals in terms of the CEFR levels

CEFR	Hungarian State Accredited Language Examinations	Goals in the Educational System
A1		
A2		End of elementary school (grade 8)
B1	Elementary	End of high school (grade 12)
B2	Intermediate	Advanced level high school exam (grade 12) Prerequisite for getting a university degree
C1	Advanced	Maybe a requirement for getting a university degree
C2		

Since 1996, the pre-requisite of getting a university degree has been passing the “intermediate” level of the state examination, which is now equated to the B2 level of the CEFR. Although the intention of this language requirement is understandable and reasonable in a globalized world, it has caused a lot of problems not only for individuals but also for the whole educational system and society. At some universities, as many as 30% or even 40 % of the students did not qualify to receive their degrees because they had not passed their language test (Czervan, 2013). The government had to come up with special plans in order to help these students pass their tests. In January 2014, about 49,000 students were in that situation (Andrejsik et al., 2014, p. 39). Some universities may require passing the C1 level, or specialized language tests, sometimes in more than one language. This has led to a situation where higher educational institutions highly prefer to accept candidates who already possess the necessary language qualification(s) prescribed for getting a degree.

As a consequence of the above circumstances, most high school students work hard not only to excel in the subjects they want to study in tertiary education but also prepare to pass the B2 or C1 levels in one or even two languages. A personal friend’s information could usefully be shared here as an instance of this. He had studied German from grade 1 to 12 at school, and passed level C1 (oral and written exam) before finishing high school. One year before that, he passed level B2 (oral and written exam) in the English that he had studied for 6 years. He had also studied French for about 4 years taking 2 or 3 private lessons a week but never took any tests in this language. In order to satisfy the readers’ curiosity, he was accepted to the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Informatics at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics.

Getting a Ph.D. in any field also requires language skills in more than one language, with the levels, types and the choices of languages usually depending on the requirements of the doctoral schools where candidates undertake their studies.

3.1.3 Special benefits and rewards for language certificates

Hungarians have been encouraged to study languages not only by imposing obligations on them such as described above, but also in more positive ways. The most important incentive is probably the system of awarding extra points for the knowledge of languages at university entrance exams. Universities not only prefer candidates who have already passed level B2 or C1 of the CEFR, but according to the official rules of calculating the points for the university entrance exam, these candidates get 28 extra points for passing a B2 level exam (oral and written exam), and 40 points for a C1 (oral and written) exam. The maximum number of points that can be earned is 40, even if the candidate has passed two language exams in two different languages. The maximum number of points for entry to university is 400 (calculated on the basis of school grades and the grades of the final exam of the high school that also serves as an entrance exam test), with a maximum of 100 additional points for other achievements, etc. including language certificates. Another option is taking the final exam of the high school at an advanced level, which may result in 50 extra points for one subject. The latest information is available at http://eduline.hu/erettségi_felveteli/2015/1/2/Ilyenek_lesznek_a_pontszamitasi_szabalyok_a_887SP8.

There are laws regulating language benefits for civil servants and employees in general. Civil servants with executive powers will receive benefits for English, German and French languages regardless of whether they need languages in their work or not. Other civil servants will only get these benefits if languages are needed for their work, or if the employer makes that decision. The amount of the monthly benefit is calculated on a percentage basis from a set basic amount, which is considered as 100%. Table 2 shows the difference between the two types of civil servants. In June 2014, a proposal was handed in to the government asking for the inclusion of Hungarian sign language into the list of languages qualifying for language benefits.

Table 2. Benefits for having language certificates²

	Civil Servant with Executive Power (38,650 HUF)		Civil Servant (20,00 HUF)	Employee
	English, German, French	Other Languages	No specification of languages	Completely depends on the employer
B1	15%	0%	0%	
B2	60%	30%	50%	
C1	100%	50%	100%	

² Based on: http://njt.hu/cgi_bin/njt_doc.cgi?docid=142936.254709

3.2 Language examinations

3.2.1 From monopoly to competition

Language testing started in 1967 at the Centre for Advanced Language Learning under the supervision of Eötvös Lóránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. This centre had the monopoly of administering language tests and awarding state language exam certificates. In January 2000, they lost their monopoly, and the state language certificates were replaced by state accredited language certificates. Any organization having the know-how can present their documentation to the Accreditation Centre for Foreign Language Examination (abbreviated as NYAK in Hungarian, which will be used from now on) in order to get the right to create and administer their own tests and to award language certificates. In 2000, organizations applied for the rights to administer tests according to the old system: Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced level exams. They also had to hand in their documentation for each language they wished to test. According to the original Hungarian system, which still exists, each level consisted of an oral (type A) and a written (type B) component, which could be taken separately. The two parts together were called a complex (type C) test. All language tests recognized by the state used to be bilingual. Now many testing systems, especially foreign based ones run monolingual tests. Although most test takers take the general language tests, there exist many specialized ones as well. Candidates can take specialized exams in “language used by the mainstream churches”, Biblical language, military, and legal and administrative usage among others (see Table 4).

3.2.2 Embarras de richesse

Many candidates wonder whether there are easier and more difficult exams in spite of the fact that they have been accredited for the same level. That may also depend on the test taker as well. Bilingual exams require mediation between the two languages, and some candidates are not good at that. Other testing centres may focus on what the test taker cannot do rather than what they can do with the language. If specialized language certificates are needed, the choice might be reduced just to one or two. Other considerations may include the price of the examination itself, which may vary considerably. In some cases the different levels have different prices, while other have a flat rate for all of them. The locations of the testing centre in relation to one’s home can also influence the decision of where candidates take tests.

Table 3. Examples of prices for language examinations in HUF

	ORIGO			ECL			Cambridge
	Oral (A)	Written (B)	Complex (C)	Oral (A)	Written (B)	Complex (C)	Complex (C)
Elementary B1	9,400	10,500	19,900	15,000	15,000	25,000	30,000 (PET)
Intermediate B2	11,300	13,600	24,900	15,000	15,000	25,000	39,000 (FCE)
Advanced C1	12,900	14,900	27,800	15,000	15,000	25,000	40,000 (CAE)

(In February 2015 the exchange rate was: 100.00 HUF to 44.13 JPY)

Table 4 gives some examples chosen from the 38 accredited language examinations from the home page of NYAK (http://www.nyak.hu/doc/akk_vizsgarendszer-eng.asp).

Table 4. Some accredited language examinations

Language Centre	Hungarian name of exam system	Type and purpose	Languages
BME Nyelvvizsgaközpont (Budapest University of Technology and Economics)	BME nyelvvizsgák általános nyelvvizsga	general Oral (A), Written (B), Complex (C)	<u>Bilingual</u> : English, French, Dutch, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish
	BME nyelvvizsgák gazdasági szaknyelvi vizsga	economic Oral (A), Written (B), Complex (C)	<u>Bilingual</u> : English, French, German
	BME nyelvvizsgák műszaki szaknyelvi vizsga	technical Oral (A), Written (B), Complex (C)	<u>Bilingual</u> : English, French, German
British Council Hungary	University of Cambridge ESOL nyelvvizsga	general Complex (C)	<u>Monolingual</u> : English
Budapesti Francia Intézet Institut Français	DELFDALF francia nyelvvizsga rendszer	general Complex (C)	<u>Monolingual</u> : French
Budapesti Gazdasági Főiskola (Budapest Business School)	BGF üzleti szaknyelvi vizsga	business Oral (A), Written (B), Complex (C)	<u>Bilingual</u> : English, French, Japanese, Chinese, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish
	BGF idegenforgalmi- vendéglátóipari szaknyelvi vizsga	tourism and catering Oral (A), Written (B), Complex (C)	<u>Bilingual</u> : English, French, German, Italian, Spanish
	BGF pénzügyi szaknyelvi vizsga	finance Oral (A), Written (B), Complex (C)	<u>Bilingual</u> : English, German
ELTE Idegennyelvi Továbbképző Központ (Centre for Advanced Language Learning)	ORIGO nyelvvizsga	general Oral (A), Written (B), Complex (C)	<u>Monolingual</u> : Esperanto, Hungarian <u>Bilingual</u> : English, Arabic, Beash, Lovari, Czech, Esperanto, Finnish, French, Croatian, Japanese, Chinese, Latin, German, Ancient Greek, Italian, Russian, Romanian, Spanish, Serbian, Slovakian, Slovenian, Turkish, Greek, Swedish, Danish

3.2.3 Training teachers and language examination testers

After matching the Hungarian system of language examination to the CEFR, the most urgent task was to train personnel who could consistently judge the level of the test takers. Even now, after a number of years using the CEFR levels, testers are required to take an online refresher test regularly to ensure the accuracy of their judgment. This can be done in the form of showing simple can do statements to testers, who have to identify what level the can do statement represents. This way, their knowledge of the CEFR can be tested. However, whether they can actually appropriately use this knowledge or not should also be tested. In order to do that, actual test recordings are played back and they have to grade them. Similar methods are used in the initial and in-service teacher training as well. Teacher training probably focuses more on the actual knowledge and matching of the “can do statements” and the CEFR levels. This reminds us that no matter how good a system is, if there is a lack of properly trained professionals, the implementation and the outcomes are doomed to failure. In order to support the successful training of teachers, a number of materials has been created and made available for free with the help of the support of the Council of Europe, for example *Preparing teachers to use the European Language Portfolio – arguments, materials and resources* (Little, Hodel, Kohonen, Meijer, & Perclová, 2008) and *First steps in teacher training: a practical guide [The TrainEd Kit]* (Matei, Bernaus, Heyworth, Pohl, & Wright, 2008).

3.3 The outcome of language education and learning in Hungary

3.3.1 Language examination results in Hungary

The ultimate test of language skills is whether people can use the skills or not. However, on the way to success, both learners and educators are likely to want to measure progress. The educational system has its own tools (school results, national surveys, and final examination of high school) to judge whether the goals have been achieved or not, and to what extent. Learning languages is one of the areas where lifelong learning is absolutely necessary in order to keep up and improve one’s skills. In other words, “Use it or lose it!”

In previous sections, some of the measures and rewards encouraging learning languages have been presented. How well do they work? First, let us see some actual numbers that can shed some light on the general tendencies. The statistical information used in this section has been taken from the home page of NYAK (<http://www.nyak.hu>), which contains the most accurate analysis available.

Table 5 shows the number of test takers in the last 10 years. Altogether, there were 1,610,869 people who took a certified language examination test, which equals 16,3% of the whole population of Hungary. A separate table on the same home page gives the age range of these test takers. It is not a surprise that 36.8% of them were between the age of 14-19, and 28.7% between 20-24. The first age group is aiming to get into higher education and the second group is trying to satisfy the prerequisite for getting a university degree. From our previous discussion about the serious problem of students not getting their degrees for lack of passing a B2 language test, one can guess that the next group is between the ages of 25-29 with 15.9%. These three groups make up 81.4% of all the test takers. If we add the 7.6% of the next age group (30-35), that brings us to 89%. Obviously, whether the test has been passed or not makes a big difference, as does the level. Maybe it can be assumed that failing

to pass a higher-level test means that learners have reached at least the previous level. So, failing level C1 probably means that the learner has actually mastered skills at B2 level. In 2014, learners took language examinations in 30 different languages. Success rate for languages varied between 33% to 100%, with an average of 64%. The success rate of English test takers was 67% (56,903 exams). Unfortunately, no information was found about the success rate according to levels within languages.

Table 5. The number of language examinations taken every year according to languages (2005–2014)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
English	106,638	111,239	108,661	112,824	114,739	115,269	111,768	97,590	88,521	85,354	1,052,603
Arabic	13	17	28	20	14	22	23	12	16	12	177
Beash	46	76	58	45	110	81	53	28	23	25	545
Lovari	1,096	1,270	1,692	1,938	2,382	2,176	1,779	1,284	945	964	15,526
Czech	25	12	11	16	13	17	9	16	13	8	140
Danish	0	3	6	9	15	17	13	12	12	12	99
Esperanto	2,985	3,991	6,163	5,596	5,586	5,422	5,240	3,699	3,613	3,342	45,637
Finnish	47	35	40	45	57	66	51	36	31	31	439
French	3,113	3,499	4,664	3,744	3,917	3,557	3,438	2,838	2,237	2,185	33,192
Hebrew	49	38	38	35	40	37	23	17	16	18	311
Dutch	22	44	43	42	46	45	39	39	30	31	381
Croatian	290	292	300	270	274	176	169	137	119	111	2,138
Japanese	23	16	13	37	29	41	45	36	45	34	319
Chinese	1	10	8	21	23	19	16	12	13	3	126
Latin	590	426	583	394	333	335	232	196	119	113	3,321
Polish	78	50	59	47	47	0	0	0	0	4	285
Hungarian	315	207	259	227	255	263	283	233	222	219	2,483
German	51,184	53,993	46,544	44,409	42,355	40,432	38,104	32,324	28,530	26,987	404,862
Greek	1	11	2	7	1	3	3	0	0	0	28
Italian	2,168	2,170	2,641	2,141	2,136	2,121	1,877	1,488	1,287	1,291	19,320
Russian	890	805	1,002	800	740	757	619	565	466	495	7,139
Portuguese	44	38	57	41	53	6	5	14	4	5	267
Rumanian	212	231	350	174	186	190	180	168	95	103	1,889
Spanish	1,481	1,537	1,837	1,491	1,518	1,818	1,583	1,324	1,166	1,155	14,910
Swedish	0	26	58	46	52	59	40	41	42	36	400
Serbian	131	135	133	90	92	87	70	92	46	72	948
Slovak	254	384	330	269	192	295	346	239	160	142	2,611
Slovenian	10	4	33	5	10	3	1	5	4	5	80
Turkish	21	19	30	22	28	0	38	33	32	29	252
Modern Greek	21	35	23	27	17	24	20	10	17	27	221
Ukrainian	27	43	80	47	9	2	0	0	1	11	220
Total	171,775	180,656	175,746	174,879	175,269	173,340	166,067	142,488	127,825	122,824	1,610,869

However, we can see a tendency where goals are shifting from lower levels towards higher levels (Table 6). The number of test takers at level B1 in 2014 dropped to less than 20% of those who took the test at that level in 2005, while the number at level C1 almost doubled over that period.

Table 6. Number of test takers of English language exams from 2005-2014

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
B1	28,614	31,600	23,896	22,175	18,866	14,846	9,974	7,062	5,986	5,079	168,098
B2	71,883	70,846	75,953	81,975	86,144	89,475	89,088	79,275	72,270	69,572	786,481
C1	6,141	8,793	8,812	86,74	9,729	10,948	12,706	11,253	10,265	10,703	98,024
Total	106,638	111,239	108,661	112,824	114,739	115,269	111,768	97,590	88,521	85,354	1,052,603

In the case of German, which is the second most popular foreign language, the number of test takers drastically dropped at level B1, from 17,097 to 2,203. In 2014, the overall number of test takers fell to 52.7% of the 2005 figure. A quick look at the summary of the examinations broken down into levels for the last 10 years leaves no doubt that B2 level is the most aimed at level for German and most other languages, at 75% of all examinations.

3.3.2 Hungary in light of European statistics

People naturally tend to compare themselves with others, and so do countries. The European Union regularly carries out surveys in many different areas, and makes them public. The European Commission has a home page entitled Foreign language learning statistics that can serve as a good point of departure for such enquiries (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Foreign_language_learning_statistics). Online publications, data, and external links to further information are available from this page.

According to a Eurostat document, “The highest shares of the population speaking no foreign language are found in Hungary, Portugal, Spain, Bulgaria and Greece (between 43 % and 75 %)” (Matei et al., 2008, p. 5). However, Hungary’s ranking climbs into the first half when it comes to the number of foreign language speakers who master their first foreign language, English well, meaning that they can use the language in a flexible way in many different situations and areas of life (Fig. 1).

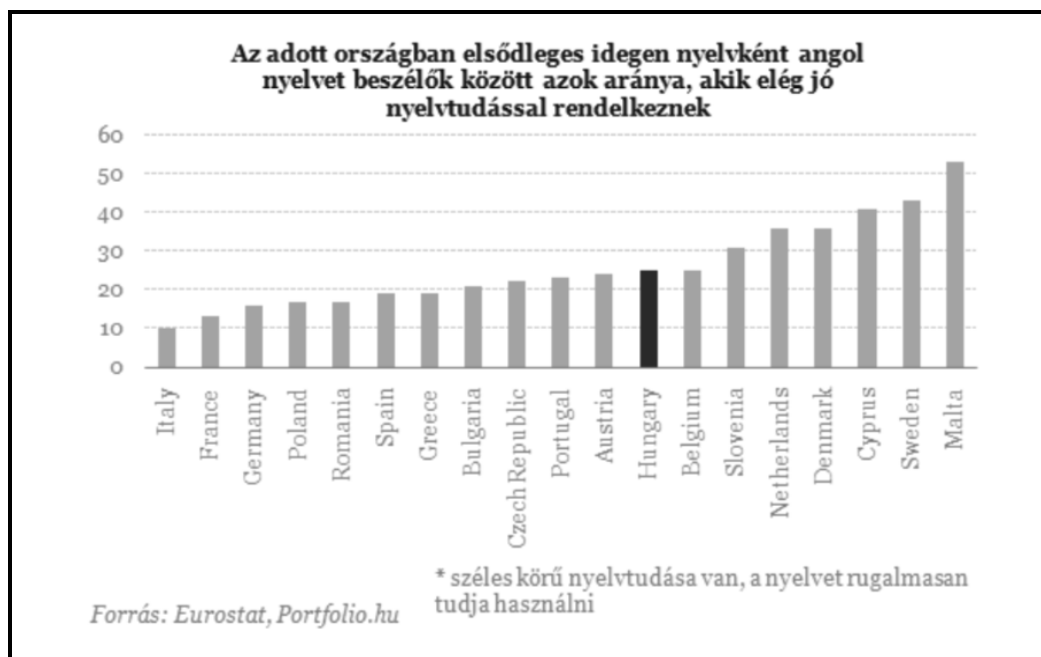


Fig. 1. Percentage of learners possessing a good command of English as a first foreign language (Source: Eurostat, Portfolio.hu)

3.4 Learning from Hungary and Japan's struggles with foreign languages

3.4.1 Traditions

Although there are many successful language learners in Hungary, and Hungarians often tell their children the saying: “You are as many persons as the number of languages you can speak”, this summarizes the value of people mastering several languages, which also implies knowledge of other cultures and a wider world. However, for almost 40 years, for historical reasons, Russian was the only foreign language for many people, and they resented it. In addition, as traveling abroad to other than Eastern-block countries was difficult and expensive, languages were in most cases just school subjects rather than tools for communication. Although Hungary was geographically situated in the middle of Europe, it was very similar to an island country, like Japan. Being brought up in that situation, and having taught English in Japan for 20 years, I can see a number of similarities between the two countries in the field of language education. Saying that, I am also aware that the situation is changing in both countries.

In the age of globalization, no country is an island any more. One cannot claim that countries are homogeneous, or the national language is perfectly good if one has no intention of working abroad. However, many people are still not convinced. If intrinsic motivation is missing, even if strict rules try to force people to achieve higher performances, they may not succeed, or their success will be very futile.

3.4.2 Linguistic distance

Most languages spoken in Europe belong to the Indo-European language family. For a European language learner, it means that many of the characteristics of the foreign language they are studying may be similar to those in their mother tongue. For example, French and English have a lot in common both in their grammars and in their lexis in spite of the fact that they belong to different language families: English to the Germanic languages, and French to the Romance languages. They both have a complicated system of tenses but these are similar. Hungarian, on the other hand, is a Finno-Ugric language, which is very different from Indo-European languages. Thus, for Hungarian learners of English or French, who only know one kind of past tense, and for whom there is no real future tense in their mother tongue, it will be much more difficult to understand even the reason why there should be so many tenses in a language, let alone being able to use them correctly without a considerable amount of practice.

Considering the limitations of this paper, this topic is not going to be discussed further but simply referred to. See Törkenczy (2002) or Kenesei, Vágó and Fenyvesi (1998) for more information about the characteristics of the Hungarian language, and Chiswick and Miller (2004) on linguistic distance.

Japanese, just like Hungarian, is an agglutinative language. Agglutinating languages cram a lot of grammatical information into one single word. This may make it difficult to even find the root of the word and look it up in a dictionary. Words as long as “*ellehetetlenségüléseitekért*”, or “*medoldathatatláságukból*” are quite usual in Hungarian newspaper articles. The roots are “*lehet*” and “*old*” respectively, and everything else is either a prefix or a suffix. Both Japanese and Hungarian have their own special characteristics, but on the whole, they are close to each other when considering the distance between either of them and English. Even speakers of English from these countries show similarities, namely their intonation when speaking English tends to be very flat.

3.4.3 Need for lower level examinations

Although the goal for most language learners is to pass the B2 level exam, it seems that having B1 level as the first possible exam for language learners may be counter productive. Intrinsic motivation is reinforced by the pleasure of feeling accomplishment. Even if English and French are compared, it is obvious that the time needed to learn the use of verbs in the present tense would be different because of the conjugation of verbs in French. Agglutinating languages, or languages with a different writing system require much more time at the beginning, and progress can be very slow because of that. When people think that they are stuck, and they make no progress, or when they feel that the goal is too far away, they tend to give up. Lower level exams would offer goals that could be achieved faster, and could prove to the learners and the people around them that they have achieved something. If there are 6 levels in the CEFR, why should only three levels be used for language tests?

In Japan as well, specialists have found that even the existing six levels are not enough for the use of the CEFR in Japan, and the lower levels need to be broken down into more units. They suggested that a Pre-A1 level should be added, and that levels A1, A2, B1 and B2 be subdivided into A1.1/ A1.2/ A1.3, A2.1/A2.2, B1.1 /B1.2 and B2.1 /B2.2, thus resulting in twelve levels instead of the original six (Tono & Negishi, 2012).

4 Final thoughts / Conclusion

Nobody can doubt that the CEFR has enormously affected the teaching and testing of languages in Europe. First, member countries of the European Union had to incorporate the ideas expressed in the CEFR into their own system. Then educational goals had to be expressed using the CEFR levels, and national language examinations had to be matched to the 6 levels of the CEFR. Although the work was started in 1971, it is far from being finished. Maybe it can never really be finished, as it will probably require constant adjustments and refinements. The CEFR is a framework with no specific language in mind. That requires active participation of each country in the process of creating profiles for and reference level descriptions each language. In many countries, the same languages are taught as foreign languages. Thus co-operation and exchange of ideas will certainly help the effectiveness of language teaching. The matching of national language examinations to the CEFR levels helps the international mobility of students and workforce.

As not only European languages are taught as foreign languages in Europe but other non-European languages as well, a wider exchange of ideas and cooperation will probably be even more fruitful. The translations of the CEFR into Chinese, Korean and Japanese are definitely signs of interest in the CEFR, even if the level of interest is different in each of these countries.

Finally, the analysis of student corpora has pointed out that foreign language learners of different linguistic background have different problems with learning the foreign language. These findings for each foreign language should also be incorporated into the national educational and testing systems. Case studies of different countries may make similarities and differences clearer, thus encouraging joint efforts. It seems that Hungary and Japan have a number of things in common in this regard, which suggests that joint research may be rewarding for both parties.

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