

Common Asian Framework of References for Languages in Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CAFR): JACET 50th International Convention Symposium

HIGUCHI Akihiko*

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Abstract

This study deals with the “Future Prospects in Language Education in East Asia” with emphasis on a Common Asian Framework of References for Languages in Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CAFR). This topic was discussed by the four panelists at the JACET 50th International Commemorative Convention 2011. The main issues were: whether or not a CAFR was necessary; what its functions would be, and the considerations needed in its development. The four panelists presented salient points from their own cultural differences, and economic and social needs etc., in the development of a CAFR.

The panelists shared a common concern about the development of a CAFR although it might not be urgently needed in some countries. They also shared the notion that an organizational structure such as Council of Asian Nations (COAN) and Asian Center for Modern Language Studies etc, has to be established. At the same time, English teachers and their organizations in Asia could play major roles in this challenge. Therefore, it might be educational and cultural exchanges among Asian people that are dominant in the first step toward the establishment of a CAFR. This symposium was a grand experiment with some potentially sensitive and politically relevant issues. Therefore, further elaborations will surely be necessary with the hope that this symposium will act as a launch pad for this issue and its consequences for the regional community.

Key words: CAFR, JACET, symposium, organizational structure, COAN, academic exchanges

Historical background

Since the establishment of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) in the early 1970s, language policies in the EU have been studied by the Council of Europe for over thirty years (see note 1). Then in 2001, the CEFR (Common European Framework of References for Languages in Learning, Teaching, and Assessment) was announced by the EU. “The policy spotlighted can-do assessment validated for the most popular proficiency tests like the TOEFL and TOEIC from the United States, and the STEP from Japan” (Koike, 2011). The CEFR also put the emphasis on plurilingualism where people are encouraged to learn two other EU languages on top of their native tongue.

Influenced by the CEFR, the idea for a CAFR emerged. Interests were mainly placed on achievement

* 鹿児島大学教育学部 教授

descriptors (can-do statements) in English language education not only in Japan but also in East Asia. Koike (2011) put it as follows: “Further examples include numerous policies of many governments linking national proficiency tests or standards to the CEFR, including some in Asia, such as the Hong Kong Workplace English Benchmarks, Taiwan’s Taiwan General English Proficiency Test, and indirectly, China’s target levels for the Chinese National English-Language Curriculum, to mention but a few.” (ibid)

Now its influence has become worldwide and at the highest levels. Many people in East Asia had strong interests in the assessment (can-do descriptors), then as a result, some countries in East Asia set up their own standards in English language learning and teaching such as China, Korea, and Taiwan etc.

However, this present study discusses solely establishing a CAFR, not its function and considerations needed in its development. This is because the four panelists in the symposium had very limited presentation time and the issue of the discussion was limited solely to the necessity of a CAFR. They presented their own ideas for the establishment of a CAFR, each based on their individual cultural and political differences, language varieties and geographical conditions amongst others. Below follows overviews of their respective presentations and considerations of them.

Overview

Different Tracks, Different Nations, Similar Goals: Toward a Common Asian Framework of Reference for Languages in Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CAFR)

Lawrence Jun Zhang (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

Common Asian Framework of Languages

First, Dr. Zhang discussed the general conceptualization of a CAFR, its political, cultural and economic benefits in East Asia, and potential challenges. He claimed that an “increasingly globalized world in international integration has made it necessary for Asians to consider a proposal for a common Asian framework of reference for languages in learning, teaching, and assessment (CAFR)” (Zhang, 2011). He stressed that “Asian nations can achieve similar goals albeit stark differences in development trajectories, political systems, and cultural diversity” (ibid).

Emphasis on Asian languages

He continued that “although English is currently a dominant foreign language (and a lingua franca) around the world and in Asia, Asian languages will probably take its place in 50 or 60 years” (ibid). Therefore, he put that “all Asian languages that are codified, standardized, offered as curriculum subjects in institutions of learning, and widely used as a common language in both spoken and written forms (lingua franca) in law, education, and daily operations of institutions, can be brought together to be reviewed within this

framework” (ibid). Here he did not refer to the reason why Asian languages will probably take the place of English language in 50 or 60 years. However, this study supports that Asian languages should also be considered and reviewed within the framework of a CAFR.

Dr. Zhang (ibid) has an interesting view of language use for people in Asia, putting the emphasis on Asian languages rather than English. Therefore, a CAFR should not necessarily be established for just the English language but for all Asian languages used in Asian countries.

He also strongly claimed that “a CAFR does not have to survive under the auspices of English language education and assessment because English language education and assessment nowadays have been very much influenced by native-speaker standards prevalent in East Asia” (ibid). His view point here is similar to Dr. Min from Korea, and his strong suggestion is placed on Asian languages not English language in the future. He claimed that “the dynamics of language use within the context of multiple languages could promote linguistic and cultural diversity as well as ecology” (ibid).

Like other panelists, Dr. Zhang put an emphasis on establishing a Council of Asian Nations (COAN) as a prerequisite for a CAFR. This is because without a common ground for understanding the importance of a CAFR, he believes it will be difficult for such an initiative to start. This suggestion is also shared with the other three panelists, which will be discussed later in this study.

Political and Cultural Benefits of CAFR

Other points in a CAFR, according to Dr. Zhang (ibid), were referred to political and cultural benefits of a CAFR. He pointed out that diffusions and conflicts often occurred due to lack of understanding of the languages of the people. He thinks that “when East Asian nations collaborate on this project, the act itself will be seen positively by the members of the public. Then consequently, it will result in a more harmonious Asia in political terms (ibid). This study also supports his view but we need to examine how to deal with this project in detail.

Economic Benefits of CAFR

Dr. Zhang (ibid) insisted that the East Asian countries should examine how further economic development will be possible through a CAFR. He continued that “with a CAFR all the governments in East Asia can have a peace of mind by commissioning the task of selecting the labor force to the specialist agencies that are certified by a CAFR in determining the language competencies” (ibid). He strongly claimed that “the dynamics of language use, including code-switching and code-mixing within a context of multiple languages concurrently in use would probably minimize prejudices against a particular variety of the language and this could promote linguistic and cultural diversity and ecology.” Dr. Zhang’s view (ibid) seems to be reflected in the current situation in variety of language in Singapore.

Organizational Structure (Council of Asian Nations)

Finally, Dr. Zhang (ibid) suggested establishing a Council of Asian Nations (COAN) that should be a prerequisite of a CAFR “because most Asian nations share certain Oriental values and cultural practices, but there are differences in political systems, and cultural diversity” (ibid). As he suggested, without a common ground for understanding the importance of a CAFR, it will be a difficult experience in starting such an initiative. This view was shared with other three panelists in the symposium.

Increasing academic exchanges to enhance ELT efficiency in Asia

Zhou Yan (Beijing Foreign Studies University)

CAFR: Not the most urgent need

Dr. Yan claimed that a CAFR, if accepted, could make English taught as a foreign/second language as an important means to increase communication in East Asia. She continued that “a CAFR will hopefully provide more guidance and better standard for efficient teaching and learning” (ibid). Although she shared the common concern about a CAFR with other panelists, she claimed that it might not be the most urgent need for many countries due to several important conditions. According to her, they are the differences between Asia and Europe from the perspectives of geographical conditions, cultural differences and economic needs. She pointed out that “each individual country seems to be enjoying more of their unique and rich cultural heritage and varieties than the needs for joint efforts and unified power in the present world. Consequently a CAFR may not be the most urgent need for many countries” (ibid). In fact, because some countries learn and teach English as a second language in Asia, such as Singapore, India and Thailand, and others as foreign language, such as China, Japan and Vietnam etc., it would be rather difficult to have a CAFR in Asia. She put it as follows: “due to the different language teaching and learning environments, it is unlikely that a common framework of reference could be applied to all Asian countries” (ibid).

Large population and geographic condition

She also put the emphasis on the English learning population in China which was about 300 million people across the country with different levels of educational development. Due to this large population learning English, she thinks that it is of great importance to have a clear standard for language learners' competence through formal schooling. In fact, in China, the National Research Centre for Foreign Language Education has been working on a research project to develop a general standard for foreign language users to describe their expected competence at different stages of English learning. Here she claims that “each country knows what is more appropriate for its own needs and standard than working out something that can be unanimously accepted by different countries in Asia” (ibid), although she agrees that it is a common concern for both TESL and TEFL countries in Asia to increase their English teaching and learning

efficiency.

Enhancing academic exchanges in the relevant fields

She also put stress on increasing exchanges in the field among Asian countries and preparations to develop a framework of references for the TESL setting and the TEFL setting. Therefore, she suggested establishing an organizational structure that guarantees communication among English language teaching and learning communities throughout all Asian countries. This suggestion was also shared with other three panelists Dr. Zhang, Dr. Min, and Dr. Koike. Unless we can establish an organizational structure, it might be quite difficult to start discussion in the relevant language issues in Asia. This is a crux of the issue in this study and perhaps the first step for the development of a CAFR in East Asian countries.

Common Asian Framework of Reference for Languages from the Perspective of English Education

Chan Kyoo Min (Korea National University of Education)

Advocacy of CAFR

Dr. Min (2011) put forward three questions and answered them in favor of a CAFR from the perspective of English language education in East Asia. He supports a CAFR and claims that this common reference system can guide English educators to better achieve the shared goal of teaching and understanding learners' English ability. He claims that a CAFR will heighten interest in learning and using Englishes among East Asian peoples "for the purpose of communication, resulting in boosting the mobility among the populations, international cooperation, and mutual respect for others' views" (Koike, 2005).

Asian-oriented standards

He also discussed some keys to developing international standards in language proficiency levels and suitable approaches to English classrooms in Asia, claiming that "these standards and suitable approaches particularly in English language instruction in Asia should originate not in the standards of European or Western contexts but in Asian contexts" (ibid). Besides, he further referred to the possibility that "a CAFR can help East Asian people learn and teach Englishes in the manner most appropriate for their educational contexts by facilitating active discussion and cooperation for an English education system tailored to the specificities of the Asian context" (ibid). Here again he put stress on the "Asian context" in the development of a CAFR, which were also supported by other three panelists in the symposium.

Core functions

The second question Dr. Min suggested was closely related to the function of a CAFR in English education. He suggested offering concrete guidelines for performing English assessment and instruction. Here again

he put stress on “the Asian context”, claiming that “the guidelines should be easily accessed and shared by learners and teachers... A CAFR needs to provide learners with English learning guidelines catered to their specific needs within the Asian context” (ibid). He thinks that “on the basis of Asianized philosophies in English learning and teaching, a CAFR should be different from currently used measurement systems” (ibid). This suggestion is similar to other three panelists particularly to Dr. Zhang and Dr. Yan.

Roles of English teachers and three different issues

Finally he claimed what English educators in East Asia should consider when developing a CAFR. Their primary concern, according to Min (ibid), can be summarized as follows:

- (1) To build a rapport among Asian learners and teachers of Englishes about the necessity of a CAFR. This is because they need to share a conviction that a CAFR would make it possible for more efficiency in applying suitable approaches to English classrooms in Asia and increase the mutual exchange of persons and materials.
- (2) To consider issues in three levels when developing a CAFR. The first level is the global one such as the international standards and expectations for English education. The second level is the regional one such as considerations for features unique to Asian culture. The third level is the local one such as “the idiosyncratic contexts of each local country within the Asian region. This should also be considered when developing guidelines for evaluating learners' proficiency levels and creating teaching methods” (ibid).

These three levels were suggested by Dr. Min (ibid), however they were not discussed in detail within the limited time of the symposium. His suggestions were noteworthy because among the four countries represented in the symposium, Japan is very close to Korea not only geographically but also educationally and economic ally. Further discussion and elaborations will surely be necessary.

What We Might Think of a Common Asian Framework of Reference for Languages

Ikuo Koike (Professor Emeritus, Keio University)

Basic principles in CEFR

Dr. Ikuo Koike from Japan first addressed his view on the historical backgrounds in the Council of Europe and EU, claiming the importance of understanding the practicalities in adopting the basic principles of the Council of Europe and EU movement by including the difficulties and of linking nations into cooperative groups like ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Then he explained the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) that promotes a unifying spirit of human rights, fairness, mutual respect, democracy, and peace among all the members of the Council of Europe. He also introduced the language-education policy of the Council with emphasis on the ideas of “plurilingualism” , and of

“pluriculturalism” (Koike, 2011).

He seemed to recognize the success in the European Language Portfolio (ELP) which functions as a practical and adaptable assessment tool reflecting the education policy of each member country. He is in favor of the ELP and explained its main concepts and its current situation in the EU, which will be discussed later in this study.

Advocacy of CAFR

Dr. Koike (ibid) supports a CAFR, claiming the basic principles of the Council and European Union movement, with the difficulties and of linking nations into cooperative groups such as ASEAN (ibid). He continued that “it would be desirable, for the majority of Asian countries, to create a CAFR irrespective of the controversy of political systems antagonistic to human rights” (ibid). He stressed the necessity for collaboration in political, economic, cultural, educational, and informational exchanges.

Points shared with CEFR

Then, Dr. Koike referred to four important in Asian nations that are common with the CEFR. They were 1. mutual intercultural respect, 2. socio-economic needs, 3. useful programs, i.e., Language Portfolio, and 4. definitions of primary goals and attributes. He explained them respectively, claiming that there are great many points in the CEFR on which all Asia can agree. The first point he mentioned was mutual intercultural respect.

The second point he mentioned was about the obvious socio-economic needs due to what he called the “global village” interconnected by telecommunications. Therefore, he claimed that “increased communicative abilities are a source of power, prestige, and wealth, through social mobility, international communication, access to information, personal interactions and improved working relations” (ibid).

The third point he mentioned was to introduce value in the usefulness of programs which the European nations have inaugurated. Here, he particularly stressed the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which will be discussed later on in this study.

The fourth point he mentioned was to appreciate the CEFR’s accomplishments in defining primary goals and attributes of language learning. He claimed that “the goal is a comprehensive system for understanding language learning that is useful for everyone in the field – learners, teachers, assessors, textbook authors, administrators and policy makers” (ibid). Here it is interesting to see that he is trying to establish a rigid framework that holds all aspects in language learning, teaching, and assessment. This is partly because he presumes that English will continue to grow in importance as the world lingua franca.

International cooperation among English teachers

Dr. Koike (ibid) takes the view that international cooperation among English teachers is absolutely necessary. Therefore, in the process of international cooperation, he claimed that Asia-TEFL, TESOL and applied-linguistic organizations in 37 Asian countries could be foundations. He thinks that “one possible approach would be to agree to adopt common proficiency levels, such as the CEFR’s descriptor scales, both for consistency in evaluation and for learner motivation” (ibid).

However, he did not explain why the descriptor scales could be one possible approach for international cooperation. In other words, there exists a very simple question why the descriptor scales should be shared with East Asian countries. Should they be the same scales as member states in a CAFR? If so why? This is one of the issues when discussing a CAFR.

Summary of the presentations

From the four presentations, it seemed that they share a common concern about teaching English and about the assessment of the language to increase proficiency and learning efficiency, although there existed some differences among the panelists. This was partly because of the differences in historical and cultural backgrounds, and language education policies. Once again, let us summarize the key points of the four presentations.

Dr. Lawrence Jun Zhang, Singapore

- In favor of a CAFR but it should not be based on native-speaker standards but rather other standards presumably Asian.
- Although English is currently a dominant foreign language (and a lingua franca) around the world and in Asia, Asian languages will probably take its place in 50 or 60 years. This is very interesting view point but no reasons were explained.
- Therefore, a CAFR should not necessarily be established for just English but for all Asian languages.
- The dynamics of language use within the context of multiple languages as in Singapore could promote linguistic and cultural diversity as well as ecology. Why ecology? We need to know about this view.
- A Council of Asian Nations (COAN) is suggested as a prerequisite for a CAFR. With a CAFR all the governments in East Asia can have peace of mind.

Dr. Zhou Yan, China

- She also shared the common concerns of a CAFR with other panelists, but she claimed that a CAFR may not be the most urgent need for many countries due to several important conditions.
- She thinks “each individual country seems to be enjoying more of their unique and rich cultural heritage and varieties than the needs for joint efforts and unified power in the present world.... due to the different

language teaching and learning environments, it is unlikely that a common framework of reference could be applied to all Asian countries” (ibid)

- Each country knows what is more appropriate for its own needs and standard than working out something that can be unanimously accepted by different countries in Asia.
- The most important point for her seems to increase exchanges in the field among Asian countries and prepare to develop framework of references for both TESL setting and TEFL setting. Therefore, she suggested establishing an organizational structure that would guarantee communication among English language teaching and learning communities among all Asian countries. This structure may start working on some joint research projects in East Asia.

Dr. Min Chan Kyoo, Korea

- In favor of a CAFR from the perspective of English language education in East Asia by creating a more systematic reference with a common basis because a variety of Englishes are currently being spoken in Asian countries.
- A CAFR will heighten interest in learning and using Englishes among East Asian people for the purpose of communication, boosting mobility among the populations, international cooperation, and mutual respect for others' views.
- He supports the overall concept of adopting a CAFR in East Asia but the standards of achievement target in English is different from Western or European standards.
- Therefore, these standards and suitable approaches should be originated not in the standards of European or Western but in Asian contexts.
- A CAFR should be developed to fulfill the needs of English education professionals in East Asia by offering concrete guidelines for performing English assessment and instruction (Min, 2011). Here again he stresses “the Asian context”
- He did not refer to any organizational structure to start working on a CAFR in East Asia.

Dr. Ikuo Koike, Japan

- In favor of a CAFR based on the Common European Framework (CEFR).
- The basic principles of the Council and European Union movement, including the difficulties and of linking nations into cooperative groups such as ASEAN are necessary when discussing a CAFR modeled on the CEFR (ibid).
- He stresses the necessity for collaboration in political, economic, cultural, educational, and informational exchanges in East Asia.
- Four points shared with the CEFR were suggested: i. mutual intercultural respect, ii. socio-economic

needs, iii. useful programs, i.e., Language Portfolio, and iv. definitions of primary goals and attributes.

Pedagogical implications

The four panelists had salient views that were a little different from each other. However, there were shared views toward the establishment of a CAFR. What were they? According to their presentations, they could be summarized as follows:

- They agreed with the establishment of a CAFR although Dr. Yan thought it was not the most urgent need for China. (She was not totally against a CAFR though)
- When establishing a CAFR, standards should not be based on European or native-speaker standards but on Asian standards. All agreed except Dr. Koike (who did not refer to Asian standards but seems to have the same view as the others)
- When establishing a CAFR, not only English but also Asian languages should be taken into consideration in its language assessment. In fact, Dr. Zhang assumed that in 50–60 years, not English but Asian languages might be the dominant languages as *lingua franca* in Asia.
- Some structural institution will be absolutely necessary for the establishment of a CAFR. This is a prerequisite without which a CAFR cannot start in reality (Zhang, *ibid*). Three panelists agreed to this point in the symposium. Dr. Koike referred to this organization as an “Asian Center for Modern Language Studies” which seems to be a counterpart of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, Austria.
- International cooperation among teachers will surely be needed in East Asia. Therefore, Asia-TEFL, TESOL and applied-linguistic organizations in 37 Asian countries could act as foundations (Koike).

Educational Supporting Program

The four panelists did not refer to any of the EU's Educational Supporting Programs. For example, its Lifelong Learning Programme (the name has been changed from Socrates program to Lifelong Learning Programme in 2007) which includes the Comenius, Erasmus, Grundtvig, and Lingua sub-programs, has been successful particularly for people in EU member states. English language teachers in the EU, for example, can visit academic institutions in Britain for teacher training under Comenius. The author of this study met many such teachers coming from all over the EU to the University of Edinburgh's summer courses in Teaching English for Medical Purposes, Teaching English for Law, and Teaching English for Business. These language teachers and business people taking the courses at the Institute of Applied Language Studies in Edinburgh in 2009 had almost no idea what the ELP was all about but they were surely supported by Comenius and other relevant programs in EU.

Therefore, this present study believes that if we could set up a counterpart program in East Asia, this

will result in boosting mobility among the populations, international cooperation, cultural exchanges and mutual respect among people in East Asia. This is also another important issue to be discussed.

Conclusion and limitations

Indeed this first symposium at the JACET 50th Convention 2011 was a grand experiment in that there were so many issues for the development of a CAFR that we could not discuss them all within a limited time. Further discussion and elaborations will surely be necessary for us to share our ideas with people in the regional community.

At the same time, we should bear in mind that English teachers and their organizations in Asia such as Asian TEFL, PKETA, RELC and others (see note 2), could, as Dr. Koike suggested, play a major role in the challenge toward the development of a CAFR. Therefore, it might not be politics and diplomacy but educational and cultural exchanges among language teachers, particularly English teachers in East Asia that could be dominant in the first step toward the establishment of a CAFR. English teachers throughout Asia have an important task to do for this challenge and ultimately for peaceful societies, human rights, mutual respect, and the development of democracy not only in East Asia but throughout the continent. It will take time to reach a conclusion on this issue with some potentially sensitive and politically relevant issues. However, this study strongly believes that this symposium was a launch pad for the future prospects in language policies in East Asia.

Notes

1. The Council of Europe: The Council of Europe (French: *Conseil de l'Europe*) is an international organisation promoting co-operation between all countries of Europe in the areas of legal standards, human rights, democratic development, the rule of law and cultural co-operation. It was founded in 1949, has 47 member states with some 800 million citizens, and is an entirely separate body from the European Union (EU), which has only 27 member states. Unlike the EU, the Council of Europe cannot make binding laws. The two do however share certain symbols such as the flag of Europe. The Council of Europe has nothing to do with either the Council of the European Union or the European Council, which are both EU bodies. (Wikipedia, 2011)
2. RELC: Regional Language Centre in SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) in Singapore. This organization is dedicated to the development of language teacher education in the region and the promotion of international cooperation among language professionals.

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