Chapter 48

WebCEF:
An Online Collaboration Tool for Assessing Foreign Language Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

The main outcome of the WebCEF project (2006-2009) is an online collaboration tool for self-, peer-, and expert assessment of oral proficiency in the foreign language using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). One distinctive feature of WebCEF is that it brings together learners and assessors in virtual communities of practice, locally and internationally. Thanks to the use of low-threshold technology, this tool – available freely online – has been used successfully in formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Attesting to its continued relevance, WebCEF was awarded the European Language Label in 2011. In this chapter, the authors discuss an experience involving trainee teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) of the University of Leuven (Belgium), EFL students at the Université de Savoie (France), and language teachers in France. It will be demonstrated how WebCEF can be a powerful platform for professional development through social mediation and a support for learner autonomy through assessment for learning.

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INTRODUCTION

The Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001; North, 2008) was designed to build a shared framework and vocabulary that could help discuss foreign language competence at a European level. The framework also encourages its adaptation to the local context. The aim of the European project WebCEF was therefore twofold: its first purpose was to provide a platform where teachers, teacher trainees and students could familiarise themselves with the scales and levels of the CEFR (http://www.webcef.eu/). The second purpose, and perhaps the most challenging and innovative one, was to set up sustainable communities of practice, both locally and internationally, for the collaborative assessment of oral language proficiency in seven European languages. The principles underlying these communities of practice were that mentoring plays a crucial role in the development of assessment skills, and that reflexivity on the part of the learner helps develop learner autonomy, while helping improve professional practice in the teacher and assessor.

This chapter will first provide a general overview of the project. This will be followed by a discussion of one particular experience involving teacher trainees and foreign language teachers in Belgium and France.

The tool was developed between 2006 and 2009 by a consortium of seven higher education institutions and one private company. The consortium consisted of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium (coordinator); the Dresden University of Technology, Germany; the University of Chambéry, France; Fontys University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands; the University of Łódź, Poland; the University of Helsinki, Finland; and the Open University, the United Kingdom. The University of Bologna, Italy, and Group T–Leuven Engineering College, Belgium, joined the consortium as associate partners in the course of the project. The general aims of the WebCEF project were (1) to help language teachers, teacher trainees and students understand and apply the scales and levels of the CEFR, and (2) to set up sustainable communities of practice, both locally and internationally, for the collaborative assessment of oral proficiency in seven European languages: Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Polish and Italian.

The specific aims of the WebCEF assessment tool were to develop the users’ capacity to assess a sample of oral production against the CEFR, be it one’s own speech or that of other learners, and to stimulate self-reflection and dialogue about perceived quality in foreign language proficiency. In this way WebCEF aimed to contribute to the professional development of teachers and to the promotion of learner autonomy across Europe.

WebCEF can be experienced in full by anyone who joins one of the virtual communities of practice. These communities can be defined along both linguistic and geographical lines. The French community, for instance, brings together learners of French throughout Europe, as well as all language teachers in France. As for the educational context of the project, the tool was developed primarily within the context of foreign language teaching and learning in secondary schools and institutes of higher education.

The WebCEF site (http://www.webcef.eu/) gives information about the project and access to a showcase of representative assessed samples of oral production in various European languages and at different CEFR levels, designed to illustrate how collaborative assessment works. But the heart of the WebCEF project is the online assessment tool, which contains five rating scales taken from the CEFR: an overall scale for oral production or interaction, and four specific ‘qualitative’ scales for range, accuracy, fluency, and coherence. As assessors watch a recorded speech sample, they select the most fitting descriptor for each scale. An annotation feature allows assessors to explain their ratings by commenting on specific segments of the speech samples. The ratings on the different
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