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From Generic Task to Cultural Practice: Appropriating the CEFR for EFL Pedagogy in an Algerian CEIL

Souad MAATAR [*]

Faculty of Letters and Languages
Department of Letters and Foreign Languages
20 Août 1955 University, Skikda, (Algeria)

s.maatar@univ-skikda.dz

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Abstract

In the intensive language teaching centers of Algerian universities (CEILs), the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is widely used, yet its standard commercial implementation often creates a profound cultural disconnect that in turn leaves learners unengaged and their identities sidelined. To address this challenge, this paper argues that the solution is not to discard this global framework, but to critically appropriate it through a culturally responsive pedagogy. Specifically, we present a comprehensive framework that systematically rebuilds General English instruction by grounding it in the Algerian sociolinguistic context. The model's three core components—a thematically redesigned syllabus, the transformation of generic tasks into authentic cultural practices, and an adapted assessment model that values pragmatic competence—work in synergy to foster genuine learner investment. By doing so, the framework moves beyond simple motivation to allow students to negotiate their identities in English, an approach that aligns with a decolonial turn in applied linguistics. Ultimately, illustrated through a detailed analysis of culturally appropriated tasks, this paper provides a practical blueprint for CEILs to transform their classrooms into more equitable, effective, and identity-affirming spaces for language learning.

Keywords: CEFR, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, EFL in Algeria, CEIL, Learner Identity

[*] *Souad MAATAR*

1. Introduction

In the intensive language teaching centers of Algerian universities, a powerful global tool meets a unique local reality. Indeed, this discussion is particularly timely, given the recent national push towards implementing English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Algerian higher education; in turn, this moves places unprecedented pressure on CEILs to deliver effective and relevant language training. To meet this demand, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been widely adopted to benchmark English proficiency, offering a valuable, action-oriented approach to language learning. However, this embrace of a global standard brings a critical challenge: without careful adaptation, we risk imposing a Eurocentric model of communication that feels disconnected from the lives and cultural identities of Algerian students. At its core, the problem is the false assumption that "General English" and the CEFR framework are culturally neutral. As a result, this disconnect is often apparent in student feedback, with learners expressing sentiments like, "Why are we always talking about booking hotels in London? I need to learn how to talk to my professor," or, "The people in the book don't talk like us; it feels strange."

Therefore, to address this issue, this paper argues for a paradigm shift from direct implementation to critical appropriation. Specifically, it proposes a new, theoretically-grounded pedagogical framework to guide this process. The contribution of this paper is not empirical data, but rather a robust, practical, and replicable conceptual model that other educators and institutions can use to guide their own curriculum reform. To achieve this, this paper will first synthesize the critical literature on the CEFR and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. It will then detail the principles guiding the framework before presenting its three core components, with a special focus on how culturally grounded task design can transform the learning experience.

2. Literature Review

To build a new path forward, we must first understand the landscape. A pedagogical framework cannot be constructed in a vacuum; rather, it must be built upon a solid foundation of existing scholarship and a deep appreciation of the context in which it will be implemented. This literature review, therefore, serves as the theoretical cornerstone for our proposed model. Specifically, it will explore the scholarship that informs our approach by systematically weaving together three distinct but interconnected areas of inquiry.

First, we will delve into the critical conversation surrounding the CEFR. While acknowledging its utility as a standardizing tool, we will engage with the significant body of literature that questions its cultural neutrality and critiques its dominant, commercial implementation. In doing so, this will establish the scholarly basis for why a simple adoption of the framework is insufficient.

Second, having identified the problem, we will turn to the proposed solution by exploring the empowering principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). Here, we will examine the

foundational work in this field to establish CRP as a robust theoretical lens for adapting curricula, validating learner identities, and fostering genuine intercultural competence.

Finally, to ground these global theories in a local reality, we will analyze scholarship pertaining to the specific educational and sociolinguistic context of Algeria. This will involve a review of the work of prominent Algerian researchers on topics such as plurilingualism, language policy, and the unique pragmatic and cultural norms that shape communication in the region.

Ultimately, by synthesizing these three strands—the critique of the global framework, the theory of the pedagogical solution, and the reality of the local context—this review will construct a clear and compelling rationale for the culturally appropriated framework that follows.

2.1 The Global Tool: A Critical Look at the CEFR

The CEFR's journey from a European project to a global phenomenon has drawn both praise and critical scrutiny. Indeed, scholars like Byram (2009) and Shohamy (2006) caution that the framework is not as culturally neutral as it appears. It is crucial, however, to make a distinction here. The official CEFR "Can-Do" descriptors themselves are often broad and open to interpretation. The real problem arises in the dominant, commercial implementation of these descriptors. Specifically, major international textbooks and tests operationalize these statements through a narrow, Western cultural lens, in effect creating a de facto curriculum that presents a particular way of life as the default standard (McNamara & Roever, 2006). Therefore, this paper’s critique is aimed not at the theoretical flexibility of the CEFR document itself, but rather at the widespread pedagogical practices that have become synonymous with it.

Encouragingly, the CEFR's own evolution acknowledges this need for a broader perspective. For instance, the CEFR Companion Volume (2020) introduced new scales for Plurilingual/Pluricultural Competence and Mediation, officially recognizing that learners draw on multiple languages and that a key communicative skill is explaining concepts across cultural divides. Ultimately, this development provides an official mandate for the very kind of appropriation this paper proposes.

2.2 The Solution: A Culturally Responsive and Identity-Affirming Approach

If blind adoption of generic practices is the problem, then Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) offers a powerful solution. Developed by pioneering educators like Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2010), CRP is founded on a simple idea: learning soars when it respects the cultural backgrounds of its students. In the context of language education, this means shifting the pedagogical goal away from cultural assimilation and towards the development of genuine intercultural competence, as Nieto (2010) critically argues.

Furthermore, this approach moves beyond simple motivation and engages with what Norton (2013) describes as learner "investment." That is to say, when learners can see their own identities and cultural realities reflected in the curriculum, they are more invested in the language

and more willing to claim ownership over it. Consequently, they begin to imagine themselves as legitimate users of English, not just as learners of a foreign system. The framework we propose, therefore, uses the principles of CRP as a mechanism to increase this crucial sense of investment and identity affirmation.

2.3 The Case: Grounding the Framework in Algerian Reality

The urgent need for this transformation becomes undeniable when we turn to Algeria itself. The nation's linguistic identity is a rich tapestry woven from Arabic, Tamazight, and French—a history meticulously documented by Benrabah (2007). For instance, as Belarbi (2020) shows in her study of urban youth, Algerian speakers masterfully code-switch, using their full linguistic repertoire not as a deficit, but as a sophisticated communicative asset and a marker of social identity. To enforce an "English-only" rule in such a classroom, then, is to ask students to leave their greatest cognitive tool at the door.

Furthermore, the content of standard EFL materials often fails to resonate with the Algerian context. As Mebtouche (2018) has observed in a detailed analysis of Algerian secondary school textbooks, the cultural content is often limited to superficial "Big C" elements (food, flags, festivals) of Anglophone nations. Crucially, this approach neglects the far more important "small c" culture of everyday communicative norms, such as how to issue an invitation, express gratitude, or disagree politely. Consequently, students are asked to perform tasks, like making a direct complaint, that can feel unnatural within a cultural context that, as Meknassi (2019) explores in her work on Algerian EFL learners' requests, often values indirectness, deference, and other face-saving politeness strategies. Ultimately, this pervasive mismatch between the curriculum and lived reality has a tangible impact on motivation—a challenge highlighted by Sadaoui (2019) in a study on Algerian university students—and underscores the need for teacher education that empowers instructors to become skilled adapters, as advocated by Sellaouti (2017).

2.4 The Rising Status of English and the CEIL's Central Role

The imperative to develop a relevant English pedagogy is further amplified by the language's shifting status. Historically overshadowed by French, English is increasingly seen as the language of global science, technology, and upward mobility. Indeed, this national reorientation is reflected in recent governmental policies promoting English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in higher education. This strategic shift, in turn, places an immense responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the intensive language teaching centers (CEILs) at Algerian universities. As such, they are no longer peripheral support services but are now central to the success of this national ambition.

However, a successful EMI policy requires far more than basic linguistic proficiency. Instead, it demands a pedagogy that builds learners' confidence to use English for complex academic and professional tasks—to write research, participate in seminars, and engage with international

scholarship. Clearly, a generic General English curriculum, with its focus on simple social transactions, is profoundly insufficient to meet this strategic goal. The framework proposed in this paper, therefore, is not merely a pedagogical preference; it is a necessary and urgent response designed to equip CEILs with the specific tools needed to fulfill their new, critical role in Algeria's evolving educational landscape.

3. Constructing the Pedagogical Framework: A Model for Appropriation

This section constructs a practical, culturally responsive pedagogical framework designed specifically for a General English program in an Algerian CEIL. To be precise, the framework is built on four foundational principles and is operationalized through three core components.

3.1 The Four Pillars: Guiding Principles of the Framework

Our framework does not float on abstract ideals. Rather, it rests on four concrete pillars that guide every pedagogical choice.

- **Contextualization:** This principle moves beyond simply using local place names. Instead, it asserts that all learning must be situated within the learners' sociocultural world. Indeed, this idea is deeply rooted in sociocultural theories of learning, which argue that knowledge is not an abstract entity but is co-constructed through social interaction within a specific context (Vygotsky, 1978). This means, in practice, that themes, tasks, and materials should reflect the values, social structures, and authentic communicative challenges that learners face. By grounding the curriculum in what Lave and Wenger (1991) term a 'situated learning' experience, we make the language immediately relevant and applicable to learners' lives, which in turn boosts motivation and investment.
- **Plurilingualism**: Our students enter the classroom as expert plurilingual communicators. This principle, which aligns with the CEFR's (2020) new focus on plurilingual competence, treats the learner's entire linguistic repertoire as an asset. Specifically, by drawing on the work of scholars like García and Baker (2014) on translanguaging, it views the strategic use of Arabic, French, or Tamazight not as "interference," but as a natural and effective cognitive strategy for scaffolding new learning, brainstorming complex ideas, and fostering a collaborative and inclusive classroom environment.
- **Pragmatic Authenticity**: This principle demands that we teach language as it is actually used for social purposes within the community. In other words, it means moving beyond decontextualized grammar rules to focus on pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately in different social situations. This concept, foundational to communicative language teaching for decades, emphasizes that knowing a language involves more than just grammatical accuracy; it also requires an understanding of social context, a principle first powerfully articulated by sociolinguists like Hymes (1972) and later developed into influential pedagogical models (Canale & Swain, 1980). Therefore, classroom tasks must reflect real-world local communication priorities, teaching the

nuances of politeness, directness, and register—skills that are often more critical for communicative success than perfect grammatical accuracy.

- **Interculturality**: The goal of this framework is not to create imitation native speakers, but instead to cultivate confident intercultural mediators. This aligns with Byram's (2009) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, where the aim is to develop learners who can critically reflect on their own culture (savoir s'engager), understand and engage with other cultures with attitudes of openness and curiosity (savoir être), and skillfully mediate between them. Ultimately, this shifts the focus from assimilation to the development of a critical cultural consciousness.

It is important to acknowledge, of course, that "Algerian culture" is not monolithic. The cultural cues used in this framework represent widely understood social scripts, intended as a foundation for discussion and critical comparison, rather than a prescriptive definition of a singular identity.

3.2 Component 1: Reimagining the Syllabus

The first practical step we take is to overhaul the syllabus. Specifically, we replace standard, disconnected "Units" with integrated, thematic "Modules." This transformation is so fundamental, in fact, that it is reflected even in our terminology. For clarity, we use 'Unit' to describe the standard approach, reflecting its common usage in textbooks where content is often presented as discrete blocks focused on specific grammar points. In contrast, we use 'Module' for our framework to signify a more holistic and integrated learning experience where all activities are thematically connected. As a result, this shift transforms the curriculum from a checklist into a meaningful journey, as the following comparison illustrates:

Standard Generic Syllabus (B1 Level) Appropriated Thematic Syllabus (B1 Level)

Unit 2: Food and Restaurants Module 2: The Art of Algerian Hospitality

Unit 3: Travel and Holidays Module 3: Algeria in the World

3.3 Component 2: Breathing Life into Learning—Culturally Grounded Task Design

The framework's power is best demonstrated by transforming classroom tasks from generic scenarios into authentic cultural practices. To illustrate this principle, let's examine two direct comparisons.

Example A: The Problem-Solving Scenario

The Generic Task:

"Role-play a situation in a clothing store. You bought a shirt yesterday, and discovered a tear in the sleeve. Go to the manager, state the problem directly, and ask for a full refund."

Here, the focus is on direct complaints and transactional efficiency.

The underlying assumption is that the consumer-provider relationship is purely functional.

The Culturally Appropriated Task:

"Role-play a conversation in a local shop where you are a known customer. First, greet the shop owner properly (e.g., 'Salam alaikum, wash rak khouya'). After establishing rapport, gently introduce the problem ('I have a small issue...'). Discuss options to find a respectful solution."

In contrast, the focus shifts to relational language, politeness formulas, honorifics, and collaborative negotiation.

The assumption, therefore, is that maintaining a good social relationship (a sense of brotherhood or o'khuwa) is paramount.

Example B: The Personal Introduction Scenario

The Generic Task:

"Introduce yourself to the class. Tell us your name, your hobby, and what you did last weekend."

The linguistic focus here is on the simple past tense and high-frequency vocabulary.

The cultural assumption is that identity is defined primarily by individual activities.

The Culturally Appropriated Task:

"Introduce yourself by explaining the meaning or origin of your family name. Tell us something about the region your family comes from and a tradition that is important to you."

Conversely, the focus is on descriptive language, expressing connections, and explaining cultural significance.

The assumption, in this case, is that identity is deeply connected to family, heritage, and place. This task, consequently, allows learners to invest their personal and collective identities in the act of communicating in English.

3.4 Component 3: Redefining Success—An Adapted Assessment Model

If we change what we teach, then we must also change what we measure. For this reason, our model is completed by an adapted assessment approach, centered on portfolio work and a rubric that makes cultural competence visible and valuable through a dedicated criterion for "Sociocultural & Pragmatic Competence."

To make this concrete, let's consider the assessment of the B1-level shop scenario. An instructor using our rubric would, for instance, look for the following specific evidence:

Excellent Performance (5/5): The student initiates with a full, appropriate greeting ("Salam alaikum, wash ahwalkum, labas?"). Following this, they build rapport before introducing the problem indirectly ("I have a small issue..."). Furthermore, they use softeners and honorifics consistently. Overall, their tone is respectful and maintains the social relationship.

Satisfactory Performance (3/5): The student greets the owner but perhaps too simply ("Hello"). They then state the problem more directly than is ideal, but politely ("This has a problem"). In this case, the core message is clear, but the social grace is limited.

Needs Improvement (1-2/5): The student begins by immediately stating the problem, thus skipping the greeting ritual ("Excuse me, this is broken"). Their request is a direct demand. Consequently, the interaction feels blunt and transactional, ignoring the local context.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The pedagogical framework we have constructed in this paper offers a clear and principled pathway for resolving the inherent tension between the global CEFR and the local realities of the Algerian CEIL. Its primary contribution is not merely to suggest adaptation, but rather to provide a systematic model for it. Specifically, by systematically integrating locally resonant themes in the syllabus, grounding communicative tasks in authentic cultural practices, and aligning assessment with sociolinguistic competence, the framework moves Culturally Responsive Pedagogy from a theoretical ideal into a tangible, classroom-based praxis. More profoundly, the success of this approach can be understood through the theoretical lens of Norton's (2013) concept of investment. That is to say, the framework operates on a deeper level than simple motivation; it seeks to increase a learner's investment in English by making the language directly relevant to their social and personal worlds. By aligning tasks with their sociocultural realities, learners are consequently better able to invest in their English language identities. This is a crucial distinction: they are no longer just learning a foreign code to communicate about generic topics, but are instead actively using a global language as a tool for the articulation of their own identity, heritage, and aspirations. In the end, this process empowers them to claim ownership of the language and to begin developing an authentic Algerian voice in English, which is the ultimate goal of any truly effective and equitable language education.

4.1. Anticipating Challenges and Reframing Opportunities

Of course, it is prudent to address potential counter-arguments. A primary concern might be that this framework is too local in its focus, thereby failing to prepare learners for global communication. However, we contend that this is a false dichotomy. Intercultural competence, as theorists like Byram (2009) have shown, begins with a deep and critical awareness of one's own culture. Therefore, by building communicative confidence from a secure cultural base, our framework better equips learners for authentic global engagement, as cultural mediators rather than cultural mimics.

Another valid concern is the demand placed on teachers. Indeed, we acknowledge that this framework requires a profound shift in professional identity, from a technician delivering pre-packaged content to a reflective practitioner and curriculum co-creator. For this reason, supporting this transition requires more than one-off workshops; it necessitates the cultivation of

professional 'communities of practice' within the CEIL, where instructors can collaboratively develop materials and share pedagogical strategies.

4.2. Implications and Future Directions

Looking ahead, we believe the logical next step is empirical validation. Rather than a simple experiment, a Collaborative Action Research (CAR) project would be the most appropriate methodology, empowering local educators as co-researchers. To support this, we also recommend the creation of a "Culturally Responsive Teacher's Toolkit" for the CEIL.

Ultimately, this framework represents a form of pedagogical praxis aligned with a decolonial turn in applied linguistics. This intellectual movement seeks to challenge the colonial legacy in language education, which has long privileged the linguistic norms and knowledge systems of the Global North. By centering Algerian sociolinguistic realities and valuing learners' full plurilingual identities, this framework thus contributes to a more equitable and just approach to teaching English. It is an argument for an educational system that upholds the linguistic and cultural rights of learners, ensuring that the acquisition of a global language serves as a tool for empowerment, not erasure.

In conclusion, in this paper, we have designed a robust framework for appropriating the CE-FR in Algeria, one that aims to help students share their unique Algerian voice with confidence and pride on the global stage.

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