

# Linking assessments to international frameworks of language proficiency: the Common European Framework of Reference

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## Introduction

Cambridge ESOL, the exam board within Cambridge Assessment which provides English language proficiency tests to 3.5 million candidates a year worldwide, uses the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as an essential element of how we define and interpret exam levels. Many in the UK who are familiar with UK language qualifications may still be unfamiliar with the CEFR, because most of these qualifications pay little attention to proficiency – how well a GCSE grade C candidate can actually communicate in French, for example, or whether this is comparable with the same grade in German. The issues of comparability which the CEFR addresses are thus effectively different in kind from those that occupy schools exams in the UK, even if the comparisons made – over time, or across subjects – sound on the face of it similar. This article offers a brief introduction to the CEFR for those unfamiliar with it.

Given its remarkable rise to prominence as an instrument of language policy within Europe, the CEFR has acquired detractors as well as advocates, the former painting it as a methodologically outdated, bureaucratic menace. Of those more positively disposed, some see it as a closed system, while others stress its open and unfinished nature. This article takes the latter view. It discusses the nature of constructing a link to the CEFR, and makes the case that extending the scope of the present framework to deal effectively with many linguistically complex contexts of learning is both necessary and possible.

## An introduction to the CEFR

Frameworks for language proficiency can take many forms and operate on many levels. The one which this article focuses on is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which has become uniquely influential in a European context, as well as beyond Europe. What exactly is the CEFR? At one level, it is a book (Council of Europe, 2001), though one which probably few people read from cover to cover, and many misunderstand. The book is complemented by some additional material on the Council of Europe website. At another level the CEFR can be seen as a major ongoing project, an area of activity which is focusing the efforts, coordinated or uncoordinated, of many language specialists across Europe and beyond: policy makers, testing bodies, curriculum designers and teachers.

For readers unfamiliar with the CEFR it is worth outlining its distinctive features:

- It is a *proficiency* framework, with quite different aims to the currently-in-development European Qualifications Framework (EQF), whose purpose is to make national qualifications more readable across Europe. Generally, qualifications frameworks need not relate strongly to language proficiency frameworks.
- It is comprehensive in scope: as its title states, it is a framework for learning, teaching and assessment.
- It is a framework for *all* European languages (and has been applied to many non-European languages).
- Its aim is to support language learning, within the Council of Europe's general remit to promote communication, exchange and intercultural awareness within Europe.
- It is *not* an assessment system, something which frustrates those who expect to make easy comparisons with test-linked scales such as the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Oral Proficiency Interview.
- It has no direct mandate, because neither the Council of Europe, who produced it, nor the European Commission, which has adopted it as an instrument of policy, has any direct authority over education policy in European member countries. However, many countries do reference it explicitly in teaching and assessment policy.

The CEFR is in fact two kinds of framework – a conceptual one, and a set of reference levels.

Conceptually, the CEFR offers a comprehensive discussion of the many ways in which contexts of learning differ. Every context of learning is unique, having its own aims and objectives, reflecting the purposes for which a language is learned, the skills to be emphasised, the teaching methodology adopted, the place of the language within a wider languages curriculum, and so on. The CEFR lays out the range of choices which must be made. This is its first purpose.

The CEFR's second purpose is to provide a set of reference proficiency levels. It claims that *despite* the differences between contexts of language learning it is possible and useful to compare them in terms of level. The levels are offered as a neutral point to which any specific context of learning can be referred. The levels are illustrated by a large number of scales: the summary table below shows the *Common Reference Levels: global scale* (Council of Europe, 2001:24).

There is no doubt that since its publication in 2001 the CEFR has acquired great prominence in Europe and beyond, particularly as an instrument of language policy, for defining learning objectives and assessing outcomes. For language testing organisations with an international market, linking their exam levels to the CEFR and providing evidence for their claims has become almost essential.

## Common Reference Levels: global scale

<b>Proficient user</b>	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
<b>Independent user</b>	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
<b>Basic user</b>	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

## The CEFR proficiency levels

Where do the CEFR proficiency levels come from? Taylor and Jones (2006) provide the following account. The levels formalise conceptual levels with which English Language Teaching (schools, teachers and publishers) had operated for some years – with familiar labels such as ‘intermediate’ or ‘advanced’. North, one of the CEFR’s authors, confirms its origins in traditional English Language Teaching levels: “the CEFR levels did not suddenly appear from nowhere.” (North, 2006:8). North outlines the gradual emergence of the concept of levels, referring to the Cambridge Proficiency and the First Certificate exams, now associated with C2 and B2, as well as the Council of Europe-sponsored Threshold and Waystage learning objectives, first published in the 1970s as defining useful levels of language competence now associated with B1 and A2. According to North, “The first time all these concepts were described as a possible set of ‘Council of Europe levels’ was in a presentation by David Wilkins (author of ‘The Functional Approach’) at the 1977 Ludwighaven Symposium.”

What this account suggests is that the CEFR levels reflect an existing reality of some kind inherent in large populations of language learners. These learners progress through a series of stages in their learning career, each stage supported by appropriate courses, coursebooks and tests, which spring up as needed around each language. The levels are as they are because they reflect a progression of steps which are sufficiently accessible as learning targets but sufficiently distinct as learning achievements (Jones, 2005). They have developed in an organic way in response to demand, and in this sense it is not unreasonable to refer to them as ‘natural’ (North, 2006:8).

At the same time there is clearly a conventional element to the levels. Each educational context, and each widely-learned language, may have developed well-embedded understandings of levels (what is intended by ‘intermediate’ or ‘advanced’, for example), and accreditation systems with well-embedded standards.

Thus it seems inevitable that particular contexts or particular studied languages will tend to refer the CEFR level descriptors to somewhat different realities, and in consequence interpret them differently.

A common understanding of levels is clearly a goal worth pursuing, within education, for setting objectives and comparing performance with other contexts, and beyond education, for example in matching language competence to jobs.

However, given the nature of the CEFR there are currently no ways of enforcing a common understanding of levels, and as will be discussed below, it is by no means clear that enforcement is desirable, even if possible. What we might expect to happen is a gradual convergence of use across countries and languages, informed by authoritative points of reference. These will of necessity arise from studies with an explicitly multilingual focus.

A further issue is the adequacy of the CEFR’s conception of proficiency for the range of contexts which we might wish to relate to it. The CEFR states explicitly that it is a framework for foreign language learning. However, foreign language learning is but one aspect of language education policy, and many educational contexts are characterised by considerable complexity. Language is an object of study but also the medium (whether as a first, second or foreign language) through which other subjects are studied. Increasingly, language testers are engaging in educational contexts demanding a single conceptual framework that encompasses this complexity. Another project of the Council of Europe Languages Policy Division, initiated after the completion of the CEFR, is the *Platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education* (also called the Languages of Schooling project). This group has avoided the term ‘framework’, and any notion of reference levels, indicating a concern with educational and social values rather than empirical scaling of proficiency. None the less, the issues which engage this group clearly complement those addressed by the CEFR, and point directions in which it might be extended. I will return to this below.

## Is linking to the CEFR worthwhile?

Let us agree that the creation of common standards relating to the CEFR’s reference levels is an aim worth pursuing. As stated above, this is in the intention of its authors the secondary purpose of the CEFR, its primary purpose being to offer a comprehensive, non-prescriptive presentation of the myriad options teachers and course designers face when deciding what to teach and how to teach it. It invites reflection.

As the authors state (Council of Europe, 2001:1) "We have not set out to tell people what to do or how to do it".

This openness, however, does not imply an absence of policy, and we should consider whether by buying into the CEFR we in some way risk adopting a policy which limits or misdirects the development of our approach to language education.

The CEFR refers to Council of Europe statements of policy which emphasise the satisfaction of learners' "communicative needs" including dealing with the business of everyday life, exchanging information and ideas, and achieving a wider and deeper intercultural understanding. This is to be achieved by "basing language teaching and learning on the needs, motivations, characteristics and resources of learners", and "defining worthwhile and realistic objectives as explicitly as possible" (p.3). This conveys the CEFR's basic communicative, action-oriented approach.

Some have interpreted the CEFR's approach as outdated. McNamara and Roever (2006, p.212) are typical when they criticise "the fundamental underlying construct of the assessment [sic], a 1970's notional/functionalism that was given its clearest expression in the work of Van Ek and Trim". The criticism is understandable, given the way readers are continually prompted to "consider and where appropriate state" their choices with respect to content, particularly throughout chapters four and five – *Language use and the language learner; The learner's competences* – which is where the descriptor scales appear. The apparent notional/functional emphasis thus partly results from the unintended prominence of the descriptor scales in most readers' understanding of the CEFR. In fact, the prompts in chapter 6 – *Language learning and teaching* – and the remaining chapters are almost entirely methodological in focus: what assumptions users make about the process of learning; which of a list of general approaches they use; what they take to be the relative roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners, and so on. These little-read invitations to methodological reflection allow us to see the CEFR as more open than it is generally given credit for.

The CEFR's approach is broad and should be coherent with the aims of most school language learning. It leaves scope for a range of implementations.

Furthermore, the simple notion of orienting language learning towards a proficiency framework is itself of great potential value. This, at least, was the view of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry (Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000; Nuffield Languages Programme, 2002), which criticised existing UK language qualifications as being bad for learning and "confusing and uninformative about the levels of competence they represented" (idem: 8). They regretted that for the most part, "beyond 14, student attainment in languages is mainly related to examination targets, and not to performance criteria in 'can do' terms" (idem: 9). The Inquiry's conclusion was that a new assessment framework should be made available based on graduated and meaningful proficiency levels. The CEFR was cited as a model.

The Inquiry's findings helped define the National Languages Strategy, launched in 2001 in the context of a deepening crisis in UK foreign language learning. A proficiency framework was defined called the *Languages Ladder* which was broadly comparable to the CEFR. *Asset Languages* was the name given to the corresponding assessment framework, developed by Cambridge Assessment for the Department of Education (then the DFES), building on an approach to construct definition, item writing and scale construction developed by Cambridge ESOL over many years of testing English as a foreign language.

The Asset Languages framework is complex, comprising 25 languages,

four skills, six levels, and a degree of differentiation of age groups (as a lifelong learning framework it encompasses both children and adults). The empirical construction of this CEFR-linked framework provides a case study on the theoretical and practical challenges involved in such a multilingual enterprise (Jones, 2005; Jones, Ashton and Walker, 2010).

Beyond the technical challenges, the Asset Languages story also illustrates the practical challenge of introducing a proficiency-focused language exam into an educational system more accustomed to interpreting performance simply in terms of exam grades. Clearly, linking assessments to the CEFR will impact positively on language learning to the extent that the goals of testing and teaching are aligned (Jones, 2009).

There are critics of the CEFR who see it as a clear force for evil, a tool of authority and control – "manipulated unthinkingly by juggernaut-like centralizing institutions" (Davies, 2008:438, cited by Fulcher, 2008:21). Consider, for example, this recent recommendation by the Council of Ministers (Council of Europe, 2008b), which calls on countries to make reference to the CEFR, and specifically in relation to assessment, to:

*ensure that all tests, examinations and assessment procedures leading to officially recognised language qualifications take full account of the relevant aspects of language use and language competences as set out in the CEFR, that they are conducted in accordance with internationally recognised principles of good practice and quality management, and that the procedures to relate these tests and examinations to the common reference levels (A1–C2) of the CEFR are carried out in a reliable and transparent manner.*

Such statements could certainly be seen as conducive to a bureaucratised adoption of the CEFR, notwithstanding the benign intention of its authors. As Trim, one of those authors, concedes: "there will always be people who are trying to use it as an instrument of power" (Saville, 2005: 282).

Language assessment providers should of course be accountable for the quality of their exams. But how should this be done? Some would see this as a process which can and should be standardised, and even policed by some suitably-instituted authority (Alderson, 2007: 662). A basis for such standardisation might be seen in the *Manual for relating language examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* (Council of Europe, 2008a), which together with an extensive reference supplement and various further materials offers practical instructions. Should this be the core of an essentially regulatory and bureaucratic process?

The Council of Europe has rejected the suggestion of fulfilling a policing role, and the authors of the Manual themselves disclaim the idea that it defines a necessary and sufficient process.

## The nature of linking to the CEFR

The main problem with understanding the issue as one of regulation or standardisation is that it seems to require, and would militate in the direction of, a closed, static system rather than an open and developing one. The construction of a comprehensive language proficiency framework must be seen as a work in progress, still needing much work to be done. This is a creative process because there are many contexts of learning that might usefully be linked to the CEFR, but which are not currently well described by the CEFR.

So it is the context which is critical. Jones and Saville (2009:54–5) put it thus:

*... some people speak of applying the CEFR to some context, as a hammer gets applied to a nail. We should speak rather of referring a context to the CEFR. The transitivity is the other way round. The argument for an alignment is to be constructed, the basis of comparison to be established. It is the specific context which determines the final meaning of the claim. By engaging with the process in this way we put the CEFR in its correct place as a point of reference, and also contribute to its future evolution.*

The CEFR levels are illustrated by a large number of descriptor scales describing activities (*addressing audiences; reports and essays*) and competences (*vocabulary control; grammatical accuracy*). We should look critically at these. They aim to be *context-free* but *context-relevant*, that is, relatable to or translatable into each and every relevant context (Council of Europe, 2001:21). A framework of reference should describe no specific context of language learning, but be framed in terms which allow widely differing contexts to find common points of reference, and implicitly, of comparison. This is easier said than done. A great virtue of the descriptor scales in the body of the CEFR is that they were developed through an empirical study (North, 2000); but this also makes them specific to the context of that study, which most closely resembles a standard language school setting. School contexts involving young children, or with instruction through the medium of a foreign language, for example, might require quite different description.

Moreover, despite the use of the term 'illustrative', it is clear that the scales function as *definitions* of the reference levels, in the way they are selected from to compile the global descriptor scales, or in a discussion of the salient features of the levels, where each level is epitomised through a compilation of selected descriptors (Council of Europe, 2001: 3.6). The description seems complete: it is hard to imagine how a particular context of learning could be *differently* characterised.

Milanovic (2009) points out that in an earlier draft of the CEFR the illustrative descriptors were included in an appendix, a layout which "visibly reinforced the different status and function of the general *reference levels* and more specific *illustrative scales*." He criticises the 'overly prescriptive' way in which the illustrative scales have come to be used, citing the earlier draft, in which it is acknowledged that:

*The establishment of a set of common reference points in no way limits how different sectors in different pedagogic cultures may choose to organise or describe their system of levels and modules. It is also **to be expected that the precise formulation of the set of common reference points, the wording of the descriptors, will develop over time as the experience of member states and of institutions with related expertise is incorporated into the description.***  
(Council of Europe, 1998:131; emphasis added)

So each context, if sufficiently distinct, may need its own illustration.

We should also be cautious of characterising levels and progression solely in terms of behavioural outcomes illustrated by can-do descriptors. The CEFR scales tend to emphasise these, because as the authors state, being observable, such language activities provide "a convenient basis for the scaling of language ability" (Council of Europe, 2001:57). Weir (2005) criticises the absence of a theoretical model of cognitive development, without which, he argues, the CEFR does not equip testers to defend the validity or comparability of their tests.

## Extending the CEFR framework

What range of contexts can the CEFR encompass? As Coste, one of the CEFR's authors has said, contextual uses can take "various forms, apply on different levels, have different aims, and involve different types of player". In his view: "All of these many contextual applications are legitimate and meaningful but, just as the Framework itself offers a range of (as it were) built-in options, so some of the contextual applications exploit it more fully, while others extend or transcend it." (Coste 2007).

Relating contexts to the CEFR inevitably leads us to extend or transcend it. I have already mentioned contexts which are not well described by the present CEFR even within its stated remit as a framework for foreign languages:

- Young children, that is, situations where what learners can do is defined both by language proficiency and cognitive stage.
- CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) situations, where the content of a school subject is taught through the medium of the language being studied.

We can easily see the current CEFR as an instance of a more general framework, which happens to be parameterised and illustrated for the case of foreign language learning in certain contexts. More parameters could be added where needed, extending the framework to other contexts without changing its relevance or meaning in contexts which it already encompasses. As Cambridge ESOL engages increasingly with linguistically complex educational contexts the need for such an extended framework becomes increasingly evident, and it is fairly clear in what respects the CEFR needs extending. Additional dimensions to be developed include:

- Cognitive development stages, which are closely linked to all linguistic development, as well as to the process of concept formation, which from school age is largely mediated through language.
- Language as the medium of schooling, as distinct from language for social interaction. This is Cummin's distinction between Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), a high level of competence necessary for academic success, and Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), which can be more readily acquired through social interaction (Cummins, 1984). In the CEFR 'CALP' is very much the stuff of the C levels, but where a child is acquiring schooling through the medium of a second language, it is involved from the outset.
- Foreign Language (language for its own sake) as distinct from Second Language (language for some extrinsic purpose).
- Mother tongue language (MTL), which is characterised by the linguistic reflexes of a developed socio-cultural competence (culture in the 'broad' sense): a shared grasp of idiom, cultural allusion, folk wisdoms, etc. MTL speakers may master both *restricted* and *elaborated* codes (Bernstein, 1973).

Such an inclusive framework will enable a coherent approach to language education, recognising synergies between different language competences, and the different purposes of language use in an educational setting and in society. Interestingly, in a foreword to a newly-revised ALTE guide to assessment, Joe Shiels, Head of the Council of Europe Languages Policy Division, points to the Council's efforts to promote a "global approach to all languages in and for education" and

calls on language testers to address the "new challenges for curriculum development, teaching and assessment, not least that of assessing learners' proficiency in using their plurilingual and intercultural repertoire" (ALTE, 2011). Is this an invitation to extend the CEFR in the way outlined here? We need such an inclusive framework because learners with different language backgrounds co-exist and intersect within educational settings which direct their learning, and qualifications frameworks which compare and judge them, on their language, or other skills mediated by language. Beyond education, they share all the personal and professional opportunities that specific language skills afford.

An example will illustrate how the extended framework will make it easier to describe and compare different groups. According to the CEFR: "Level C2 ... is not intended to imply native-speaker or near native-speaker competence. What is intended is to characterise the degree of precision, appropriateness and ease with the language which typifies the speech of those who have been highly successful learners" (Council of Europe, 2001:36).

But some C2 descriptors of educated competences evidently denote levels of skill well beyond the capacity of many native speakers. So if native speakers are lower than C2 in some respects, in what respects might they be higher, and do we need a D level to describe them? As noted above, MTL speakers possess a socio-cultural competence (culture in the 'broad' sense) which few foreign language learners will acquire. They may master several codes, and naturally move between them.

By distinguishing these skills from the educated, CALP competences which native speakers may well not acquire, while foreign learners can, we can describe two distinct kinds of C-ness and avoid setting one above the other.

The heterogeneous nature of the dimensions in the extended framework do not prevent a coherent approach to defining levels. As the history of the development of the CEFR levels illustrates, the lowest identified level is the first point at which there is any significant competence to describe (where 'significant' represents a social value judgement). It is interesting that as far as ESOL goes, over the years that level has moved progressively lower: in 1913 it stood at C2, with the Cambridge Proficiency (CPE) exam. By 1939 it had moved down to B2 with what became First Certificate. Then in the 1970s it moved down through B1 (Threshold level) to A2 (Waystage). Currently it stands at A1, but there are already many contexts where A1 is being sub-divided to provide a lower first objective.

The highest identified level is the last one worth describing because it is observed sufficiently frequently in the relevant population to be useful; that is, we exclude exceptional cases of literary, intellectual or linguistic brilliance. For ESOL, the CPE exam still exemplifies the C2 level. Some people argue that the CEFR description of C2 is a higher level than CPE, but a counter-argument to that is: if C2 were any higher, it would not exist, because a sufficiently large group of learners seeking accreditation at that level would not exist. In this way the need for a D level is eliminated, unless we wish to reserve a category for the truly exceptional (interpretation, for example, might qualify, as a skill quite beyond ordinary language use).

## Conclusion

In this article I have introduced the CEFR and claimed that its reference levels have a kind of reality inherent in populations of learners; but that

this means that different educational contexts may tend to have different understandings of them. I made a positive case for linking assessment to the CEFR, but argued against the view that linking to the CEFR could or should be a formally standardised or policed process, and in favour of a conception of linking which treats each context of learning on its own terms, and in this way progressively enriches the CEFR and leads to improvements in its articulation. Finally, I made specific proposals for extending the CEFR so that those who have the requirement to work in linguistically complex contexts should be able to do so within a single coherent framework.

I have not gone into detail here regarding the technical and practical issues involved in aligning language tests or setting standards within a proficiency framework, even though Asset Languages (Jones, Ashton and Walker, 2010), and the currently in-progress European Survey on Language Competences ([www.surveylang.org](http://www.surveylang.org)), are two projects which have offered ample first-hand experience and a number of lessons. This is material for a different article.

I believe the aim of linking different languages and contexts to a common framework is a meaningful one which can bring benefits. The explicitly multilingual assessment context is the one which has most to offer the CEFR project, if our goal is to move progressively towards something like a common understanding of levels. Comparison across languages and contexts is vital. We should, as far as possible, base our comparisons on what we can discover about learners, rather than their performance on tests. Finally, I think that in constructing the argument that links a learning context to the CEFR we could focus with benefit on the partial, scaffolded nature of classroom language competence (Jones, 2009). There is formative potential in articulating the chain of activities and observations that link the inputs to learning to their intended outcomes in communication.

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