

# The CEFR: over-utilised or under-utilised?

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# The CEFR: over-utilised or under-utilised?

## OUTLINE

1. What purpose(s) is the CEFR designed to serve?
2. Has the CEFR's influence widened its original purpose?
3. Is the CEFR over-utilised or under-utilised?
4. Conclusions

# 1. WHAT PURPOSE(S) IS THE CEFR DESIGNED TO SERVE?

(or to give the framework document its full title)

The Common European Framework of  
Reference for Languages:  
Learning, teaching, assessment

# What is the CEFR?

*The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, abbreviated as CEFR, is a framework used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and, increasingly, in other countries.*

*The CEFR provides a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications and enables awarding bodies to define and articulate language proficiency levels and interpret language qualifications.*

# What is the purpose of the CEFR?

## *1. A Conceptual Framework*

- ▶ CEFR offers a comprehensive discussion of the many ways in which **contexts of learning differ**
- ▶ Every context of learning is unique

## *2. A Set of Reference Proficiency Levels*

- ▶ **Claim:** despite differences between contexts of language learning it is possible and useful to compare them in terms of level
- ▶ Levels are offered as a neutral point to which any specific context of learning can be referred

# How does the CEFR describe proficiency?

## *Vertical scale*

- ▶ Ascending series of ‘common reference levels’ for describing learners’ proficiency levels in the framework document (Chapter 3)
- ▶ But not meant to be an equal interval scale
- ▶ Different scales describe what students **can do** with language at each level
- ▶ Statements are **positive in nature** – what the learner can do

Type of language user	CEFR level
Proficient User	C2 – Mastery
	C1 – Effective operational proficiency
Independent User	B2 – Vantage
	B1 – Threshold
Basic User	A2 – Waystage
	A1 – Breakthrough

# Horizontal dimension

- ▶ Allows for clearer profiling of competencies. Takes into account:
  - ▶ **domains** - personal, public, occupational, educational
  - ▶ **situation within each domain** - location, events, objects/persons involved
  - ▶ **external conditions** - familiarity of speakers, time pressures
  - ▶ **mental context of learner/interlocutors** - intentions, line of thought, expectations, reflection, needs
  - ▶ **communication themes** - daily life, leisure, weather
  - ▶ **communication tasks and purposes** - writing letter of application
  - ▶ **aesthetic uses of language** - telling stories, writing poetry, use of literary texts

# CEFR scales and their idiosyncracies

- ▶ **'Global Scale'**
- ▶ **Illustrative scales:**
  - ▶ Communicative Activities
  - ▶ Communication Strategies
  - ▶ Working with Text
  - ▶ Communicative Language Competences
- ▶ **Scale idiosyncracies:**
  - ▶ Some subscales descriptors are not available at every level (A1, C2)
  - ▶ Some descriptors are short and focused, others are longer
  - ▶ For some levels, descriptors have been divided into two sections



# Is the CEFR without criticism? (certainly not!)

- ▶ Tool of authority and **control**: “manipulated unthinkingly by juggernaut-like centralizing institutions”  
Davies 2008, p.438, cited by Fulcher 2008, p.21
- ▶ Some reservations within testing community as to **comprehensiveness** of CEFR for practical **test development and comparability purposes**:
  - ▶ Weir (2005) - a more comprehensive/coherent/transparent form of CEFR would better serve language testing:
    - ▶ best seen as heuristic rather than prescriptive
    - ▶ can be refined/developed by language testers to better meet their needs
- ▶ Not designed to say with **precision** or **confidence** whether or not tests are comparable nor does it equip language testers to develop comparable tests
- ▶ Comparisons based on illustrative scales alone might prove to be misleading given insufficient attention paid in these scales to issues of **validity**

## 2. HAS THE CEFR'S INFLUENCE WIDENED ITS ORIGINAL PURPOSE?

# How has the CEFR widened its influence?

- ▶ beyond Europe?
- ▶ beyond foreign languages?
- ▶ beyond adults?

# Used beyond Europe?

- ▶ **YES** *‘Work is going on in many countries to extend and refine the CEFR with respect to different contexts **in and outside Europe** (e.g. in Japan) and for specific languages.’*  
Saville (2011)
  
- ▶ **YES** *‘Since the 2001 Council of Europe recommendation to adopt the CEFR, widespread promotion and application has contributed to the growth of CEFR and has influenced education systems in more than 40 countries. Countries **outside Europe**, like Japan, Canada, and New Zealand, have referred to CEFR as a framework reference for their foreign language learning, teaching and assessment. Therefore, CEFR is becoming the **international** language framework reference for language proficiency.’*  
Hsuan-Po Wang *et al* (2012)

# Used beyond foreign languages?

- ▶ **YES** 'language' levels:

Certain universities and UK Border Agency specify CEFR levels for a '**language**' (regardless of whether foreign, first, second)

- ▶ **YES** plurilingual proficiency:

Some trilingual education systems consider CEFR for L1, L2 and L3 language curricula, to differentiate levels and **compare** progress

# Appropriate beyond foreign languages?

- ▶ **YES** Aspects of CEFR levels are also **relevant** to L1 learners as they vary in communicative ability – e.g.
  - ▶ *‘formulate thoughts precisely’* (C2)
  - ▶ *‘coherent presentation’* (C2)
  - ▶ *‘elaborate descriptions...integrating sub-themes...appropriate conclusion’* (C2)
  - ▶ *‘spelling is accurate apart from occasional slips of the pen’* (C1)
  
- ▶ **NO** Aspects of CEFR levels are **irrelevant** to, or assumed for, L1 learners as they have rich language exposure to the L1 – e.g.
  - ▶ *Understanding interaction between native speakers illustrative scale*
  - ▶ *‘provided the other person talks slowly and clearly’* (A1)
  - ▶ *‘whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken’* (B1)
  - ▶ *‘noticeable mother tongue influence’* (B1)

# Is ‘foreign language’ clearly defined?

- ▶ Are ‘foreign language’, ‘second language’ and ‘first language’ sufficiently distinctive, or has their blurring led to wider use of CEFR?
  - ▶ What is meant by English as a Foreign Language (EFL)?
    - ▶ I choose to use English in an external sociolinguistic setting
  - ▶ What do we mean by English as a Second Language (E2L)?
    - ▶ I need to use English in an internal or international sociolinguistic setting
    - ▶ I learnt English second/ English is not my best / I use English less than L1
  - ▶ What do we mean by English as a First Language (E1L)?
    - ▶ I learnt English first/ I know English best/ I use English most
- ▶ **Grey area:** distinction between EFL and E2L: 1) growing status of English, 2) internet merging external vs internal boundaries, choice vs obligation
- ▶ **Grey area:** distinction between E2L and E1L: 1) E2L learners’ progression to E1L level, 2) certain skills more generic – e.g. essay writing

# Used beyond adults?

- ▶ **YES** In young learner **school** contexts, CEFR levels (as prerequisites or as outcomes) sometimes referred to in:
  - ▶ international schools, where subjects taught through L2 (English)
  - ▶ bilingual education programmes, where some subjects taught through L1 and some through L2
  - ▶ content and language integrated learning (CLIL), where ‘a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and the subject have a joint role’ (Marsh, 2002, p.58)



# Appropriate beyond adults?

- ▶ **YES** Many CEFR illustrative scales are also **relevant** to school contexts – e.g.:
  - ▶ *‘Reading for information and argument’*
  - ▶ *‘Overall written production’*
- ▶ **NO** Aspects of CEFR, especially higher levels, assume a more **adult** lifestyle – e.g.:
  - ▶ *‘professional purposes’, ‘field of specialisation’, ‘manuals’, ‘specialised articles’, ‘literary works’, ‘complex topics beyond his/her own field’, ‘specialised lectures’, ‘complex technical information’*
  - ▶ academic language seems to be the essence of the CEFR ‘B’/‘C’ levels (proficient user level), whereas in a second language school context, where a child is acquiring schooling through the L2, academic language is involved from the outset

# Why use the CEFR for other purposes?

- ▶ Whilst the CEFR provides a means for awarding bodies to articulate foreign language proficiency levels, there is **no other widely recognised language scale** which allows stakeholders to:
  - ▶ identify language levels and skills of **non-foreign language** qualifications
  - ▶ identify the **academic language levels and skills** needed to access school content subjects such as science and humanities subjects.
- ▶ In the absence of such a scale, the CEFR scale has been employed in **response to requests** – e.g.:
  - ▶ to meet certain university requirements
  - ▶ to meet immigration requirements of UK Border Agency
  - ▶ useful CEFR level to embark upon IGCSE programmes.

# 3. IS THE CEFR OVER-UTILISED OR UNDER-UTILISED?

Reflections on Cambridge International  
Examinations ('CIE') research

# The language context

- ▶ CIE assessments in wide range of subjects - prepared for and delivered through medium of English in a variety of educational contexts
  - ▶ assessments taken by many candidates whose first language is not necessarily English
- ▶ Recent survey (2013) of senior management, teaching and examinations staff in CIE schools worldwide identified:
  - ▶ language use in schools, including bilingual education programmes
  - ▶ language use by teachers
  - ▶ language use by learners
  - ▶ support in place and support needed.

# The language context

- ▶ Survey identified:
  - ▶ **three school categories:** English-medium, non-English-medium, bilingual
  - ▶ **subject teacher is perceived as the main provider of support to learners** for whom English is not their first language
    - ▶ **Are all content teachers language teachers?**
  - ▶ in some schools learners are selected for bilingual education programmes if they have sufficient English
    - ▶ **Does bilingual education require proficiency in the L2, or develop proficiency in the L2?**

# Two areas of research

- ▶ Despite caveats, aspects of CEFR descriptors still provide some basis from which to determine language levels and skills for the purpose of two CIE projects
  
- ▶ We will not go into these studies in depth, but reflect on some of the language issues
  - A. IGCSE E1L/E2L mapping
  
  - B. Academic language of content subjects (IGCSE)
    - Academic language of History IGCSE

# A. Mapping work CEFR/IGCSE E1L, E2L

## Why?

- ▶ Application for IGCSE E1L and E2L to be included in UKBA's list of approved English language tests (2011)

## How?

- ▶ CEFR Manual (2009) - methods of relating exams to the CEFR:
  - ▶ **Specification of the contents of the examination** (analysis of the syllabus, question papers, listening recordings and mark schemes)
  - ▶ **Standardisation of judgements** (analysis of candidate performances)

# A. Mapping work CEFR/IGCSE E1L, E2L

## Findings

- ▶ IGCSE English spans range of CEFR levels, depending on skill/grade:
  - ▶ E1L a higher range (B1-C2)
  - ▶ E2L a lower range (A2-C1)

## Questions

- ▶ What aspects of the CEFR are relevant to L1 and L2?
- ▶ What aspects of the CEFR are relevant to foreign language only?
- ▶ What aspects of L1/L2 are not tapped by CEFR?



# A. E1L Reflections

- ▶ **Examples of how CEFR was relevant for E1L**
  - ▶ Scales appropriate: overall reading comprehension, reading for information and argument, overall written production, creative writing, overall oral production, formal discussion, informal discussion
- ▶ **Examples of how CEFR was inappropriate for E1L**
  - ▶ E1L syllabus taken by candidates still at school, whereas higher levels of CEFR assume a more adult lifestyle
  - ▶ E1L syllabus designed for candidates who use English for their daily life. Therefore, skills tested are sometimes different from the skills described in scales
  - ▶ E1L syllabus has a combined speaking and listening assessment, with a different emphasis on listening skills, so high CEFR levels cannot be accessed for this skill
- ▶ **Examples of how CEFR could not tap E1L**
  - ▶ E1L syllabus presents a more 'literary' approach to command of English, in both reading and writing – e.g. discussing writer's craft, literary devices

# A. E2L Reflections

## ▶ Examples of how CEFR was relevant for E2L

- ▶ fits functional approach of CEFR
- ▶ Many scales appropriate: overall reading comprehension, reading for information and argument, overall written production, overall written interaction, overall oral production, formal discussion (meetings), overall listening comprehension, listening to audio media and recordings

## ▶ Examples of how CEFR was inappropriate for E2L

- ▶ E2L syllabus taken by candidates still at school, whereas higher levels of CEFR, assume a more adult lifestyle
- ▶ especially apparent in receptive skills, where E2L texts and scripts do not allow students to perform at high CEFR levels requiring:
  - ▶ ‘wide range of lengthy, complex texts... in social, professional or academic life... understanding extended speech on abstract and complex topics beyond his/her own field’

## B. Academic language of subjects

### Why?

- ▶ Use CEFR to identify academic language levels and skills needed to access school content subjects

### How?

- ▶ Focus of study: IGCSE History, Biology and Geography
  - ▶ 3 sessions: Nov, 2008; June 2009; June 2010
- ▶ Data for linguistic analysis included syllabuses, question papers, mark schemes and candidate performances
- ▶ Final data set comprised 47 History scripts, 74 Biology scripts and 48 Geography scripts

## B. Academic language of subjects

### Issues

- ▶ Relationship between content and language – content-compulsory vs content-compatible language
- ▶ BICS/social language and CALP/academic language – distinction intended to highlight to teachers the additional time needed to develop

## B. Academic language of subjects

### Findings

- ▶ Research identified **subject-specific** as well **generic** academic language skills of IGCSEs
- ▶ Research suggested **CEFR B2 useful to access IGCSE subjects, C1 added advantage**
- ▶ Minimum language levels necessary but not sufficient for success in a content subject

# B. Academic language of subjects

Language	Commonalities	Subject-specific differences
<b>LEXICAL</b> (content vocabulary)	<p>Subject-specific lexis for particular topics.</p> <p>General subject lexis to operate within subject.</p>	<p>History: '<b>Appropriate</b>' or '<b>Simple</b>' historical terminology required; subject-specific lexis tied to particular periods/events, mainly nouns and proper nouns</p> <p>Biology: <b>Very high</b> level of subject-specific lexis inextricably linked with the learning of the subject; some Latin terms</p> <p>Geography: <b>High</b> level of subject-specific lexis in most questions; collocations common</p>
<b>FUNCTIONAL RESOURCES</b> (task: language demand)	<p>Language functions indicated by command words and instructions.</p>	<p>History: <b>constructed</b> responses, from open questions, requiring in-depth source evaluation</p> <p>Biology: <b>precision</b>, limited range of command words with specific meaning</p> <p>Geography: <b>flexibility</b>, variety of question types requiring range of language skills, broad range of command words</p>
<b>STRUCTURAL RESOURCES</b>	<p>Passive forms, modal verbs, conditional structures, language of comparison, reason and result clauses, definition structures, language of exemplification</p>	<p>History and Geography: present and past tenses, cohesive devices</p> <p>Biology: mainly present tenses, imperatives, infinitives of purpose</p>

## B. Academic language of subjects

### Questions

- ▶ Could the suggested CEFR level B2 found from this study represent a **critical CALP level for this age group**?
- ▶ Could further analysis of the inherent academic language skills of content subjects in future help to adapt the CEFR for school contexts?

## B. Academic language of History IGCSE

### Why:

- ▶ To unpack the language demands of a ‘hard’ subject

### How:

- ▶ *Achieving in Content Through Language: Teacher Perceptions, Examiner Expectations and Student Performance in IGCSE History* (MA dissertation, Imam, 2010)
- ▶ Teacher perceptions:
  - ▶ questionnaire to English and History teachers at 30 (return, n=10) schools
- ▶ Examiner expectations:
  - ▶ questionnaire to senior examiner
  - ▶ syllabus, question paper and mark scheme analysis referring to CEFR
- ▶ Student performance:
  - ▶ syllabus pair data for 993 candidates taking IGCSE E2L and History
  - ▶ syllabus pair data for 3588 candidates taking IGCSE E1L and History
  - ▶ sample script analysis using Beacco framework to apply CEFR to function ‘evaluate’



## B. Academic language of History IGCSE

### Findings:

- ▶ Established a **language dependency** principle – performance in History related to performance in English
- ▶ Difference in History performance for ‘E1L’ and ‘E2L’ – the **CALP gap**?
- ▶ Exemplified content-compulsory vs content-compatible language
- ▶ Suggested CEFR B2 useful to access IGCSE History – ‘**threshold**’ scales (e.g. Linguistic Range, Linguistic Accuracy)
- ▶ Suggested CEFR C1 provides added advantage – ‘**influential**’ cognitive-academic scales (e.g. Pragmatic scales (Thematic Development, Propositional Precision, Coherence, Coherence and Cohesion), Overall Written Production, Integrated (Text Processing))

### Issue:

- ▶ Key history language skill (evaluating sources)

### Question:

- ▶ Could there be a new academic language scale for schools?

## 4. Conclusions

Our work has enabled us to begin to:

- ▶ expose aspects of the CEFR that are **applicable** to academic language in general (**under-utilised?**)
  - e.g. pragmatic scales such as ‘cohesion and coherence’
- ▶ identify aspects of the CEFR that are **not appropriate** for use beyond its original purpose (**over-utilised?**)
  - e.g. listening comprehension applied to L1
- ▶ identify aspects of academic language which are **not captured** by the CEFR (**useful but not sufficient?**)
  - e.g. discussing writer’s craft and literary devices in L1, evaluating sources in History

## 4. Conclusions

This confirms that the CEFR:

- ▶ has **far more to offer than users make of it** (Martyniuk , 2012, referring to Coste, 2007)
- ▶ is **not applicable to all contexts** without user intervention to adapt it to suit local purposes (Milanovic, 2009)
- ▶ is **comprehensive, but not exhaustive** (Council of Europe, 2008)

# QUESTION

IS THE CEFR OVER-UTILISED OR UNDER-UTILISED?

discuss ...

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