



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



Should the CEFR Illustrative Scales be localised to Malaysian Higher Education Standards? – A Conceptual Paper

Mohd. Khairul Abu Sufi and Mahani Stapa

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v10-i9/7882>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v10-i9/7882

Received: 27 June 2020, **Revised:** 15 July 2020, **Accepted:** 16 August 2020

Published Online: 28 September 2020

In-Text Citation: (Sufi, & Stapa, 2020)

To Cite this Article: Sufi, M. K. A., & Stapa, M. (2020). Should the CEFR Illustrative Scales be localised to Malaysian Higher Education Standards? – A Conceptual Paper. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. 10(9), 885-897.

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s)

Published by Human Resource Management Academic Research Society (www.hrmars.com)

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this license may be seen at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

Vol. 10, No. 9, 2020, Pg. 885 - 897

<http://hrmars.com/index.php/pages/detail/IJARBSS>

JOURNAL HOMEPAGE

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<http://hrmars.com/index.php/pages/detail/publication-ethics>



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



Should the CEFR Illustrative Scales be localised to Malaysian Higher Education Standards? – A Conceptual Paper

Mohd. Khairul Abu Sufi and Mahani Stapa

Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia,
Malaysia

Abstract

With the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in 2015, Malaysia experienced another English language-in-education policy reform at all levels of education. Its institution into the Malaysian scene has enthused much attention in the Malaysian educational setting at all levels. As is the case, the Malaysian higher education scene is not spared from the enthusiasm of its insertion into tertiary level. Such is because its timely introduction into Malaysian higher education has brought with it concerns that necessitate addressing; namely its European nature, and guiding framework. Furthermore, issues enveloping the CEFR illustrative scales development, and deciphering also present a case worthy of investigation. This conceptual paper attempts to evaluate the concerns based on reviews of related existing literature. The paper will conclude with a proposal of recommended research on CEFR illustrative scales at Malaysian higher education level.

Keywords: CEFR, Localisation, Malaysian Higher Education, Language in Education Policy.

Introduction

The education setting in Malaysia has always been an interesting scenario as it involves different mediums of instruction for schools that are categorised into different types. Although the British administration introduced English-medium schools during its colonisation period, Malaysia has metamorphosed into a nation that has a melting-pot of cultures and languages spoken by different races and people. As a result of the integration of different races and languages, being polyglot in nature, the instructional languages of Malaysia's current education system comprise of Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, and Tamil. Previously in 1968, as a result of the adjustment in medium of instruction, all national schools in Malaysia switched to the national language, Bahasa Malaysia as its main instructional medium in 1976 (Omar, 2016). Prior to this switch, Malaysia's medium of instruction was the English language. The final phase of the adjustment occurred in 1985 where all schools in the state of Sabah and Sarawak made the compulsory switch from English to Bahasa Malaysia.

Though Bahasa Malaysia was gazetted as being the main medium of instruction in Malaysia, the English language was not left behind nor forgotten, and its importance periodically resurfaced with different language policy shifts in Malaysia. To illustrate, while Bahasa Malaysia was chiefly the medium of instruction in the educational setting, Malaysian policymakers allowed the use of English for the teaching of Science and Mathematics in schools during the year 2003 onwards. However, the policy implementation took a twist when in 2019, the Malaysian government announced the annulment of the policy effective from the 2012 cohort. The annulment stemmed from the Malaysian government's realisation of the students' academic performance gap that existed between those residing in the interior of the nation versus those who reside in the urban areas. Additionally, tertiary level educational institutions were also allowed to offer science-based courses through the English language. This clearly emphasises on the importance of the English language to the nation. Realising its prominent role in education, policymakers realised the surmount importance of being proficient in the English language. Further language in education policies were made, and in 2015 a document expounding Malaysia's English language policy and initiatives was published. Dubbed *The Roadmap*, the document explicitly outlines the plans towards achieving greater proficiency of the English language for Malaysians studying in primary, secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary level education. In *The Roadmap* (2015), policymakers introduced the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It stipulates that CEFR is to be utilised as the benchmark of Malaysians' English language proficiency. As CEFR made its entrance into the Malaysian educational system, all English language textbooks in primary and secondary level education were replaced with textbooks that are aligned to CEFR. This association also influenced the alignment of the SPM and MUET examinations where results of the test takers English language proficiency will be banded against the descriptor of CEFR.

Concocted in Europe by the Council of Europe (COE), CEFR's history can be traced back to as early as 1991 where COE together with a Swiss research group embarked on the development of the initial CEFR framework (Council of Europe, 2020). The motivation behind the development of this common language framework stemmed from COE's realisation to unite Europe "by the adoption of common action in the cultural field" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 2). Additionally, the CEFR manual clearly explains that the developed descriptors are to be used as references towards the development of academic materials such as learning syllabuses and coursebooks, to name a few. Assessment wise, the CEFR illustrative scales claim to provide reference levels of one's language ability although the scales were developed from a collection of other high-stakes language assessment descriptors in the European region.

In the Malaysian context, the utilisation of CEFR was made clear in *The Roadmap* (2015) and a whole chapter was generously devoted to its introduction and adoption into the Malaysian educational scene. *The Roadmap* (2015) also explicates the different CEFR levels that Malaysian students are required to attain in every level of education they experience. For the case of tertiary level education, *The Roadmap* (2015) states that students are required to achieve CEFR B1 upon university entrance. Additionally, it was expounded that students of tertiary level education are required to reach a proficiency of CEFR B2/C1 upon graduation from higher education (*The Roadmap*, 2015). In attaining the required CEFR condition for university completion, *The Roadmap* implies that students' English language proficiency may need to be reassessed by the institution prior to their graduation.

Statement of Problem

It is without doubt that the CEFR's introduction into the Malaysian educational scene is timely as it boosts the nation's English language proficiency to an internationally acclaimed standard. This is done through the mapping of various national level English language examinations to the CEFR standards. By having the English language examination results aligned to the CEFR, the results of the English language examination will be streamlined to the CEFR criteria. This then affords international recognition of the students' English language proficiency. Furthermore, illustrative scales of CEFR is indisputably comprehensive. The framework has managed to encompass all language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) into its illustrative scales.

CEFR originates from Europe and its fundamentals were developed with the view, among others, to unite and acknowledge all European languages as equal to one another. As the development took into consideration the conditions of all European languages, the framework attests to the conventionality of languages in the European continent. Although the CEFR claims that its rudiments are suited for the usage of any language, contents of the CEFR do not make allowances for Englishes that are spoken outside the inner circle of Kachru's (1985) concentric circles of World English. Malaysia is situated in the outer circle and carries with it certain linguistic and syntactical features that may not seem as standards from the inner circle. Therefore, the illustrative scales would not be able to recognise unique features of other Englishes that exist outside the inner circle.

Whilst the commendations of CEFR utilisation in the Malaysian educational setting seems impressive in its nature, certain grey areas surface with the timely CEFR introduction. Such is especially obvious when one looks into the utilisation of the illustrative descriptive scales that have been published in the CEFR manual as many end users have been found to grapple with the utilisation of CEFR illustrative scales. For the case of Malaysian higher educational institutions, policy interpretations at the micro level may differ based on individual institutions since Malaysian higher educational institutions are self-autonomous. This is in contrast to primary and secondary level education as there is more concentration to policy implementation from the macro level and teaching and learning materials are streamlined at the national level. Therefore, implementors at tertiary level institutions may find it difficult to decipher CEFR illustrative scales for university students. This results to the interpretation of policies based on institutional understanding.

Additionally, the introduction of CEFR and its illustrative scales into the Malaysian educational system was meant to internationalise and also uplift the standard of the Malaysian English language proficiency, such as the result of Malaysian University English Test (MUET). In Malaysia, MUET is used to assess students' English language proficiency upon exiting secondary and post-secondary level education. The purpose of the testing was to ensure that secondary and post-secondary students possessed sufficient proficiency in the English language to negotiate tertiary level education. Therefore, MUET gained much importance to those who wish to further their studies at Malaysian institutions of higher education. Based on the 2015 Budget Speech (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2014), the MUET requirement for entry into public Malaysian universities was set for as low as Band 2 to a high of Band 5, depending on the course taken.

As MUET is being aligned to the CEFR for the first session of the 2021 examination, its descriptors have also been adapted to conform to the standards of CEFR (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019). Upon closer inspection, descriptors for all four language skills have been duly adjusted. The concerned four skills comprise listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, MUET is only applicable to Malaysian higher learning institutions that recognises MUET as an English

language qualification. For Malaysian public universities that organise their own in-house English language proficiency assessments, MUET only functions as an entry requirement to the institution. It is for this reason that descriptors are then individually developed to cater to individual institutional needs resulting to differences in language proficiency interpretation.

Purpose of Study

This conceptual paper aims to unravel the concerns surrounding the CEFR in the Malaysian higher education context by briefly exploring existing literature related to the:

1. “*Europeanness*” of CEFR
2. guiding principles of CEFR
3. decipherment of CEFR illustrative scales, and
4. modification of CEFR illustrative scales.

Literature Review

CEFR

The CEFR is acknowledged as a framework that is known to possess distinctive character of describing one level of language proficiency related to learning, teaching and evaluation. Its utilisation was predominant in the European continent but today, this language framework has made its introduction and usage in nations outside Europe. Globally, CEFR partakes a relatable role in the field of language learning and also its policy (Ito, 2020; Read, 2019). Additionally, CEFR is also the most researched language proficiency scale in the world (Hulstijn, Alderson, & Schoonen, 2010). In view of this, Malaysia is no exception and has adopted the framework since the publication of a document spelling out its English language reform called *The Roadmap* in 2015. As the language framework aids language planners universally, it has transformed itself as a significant tool towards establishing individuals’ language proficiency levels in areas or reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Taking a more action-oriented approach, the CEFR illustrative scales can be further divided into three divisions: scales that identifies one’s (1) receptive skills, (2) interactive skills, or (3) productive skills. Though the CEFR enfolds all language skills in its framework, CEFR’s development was based on the perspective of communicative language. However, it’s concentration also includes other language perspectives such as competencies in the sociolinguistic and pragmatic view of language. Moreover, the framework’s development also includes scales that define diverse language-related approaches.

Although CEFR was mainly designed as a reference framework for language learning and planning, CEFR is also extensively used to specify one’s language proficiency in many high-stakes language-based assessments around the world, such as IELTS, ILEC, ICFE, and BULATS to name a few. In fact, the CEFR illustrative scales has been said to be more influential than other parts of the framework (Little, 2006). The extensive usage of CEFR’s illustrative scales was also made vivid by Council of Europe (2001) where it was explicated that CEFR can be used for assessment purposed based on three spectrums: “(1) for the specification of the content...; 2) for stating the criteria to determine the attainment of a learning objective; and 3) for describing the levels of proficiency in existing tests and examinations...”(p.178). This being said, CEFR’s assimilation into many language assessments ensures a calibration of standards at a mutually accepted norm.

What is more vital to language planners and implementors worldwide is that the CEFR enables the deciphering of language proficiency levels that is mutually recognised around the globe and it has

become the norm of many language testers worldwide to align their language examinations to CEFR. This alignment has become imperative for language testers and examination boards worldwide as it assists language planners define language proficiency levels and decipher them into meaningful language credentials. To illustrate, students in Malaysia after having been assessed and awarded, for instance a CEFR B2 by an acclaimed Malaysian examination body like the Malaysian Examination Syndicate, will possess with them a document that profiles their language proficiency based on CEFR. As CEFR is a universal benchmark, the students are able to utilise this as proof of their language proficiency. For the case of Malaysia, currently only the English language examinations are aligned to the CEFR standards.

CEFR Illustrative Scales

In any language assessments, evaluation of a certain proficiency is usually performed with the aid of a scale or descriptor. In definition, a rating scale is composed of an amalgamation of different hierarchical levels, and each of these different levels (or bands) is typified by a descriptor responding to the achieved level of proficiency (Jones & Saville, 2008). With the combination of the rating scale and its descriptor, an operational definition of the claimed level is produced. Illustrative scales (or descriptors) developed in the CEFR encompass all four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. As stated earlier in this paper, the scales were developed in order to identify and categorise language ability to an individual. Structured in a 6-level hierarchy, the language ability levels are segregated into three broad subsections based on the level of proficiency: basic, independent, and proficient. Within these general subsections exist the proficiency levels that respond to the three broad divisions of proficiency. Table 2 provides a visual representation of the proficiency levels divisions.

Table 2. CEFR Common Reference Levels: global scale

Proficient	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.
Independent	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 & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic	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.

Even though the CEFR is an all-encompassing framework in the field of teaching, learning, and assessment, its illustrative scales have received more attention than other parts of the language framework. This exemplifies how important the illustrative scales have become to the users of the CEFR framework itself (Alderson, 2007; Foley, 2019; Little, 2006). With CEFR being recognised worldwide, its illustrative scales have provided users with a structure that is convenient to communicate an individual's progression of language ability(ies). In fact, Alderson (2007) explained that the widespread acknowledgement of the CEFR illustrative scales as a benchmark of one's language ability had elevated the status of the CEFR scales to become a valuable currency in areas pertaining to language education, curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, and teacher training. This

recognition became the motive for many high-stake examinations around the world to peg their assessment results to the CEFR hallmark. For instance, relevant authorities of the IELTS examination began researching since the 1990s on how to appropriately align its scoring band to that of CEFR (Papageorgiou, Tannenbaum, Bridgeman, & Cho, 2015). As a result, the IELTS test band descriptors are now aligned to the CEFR illustrative scales.

The Roadmap

The English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025 (known as The Roadmap) was developed by The English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC). In 2015, together with the Ministry of Education, The Roadmap was revealed to the nation after batteries of meetings towards its successful development. The Roadmap is also an indication of Malaysia's determination in bringing considerable transformations in the nation's English language proficiency. The development of this document was in response to the nation's decline in English language proficiency (Aziz & Uri, 2017). Therefore, the production of The Roadmap was to address the challenges confronted by young Malaysians in a world that is globalised and drastically changing, requiring them to be more proficient and effective in their English language communicative skills (Don & Abdullah, 2019). This is due to the fact that Malaysian policymakers realised that being proficient in the English language would help propel the nation to greater economic heights, and the English language proficiency of the young Malaysian needed to be buffed towards better economic and international realisation (Ahmad Afip, Hamid, & Renshaw, 2019). As the initiatives in The Roadmap run from 2015-2025, the document spells out a reform plan that progresses throughout the 10 years and all levels of education is taken into its consideration. This means that all Malaysians following the prescribed educational journey will benefit from the English language reform regardless of their level of education.

The Roadmap informs Malaysian policymakers and policy implementors of its intention to comprehensively utilise the CEFR in its plans to make Malaysians more proficient and effective communicators of the English language. The Roadmap dedicates an entire chapter towards the introduction and explanation of CEFR. After CEFR made its introduction to the Malaysian scene through The Roadmap, it was from this point onwards that the Malaysian educational system made necessary amendments and transformations towards its English language syllabus. Based on The Roadmap, specific CEFR bands were being targeted to specific levels of education to ensure a continuous progression of Malaysian students' English language ability. Table 1 explains the CEFR targets based on the level of education.

Table 1. Level of education and CEFR targets

Level of Education	CEFR Targets
Preschool	A1
Primary school	A2
Secondary school	B1/B2
Post-secondary	B2
University	B2/C1
Teacher education	C2

To ensure the success of The Roadmap, ELSQC monitors its implementation in the country and in 2017, ELSQC conducted a study on the implementation progress. Based on the study, Don and Abdullah (2019) explains that there were minor adjustments to The Roadmap and further changes are expected in the future. However, the public is not informed of these changes as yet.

Results and Discussion

“Europeanness” of CEFR

Hulstijn (2007) asserts that CEFR is remarkably instrumental in a number of European regions. He stresses that the framework has achieved to foster European plurilingualism through the design of syllabus, the planning of curriculum, and assessing language. In response, the success of CEFR in Europe is attributed to its developmental objectives since its aim is to recognise European languages as being at par with one another. Intrinsically, development of the CEFR and its illustrative scales were based on native speaker norms of the European languages (Barni, 2015; Barni & Salvati, 2017; McNamara, 2014). Conversely, a new version of the CEFR illustrative scales was developed in 2018 and claims to respond to conditions of L2 or foreign language (Council of Europe, 2018). For the Malaysian context, the CEFR is currently in place for matters relating to English language teaching and learning in schools, and tertiary level institutions. As English is L2 to many Malaysians, the provisions set forth in the 2018 amended CEFR illustrative scales may conform to the standards of English in Malaysia as a second, or even third language. However so, Malaysia is placed as being in the outer circle of Kachru’s (1995) concentric circles of English. Whilst stipulations of standard Malaysian English are accepted and acknowledged as another variety of World English, the CEFR illustrative scales do not pay tribute to standard Malaysian English that is proper and accepted as a local model. To ensure that accepted standard Malaysian English is taken into account and recognised, CEFR descriptors need to be adapted to conform to the standards of standard Malaysian English which is an accepted variation of World English.

Guiding Principles of CEFR

According to Little (2011), the designing of CEFR is of two-folds. First is to position learners in an assessment system that is criteria-based and used for evaluation purposes, and the second aim is to promote learner autonomy and self-evaluation. Correspondingly, the Council of Europe (2018) explicates, through the user manual, that the CEFR was originally designed as a framework to assist teaching, learning and assessing language related abilities. The manual then continues by reiterating that all provisions presented in the CEFR manual is meant to guide users and is in no way conclusive. The manual emphasises that the developers of the framework “have NOT set out to tell practitioners what to do, or how to do it” because they “are raising questions, not answering them” (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 26). As elucidated by CoE, the framework does not ordain how a user is to utilise the CEFR and therefore, it is evident that end users may accordingly use the framework through approaches that best fit their purpose. Therefore, as Malaysia has embarked on embracing the framework into the educational system, policymakers should also delve into the framework and suggest appropriate adaptations to meet the demands of the local context.

Decipherment of CEFR Illustrative Scales

The CEFR, although impressive, is without its shortcomings (Díez-Bedmar, 2018; Weir, 2005). To exemplify this, Weir explained that the published illustrative scales are built on

variables/performance conditions that are viewed as inadequate and uneven. This may pose complications for users of CEFR in Malaysia as the scales may need finetuning before being used in any assessment practices. In a similar vein, Díez-Bedmar asserts that the illustrative scales are problematic as it lacks explicit information concerning the language that is presumed at each level of the CEFR descriptor. Other research also asserts that the published scales do not come ready made (Hawkins & Filipović, 2012; North, 2014), while Coste (2007) expressed concerns that users of the framework may not have the motivation and drive towards the comprehension of the CEFR illustrative scales. He further adds that many users may resort to construe the CEFR scales as “a measuring instrument which can define proficiency levels exactly, calibrating them as precisely as the graduations on a medical thermometer” alongside “global, summary labels, signifying that an A2 or B2 learner has attained that level, across the board, in all the skills to which descriptors are attached” (p. 39). To elucidate this, Coste is concerned with users who are not given adequate guidance on CEFR as they may tend to overgeneralise an individual’s language proficiency rather than the aspects that any one assessment is attempting to evaluate.

A previous research conducted by Papagergiou (2010) aimed at exploring examiners’ responses in an examination standard-setting session using the CEFR illustrative scales. The research participants comprised of 12 expert judges of whom all are native speakers of the English language. In addition to being native speakers, all 12 participants also possessed with them a qualification in either the field of Teaching English to Speaker of Other Languages (TESOL) or Applied Linguistics. During the standard-setting session, the research participants informed that the CEFR illustrative scales were difficult to interpret since the language of the scales reflect “real life” language. Accordingly, the research participants also revealed that there exist inconsistencies in the wordings of the CEFR scales. For example, it was highlighted that there were concerns on the usage of the words “understand” and “follow”. The research explained that the judges were unable to ascertain whether “understand” was used interchangeably with “follow”. This disclosure affirms that there exist misunderstandings when using the CEFR illustrative scales at its face value. Such may be the case for Malaysia should users at the tertiary educational level not be given enough exposure to understand and interpret the CEFR based on a set of standards that have been mutually agreed among institutions. Therefore, it is pertinent to develop a set of illustrative scales where its descriptors are found to be mutually agreeable among all parties.

Modification of CEFR Illustrative Scales

Many literatures have shown that CEFR illustrative scales require adjustment based on individual or institutional needs (Berger, 2020; Díez-Bedmar, 2018; North, 2014). This is mainly because CEFR was only developed as a language framework consisting of guiding principles (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018). Therefore, it is pertinent for end users to comprehend that CEFR provides allowances for individual and institutional rectifications to ensure that CEFR meets needs of the institutions at the micro level. Lateral to the success of language planning, policies at the macro level can be implemented and carried out efficiently when planning at the micro and infra-micro level is effective (Chua, 2018). In the Malaysian perspective, higher educational institutions are usually left to interpret policies at the macro level based on the institution’s own understanding and prerogative (Ali, 2013). Therefore, the lack of unison among Malaysian institutions of higher education may result in heterogenous modifications of the CEFR illustrative scales. The consequence of such employment would result in the churning of different illustrative scales that conform to different institutional

needs. In mitigating this concern, Malaysian institutions of higher learning should develop CEFR illustrative scales based on the common and shared needs of all concerned institutions.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper aimed at unravelling the concerns that is of surmount importance to the introduction of CEFR into the Malaysian higher education scenario. In situating the context, a brief review of literature on CEFR and its implementation into the Malaysian education system was presented. The discussion revolved around four main issues regarding CEFR implementation: (1) “*Europeanness*” of the CEFR, (2) the guiding principles of the CEFR, (3) decipherment of the CEFR illustrative scales at tertiary level education, and (4) modification of the CEFR illustrative scales. Analyses of relevant literature based on these four spectrums were presented, and it was discovered that there is a need to amend the CEFR illustrative scales to suit the Malaysian higher education context. Therefore, based on the findings of this conceptual paper, it is recommended that research on adapting the CEFR illustrative scales to local higher education standards is undertaken for the productive skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In sum, it is pertinent that educators at Malaysian higher educational institution work in unanimity to scale down the CEFR descriptors to a level of standard that is acceptable to the English language settings at all Malaysian universities.

Acknowledgement

This is a self-funded study. No financial assistance was received towards the publication of this article.

Corresponding Author

Mohd. Khairul Abu Sufi

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia

Email: khairul.sufi@yahoo.com

References

- Afip, A. L., Hamid, M. O., & Renshaw, P. (2019). Common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR): insights into global policy borrowing in Malaysian higher education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 0*(0), 1–16.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2019.1578195>
- Alderson, J. C. (2007). The CEFR and the need for more research. *The Modern Language Journal, 91*(4), 659–663.
- Ali, N. L. (2013). A changing paradigm in language planning: English-medium instruction policy at the tertiary level in Malaysia. *Current Issues in Language Planning, 14*(1), 73–92.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2013.775543>
- Aziz, M. S. A., & Uri, N. F. M. (2017). CEFR in Malaysia: Current issues and challenges in the implementation of the framework. In *The 3rd International Conference on Language Testing and Assessment and the 5th British Council New Directions in Language Assessment Conference* (pp. 2–3).
- Barni, M. (2015). In the name of the CEFR: Individuals and standards. In B. Spolsky, O. Inbar-Lourie, & M. Tannenbaum (Eds.), *Challenges of language education and policy. Making space for people* (pp. 40–52). London: Routledge.
- Barni, M., & Salvati, L. (2017). The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). *Language*

- Testing and Assessment*, 1, 417–426. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02261-1_29
- Berger, A. (2020). Specifying Progression in Academic Speaking: A Keyword Analysis of CEFR-Based Proficiency Descriptors. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 17(1), 85–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2019.1689981>
- Chua, C. S. K. (2018). Introduction. Issues in language planning and policy: From global to local. In P. C. G. Lian, C. Chua, K. Taylor-Leech, & C. Williams (Eds.), *Un(intended) Language Planning in a Globalising World: Multiple Levels of Players at Work* (pp. 1–14). Warsaw: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Coste, D. (2007). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the development of language policies: Challenges and responsibilities (pp. 6–8). Strasbourg.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Strasbourg Cedex: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe. (2018). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*. Strasbourg Cedex: Council of Europe. Retrieved from www.coe.int/lang-cefr
- Council of Europe. (2020). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Retrieved from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/history>
- Díez-Bedmar, M. B. (2018). Fine-tuning descriptors for CEFR B1 level: Insights from learner corpora. *ELT Journal*, 72(2), 199–209. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx052>
- Don, Z. M., & Abdullah, M. H. (2019, May 22). The reform of English language education in Malaysia. *Free Malaysia Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2019/05/22/the-reform-of-english-language-education-in-malaysia/>
- Foley, J. A. (2019). Issues on Assessment using CEFR in the Region. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 12(2), 28–48.
- Hawkins, J., & Filipović, L. (2012). *Criteria features in L2 English: Specifying the reference levels of the common European framework*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hulstijn, J. H. (2007). The shaky ground beneath the CEFR: Quantitative and qualitative dimensions of language proficiency. *The Modern Language Journal*, (91), 662–666.
- Hulstijn, J. H., Alderson, J. C., & Schoonen, R. (2010). Developmental stages in second-language acquisition and levels of second-language proficiency: Are there links between them? In I. Bartning, M. Martin, & I. Vedder (Eds.), *Communicative proficiency and linguistic development: Intersections between SLA and language testing research Link* (pp. 11–20). European Second Language Association.
- Ito, H. (2020). Orthoepic competence descriptors in Japanese language education: CEFR levels B1 to C2. *Acta Linguistica Asiatica*, 10(1), 49–66. <https://doi.org/10.4312/ala.10.1.49-66>
- Jones, N., & Saville, N. (2008). Scales and frameworks. In Bernard Spolsky & F. M. Hult (Eds.), *The Handbook of Educational Linguistics* (pp. 495–509). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470694138.ch38>
- Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: the English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11–30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Little, D. (2006). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Content, purpose, origin, reception and impact. *Language Teaching*, 39(3), 167–190.

- <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444806003557>
- Little, D. (2011). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: A research agenda. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 381–393. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000097>
- Malaysian Examinations Council. (2019). *Malaysian university English test (MUET): Regulations and test specifications*. Malaysian Examinations Council. Retrieved from <http://portal.mpm.edu.my/documents/10156/3fd4da51-7768-4be2-ace5-5021ed73d9ad>
- McNamara, T. (2014). 30 Years on - evolution or revolution? *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 11(2), 226–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2014.895830>
- Ministry of Finance Malaysia. (2014). *Budget 2015: People's economy*.
- North, B. (2014). *The CEFR in practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Omar, A. H. (2016). Positioning languages in the Malaysian education system. In A. H. Omar (Ed.), *Languages in the Malaysian Education System* (pp. 1–30). London: Routledge.
- Papageorgiou, S. (2010). Investigating the decision-making process of standard setting participants. *Language Testing*, 27(2), 261–282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532209349472>
- Papageorgiou, S., Tannenbaum, R. J., Bridgeman, B., & Cho, Y. (2015). *The association between TOEFL iBT® test scores and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels*. ETS Research Memorandum No. RM-15-06. Princeton, NJ. Retrieved from <http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RM-15-06.pdf>
http://www.ets.org/research/policy_research_reports/publications/report/2015/jv
gf
- Read, J. (2019). The influence of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in the Asia-pacific region. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 12(1), 12–18.
- The Roadmap. (2015). *English language education reform in Malaysia: The roadmap 2015-2025*. (Z. M. Don, Ed.).
- Weir, C. J. (2005). Limitations of the Common European Framework for developing comparable examinations and tests. *Language Testing*, 22(3), 281–300. <https://doi.org/10.1191/0265532205lt309oa>