

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): Implications for Language Testing

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ABSTRACT

Language is infinite. This feature of language poses a challenge for an ESL teacher to gauge the proficiency level of ESL learners. As a matter of fact, what we test and how we test language learners' proficiency is always a complex conundrum. This makes language assessment a daunting task for an ESL teacher. This paper gives insights into fallacies of language assessment and provides strategies to make language assessment more objective, reliable, and uniform. The paper advocates the CEFR apparatus for language assessment. It is an internationally acclaimed framework for teaching and assessment, and all important examinations are mapped to the CEFR. The new approach of using the CEFR apparatus for language testing in this paper is highly pragmatic and attempts to make language testing a more standardised process. This proposed new approach to language assessment focuses on skills rather than just accuracy. It shifts the focus of language assessment from mere accuracy to comprehensive communicative competence of the ESL learners.

Keywords: CEFR, Evaluation, Language Assessment, Language Testing.

Introduction

Language assessment plays an essential role in second language learners' educational experience and learning outcomes. Assessment is an integral part of the teaching-learning process. Whether the assessment is used for a student's initial screening, placement, or progression in a language course, it always includes gathering, interpreting, and evaluating evidence of learning. Such information collected through the different assessment and evaluation tools allows educators to identify student needs and plan a course of action to address these needs, provides feedback about the effectiveness of teaching practices, guides instruction and

curriculum design, and provides accountability for the system.

However, in the case of English language assessment, ESL teachers confront unique challenges. For language educators, assessment is perhaps one of the most challenging and demanding tasks. Since English is more of a skill than a content-based subject, unlike other subjects, assessment of English language skills requires a different approach. The commonly followed trend for English language assessment is subjective and lacks precision. In this case, the validity and reliability of the assessment are questionable. ESL teachers are generally baffled about the consistency and reliability

of assessment.

Assessment and Language Teaching

The demand for language assessments has increased, and there is greater demand for language testers to be accountable to stakeholders. The word 'test' or 'examination' is commonly confused with assessment in current educational practices. However, in reality, the test is the only subset of the assessment process. A test measures a person's knowledge, ability, or performance in a given domain. On the other hand, assessment is a comprehensive and ongoing process. In order for the assessment to be effective, it should have five characteristics: practicability, reliability, validity, authenticity, and washback.

Issues in Language Assessment

a. Identifying Language Knowledge and Skills

The first puzzling question in language assessment is zeroing in on what to assess. Language is an infinite entity. There are numerous possibilities of generating expressions. Hence, the first puzzling question for the English language tester is what to test. Reading, writing, or speaking skill assessment is included from the primary school curriculum to English language proficiency tests like IELTS, TOEFL, and so on.

b. Validity and Reliability of Assessment

As no single type of assessment can provide all the information essential to gauge students' progress and language proficiency levels, educators need to

incorporate various assessment techniques into their practice and be aware of approaches and methods that can help provide valid and reliable evidence of student learning.

c. Methods of Assessment

Despite a growing number of second language learners in India, administering language assessments to bilingual learners is not standardised.

d. Subjectivity in Language Assessment

Objective evaluation is not an easy task when assessing student attainment, even if we evaluate such a well-measured subject as knowledge of mathematics. In the case of English language proficiency assessment, the challenges are more, to avoid subjectivity in assessment. For instance, if two ESL teachers assess an essay, the degree of deviation in allotted grades/scores may vary. Language assessment is more prone to subjective assessment. It is indeed a challenge for ESL teachers to develop objective test methods and tools.

Suggestions for English Language Assessment

The above-mentioned language assessment issues can be addressed by implementing CEFR guidelines. CEFR has been extremely influential in language testing. The vast majority of internationally developed language examinations refer to CEFR, primarily to describe the level of language proficiency they assess.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): Learning, Teaching, Assessment was designed by the Council of Europe to provide a common basis for the elaboration of language curriculum guidelines, syllabuses, textbooks, examinations, and so on, across Europe (2001a:1). The CEFR is an international standard for describing language ability. It describes language competence on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners to C2 for those who have mastered a language.

C2 Mastery	}	Proficient User
C1 Effective Operational Proficiency		
B2 Vantage	}	Independent User
B1 Threshold		
A2 Waystage	}	Basic User
A1 Breakthrough		

CEFR defines what a user can do in a language as they advance from the lowest level to the highest level (Berry and O’Sullivan). It entails the whole series of performance descriptions allied with each language skill, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These performance descriptions are termed ‘Can Do’ statements and focus on different things a language user can do with the target language. The following are the competencies a learner may exhibit at each level.

- **Level A1:** A language user can comprehend and use basic phrases pertaining to daily use. They can perform simple acts like introducing themselves, can pose and reply to questions about basic things, such as the place they belong to and their profession.
- **Level A2:** Learners can express or discuss routine and familiar matters, such as immediate environment, food, and so on. They can describe them in simple terms.
- **Level B1:** At this level, the learner has become more independent. They can deal with most general situations and can converse about them precisely. They can describe events, experiences, dreams, hopes, and ambitions.
- **Level B2:** At this level, the learner can comprehend the main ideas of a difficult text. They can indulge in technical discussions and present the matter logically and analytically. They can interact fluently with native speakers.
- **Level C1:** The learner has reached a proficiency level wherein they can use language efficiently for academic, personal, and social purposes.
- **Level C2:** The learners can easily understand almost everything they hear or read, and can express almost everything easily through the target language.

Thus, CEFR provides a common language to describe proficiency levels. This aids the teachers or learners to check the level of different qualifications (Cambridge Assessment) (Berry and O’Sullivan).

Using CEFR – Principles of Good Practice

CEFR can be used for syllabus designing, classroom teaching, and assessment. CEFR can be helpful in the following ways, particularly for assessment:

- Using the CEFR to choose, commission, or develop appropriate tests
- Using the CEFR in defining a learner's proficiency or achievement.

Step 1: According to CEFR guidelines, the test developer should first define the test's context(s) and purpose(s). There may be a wide range of contexts and purposes for assessment. In the case of education at different levels, migration, and employment, the context and purpose of assessment vary. If the test developer has specified the context and purpose as clearly as possible, the task of developing the test can be completed successfully.

Step 2: Once the context and purpose are established, it is possible to delineate the target language use (TLU) situations. For example, for university applicants, several TLUs can be imagined: attending lectures, writing reports and essays, writing notes, giving presentations, participating in seminars, and reading books and papers; and each TLU suggests a different combination of skills and language components. Moreover, the requirements may vary for different courses: those such as law degrees may require higher levels of ability in literacy-related areas than others, such as technical courses.

The CEFR may aid in defining TLUs with

its descriptive scheme. It divides language use into four separate, wide-ranging domains (2001a:45): personal, public, occupational, and educational. These categories are illustrated with 'Can Do' descriptors arranged on scales corresponding to proficiency/ability level. Therefore, the descriptive scheme will aid not only in describing the TLU situation, but also in determining the minimally acceptable level for the context.

Step 3: Having followed the above-mentioned steps, the language test maker can map the learner's ability to the particular level of CEFR. For example, having observed a learner's speaking performance, the test giver can list out the learner's speaking skills level using 'can do' descriptors and decide a learner's proficiency level instead of randomly assigning a grade or percentage. For example, see the following comments on a candidate's speaking test performance:

- The candidate can maintain the flow of speech effortlessly.
- The candidate uses a variety of linking words and markers. However, makes overuse of fillers.
- The candidate uses a wide range of vocabulary (formal vocabulary) like *persuade, surplus, verdict, personalise, optimum*, and so on.
- The candidate's sentences are error-free. However, some mistakes in subject-verb agreement.
- Pronunciation is clear and easy to follow. Uses intonation effectively. However, some mispronounced words resulted in the loss of clarity.

Based on the above comments, the examiner can objectively map the candidate's speaking performance to the appropriate CEFR level (i.e., B1/B2). On the other hand, the learner will get to know their mistakes or errors and be aware of their competencies/ability in the target language. Both the teacher and learner will benefit by using the CEFR apparatus for assessment.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be seen from the table that CEFR has quite clearly charted out the level of performance and policy for assessment. CEFR was envisaged primarily as a planning tool, whose aim was to promote 'transparency and coherence' in language education. The CEFR framework of reference can be adapted to fit specific requirements or contexts. It can address the issues confronted by test developers. Teachers and learners move towards specific levels and specific goals of second language learning. Since CEFR is a flexible tool to be adapted to the specific context of use, it can be moulded considering the regional context and specific requirements of learning objectives. However, the framework should be exploited, keeping in mind the ground realities of bilingual non-native speakers of English.

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