Incorporating the CEFR into language test development: Using an international framework in local contexts

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What is the CEFR?

To summarize there is no gold standard, there is no true cut-off score, there is no best standard setting method, there is no perfect training, there is no flawless implementation of any standard setting method on any occasion and there is never sufficiently strong validity evidence. In three words, nothing is perfect. (Kaftandjieva, 2004)
What is the CEFR?

Common European Framework of Reference for Language: learning, teaching and assessment
What is the CEFR?

- Published by the Council of Europe in 2001
- “Formal origins of the CEFR date back to 1991” (Morrow, 2004)
- 40 years of research in language education in Europe (Morrow, 2004; Trim, 2010)

Waystage, Threshold, Vantage
What is the CEFR?

What the blue book says...

*Provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe.*

*defines levels of proficiency which allow learners’ progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis.*

*will facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications gained in different learning contexts, and accordingly will aid European mobility.*
What is the CEFR?

“At the heart of the CEF are the Common Reference levels.” (Morrow, 2004)
What is the CEFR?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficient User</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent User</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic User</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- B2+
- B2
- B1+
- B1
- A2+
- A2
What is the CEFR?

The Global Scale summarizes “the proposed Common Reference Levels in single holistic paragraphs” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A2</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B1</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C1</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C2</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
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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.
What is the CEFR?

The global scale is “just the tip of the iceberg” (Morrow, 2004)

- Illustrative descriptors in **54 scales**
  - Communicative activities
  - Strategies
  - Communicative language competences
What is the CEFR?

Overall Listening Comprehension
Understanding Interaction between Native Speakers.
Listening as a Member of a Live Audience
Listening to Announcements & Instructions

Overall Reading Comprehension
Reading Correspondence
Reading for Orientation
Reading for Information and Argument
Reading Instructions
What is the CEFR?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CEFR LEVEL</th>
<th>Cambridge ESOL</th>
<th>IELTS</th>
<th>TOEFL PBT</th>
<th>TOEFL iBT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>CPE</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>CAE</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>110-120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>FCE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>87-109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>PET</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>57-86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>KET</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td></td>
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- Based on information presented by individual exam boards
- IELTS scores are borderline band scores for that level (for more, see www.ielts.org/researchers/common_european_framework)
Cautions, criticisms…

- Morrow (2004): notes ambiguity in terminology: “what are main points?”; “How many is most?”
- O’Sullivan & Weir (2011): “lacks the theoretical rigor, coverage and explicitness necessary…to develop tests”
- Davidson & Fulcher (2007): “does not detail particular contexts in which it is to be used, and so lacks the necessary detail on which to build test specifications.”
Principles for users of the CEFR

(North, Martyniuk, & Panthier, 2010)

- The CEFR is purely descriptive – not normative
- The CEFR is language neutral – it needs to be applied with regard to each specific language.
- The CEFR is context neutral – it needs to be applied and interpreted with regard to each specific educational context in accordance with the needs and priorities of that context.
- The CEFR attempts to be comprehensive. It cannot, of course, claim to be exhaustive. Further elaboration and developments are welcomed.
Applications to testing

- City & Guilds Communicator IESOL Examination (O’Sullivan, 2008)
- Dutch state foreign language examinations (Berger, Kuiper, & Maris, 2009; Noijons & Kuipers, 2010)
- TestDAF (Kecker & Eckes, 2010)
- Trinity College Examinations (Papageorgio, 2007; Papageorgio, 2009)
- The European language portfolio (Lenz, 2004)
- The English Profile project (Trim, 2010)
Applications to testing: Outside Europe

- TOEFL PBT (Tannenbaum & Wylie, 2005)
- TOEFL iBT (Tannenbaum & Wylie, 2008)
- GEPT, Taiwan (Wu & Wu, 2010; Wu, 2012)
- EIKEN, Japan (Dunlea & Figueras, 2012)
Is it useful?

It has problems, but…

- It **was not** designed to be a completed, prescriptive document
- It **was** designed to facilitate communication and collaboration amongst language educators
- It **is** a work in progress
- Attempts to link or relate exams to the CEFR should be seen as validation projects of the CEFR itself
- Describing problems encountered in the “linking” process can lead to more extensive descriptions being added to the CEFR tool kit
Is it useful?

- A three-way classification of proficiency scales (Alderson, 1991) is often used:
  - user oriented
  - assessor oriented
  - constructor oriented

- The CEFR is a user oriented scale (North, 2000)

- It was not designed or intended for use as a rating scale or in test development without adaption and modification suitable for those purposes
Is it useful?

Davidson & Fulcher (2007) encourage test developers to see the framework as a “series of guidelines from which tests (and teaching materials) can be built to suit local contextualized needs.”

The CEFR can be a springboard to task and test development
Filling the gaps: validation

Socio-cognitive framework for language test development and validation (Weir, 2005; O’Sullivan & Weir, 2011)

- Reading: Khalifa & Weir (2007)
- Listening: Geranpayeh & Taylor (2013)
- Writing: Shaw & Weir (2009)
- Test design & development: O’Sullivan (2012)
Filling the gaps: validation

- Context Validity
- Cognitive Validity
- Response
- Scoring Validity
- Consequential Validity
- Criterion-Related Validity

Test-Taker Characteristics
Filling the gaps: validation

- Are the characteristics of the test tasks and their administration fair to the candidates who are taking them? (Context validity)
- Are the cognitive processes required to complete the tasks appropriate? Are candidates likely to use the same cognitive processes as they would if performing the task in a ‘real world’ context? (Cognitive validity)
- To what extent can we depend on the scores on the test? What do the numbers or grades mean? (Scoring validity)
- What effects does the test have on its various stakeholders? (Consequential validity)
- What external evidence is there outside of the test scores themselves that the test is doing a good job? (Criterion-related validity)
Filling the gaps: cognitive
(Khalifa & Weir, 2007)

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<tr>
<th>Types of reading (goal setting)</th>
<th>Expeditious reading: local</th>
<th>Careful reading: local</th>
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<tr>
<td>Expeditious reading: global</td>
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Levels of reading
Filling the gaps: cognitive
(Khalifa & Weir, 2007)

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<th>Levels of reading</th>
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## Filling the gaps: cognitive

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<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL READING COMPREHENSION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B2</strong></td>
<td>Can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low-frequency idioms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B1</strong></td>
<td>Can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his/her field and interest with a satisfactory level of comprehension. Can understand short, simple texts on familiar matters of a concrete type which consist of high frequency everyday or job-related language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A2</strong></td>
<td>Can understand short, simple texts containing the highest frequency vocabulary, including a proportion of shared international vocabulary items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1</strong></td>
<td>Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words and basic phrases and rereading as required.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Filling the gaps: Test specification for an A1 Reading task in the Aptis test

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# Filling the gaps: a test spec

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Aptis General</th>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Multiple Choice Gap-Fill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>

## Features of the Task

**Skill focus**
- Reading comprehension up to the sentence level

**Task Level**
- A1
- A2
- B1
- B2
- C1
- C2

**Task description**
- Multiple-choice gap fill. A short text of 6 sentences is presented. Each sentence contains one gap. Test takers choose the best option from a pull-down menu for each gap to complete the sentence. The first sentence is an example with the gap completed. Each gap can be filled by reading within the sentence.

## Cognitive processing

### Goal setting
- **Expeditious reading: local** (scan/search for specifics)
- **Careful reading: local** (understanding sentence)
- **Expeditious reading: global** (skim for gist/search for key ideas/detail)
- **Careful reading: global** (comprehend main idea(s)/overall text(s))

## Cognitive processing

### Levels of reading
- **Word recognition**
- **Lexical access**
- **Syntactic parsing**
- **Establishing propositional meaning** (cl./sent. level)
- **Inferencing**
- **Building a mental model**
- **Creating a text level representation** (disc. structure)
- **Creating an intertextual representation** (multi-text)
# Filling the gaps: a test spec

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of the Input Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Words</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Domain</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discourse mode</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content knowledge</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural specificity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of information</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexical Level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text genre</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of the Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distractors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear Morgan,

Thank you for a wonderful weekend. I had a really great time with you and Becky. Your wife is a good cook and she prepared a very nice dinner.

I am writing this note in my hotel room and I can see the park from my window. My plane leaves tomorrow and I will take a taxi to the airport for breakfast. I hope you and Becky will come and stay with me in Rome next summer. I am feeling a little tired now and I want to have a sleep.

Thanks again and see you soon,

James
Filling the gaps: Test spec overview for the Aptis reading test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill focus</th>
<th>Lvl</th>
<th>Task description</th>
<th>Types and levels of reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentence level meaning</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>A short text with 5 gaps. Filling each gap only requires comprehension of the</td>
<td>• Careful local reading • Syntactic parsing • Understanding propositional meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>sentence containing the gap. Text-level comprehension is not required.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-sentence cohesion</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Reorder jumbled sentences to form a cohesive text</td>
<td>• Careful global reading • Inferencing • Building a mental model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text-level comprehension of short texts</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>A short text with 7 gaps. Requires comprehension of text across sentences.</td>
<td>• Careful global reading • Building a mental model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating macro-propositions and understanding important ideas in longer texts</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Matching the most appropriate heading to paragraphs. Requires integration of micro- and macro-propositions within and across paragraphs, and comprehension of discourse structure of more complex and abstract texts.</td>
<td>• Expeditious global reading • Creating a text level representation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Filling the gap: a test spec

More on the Aptis Test is available online:

http://www.britishcouncil.org/aptis
And remember…

*In three words, nothing is perfect.*

*But that is part of the fun*

*Thank you!*
References


References


References


