Assessing level and CEFR
A toolkit for teacher development

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Assessing level and CEFR

• These materials provide an overview of issues relating to assessing level.

• We explore why this issue might be challenging and offer a practical approach to devising assessments at a particular level.
Assessing level and CEFR

This module is aimed at:

• teachers of English as a foreign language
• in-service teachers
This module provides an introduction to issues surrounding level and how to create assessment tasks at a particular level. Level is discussed in the context of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).
Learning outcomes

By the end of this module you will have developed:

• an awareness of the CEFR

• an understanding of an approach to creating assessment tasks

• an appreciation of the challenges of establishing level.
Problems of ready-made assessments

- When developing these materials, we asked teachers what kind of materials would be of most use to them. They all mentioned the difficulties they had experienced in creating assessment tasks at a particular level.

- The request was made for ready-made assessments which the teachers could take into the classroom that evening. Unfortunately, we cannot provide this as one-size fits all solutions do not really exist.
Problems of ready-made assessments

• Happily, we can provide an approach which will help you with the difficult task of creating assessments.

• This approach will be outlined in later slides.
The CEFR

- The CEFR describes foreign language proficiency at six levels: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, C1 and C2.
- The scale starts at A1 and finishes at C2.
- More information about the CEFR can be found [here](#).
- A good introductory video to the CEFR can be found [here](#).
Level and the CEFR are not synonymous. The CEFR is not without critics (see Fulcher, 2004, for further discussion of the debate around the CEFR).

The teachers we spoke to all referred to the CEFR and discussed its impact on their assessment practices.

For this reason we are discussing the CEFR and level in the same module.
Think about the following questions. If possible discuss them with another teacher.

- Is the CEFR used in your school? If yes, how?
- What are the positive and negative aspects of working with the CEFR?
We would expect that most teachers have come across the CEFR in some form.

Perhaps the coursebook you are using is labelled with a CEFR level, such as A2.

Or maybe your students are working towards a test which has been benchmarked at a particular CEFR level.

The teachers we spoke to for the project were aware of some aspects of the CEFR.
The CEFR

Listen to Claire talk about the CEFR.

• As you listen make notes about the aims of the CEFR and ways in which it has been used and perhaps misused.

• Listen here.

• Do you agree with her?
The CEFR

• Here are some descriptors from the CEFR. Order them by level of language proficiency with A1 at the bottom and C1 at the top.

• As you complete the task think about how you made the decisions when ordering the statements.
The CEFR

• Here is the full scale on page 24.

• Were you correct?

• Did you find that a straightforward task?
The CEFR

• Now that we have considered the origins of the CEFR, it is time to turn our attention to the CEFR and classroom assessment.

• The CEFR is complex and multi-faceted.

• It can be a challenge to relate the CEFR to classroom practice.

• Over the next few slides we will show you some resources which will help you to do this.
Classroom posters

- Look at these [classroom posters](#) which were created as part of a [project](#) which aimed to support teachers.

- The posters contain ‘can do’ statements for each of the 4 language skills.

- Furthermore, they contain grammar and vocabulary objectives.

- The posters also contain examples of the type of language needed to achieve the ‘can do’ statements in the language work sections.

- The posters cover levels A1 to C1 of the CEFR.
Reflective task

• Review the posters and consider how they could be used in the classes you teach.
Commentary

- The posters can be used for self, peer or teacher assessment.
- They can be used to discuss learning goals.
- They can guide materials selection.
Beyond the posters

• Having reviewed the posters you may be thinking that you need something which contains more detail.

• This book contains more detail about the language points which are relevant at levels A1 to C1 of the CEFR. We will be using this book for activities in later slides so we recommend you keep it accessible.
Core Inventory of general English

- Watch the authors of the Core Inventory talk about its creation and how it can support teacher assessment of classroom learning

- Make notes to answer the following questions:
  - What are the main aims of the project?
  - How can the Core Inventory be used?
  - What are the ‘Core Language points’?
  - What is a scenario?
Commentary

• The Core Inventory was developed to make the CEFR tangible and to provide support and guidance for teachers, syllabus designers and language learners.

• It can be used as reference of a minimum core content to which other materials can be added.

• The ‘Core Language Points’ is a list of language points placed at the CEFR level which is considered of most relevance to the classroom.

• A scenario is a framework for developing teaching and assessment activities based on real-life language use.
The Core Inventory contains an approach to creating classroom-based assessments. On page 13 you will find a definition of a scenario and how it can be used to create an assessment task.

On the following two pages there is an example scenario. In the appendices there are example scenarios for the 5 CEFR levels covered in the Core Inventory.
Core Inventory of general English

• A scenario starts with a language use situation. In the case of the example, a business meeting. The relevant ‘Can Do’ statements are added to the scenario with the required competences.

• Guidance on how scenarios can be used to create assessment activities continues on pages 16 and 17 of the Core Inventory.

• Using the example scenarios as a guide, think of a language use situation which is relevant for your learners and develop an assessment task for it.
The Word Family Framework

• You may want to think about the relationship between lexis and level.

• The Word Family Framework Tool can help you to consider the difficulty of vocabulary and ensure you choose words for vocabulary tests with your class which are appropriate to their level.

• The tool is very easy to use – simply enter a word into the search box and it will tell you its CEFR level.
CEFR and level

- A project in Finland created this training resource for teachers.

- There is information about the CEFR and example tasks for each level.
Other ways to think of level

• The CEFR is not the only way to consider level.

• The difficulty of the task and the amount of text we expect our students to process in a particular amount of time all contribute to the level of difficulty of a task.

• Therefore we need to control a number of different factors when creating our classroom assessments.
Reading and difficulty

Stephen Bax (2013) created this table to illustrate how different factors interact to create difficulty.

Table 1: Levels of cognitive processing in reading tests (adapted from Khalifa and Weir, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of activity (ordered from more simple to more complex)</th>
<th>Readers’ typical cognitive operations in language tests</th>
<th>Size of typical unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Lexis: word matching</td>
<td>Reader identifies same word in question and text</td>
<td>Word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Lexis: synonym and word-class matching</td>
<td>Reader uses knowledge of word meaning or word class to identify synonym, antonym or other related word</td>
<td>Word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Grammar/syntax</td>
<td>Reader uses grammatical knowledge to disambiguate and identify answer</td>
<td>Clause/sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Propositional meaning</td>
<td>Reader uses knowledge of lexis and grammar to establish meaning of a sentence.</td>
<td>Sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Inference</td>
<td>Reader goes beyond literal meaning to infer a further significance</td>
<td>Sentence/ paragraph/text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Building a mental model</td>
<td>Reader uses several features of the text to build a larger mental model</td>
<td>Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Understanding text function</td>
<td>Reader uses genre knowledge to identify text structure and purpose</td>
<td>Text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reading and difficulty

• The table appears on page 5 of this report. Though we are only focussing on page 5 here, the rest of the report is well worth reading.

• The table shows that the type of task we ask our students to complete affects the level of difficulty of our assessment tasks.

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Task

- Analyse a reading assessment task you have used with students, using the framework outlined by Bax.
- What kind of processes does the task require?
- How difficult is the task?
Level and difficulty

• We have provided a way of determining difficulty for reading tasks. Other authors have written about similar issues relating to the other skills.

• In essence, it is important to remember the task and the text length combine to create task difficulty.
Assessing level

- It is difficult to discuss assessing level in isolation.

- We would recommend you work with colleagues to discuss your ideas of level and to consider ways of coming to agreement about level.

- This type of agreement can be referred to as standardisation.
Standardisation

• The term standardisation can be controversial in EFL. Some argue that standards can be reductive (see Hulstijn, 2007).

• If you decide you want to engage in a standardisation process, there follows some steps which you may consider undertaking.
Standardisation

- Gather colleagues together in one room for a day.
- Discuss and agree the standard to be used for the session. This could be the CEFR or it could be another framework (such as the Canadian benchmarks)
• Look at the level descriptors of the framework you have chosen. Discuss with your colleagues the range of levels and completeness of the descriptors.

• Use the descriptors to self-assess your levels of language proficiency in any languages which you know.
• For example, using the CEFR, I would assess my spoken Italian as C1 but written Italian is a B2 level. My reading level in French is A2 but my spoken level is A1.

• Self-assessing is a good way to develop your understanding of levels.

• In groups compare your self-assessments.
Standardisation

• Look at a range of assessment tasks used in your school. Discuss together the difficulty level of the task and evaluate if it is appropriate for your teaching context.

• Look at a range of student texts and discuss the level of each. Discuss the factors which helped you to come to your decisions.

• Look at your organisation’s curriculum documents. With colleagues work together to create test specifications for level tests. Watch this video if you are not familiar with the term.

• With the specifications you will be able to write tests whilst working to a common standard.
Conclusions

- In this module we have discussed level and the CEFR. We have seen that level is not a straightforward issue. We have provided practical suggestions and resources to help guide you through the minefield.
What next?

You have now finished these materials on assessing level. We hope you have found them useful and enjoyable. If you are interested in learning more about assessment, please look at our other materials on:

- Assessment for Learning
- Assessing Young Learners
- Language Assessment for Teachers
- Assessment Resources
References


