

Assessment, the CEFR and the Role of International Exams



There is a need to define and measure levels of language proficiency in a way that leads to mutual understanding, exchange, and mobility among various stakeholders in the field of second/foreign/modern language education on a national and international level, including learners, teachers, administrators, employers, decision-makers, etc. One of the goals of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) is to help these stakeholders “to describe the levels of proficiency required by existing standards, tests, and examinations, in order to facilitate comparisons between different systems of qualifications” (Council of Europe, 2001a:21). The common reference levels (including the *global scale* and the *self-assessment grid*) and the many *illustrative scales* have been developed for this purpose. These represent CEFR tools that offer users a conceptual grid, which they can employ to describe or set up their specific system of qualification. Various systems of qualifications would thus use the Framework as common medium.

What Is the CEFR-based Assessment?

The CEFR-based assessment relies on the *common reference levels* and on the *illustrative scales*, which use positive descriptors (i.e. ‘Can Do’ statements – see Council of Europe, 2001b). These make up a conceptual grid that can be used to: i) relate various national and institutional frameworks to each other; ii) plan the objectives of particular examinations, tests, and course curricula by using the categories and levels of the scales.

The CEFR includes an overview of methods to develop customized scales of descriptors and relate them to the Framework levels (see Appendix A in Council of Europe, 2001a:205). Developing such scales of descriptors may target a broad level of general language proficiency (e.g. Level B1), or it may aim at a particular set of activities, skills, and competencies (Council of Europe, 2001a:179).

The CEFR provides a point of reference, and is not a practical assessment tool. The *common reference levels* and the *illustrative scales* in the CEFR allow a whole range of forms of assessment. Establishing what kind of assessment is needed for specific purposes is an integral part of how successful teaching and learning are.

Achievement Assessment:

- is the assessment of what has been taught (i.e. the achievement of specific course/syllabus objectives)
- is oriented to the week’s/term’s work, the course book, and/or the syllabus
- tends to be the teachers’ focus, as they are interested in getting feedback for teaching

Proficiency Assessment:

- is the assessment of what someone can do/ knows in relation to the application of the competencies in the real world
- is oriented to the skills needed in the real world
- tends to be the employers’, educational administrators’, and adult learners’ focus, as they are interested in the assessment of outcomes, in what the person can do

Through its action-oriented approach, the CEFR minimizes the distinction between achievement and proficiency. Syllabi and curricula are reformed in a way that course content supports ascending levels of proficiency. That is, proficiency assessment consists of “language and communicative tasks based on a transparent relevant syllabus, giving the learner the opportunity to show what they have achieved” (Council of Europe, 2001b:184).



Why Use the CEFR-based Assessment in Canada?

In Canada, the lack of common definitions and standardized evaluation tools is often cited as a barrier to mobility of learners and employees among provinces and internationally. It also makes it difficult to report in a nationally comprehensible way whether the language programs have met the expected goals. There have been recommendations on several fronts for a clear and unambiguous system to report program outcomes in terms of language proficiency and the need to balance such a system with provincial autonomy in education. Provincial/ territorial school authorities have developed local evaluation tools for assessing student language proficiency, but these are not based on common terminology or common definitions of developing proficiency levels.

The CEFR provides a comprehensive and coherent framework and a common terminology for all components of language learning anchored to six proficiency levels. These levels describe basic to proficient learner performance for five skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing and oral interaction). This framework can be used for the development of language assessment specific to each province. Alternately, the framework can be employed to relate existing tests to the CEFR proficiency levels. Various CEFR tools for this purpose, including the *Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, are available on the Council of Europe's website, at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/manual1_en.asp.

CEFR-related language proficiency tests for secondary school students in Canada would:

- encourage more students to enroll in and to complete second language programs at the secondary school level, by providing them with established cross-provincially and internationally recognised credentials (e.g. student enrolments have increased significantly in school districts offering access to and availability of international language certification, and parents, in particular, are supportive of such initiatives)
- streamline recognition of the certificates or diplomas students obtain as evidence of their language proficiency

- contribute to defining levels of bilingualism in a coherent and transparent way, accessible to all
- enable private employers and the Government of Canada to hire more bilingual people who have received training at the secondary school level, thus reducing training costs at the federal level
- help increase the number of bilingual and plurilingual citizens in Canada (i.e. more people would have functional knowledge in the other official and/or additional language)
- encourage and motivate students to consider continuing their second language learning at the postsecondary level and in the workforce.

What Language Proficiency Exams Are Linked to the CEFR?

For provinces/territories that do not wish to develop an assessment system based on the CEFR, or to relate their existing assessment system to it, there are several readily available international examinations already linked to the CEFR. Each is language specific; some are intended for either native or non-native speakers; some are workplace oriented. Examples of such examinations include:

- Cambridge English Language Assessment; International English Language Testing System (IELTS); Test of English for International Communication (TOEC or TOEIC); Test de français international (TFI); Test d'Évaluation du Français (TEF); Diplôme d'études en langue française (DELFL); Diplôme approfondi de langue française (DALF).

References

- Council of Europe. (2001a). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_en.pdf.
- Council of Europe (2001b). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Teaching, Learning, Assessment. Structured Overview of All CEFR Scales*. Available at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/Key_reference/Overview_CEFRscales_EN.pdf.

Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers
Association canadienne des professeurs de langues secondes

☎ 1-877-727-0994 | 613-727-0994

www.caslt.org | admin@caslt.org

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