

Reflecting on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR) in the Indonesian Context

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Abstract

CEFR is, in the Indonesian view, commonly associated merely with the standardized English test and rarely connected to the educational curriculum, pedagogy, and learning. This paper, therefore, aims to give an overview of the CEFR conceptualization; the original version (2001), and its companion volumes (2018 and 2020). The three versions or editions are concisely overviewed in terms of their purposes, approaches, and changes. Then it is reflected in Indonesian and probably in other similar contexts. There are two options for how to apply the CEFR in the Indonesian context: adoption and adaptation. The challenges for both involve preconceived assumptions influenced by traditional approaches such as rote learning or test-oriented learning and concealing the CEFR in the field of testing. For profound use, the approach of CEFR (action-oriented) can support transformative and coherent language policy, teaching, learning, and assessment.

Keywords: *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), Companion Volume (CV), action-oriented approach, coherent language education*

1. Introduction

What is CEFR? It stands for *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, and assessment* (Council of Europe, 2018, 2020).

In the Indonesian context, CEFR is commonly known as a reference framework for language testing and assessment and, therefore, more often associated with standardized English tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS, and others. Thus, CEFR is commonly assumed merely to deal with language tests, especially English as the international language. This understanding can lead to the superficial comprehension and problematic adoption of the CEFR which undermines “the why” behind the creation of the CEFR which is philosophically intended to become a reference framework for quality and equal

language education in multilingual and multicultural contexts (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018, 2020; Little & Figueras, 2022).

This paper, therefore, aims to give a reflection on the CEFR; the original version, which has been updated into the 2018 and 2020 versions (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018, 2020), and the possible implications to the language policy and education in Indonesia. The overview focuses on to which extent the CEFR and its CV can provide opportunities to support language education at the national and institutional levels, and not only does it cover the English language but also other foreign languages, Indonesian, and the traditional languages.

2. History and roles

Published in 2001 by the Council of Europe, CEFR was historically a long process initiated in the 1970s and 1980s and finally formulated based on the recommendation of an intergovernmental symposium held in Switzerland in 1991 (Council of Europe, 2020; Little & Figueras, 2022). The CEFR 2001 offers a formulaic reference and concepts that are aimed to “achieve greater unity among its members (in Europe) by the adoption of common action in the cultural field”.

The purposes of CEFR are as follows:

- a. to promote and facilitate cooperation among educational institutions in different countries,
- b. to provide a sound basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, and
- c. to assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and coordinate their efforts

(Council of Europe, 2001, p. 5)

More specifically, the official website of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, n.d.) provides more clarified objectives of CEFR:

- a. promoting plurilingualism and diversification in the choice of languages in the curriculum
- b. supporting the development and demonstration of the plurilingual profile of individual learners
- c. developing and reviewing the content of language curricula and defining positive ‘can do’ descriptors adapted to the age, interests and needs of learners
- d. designing and developing textbooks and teaching material
- e. supporting teacher education and cooperation among teachers of different languages
- f. enhancing quality and success in learning, teaching and assessment
- g. facilitating transparency in testing and the comparability of certifications

As stated in the purposes and objectives, CEFR is not intended to be applied exclusively within the fields of language testing and assessment, rather it is intended to become an umbrella tool to provide “a common basis for the elaboration of language

syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc.” that will “enhance the transparency of courses, syllabuses and qualifications, thus promoting international co-operation in the field of modern languages” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). In this case, CEFR is a visionary effort to create quality education for all citizens in Europe and to promote plurilingual and pluricultural education across European countries (Council of Europe, 2020). In a long term, CEFR is expected to cope with barriers in communication and interaction among professionals working in the educational field across Europe so that unity and well-being can be nurtured within the multilingual and multicultural environments in Europe (Council of Europe, 2020).

The word “reference” in CEFR indicates that the main role of CEFR is to give a reference to policymakers, educators, practitioners, professionals, learners, and society for educational practices that will improve the equality and quality of education in diverse settings (convergence). In practice, this convergence can be socio-political, pedagogical, and instrumental, as follows:

- a. For policymakers, CEFR and its CV can be used to inform language policy and guide curriculum development at different levels across the nations, within a nation, and at the institutional levels
- b. Educators, practitioners, and professionals in education can refer to the CEFR Schematic Levels, Levels Descriptions, approaches to language pedagogies, and other related information and guidance to inform their syllabus, teaching, materials development, and assessment
- c. For learners, CEFR descriptors are very essential to help them reflect on their language proficiency and to plan and navigate their learning
- d. For the language test developers and bodies, CEFR becomes an overarching tool to map, guide, and inform the development of language test instruments

3. CEFR versions and editions

CEFR, currently, has 3 versions or editions: the 2001 version (original version), the 2018 version (Provisional Companion Volume), and the 2020 version (Definitive Companion Volume) (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018, 2020; Little & Figueras, 2022).

a. *The CEFR 2001 (Original Version)*

The original CEFR has 2 main parts: *Reference Level Descriptions* (RLD) and CEFR Guidebook. RLD explains the language user communicative performance divided into 3 common levels: Basic User (A1, A2), Independent User (B1, B2), and Proficient User (C1, C2) (Figure 1). RLD becomes popular since it is frequently referred to in standardized language tests worldwide which have been very popular in the global education contexts. CEFR Guidebook comprises the elicitation of level descriptions, the background of CEFR creation, theoretical underpinnings, recommended approaches to language learning, teaching, and assessment, and other related information.

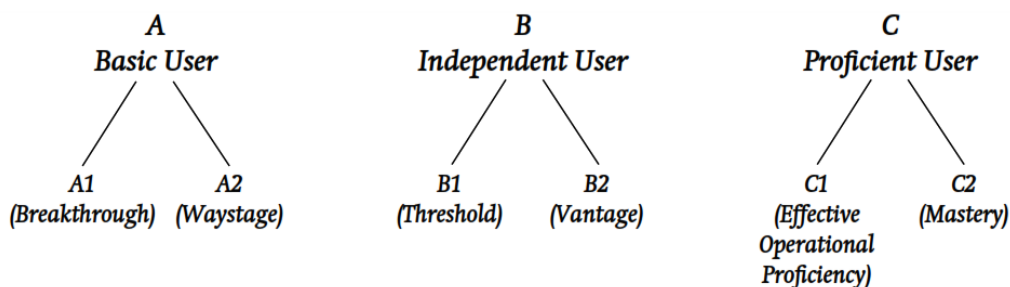


Figure 1: CEFR Levels

b. *The CEFR 2018 with New Descriptors (Provisional Version)*

The CEFR published in 2018 was a provisional version (Little & Figueras, 2022; North et al., 2022) of the CEFR Companion Volume authored by Brian North, Tim Goodier, and Enrica Piccardo (Council of Europe, 2018). This version was launched in the middle of the extensive collaborative research from 2013 to 2020 by using the same research method as what was done in developing the original CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018; North, 2021). In this 2018 version, some changes were made particularly, as follows:

- the addition of a pre-A1 level, plus levels for A2, B1 and B2, and more descriptors for the C levels
- scales for areas, including mediation, online interaction, response to literature, ‘plurilingual’ and ‘pluricultural’ competencies.
- selected revisions to the original descriptors to better reflect a plurilingual model of language competence, such as removing any references to ‘native speakers’, and replacing the existing phonology scale with two new scales that emphasise intelligibility (not a native speaker ideal).
- key aspects of the CEFR for learning and teaching to introduce ideas for the CEFR adoption in the course design and classroom practice.

c. *The CEFR 2020 version*

The CEFR 2020 version is now the most current CEFR which is intended to update the original version (Council of Europe, 2020). After publishing the provisional version in the middle of the research project in 2018, the Council of Europe published the most updated version which updates the CEFR’s illustrative descriptors in the following ways:

- highlighting certain innovative areas of the CEFR for which no descriptor scales had been provided in the set of descriptors published in 2001, but which have become increasingly relevant over the past 20 years, especially mediation and plurilingual/pluricultural competence;
- building on the successful implementation and further development of the CEFR, for example by more fully defining “plus levels” and a new “Pre-A1” level;
- responding to demands for more elaborate descriptions of listening and reading in existing scales, and for descriptors for other communicative activities such as

online interaction, using telecommunications, and expressing reactions to creative texts (including literature);

- enriching description at A1, and the C levels, particularly C2;
- adapting the descriptors to make them gender-neutral and “modality-inclusive” (and so applicable also to sign languages), sometimes by changing verbs and sometimes by offering the alternative “speaker/signer”.

(Council of Europe, 2020, p. 22)

The CEFR 2020 is also called CEFR Companion Volume (CEFR-CV) since it was developed to update the CEFR 2001 version without an intention to replace it totally. The CEFR 2001 remains an official reference document that is available on the CEFR website (North, 2021). There are some essential parts of the original version remain unchanged and are still referred to in the provisional and official CEFR/CV. For example, the categories of the CEFR descriptive scheme remain unchanged with an updated concept of ‘mediation’. The levels (A1-C2) are still used with the addition of a pre-A1 level and three additional plus levels. The elements in the taxonomic scheme (CEFR Chapters 4 and 5 are now more elaborated and updated in the various RLD in different languages. While Chapter 8 is replaced by the newest CEFR for the development and implementation of plurilingual and intercultural curriculum development. Some fundamental issues in approaches such as action-oriented, plurilingualism, mediation, and others remain valid and crucial for CEFR adoption today.

4. CEFR approach: *Action-oriented*

After the publication of the CEFR 2001, the *action-oriented approach* presented in Chapter 2, has little been addressed and researched elsewhere within the implementation of CEFR in Europe and others. However, this conceptualization remains consistent in the CEFR 2001 version, 2018 version, and 2020 version which indicates how important this approach is in language development and language education within the CEFR implementation. As quoted below, the CEFR explicitly mentions that language development can be nurtured through *actions* within the social agendas which lead to affordance for communicative ability and activation of particular discursive strategies.

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains, activating those strategies which seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 9)

Leo van Lier (2004, 2007) perhaps one of the most influential educational linguists extensively conceptualizes the *action-based approach* based on Vygotsky’s Socio-Cultural Theory and Gibbon’s Affordance Theory of Cognitive Psychology. Van Lier’s

action-based approach puts *perception-in-action* in the core learning process that precedes affordance which will influence language development. The role of ecological situations (Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008) within which the learners' engagement is encouraged and intensified is, in this case, irreplaceable. It implies the importance of *learning environment design* to make it possible for the learners as social agents to experience ecological learning. This type of learning is transformative, not exclusively related to and focused on language-related learning, but can be more holistic covering the authenticity of social activities facilitated through tasks or activities of reception, interaction, (re)production, and mediation (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018, 2020).

There are some characteristics of ecological language pedagogy through action-based learning according to Leo van Lier dan others. Three of them are summarised in Novawan, et al. (2022), as follows:

1. Emergent, language learning requires authentic artefacts, situations, and context that will afford the development of the functional and relational capacity of learners as the social agent
2. Discursive, language learning requires conversational (speech-oriented), interactional (function-oriented), and relational (discourse-oriented) learning tasks and activities
3. Experiential, language learning requires iterative, integrated, and holistic projects, not necessarily limited to language-related learning, systematised in such a way that will develop the learner's social capacity.

More specifically, to be able to provide the learner with a quality learning experience, the environment of learning is expected to be created or designed following particular scenarios (Piccardo & North, 2019) rather than a sequential-procedural syllabus. Sequential-procedural syllabus generally focuses on the creation of sequential-procedural stages of learning, step-by-step, which can impose action-oriented learning which is emergent, discursive, and experiential. Meanwhile, by using scenarios, language learning and teaching will become more task-based or project-based (van Lier, 2004, 2007). One of the examples of this pedagogical model can be found in Novawan et. al. (2019) which investigated action-based teaching by using MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning). As stated by van Lier (2004, 2007), the use of computer technology such as in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and other technology can potentially facilitate action-based pedagogy. The learners act out the language mediated by technology following a certain scenario.

Piccardo and North define scenarios as:

"...blueprints for projects and they contain one (or more) culminating, action-oriented tasks that provide the necessary coherence to the entire scenario. Users/learners are working towards a precise goal and each task implies the creation of some form of artefact (it can be a written or an oral text, or a multimedia product involving some other semiotic code(s), like pictures or graphics, etc.)"

(2019, p. 272)

In the action-oriented approach, scenarios enable the language educators to plan, implement, and sustain coherence within and between the learning activities, tasks, and goals, and within and between the teaching, learning, and assessment (Novawan, 2013; Novawan et al., 2018). All learning activities have to be meaningful and purposeful occurred in a real-life environment and artefacts which are particularly available or modified to nurture the social capacity of the social agents. Learners learn to use their existing ability to navigate their actions, collaborate with others, and develop new skills toward the expected level through scenarios. CEFR in this case is useful to align the entire process of scenario-making (goals, levels, materials), implementation, and assessment.

5. Implications, opportunities, and challenges

CEFR is particularly created based on the European context and need. However, since Europe is characterised by diversity in ethnicity, culture, language, education policy, and social background across the countries, it is an ideal framework of reference to be referred to, compared with, adopted, and adapted in other contexts beyond Europe.

Studies indicate that CEFR has been widely applied particularly in America and Asia Pacific. For example, Byram & Parmenter's (2012) work collects and synthesises political and academic perspectives of CEFR from European (France, Germany, Bulgaria, and Poland), America (Argentina, Colombia, and the USA), and Asia Pacific (China, Taiwan, and New Zealand). Related to policy, CEFR is connected to language curriculum development such as to which extent it influences the curriculum development process, what crucial issues emerged within the adoption of CEFR, and to which extent socialisation and diffusion of CEFR in the curriculum development and pedagogical practice. Within the academic perspectives, the chapters address theoretical and philosophical underpinnings which guide the adoption of CEFR in the institutional and national contexts, highlighting prominent aspects in particular settings, to which extent it is feasible in particular contexts, what motivates the adoption or adaptation of CEFR, and what barriers and constraints commonly occurs.

Excellent examples of how CEFR has been systematically adapted and impacted on a national level are the cases of Japan (Negishi, 2022; Negishi et al., 2013; Nishimura-Sahi, 2022), and other Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam (Foley, 2019a, 2019b, 2022). The cases show that CEFR has been influential in Asian countries to inform language education policy nationwide. The use of CEFR is thus not exclusively limited to the field of language tests but also useful to be referred to in the course and syllabus design, materials development, teaching approaches, and the learning process experienced by the students. In these cases, CEFR contributes to the quality process of classroom and *ad hoc* language teaching and learning. Moreover, since CEFR CV anticipates diverse and multilingual settings, its adoption can be practical and flexible for Asian countries with multicultural backgrounds and contexts of language education.

Common options for policymakers and educators are two, *adoption* and *adaptation*. It is important to note that concealing the CEFR in the areas of test-oriented language learning and teaching can conceal the process-oriented conceptualization behind the

creation of CEFR. Firstly, CEFR can be adopted and referred to guide and inform teaching, learning, and assessment without making any changes or contextualization to the Levels, RLD, and CV. The educators plan their teaching and decide the approach by referring to the CEFR Levels, RLD, and CV when developing a syllabus, lesson plan, materials, and assessment. The language education policy in Europe is an example of how CEFR is used as the main guide to standardize language teaching, learning and assessment. Secondly, CEFR can also be adapted and adjusted in particular ways to suit particular needs. The second choice is more challenging and complex. This is rare to find except in an institutional level of language certification bodies such as language centres, language courses, and language units. The case of CEFR adaptation remains problematic when dealing with the credibility and validity of the newly adapted CEFR. Adaptation needs a scientific, systematic, transparent, and measurable research-based process to be able to decide to which extent the changes will be made, how to do that, and how to keep all components valid as the official CEFR CV. An essential question to anticipate is whether the newly adapted CEFR will have the same quality of convergence at the global level or not. Japan is an example of a country that successfully adapts CEFR into CEFR-J (CEFR-Japan) to accommodate the language education policy at the national level. CEFR-J is evidence that CEFR CV has a significant role in Asia (Little & Figueras, 2022; Negishi, 2022; Negishi et al., 2013) and that CEFR is useful to adapt in a national language education policy which contributes to the development of language proficiency and plurilingual education nationwide.

The most essential challenge for those who are interested in the CEFR adoption outside the Europe countries is to which extent the users will make use of “its entire features” for the shared goal and vision in terms of quality language education for plurilingual and pluricultural citizenship. CEFR is similar to other projects of overarching convergence such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are oriented to promote and accelerate sustainability in the selected and strategic fields including education. In this case, the CEFR focuses on plurilingual and pluricultural education to support mobility and unity across Europe countries. Both SDGs and CEFR require the users to move forwards collaboratively to the shared vision by using shared beliefs and instruments. In the CEFR adoption, particularly, at least the users start with the underpinning mindsets of the “what”, “why”, and “how” CEFR. In some countries superficially introduced to the CEFR, including Indonesia, traditional approaches such as rote learning or test-oriented learning can become the most crucial barrier to effective adoption. With the traditional mindset, the CEFR will be prone to be merely instrumental to traditional learning and lose its philosophical underpinnings such as the action-oriented approach. Anticipation will be necessary at the level of policy, educator professional development, collaborative works in designing CEFR-oriented teaching, and research on learning experience and language proficiency.

Moreover, the Levels, RLD, and CV on CEFR wholly confirm the centrality of coherence between language policy (curriculum), pedagogy, and assessment in the adoption or adaptation of the CEFR. Adopting CEFR in the level of policy and assessment without being followed by its implementation in teaching and learning will create anxiety

and greater gaps between expectations and reality related to language proficiency. Adopting CEFR in teaching and learning without the overarching policy will open up different interpretations of what and how CEFR will be used and that's why will influence the outcome. Therefore, the notion of coherence between the three (Novawan, 2013; Novawan et al., 2018) is fundamental in the adoption of the CEFR.

6. Conclusion

The paper has reflected on the CEFR conceptualization, aims, and vision to draw on the implications and opportunities for its adoption or adaptation in Indonesian language education. On the three CEFR versions or editions, the action-oriented approach remains emphasised and strengthened, which means that CEFR recommends particular approaches such as those underpinned by the Socio-Cultural Theory, Ecological Approach, and other related theories. There are two options for how to apply the CEFR in Indonesia: adoption and adaptation. Adoption is when we apply it without any changes to the CEFR-CV. When the users make systematic efforts of adjusting any of its "features" according to a specific background and need, they intend to adapt the CEFR. Both are possible and useful to be applied in the Indonesian context without ignoring the philosophical underpinnings of why the CEFR is created in Europe. Particularly, the use of CEFR will support transformative and coherent language policy, teaching, learning, and assessment.

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