



The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and Cambridge English Language Assessment

By choosing Cambridge English Language Assessment our customers benefit from using an assessment system which is robustly aligned to internationally recognised levels of language proficiency, such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

What is the CEFR?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR) defines levels of language proficiency in Speaking, Reading, Writing and Listening and provides the basis for many language syllabuses and curricula around the world. Language ability is described across a 6 level scale from A1 for beginners up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. As well as common reference levels, the CEFR provides a 'Descriptive Scheme' of definitions, categories and examples that language professionals can use to better understand and communicate their aims and objectives. The examples given are called 'illustrative descriptors' and are presented as a series of scales with Can Do statements.

The CEFR describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis. Hence, the Framework enhances the transparency of courses, syllabuses and qualifications, thereby promoting international co-operation in the field of modern languages.

Cambridge English and the CEFR

The Framework was developed by a Council of Europe international working party between 1993 and 1996 with involvement from Cambridge English Language Assessment (formerly University of Cambridge ESOL examinations) and its partners in the Association of Language Teachers in Europe (ALTE). It was first published in 2001 in English and French and since then has been published in over 30 languages and has become an accepted benchmark for language ability all over the world.

Shared origins and long-term engagement

We have been continuously involved in the development and implementation of the CEFR since its earliest stages in the 1980s. Due to this close relationship and ongoing engagement and collaboration with the Council of Europe, we benefit from a particularly strong alignment argument with respect to the reference levels. This has been noted by Dr Brian North, one of the authors of the Framework, who comments on the historical link between the Cambridge examinations and the CEFR as follows:

'We're really at the beginning of the process of validating the claims which are made by the examination boards about the relationship of their exams to the Framework. There is a difference between having a very good idea of what the relationship is and confirming it. Cambridge ESOL is an exception, because there is a relationship between the levels in the CEFR and the levels of the Cambridge ESOL exams.' (Interview with Brian North in ELT news, Feb 06.)

Integrated item banking and calibration systems

Well established calibration systems are used to establish comparisons between the levels of the Cambridge English exams and to maintain alignment to external benchmarks such as the CEFR. This system is built into routine

procedures for every examination session, rather than just applying a one-off snap-shot of a single session. Data from millions of candidates over more than 20 years is used to validate this alignment.

Quality management and validation

Quality management systems certified to ISO standard 9001:2008 are used at every stage in the development, marking, grading and evaluation of all Cambridge English examinations. These processes use data from 'live' examinations conducted throughout the world and involve constant cross-referencing to the CEFR.

Alignment and standard-setting studies

Since 2001 alignment exercises and standard-setting studies have been carried out in line with the recommendations made in the extensive supporting documentation produced by the Council of Europe. These studies have led to international symposia hosted by ALTE and us, case study conferences, reports, publications and presentation of academic papers at international conferences.

Our view is that the alignment of tests to the CEFR – rather than to any other existing test – is a key aspect of gaining an understanding of the quality of performance that is represented by a candidate's score on a particular test; this forms part of our communication with stakeholders about the meaningfulness of any test's results.

For us, alignment is an embedded and integrated feature of its test development and validation model, which has an on-going cycle of perceived need, test design, trialling and administration to post exam review (for full discussion of the model see Saville 2003). This test development cycle enables us to incorporate changes in learning, pedagogy and assessment trends, as well as in the targeted candidature, into an examination. It is our view that alignment to the CEFR is an on-going activity rather than a one-off exercise at a given time (see Khalifa and French 2009).

Only we can back up the claim that all of our exams embody the CEFR, based on our shared history, active involvement in the development of frameworks of levels (Cambridge Common Scale, ALTE and CEFR level frameworks) and the research-led development and on-going validation of its language tests (see Taylor and Jones 2006).

We have published widely on the unique relationship between the CEFR and Cambridge English Language Assessment (see our Research Notes 37 on this topic and for an extensive bibliography containing 44 references: www.cambridgeesol.org/rs_notes/rs_nts37.pdf; Jones and Saville 2009, Jones 2011).

Application and extension of CEFR for English

The CEFR provides a useful frame of reference for locating language examinations within a commonly accepted system of levels which can be used to help organisations select examinations which meet their language testing requirements. It allows governments and ministries to compare standards in their own countries with those of students around the world and is often used by policy-makers in the framing of language policy and to set minimum language requirements for a wide range of purposes. It is also widely used in the design of curricula and syllabuses and many other contexts. Although comprehensive in many ways the CEFR also has limitations. This was recognised by the authors of the CEFR who suggested that users of the Framework would need to adapt it in various ways to meet specific requirements in their own contexts.

We continue to work with the Council of Europe in developing user guides and language-specific supplements to accompany the CEFR, and together with other academics at the University of Cambridge, is leading the way in



extending the CEFR to describe the reference levels more precisely for the English language (see English Profile Programme at www.englishprofile.org).

Although the Common European Framework applies to European languages, it has also been adopted by curriculum developers, publishers, examination providers and Ministries of Education around the world. Cambridge English has worked with these types of organisation to develop alignment claims to the CEFR within their own educational contexts. In many cases Cambridge English tests or assessment services have been used as benchmarks to provide the link to the international standards. For example projects of this kind have been carried out with Beijing's Municipal Government, with the State Government of Gujarat, and with Ministries of Education in Taiwan, Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Italy and France.

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