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# Challenges and frictions in the implementation of the CEFR-M: A Conceptual Paper

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**Abstract**

Undeniably, there have been a lot of English language educational initiatives inMalaysia since 1970, mainly aimed at improving learners' English language skills. The most recent development is the incorporation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into Malaysian English language curricula, also known as CEFR-M at all levels of education from pre-school to university. This move is in line with the country's long-term commitment to raise the bar for students' English proficiency, as articulated in the Malaysian Education Roadmap 2013-2025 and further accentuated in the 10-year Reform of English Language Education in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025. The implementation of the CEFR has entered the final phase of reform and has not been without challenges and frictions since its official introduction to primary and secondary education in 2017. Drawing upon numerous studies backed up by CEFR-related webinars, national CEFR-related English examination reports and CEFR-related documents pertinent to the CEFR implementation in Malaysia, this paper aims to bring to the fore the challenges encountered in the implementation of the CEFR in the local context, which may reverberate with similar problems in other countries pursuing the same educational agenda. The paper ends with implications worth reflecting upon to better manage and improve the CEFR-M implementation.

**Keywords:** *CEFR, CEFR's challenges and frictions, CEFR in Malaysia, CEFR implementation, CEFR-M*

## Introduction

Malaysia has undoubtedly placed great emphasis on the mastery of the English language since it gained prominence during the British occupation. Indeed, the influence of English in Malaysia has grown exponentially, impacting all aspects of life, from trade and commerce to laws and legislation, in addition to being a major driver of globalisation (Hashim, Leitner, 2015; Zaki & Darmi, 2018). This would not have been possible without the role that English language education plays in the local context, shaping the English competencies of Malaysians (Don, 2015).

In the context of English language education, the country has witnessed a plethora of initiatives, reforms or strategies to provide students with good English language skills (Don, 2015; Pandian, 2002; Rahman et al., 2022; Sukri & Yunus, 2020). Unlike some countries such as Japan and Indonesia that mandate the teaching of English at a later stage of schooling, in Malaysia, it becomes compulsory at primary school, starting from the age of seven until the completion of secondary school at the age of seventeen (Jalaluddin et al., 2008). In other words, every Malaysian receives a total of 11 years of compulsory English education, six

years in primary school and five years in secondary school, which is considered sufficient for ones to effectively perform language-based tasks or, more specifically, communicate ideas and interact with others confidently and successfully in the target language.

Despite a considerable period of exposure to the English language, the standard of English in Malaysia has gone downhill (Sahib & Stapa, 2022; Sukri & Yunus, 2020). The decline can be attributed to the government's decision to relegate the status of English as a medium of instruction to a mere compulsory language subject in the 1970s following the 1969 race riots (Ali et al, 2011; Hashim & Leitner, 2015). Over the years, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) has recognised the precarious state of English language proficiency and has made a number of pedagogical changes, shifting from a structural-situational approach that advocates the conventional teaching of grammar and sentence structures to a communicative approach (Pandian, 2002; Rahman et al., 2022). Additionally, the country's commitment to improving the quality of English was translated into a policy to teach mathematics and science in English in 2003 (Pandian & Ramiah, 2004). In 2012, this policy was abolished and replaced by the Dual Language Programme in 2016 (Yunus & Sukri, 2017). Moreover, under the Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language Policy, a number of programmes have been introduced since 2010, such as the Highly Immersive Programme and the Fullbright Programme English Teaching Assistants (ETA), which aim to strengthen students' communicative skills in English (MOE, 2017). Nevertheless, all these efforts have proven to be of little help in improving students' English skills, especially in the area of speaking (Cambridge English, 2013).

Accordingly, the country took an unprecedented step by incorporating the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into the English curricula in all sectors of education, as articulated in the 2015-2025 Roadmap for English Language Teaching (Don, 2015; Pillai, 2021). Following such a move, the aspects of English language teaching, learning and assessment are then aligned to improve students' English proficiency. In 2017, Standard One and Form One students were the first cohorts to go through the CEFR-aligned curriculum (Lee et al., 2022), marking a significant departure from the previous English curriculum, which, among other things, over-privileged reading and writing over speaking and listening, and placed great emphasis on English testing and assessment.

At present, less than two years before the CEFR is concluded, its implementation is perceived with mixed reactions (Aziz, 2022; Chua, 2023: Lee et al., 2022). Although the grassroots have been positive about the CEFR, such approving, impressionistic expressions are far outweighed by concerns about the implementation of the CEFR in the Malaysian context and its effectiveness (Aziz, 2022; Chua, 2023; Hashim, 2022). In fact, the current state of CEFR implementation is far from ideal, ranging from 65% to 69% based on the observations of 980 English lessons in primary and secondary schools from 2018 to 2021 (Aziz, 2022). Likewise, Teach for Malaysia, the non-governmental organisation claimed that the significant chang-

es advocated in the CEFR have not yet occurred as upper primary and secondary students still face notorious difficulties in acquiring basic English skills (Chua, 2023). More worryingly, the percentage of students who have gone through the CEFR-aligned English curriculum throughout their secondary education have failed the Malaysian Certificate of Education in English, rising from 13.9% or 51,294 candidates in 2021 to 14.3% or 52.674 candidates in 2022 (Examination Syndicate, 2023). In addition, in 2021 alone, when the pioneering phase of the CEFR-aligned English curriculum began, more than 130,000 candidates were assessed at A2 (114,813), A1 (15,669) and Pre-A1 (6) and thus failed to reach the target level of B1 after their secondary education (Hashim, 2022).

Under these circumstances, it is a timely endeavour and to revisit the CEFR in order to highlight the challenges and frictions that have emerged in the course of its almost decade-long implementation. The initiative undertaken in this paper is indeed of utmost importance as it provides a rather mature and comprehensive analysis of the constraints and problems from the introduction of the CEFR to its dissemination and implementation in classroom practice. By implication, this would serve as an optimistic impetus to steer the modus operandi of the CEFR in a more promising, fruitful direction and increase the chances of its viability in the short term and its sustainability in the long term.

## Methodology

The researchers conducted a literature search sourced from Google Scholar. When searching for articles related to CEFR implementation, some key words such as CEFR in Malaysia, implementation of CEFR in Malaysia, challenges and frictions of CEFR in Malaysia were entered to guide and refine the selection process of the above articles. Altogether, there are 25 CEFR-related studies in the local context published between 2013 and 2023 chosen to be reviewed. Also, it is best to stress that the information relevant to the discourse on the CEFR in Malaysia was not only drawn from a single source but also from a number of CEFR-related webinars, national CEFR-related English examination reports and CEFR-related documents, further extending the works of previous researchers in a bid to provide possibly the most recent state of the CEFR implementation in Malaysia insofar as its challenges and frictions are concerned (Lee et al., 2022; Sahib & Stapa, 2022).

The decision to limit the geographical scope to the Malaysian context was purposefully made to highlight specific challenges and frictions that arguably posed an immediate threat to the implementation of the CEFR and to provide a focused view and critical understanding of the extent to which the CEFR has moved beyond its target audience and original mandate (Huei-Lein, 2020; Zarate & Alvarez, 2004). However, given the adoption of the CEFR is now an increasingly universal phenomenon, with the framework having been translated into more than 40 languages, it is inevitable not to draw significant parallels with other countries that are pursuing a similar educational agenda through the CEFR, hence references are made to the

CEFR implementation within and beyond Europe, such as Poland, Sweeden, Colombia, Thailand and China, among others (Baldwin & Apelgren, 2018; de Mejia, 2012; Foley, 2021; Franz & Teo, 2018; Komorowska, 2012; Poszytek, 2012; Vallax, 2011; Wu, 2012).

In this study, data were analysed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-level thematic analysis. In this sense, before finalising the themes from which the data obtained were derived, the researchers had gone through the earlier processes of transcribing the data, generating initial codes, searching for and reviewing these themes. These steps ensured that the final key themes were thoroughly explored, addressed and brought to the fore, as illustrated in the following section. It is also noteworthy to point out that while the final analyses revealed six key themes, given the limited space and the greatest number of recurring themes across the studies reviewed, only four salient themes are addressed and exemplified accordingly.

## Findings

### Theme 1: Top-down approach in the Malaysian education system

The fact that the implementation of the CEFR is inherently compulsory can be attributed to the top-down educational structure of the country. This is because education in Malaysia is administered at four different levels, namely the federal, state, district and school levels. Of all the levels, the federal level holds the most powerful role where it "has overall responsibility for policy and regulatory development under the leadership of the Director-General of Education" (Bush, et al., 2019, p. 1). This confirms the assertion, which is not limited to the Malaysian context, that decisions regarding language policy and planning are often made at the political level and are thus the unchallenged prerogative of politicians in power (Poszytek, 2012; Rahman et al., 2022). Having observed various countries operating within the same highly authoritarian, bureaucratic and tightly controlled centralised educational structure, it is undeniable that Malaysia, among other countries, has the greatest distance power in the world (Ismail, 2014; The World Bank, 2013). Compared to the undisputed power exercised at the federal level, it is more than obvious that there is virtually no comparable power at the school level, as teachers in particular are not expected to do anything other than implement policies dictated by the federal level (Bush et al., 2021; Castro, 2020).

Although the top-down approach to the administration of the education system has many advantages, such as consistency and standardisation, centralised assessment standards, effective provision of resources, and stability and order (Jin et al., 2017), there is no certainty that the application of the CEFR will have a profound impact, especially in terms of the effectiveness of its implementation (Bush et al., 2021). To date, there is ample evidence that teachers are struggling to implement and use the CEFR for the benefit of their students (Alih, et al., 2020; Uri & Aziz, 2018; Uri, 2023; Vallax, 2011). While there are a variety of factors that lead to the difficulties faced by teachers, it is important to bear in mind that the policy makers charged

with English education reform have not taken into account what teachers can contribute to the implementation of the CEFR, which directly shows the signs of a power imbalance inherent in the top-down education system being advocated (Poszytek, 2012). Concerning teachers' non-participation in educational reforms, to illustrate, Naidu (2013) lamented the decision to exclude teachers from attending the very first CEFR symposium in Malaysia, which would have been a perfect opportunity to educate and raise their awareness of what the CEFR is essentially about and involves. To this day, English teachers in some regions are still unaware of the CEFR as evidenced in their limited or, at best, rudimentary knowledge of the CEFR (Huei-Lin, 2020; Levy & Figueras, 2022; Marzaini et al., 2023b; Negishi, 2022; Pillai, 2021), and even if they are, there is a reasonable suspicion that their awareness correlates with their teaching practice (Alih, et al., 2020; Komorowska, 2012; Uri, 2023).

Looking into this issue more deeply, however, it is sensible to conclude the underlying reason behind teachers' lack of identification with the CEFR is the denying of their ownership as a result of the imposition of the enacted framework. Logically, when the implementation of an educational innovation is imposed, as is the case with the CEFR, instead of taking ownership of it, it is often merely symbolic without any real, profound change taking place (Baldwin & Apelgren, 2018; Bush, et al., 2021; Hallinger, 2010). Nonetheless, the scenario would have been different if a large number of teachers had been involved at the very onset of the reform as this would render them a sense of ownership and accountability (Piccardo et al., 2019) Besides, the lack of a sense of belonging can be traced back to the practice of hiring and consulting experts from abroad, in this case Cambridge English, to implement the CEFR in the local context (Sahib & Stapa, 2022). This in turn undermines or devalues the ability and agency of teachers to have their voices heard or be considered in the implementation of the CEFR (Castro, 2020). Furthermore, the issue of reliance on foreign consultancies has also been discussed in other countries pursuing a similar agenda and it was concluded that many are not comfortable with outsiders dictating the direction of their educational landscape, disregarding local needs and contexts (de Mejia, 2012; Franz & Teo, 2018).

**Theme 2: The CEFR cascade training**

The other major challenge hindering the implementation of the CEFR is the implementation of CEFR training based on a cascading training model (Alih et al., 2021; Aziz et al., 2018), echoing Khong and Saito's (2013) stance that it is problematic quantitatively and qualitatively Although resorting to such a model is less costly and capable of training large numbers of participants relatively quickly (Bett, 2016; Hayes, 2000) warns that the success of the cascading training model depends on several factors such as the training delivered must be experiential and reflective as well as it must allow room for reinterpretation, among others.

Given the importance of such training in developing CEFR-based knowledge and skills among CEFR practitioners, it is useful to examine shortcomings and inadequacies in the way CEFR cascade train-

ing was conducted a few years ago. In fact, it is prudent to remain cautious given the questionable quality and sufficiency of teacher training and teacher education (Ag-Ahmad et al., 2023; Adams & Kok, 2020; Bayuong & Hashim, 2023; Hishamudin & Kee, 2023; Rashid et al., 2016; Sulaiman, 2022). Before doing so, we will first describe the process of CEFR cascade training in order to gain an understanding of how it was operationalised. Generally, the training in question consisted of four stages. Stage 1 used 5 to 7 Cambridge English Super Trainers to train 25 national master trainers for each stage; Stage 1: Induction, Stage 2: Assessment, adaptation and design of learning materials, Stage 3: Introduction to the curriculum (pre-primary, primary and secondary) and Stage 4: Formative assessment (Aziz et al., 2018). Upon completion of the training, these designated National Master Trainers conducted similar courses for district trainers at Tier 2. Thereafter, District Trainers were responsible for conducting the same courses for School Reps in Tier 3. Finally, at Tier 4, the school representatives disseminated information to their colleagues who did not have the opportunity to attend the district level training; the mechanisms in the last two tiers, notwithstanding its ineffectiveness, have ironically been a longstanding practice in the Malaysian in-service teacher training context (Hardman & Rahman, 2014; Marzaini et al., 2023a; Othman & Senom, 2019; Sulaiman, 2022) which in a way is reflective of Malaysia's muti-layer bureaucracy (Bush et al., 2021).

However, the seemingly organised and systematic plan for the division of the levels and the focused content area did not translate well into implementation, with the exception of Tier 1 (Aziz et al., 2018; Sulaiman, 2022; Ong & Tajuddin, 2021). According to the findings of Aziz et al. (2018), the CEFR cascade training model was fraught with setbacks in Tier 2 and beyond, which can be summarised under a few themes, namely the competence of district trainers, lack of preparation, shortened training duration, lack of infrastructure and inequality of resources and materials, and lack of accessibility of training for rural teachers.

Of all the above limitations, the training seems to have suffered most from the lack of preparation and the incompetence of the trainers (Aziz et al., 2018; Marzaini et al.,2023b). To illustrate, in the case of Tier 3 in Phase 2: Assessment, adaptation and design of learning materials, the printed materials that were supposed to be given to the participants by the district trainers at the beginning of the training were only accessible at a later stage when the training had already taken place. Participants at the same stage in Phase 3: Curriculum Induction also experienced a similar hardship of unpreparedness when they were not given access to the printed materials in the form of handouts and slides until the second day of the training. Even more devastating was the fact that the curriculum documents such as Scheme of Works and Curriculum Standard, which are crucial for guiding teachers in the implementation of the CEFR, were unavailable during the training. In turn, the participants were confused but even more confused when the trainers were not able to explain the nature of the documents. In fact, the competencies of the district trainers had already been questionable during Phase 1: Induction, when they were not only well prepared and often left questions un-

answered, but dominated the entire discourse of the training, resulting in a one-sided, transmissive mode of interaction. Most of the time, the training was purely theory-oriented, leaving no room for experiential learning which compromised the training success rate (Hayes, 2000; Girardert, 2017).

Apart from this, the psychological aspect of teachers was not considered when they suffered from deprivation of facilities and time during training (Aziz et al., 2018). The former could not concentrate on what was being shown due to the unreliable projector LCD and the fact that some training materials were only accessible online caused inconvenience, especially for some teachers without Internet access. In addition, the tendency to shorten the duration of the training was the main reason for its ineffectiveness (Rashid, et al., 2016; Marzaini et al., 2023b). This was evident when the training for Stage 2: LMAD was shortened from five days to only one day. Similarly, despite the wide coverage of content and materials to be taught, the training for Stage 3: CI was conducted in only two days, which in itself is an indictment of teacher capacity building in CEFR-informed literacy. Of all the levels, English teachers at the final level suffered the fatal blow when there were instances where school representatives did not even bother to organise the in-service training, if at all, it was severely abbreviated and clearly inadequate for explaining in detail, let alone demonstrating the CEFR in concrete form (Marzaini et al., 2013a; Uri, 2018). Parallel to Othman and Senom (2019) as well as Marzaini et al. (2023b) , it is particularly disappointing that there was no follow-up or further support after the training was completed, leaving most teachers at the lowest level helpless to implement the CEFR in the classroom (Sulaiman, 2022) and indirectly decreasing its acceptance and uptake (Nuby et al., 2019; Ohlemann, et al., 2023) This partly confirms why the highest levels of concern about CEFR implementation among teachers were always measured at the lowest level of concern, either at Level 0 of Awareness, where they showed little concern or commitment to the CEFR (Yueh, 2018), or at Level 2 of Personal, meaning that they were not clear about the roles and responsibilities they had to play in the CEFR (Kee & Iksan, 2019).

In parallel, Ong and Tajuddin (2021) as well as Sulaiman (2022) noted that unequal access to quality in-service training is the inevitable consequence of CEFR cascade training. Firstly, they pointed out that the introduction of the cascade training model has created an inexorable imbalance in resources and materials between training at Level 1 and the other levels. While at Level 1, National Master Trainers were effectively trained by Cambridge English Super Trainers as they were trained over a sufficient period of 5 days and there was an ideal ratio of trainers (25) to Super Trainers (1-5), such conducive training was not reported at Level 2 and beyond in light of the issues discussed earlier, confirming the dwindling amount of time, materials, resources and facilities as training cascaded from Level 1 to Level 4. Secondly, cascade training was out of reach for some teachers in rural areas, mainly for logistical reasons, so they were kept in the dark about the CEFR. At the same time, the school administration even forbade them to attend the training in view of the shortage of teachers (Ong & Tajuddin, 2021).

### Theme 3: Teachers' English proficiency

One of the biggest challenges in implementing the CEFR is the undeniably low English proficiency of teachers. This is worrying as teachers' English proficiency is a crucial factor in the effectiveness of the implementation of the CEFR (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Canh, 2015; Foley, 2021; Hishamuddin & Kee, 2023). Even prior to that, it was deemed the most, if not, the frequently mentioned debilitating setback to the implementation of the Communicative Language Teaching upon which the CEFR was founded (Asraf, et al., 2019; Jeon & Yin, 2022; Yoon & Yoo, 2019). Already in the Pedagogical Standards for the Teaching of English published in 2011, teachers' English language skills are given utmost importance (Kepol, 2017). They are therefore referred to as Dimension 1, which precedes the other six dimensions consisting of Dimension 2: English Language Curriculum, Dimension 3: Learners, Dimension 4: Methodology, Dimension 5: Management and Dimension 6: Assessment. In this context, English teachers are expected to be able to use the language competently and to be a role model for learners, in addition to having a sound knowledge of the language. The importance of teachers' English language proficiency is also reiterated in the Roadmap 2015-2025, which explicitly states that "if children are to be proficient in English, then teachers of English must also be proficient in English" (Don, 2015, p.318).

Nonetheless, the 2013 Cambridge Baseline Study found that 70% of 61000 English teachers across the country were diagnosed at CEFR level B2 and below, particularly in the skill of speaking (Cambridge English, 2013). In view of the acute deficiencies, the MOE launched the Professional up-skilling of English Language Teachers (Pro- ELT) programme in 2013 for those who do not achieve CEFR level C1, which is the minimum requirement for English teachers in primary, secondary and post-secondary institutions (Sukri & Yunus, 2018). Under this programme, they will have to complete six micro-courses designed to provide participants with a holistic study experience. At the end of the programme, they will take an English test consisting mainly of the four areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking. To date, the programme has been in existence for almost 10 years and in the course of its implementation, there have been striking changes, notably the shift from recruiting instructors from abroad to local experts, the reduction of learning hours from 240 to 180 hours, the duration of the programme itself from 12 to five months and much more (ELTC, 2023: Sukri & Yunus, 2017). Even though currently great strides have been made in raising teachers' English proficiency to C1 or even C2 (Abdullah & Alias, 2017), it must be noted that quite a number of the English teachers concerned have an unchanged level of English, mostly at B2 (Sukri, 2018). More worryingly, in recent years the number of teachers achieving the target CEFR level of C1 has fallen from 53.2% in 2020 to 49.89% in 2021 (Education Performance & Delivery Unit, 2020; 2021).

Against the background of the declining trend in teachers' language proficiency, this raises legitimate doubts about the effectiveness of the CEFR in improving students' English language skills (Rahman & Singh, 2021) as both linguistic competence and pedagogical competences are implicated in the CEFR fram-

ing (Smith & Battistuzzi, 2023). Moreover, as pointed out in the introductory part of the article, there is sufficient evidence that students' English proficiency has still not reached its intended target Worse, the number of students failing English is increasing, despite having received a total of 11 years of formal English instruction in primary and secondary schools (Hashim, 2022: Examination Syndicate, 2023). While the unsatisfactory performance of students in English cannot be solely attributed to teachers' inadequate English skills, as other contextual and attitudinal factors may also play a role (Musa et al., 2012), it should not be forgotten that the quality of English teachers bring to the classroom has always been given great importance in the success of English teaching (Don, 2015; Kepol, 2017). With the integration of the CEFR into the English curriculum, this has further increased the importance of teachers' operational English skills, as teaching English aligned to the CEFR requires a fundamental change from what teachers have been used to for many years (Levy & Figueras, 2022; Sahib & Stapa, 2023). In this sense, teachers entrusted with the CEFR-aligned English curriculum are expected to create an authentic English language environment that is oriented towards meaning and oral communication skills, rather than form-oriented teaching that is highly dependent on teachers' proficiency in the target language (Foley, 2021; Nagai et al., 2020). For this reason, they are also responsible for providing the widest possible input that reflects authentic language use (Ashton, 2014; Nunan,2003). At the same time, learners are encouraged to actively participate in activities by performing actions to complete the task assigned to them, emphasising that they act to learn rather than learn to act, which is in line with the action-oriented approach of the CEFR (Piccardo & North, 2019; Scott & East, 2012).

In contrast, the conditions in CEFR-aligned classrooms have not changed, if at all, as teaching remains ex cathedra, which in turn provides almost no space for active learning (Aziz, 2022; Chua, 2023), similar to what was observed in previous reforms (Rahman, 2014; Doss & Nair, 2018). Even more tragically, students do not use English in their classroom activities (Aziz, 2022; Chua, 2023). Therefore, the expectation that the CEFR would promote students' communicative competence is rather an illusion. Although these deficits cannot be entirely attributed to teachers' low English proficiency, the fact that English teachers are the formal source of input that significantly influences the acquisition of English for a large proportion of students in the ESL context cannot be overemphasised (Musa et al., 2013; Sukri & Yunus, 2018). Suffice it to say that mastery of English is never a condition, but a DNA that must be present in members of the English teaching community in order to decisively improve English teaching as a whole.

**Theme 4: Provision for instructional materials**

The other noted setback to the effective implementation of the CEFR, at least in Malaysia, is due to the provision of teaching materials. Indeed, teaching materials are one of the most important factors that influence the success of an educational innovation (Carless, 2013; Moonen et al., 2013). In the context studied, the

MOE mandated the use of imported textbooks loaded with Western values after the implementation of the CEFR because there was no expertise in the country to develop materials aligned to the CEFR (Uri & Aziz, 2018). As expected, such a move has generated more headwinds than praise over the past six years. According to Mohammed et al (2021), reliance on foreign textbooks exacerbates tensions in English language learning, as students had already had difficulty coping with locally produced textbooks even before the CEFR-aligned curriculum came into effect.

Several studies have been conducted on the feasibility of foreign textbooks, particularly on teachers' perceptions, use and competencies in adapting the prescribed materials (Ahamat & Kabilan, 2022; Chong & Yamat, 2021; Ishak & Mohammad, 2018; Mohammed et al., 2021; Sulaiman, 2022; Yassin & Yamat, 2021). In relation to teachers' perceptions of this matter, Ishak and Mohammad (2018) found that most of them perceived a clear disconnect between what they taught in the classroom and what their students experienced in their daily lives or in their immediate environment. The helplessness to relate to what the students are supposed to learn had led to increased anxiety and frustration in learning English. Teachers themselves found it difficult to relate to the elements of Western culture, let alone students who had limited knowledge to understand anything from their context. In this context, participants in Mohammed et al.'s (2021) study expressed their disapproval of the content promoted in these textbooks, claiming that it was culturally and practically inappropriate. For example, students were asked to respond to four seasons typical of European countries, to deal with a rather taboo topic such as Valentine's Day, or to imagine the beaches of Australia and Canada in a distant, isolated setting.

Given the challenges posed by the aforementioned imported textbooks, it is not surprising that Chong and Yamat (2021) concluded that more than 75% of primary school English teachers either used prescribed teaching materials sparingly or developed their own curriculum-aligned materials from time to time. Meanwhile, Yassin and Yamat (2021) found that in adapting CEFR-aligned resources to students' needs, teachers had an alarmingly low level of adaptation knowledge as they were unsure of the need for adaptation, raising doubts about the effectiveness of the training they attended on adapting learning materials. On the other hand, Ahamat and Kabilan (2022) revealed a rather disturbing observation that adaptation practices were generally not well received by education officials and school supervisors. This is at odds with the ethos of the CEFR, which welcomes change and development and is particularly responsive to the needs of language learners (Trim, 2011). As a result, students' learning was affected when teachers continued their teaching by fully adhering to the presentation of the material, even though they were aware of the difficulties their students faced (Sulaiman, 2022).

More devastatingly, the provision of instructional materials is not the same for all educational sectors brought about by the CEFR, with post-secondary education being the most affected until early 2023, when the PSELFC was finally released (MOE, 2020). In other words, documents that were considered integral to

the implementation of the CEFR in the local context were not available for post-secondary education. In fact, in accord with the findings of Singh et al. (2015) and corroborated by Don et al. (2021), post-secondary education was the only sector that did not receive a curriculum roll-out that included content and learning standards, schemes of work, lesson plans and procedures, resources, cross-curricular elements, differentiation strategies and teacher feedback, hence repudiating a sense of order, security, purpose and direction (Kriaučiūnienė et al., 2020). Despite the publication of PSELFC, the critical aspects mentioned above were not covered except for content and learning standards. This means that the availability of PSELFC may not be able to compensate for adequate implementation of the CEFR, as the mere issuing of guidelines is far from sufficient to achieve the desired effects in teaching practice particularly (Khong & Saito, 2013; Negishi, 2022; Savski & Prabjandee, 2022; Wu, 2012). In other words, merely adapting to nothing more than a cosmetic change cannot prevent the likelihood of possible impacts. One is that they will cling to the prevailing old teaching and learning practices that focus primarily on assessment, especially when the training provided is about introducing a new assessment aligned to the CEFR. The other worrying fact is that they may not be able to carry out teaching practices that are coherent with the principles of the CEFR, if at all, only superficially and, in parallel, may not be able to equip them with skills that are crucial for their studies at university, given the focus on the micro-aspect of test-taking and assessment per se. Finally, as also noted in the 2013 Cambridge Baseline Study, reliance on commercial reference books that target student performance on the test will be a prevailing problem (Cambridge English, 2013). All the potential risks identified remain, unless that the provision of teaching materials is guaranteed, especially at the post-secondary level, as it is at the other levels of education.

## Conclusion

In summary, this paper has succeeded in revealing a variety of challenges and frictions associated with the implementation of the CEFR. These range from the centralised, hierarchical top-down education management system to the provision for teaching materials. Only by explicitly identifying these challenges, which are symptomatic of the factors hindering the implementation of the CEFR in its broadest sense, can specific measures and interventions be formulated to improve the seemingly compromised implementation of the CEFR in the context under study. Among the insights the paper aims to convey and reinforce is that in any attempt at educational innovation, there is no guarantee that the implementation process will go as planned.

For this reason, it is of great importance to reiterate the point that that the CEFR implementation is never an event that can be completed in a short period of time and therefore no interference is required. Rather, it is a process that not only takes a considerable amount of time, but also requires a high degree of preparation, monitoring, evaluation and rectification to achieve the intended results. A key prerequisite for the successful application of the CEFR is therefore that all stakeholders, and not only teachers, should no

longer view the implementation of the CEFR as an event, but as a process. If this change in mindset, accompanied by a stronger sense of trust and commitment on the part of implementers, comes to the fore, it will not only facilitate the implementation of the CEFR but also avoid the prevailing practice of making hasty judgements that lead to the abrupt termination or abolition of the CEFR, as was the case with its predecessors in the past, thus trapping it in a vicious circle of trial and error with little chance of positive outcomes in sight.

In addition to this change in perspective, it is crucial for all involved to develop a high level of tolerance towards failure. In recent years, the ability to tolerate failure has been shown to be particularly lacking when educational reforms - not least those related to the teaching and learning of English - go awry. Instead of addressing the shortcomings, many of these reforms have been prematurely abandoned, partly due to an uncompromising attitude towards failure. In this regard, it is crucial to be equipped with tolerance and forbearance in the face of failures and imponderables in the course of reform implementation and to look beyond the product-oriented paradigm. Failures or setbacks should instead be seen as tangible evidence of delayed progress and thus as opportunities to be seized so that desirable outcomes slowly but surely emerge in the foreseeable future.

Last but not least, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this conceptual paper. Firstly, the challenges and frictions highlighted are mainly in the Malaysian context, which may not be generalisable or transferable to other settings, and therefore caution should be exercised when interpreting the findings reported here. Secondly, the data presented are from only one source, Google Scholar, yet some of which are found indexed in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. Therefore, the information on this topic is neither exhaustive nor comprehensive, but it is undeniably an invaluable starting point for a deeper, more nuanced exploration of CEFR implementation, which is fraught with pitfalls. Finally, the scope of the article is limited to the challenges and frictions of implementing the CEFR. Other equally important aspects of CEFR implementation worth exploring are left out. Hence, future studies could probe into, for example, post-secondary English teachers' concerns over the CEFR, their level of CEFR use and teaching practices in operationalising the CEFR in the classrooms.

## Author contributions

Writing—original draft preparation, S.I.A.S.; writing—review and editing, S.I.A.S.., M.A. S., A.S. D. P.; supervision, A. M. Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting findings of this study are available within the article.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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