

## Can-Do descriptors – Realigning English Language Curriculum at Higher Education Institution to CEFR

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### Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) has become the standard used to describe and evaluate students' command of a second or foreign language. It is an internationally acknowledged standard language proficiency framework which many countries have adopted such as China, Thailand, Japan and Taiwan. Malaysia Ministry of Education is aware and realise the need for the current English language curriculum to be validated as to reach the international standard as prescribed by the CEFR. The implementation of CEFR has begun at primary and secondary level since 2017 and now higher education institutions are urged to align their English Language Curriculum to CEFR as part of preparation in receiving students who have been taught using CEFR-aligned curriculum at schools by year 2022. This critical reflection article elucidates the meticulous processes that we have embarked on in realigning our English Language Curriculum to the standard and requirements of CEFR. The paper concludes with a remark that the alignment of the English curriculum at the university needs full support from the management in ensuring that all the stakeholders are fully prepared, informed and familiar with the framework.

**Keywords:** *CEFR, English language curriculum, Higher Education institutions, military university*

### Introduction

Since its inception, the Center for Language or Pusat Bahasa (PB) has been an academic center responsible for managing Language courses at the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM). As early as 2006, English courses offered were in accordance with the curriculum set by the University of Technology Malaysia (UTM). In line with the latest developments and requirements, there have been several improvements made to the language courses offered over time. The Language Centre runs English language courses at Foundation, Diploma and Degree levels. All these courses are made compulsory for all students and become part of the conditions for graduation. In order to fulfill the national aspiration of aligning the English curriculum to Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR), the higher education institutions in Malaysia are urged to revamp and revise their English curriculum and to establish a holistic ecosystem that supports English language learning inside and outside campus. In 2017 the

Ministry spearheaded the effort in aligning the national English curriculum based on the CEFR. One of the primary goals of this bench-marking is to increase the marketability of graduates after they graduate. Fung & Min (2016) in their study expressed concern about the students' ability to master English well despite being exposed to the language for 11 years at primary and secondary level. The graduates' inability and low achievement in mastering English are perhaps due to their own reluctance in using the language outside the lecture rooms. The problem persists when these former high school students enter higher education institution and they still maintain the same attitude of refusing to use the English language or just being plain ignorant on the importance of the language. Thus, even after three to five years completing their studies in a university, many graduates still fail to improve their job prospects because of their own inability to communicate in English.

English language is promoted for its utilitarian value for employment, technology and globalisation (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014), thus Malaysia's Ministry of Education has continuously reformed English Language Education (ELE) for the past 30 years (Azman, 2016). The effort was first begun in 1982 with the introduction of Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary School or KBSR by placing emphasis on communicative language teaching (CLT) rather than grammatical knowledge. Nunan (2003) stated that in a CLT classroom, learning is focussed on contextualised language use and student-centred based. In order to align and comprehensively review the national English language curriculum to CEFR, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has collaborated with Cambridge English (CE). Before reviewing the English curriculum, CE has conducted The Cambridge Baseline Study 2013 for them to evaluate the current state of English language proficiency among students in Malaysia (Zuraidah Mohd Don et al., 2015). Upon the completion of this study, MOE and CE agreed to sign a five-year consultancy programme "which includes the incorporation of the CEFR into creating cognizance, structural preparation, implementation and monitoring of change including the assessment of its impact (Ahmad Afip, Hamid, & Renshaw, 2019, p. 2). The product of this collaboration was first put into action in January 2018 as CEFR was implemented for the first time in school's English language classroom for Primary 1 and Form 1 students.

With the realisation of this significant national aspiration and agenda to improve the standard of English Language proficiency among Malaysian students, the higher education institutions are urged to review the English language curriculum by aligning it to CEFR. This paper

is written to review the processes of aligning the English language curriculum at a military university and determining the influence of CEFR from the aspects of learning outcomes, learning materials and assessments.

## Curriculum Review through the Lens of CEFR

CEFR is an international standard used to assess language proficiency. CEFR describes language proficiency based on the 6 Level Scale, from A1 to C2. Students are classified into three specific groups: Basic Users (A1 and A2), Independent Users (B1 and B2) and Advanced Users (C1 and C2) (see Fig. 1). The language proficiency of a person is determined through four components of language skills: Reception, Production, Interaction and Mediation (Council of Europe, 2017). These scales are used “to profile ability” (Council of Europe, 2017, p. 53) as learners are engaged not only actively but also meaningfully in using the language.

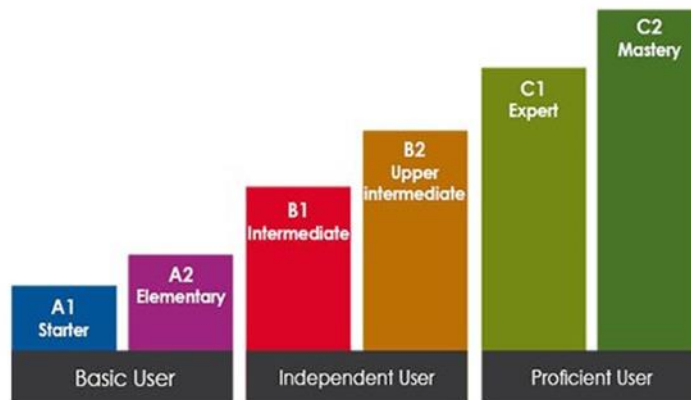


Figure 1: CEFR 6-Level Scale

The CEFR standard does not apply only to English for there are 40 languages of the world that have adopted CEFR Standard in defining one’s level of language proficiency. CEFR enables and facilitates educators and language testers to evaluate their students’ language achievement. Apart from that, the framework also can provide a transparent, coherent, and comprehensive basis for discussing language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. CEFR promoters believe that the framework makes it possible to compare tests and examinations across languages and national

boundaries. The impact of CEFR is significant in a sense that the framework is perceived to be a “neutral reference” and tool needed to coordinate the objectives of education at all levels (Martyniuk & Noijons, 2007). It is undeniable that a valuable characteristic of the framework is the possibility it offers to communicate more easily about language competences and proficiencies. Another advantage of the CEFR is that it might help to assess the language proficiencies of students in an internationally comparable manner. Within the context of Malaysian education, the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) was set up in 2013 to focus on the foundation and structural changes to help raise the standard of English in the country as well as advising the government on the appropriate language policy (Uri & Aziz, 2018). This marks the birth of Roadmap for English Language Education Reform in Malaysia 2015-2025. Key to the road map is the alignment of Malaysia’s English Language Education System to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) — an international standard that focuses on producing learners who can communicate and interact in any language, particularly in English. CEFR was chosen to be the framework of reference as part of the Ministry’s initiatives to boost the level of education in the country.

The core view of language learning in the CEFR is that learning a language is essentially a process of learning to use language to perform communicative acts – either in social contexts with others or in private contexts in communicating with ourselves. The process of engaging with texts through spoken or written requires language users to draw on a range of communicative language competences (linguistic, socio-linguistic, pragmatic) to handle communication with flexibility in a variety of contexts. Performing tasks in different contexts, to the extent that these tasks are not routine or automatic and subject to different conditions and constraints will require learners to use different strategies for their successful completion. It is this broad conception of language use and emergent communicative competences that underpins the action-oriented approach to language teaching and learning embodied in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2017). In a study by North & Jones (2009), they forwarded the notion that CEFR is designed to “stimulate reflection and discussion” (p. 22). Therefore, apart from being the standard benchmarking, CEFR aims to; (a) establish a common meta-language when dealing with objectives and assessment, (b) encourage practitioners to reflect on their current practice, learning needs, setting objectives and progress tracking, (c) agree upon common reference points (Baldwin & Apelgren, 2018). In order for learners to engage with the English language meaningfully, educators need to ensure that they

equip the learners with meaningful contexts through themes of communication which will enable learners to use the language by employing strategies of communication throughout the four language skills as mentioned earlier (Council of Europe, 2017). Similar view is expressed by Baldwin & Apelgren (2018) who maintained that communicative language learning triggers learners' cognitive process as they question and reason in an inductive manner. The learners are expected to continuously aware of their learning experiences as “they construe, reflect and reconstruct meanings” (p. 21).

## **Aligning English Language Curriculum to CEFR**

In aligning the English Language curriculum at NDUM to CEFR, all the English language instructors and lecturers were involved at various stages. The process of alignment began with a familiarization course for two days conducted by a Master Trainer from University Malaya. During the familiarization course, all faculty members were introduced to the principles of CEFR and how CEFR provides the international standard in determining the language proficiency of learners. Before reviewing the curriculum, faculty members were required to conduct a baseline study in order to identify the expectations and needs of stakeholders when it comes to English Language proficiency among the student. Survey was carried out to alumni and interviews were carried out with the stakeholders. The Baseline study reveals the following:

### 1. Baseline study with Experts from Industry

56.4% “strongly agree” while 27.9% of respondents “agree” that English is important in the world of work.

On the importance of speaking skills, 89.2% stated that communication skills in English are very important.

A total of 79.3% of respondents agreed that their employees had trouble speaking English, with 47% lack writing skills in English, 18.3% have poor listening skills and 7.3% have poor reading skills.

### 2. Baseline study with the Alumni

70% of respondents agreed that there was a weak relationship between subjects that they have learned at NDUM to their field of work.

Over 40% of respondents stated that reading skills in English was very much needed in the workplace.

43% of respondents said they were very proficient in writing and speaking in English (basic) at work.

Over 30% of respondents stated that English courses taken at NDUM have helped them to complete their workplace assignments.

3. Baseline study with the stakeholders.

Faculty of Medicine – The faculty perceives the existing syllabus does not prepare students for international engagement. As future doctors, their students need reinforcement in their speaking, reading comprehension and writing skills.

Faculty of Defense Studies & Management - The faculty perceives the existing English language syllabus does not meet the competitive demands of the job market. To merely engage the students with 2 semesters of learning English across their 3- year degree programme is insufficient.

4. Faculty of Engineering – The faculty perceives their students writing skill is satisfactory, however their speaking skill need urgent improvement. As engineering students, they are required to use English language in every aspect of their job as part of their compliance to the Engineering Accreditation Council (EAC).

5. Faculty of Defense Science & Technology – The faculty perceives that the current English language syllabus is sufficient to equip the students with the necessary skills in English language, however, their students need to be groomed for presentation sessions as to prepare them for international conferences and exhibitions.

6. Centre for Defense Foundation Studies – The Centre perceives the existing syllabus is sufficient to prepare students for the MUET, however, the language instructors need to improve their teaching pedagogy in class in order to cultivate higher confidence level amongst the students in using English language.

Based on the feedback received, the Language Centre in NDUM has re-designed the English language syllabuses as well as a holistic plan to make NDUM an English language-friendly campus. All courses and activities conducted by the Language Centre will be divided into the THREE (3) main areas:

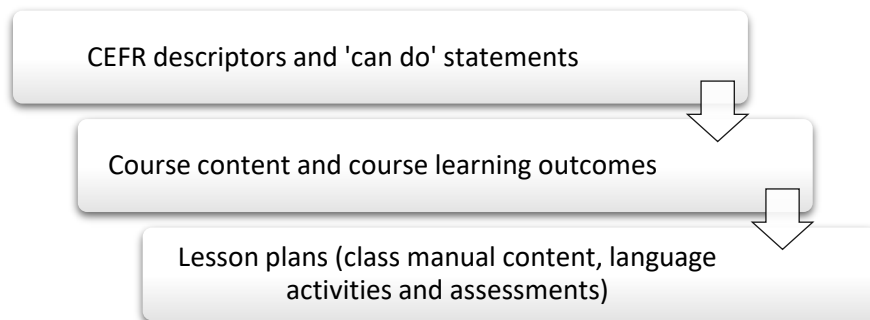
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- a. *Core & Audit Courses* - Subjects offered to NDUM students as University Core Subjects in their academic programmes.
- b. *Support Courses* - Short courses offered by the Centre on a regular basis and to be conducted periodically.
- c. *Supporting Activities* - Supporting English language activities organized to activate and promote the use of English within and outside campus.

**CEFR- Bringing the Framework into the Classroom**

This section shall demonstrate the process that the Language Centre has adopted when aligning the syllabus on one of its core courses. One of the core English subjects in NDUM is *Al-Ghazali Dialogue: English Communication*. The course focuses on building students’ capability in English language to discuss, argue and defend their thoughts based on selected case studies. They will be also taught the techniques of producing good spoken discourses (oral presentation, speech and briefing). The course incorporates aspects of confidence building, visual aids preparation and audience handling. Through this course, the students are required to deliver speeches, whilst simultaneously trained to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (NDUM, 2019).

In order to realign the syllabus to CEFR, the English Language Unit team refers to CEFR Can-do descriptors in finding the relevant scales and descriptors to be adapted into the course according to the targeted of students’ proficiency level. For students in higher education, they are aspired to reach CEFR B2 by the end of their degree programme (Education, 2015, bk. The English Language Roadmap). The process of alignment follows the steps below as proposed by Cambridge English:



*Figure 2: Steps in adapting CEFR Framework*

Upon examining the syllabus of *Al-Ghazali Dialogue: English Communication*, the following figure illustrates how the course is now aligned to CEFR.

<b>CEFR Descriptor: ‘Can do statement’</b>
<b>Reading for Information and Argument at B2 Level</b>
Can understand articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular stances or viewpoints.
Can recognise when a text provides factual information and when it seeks to convince readers of something.
Can recognise different structures in discursive text: contrasting arguments, problem-solution presentation and cause-effect relationships.
<b>Overall Spoken Production at B2 Level</b>
Can give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail.
Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field of interest, expanding and supporting ideas with subsidiary points and relevant examples.
<b>Sustained Monologue: Giving Information</b>
Can communicate complex information and advice on the full range of matters related to his/her occupational role.
Can communicate detailed information reliably.
Can give a clear, detailed description of how to carry out a procedure.
<b>Sustained Monologue: Putting A Case (E.G. In A Debate)</b>
Can develop an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail.
Can develop a clear argument, expanding and supporting his/her points of view at some length with subsidiary points and relevant examples.
Can construct a chain of reasoned argument.
Can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.



(Source: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment Companion Volume with New Descriptors, 2017)



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Course Learning Outcomes (CLO)		
	Before CEFR-aligned	After CEFR-aligned
CLO1	Identify correctly the strategies for effective communication, presentation skills, and literary elements.	Demonstrate understanding of case studies by locating the issues/arguments and stance of the authors.
CLO2	Apply appropriate strategies for effective communication, presentation skills, and analytical tools to the selected case studies effectively.	Apply appropriate strategies in relaying detailed and complex information for effective communication, presentation skills, and analytical tools to the selected case studies effectively.
CLO3	Evaluate different issues in the selected case studies critically.	Evaluate different issues/arguments critically and systematically by highlighting significant points, and relevant supporting details.

Sample of CEFR-aligned Lesson Plan		
Week 4	Case Study I - ‘Find, Fix, Finish & Exploit – Counter Insurgency Operations’	Group discussion – Using appropriate analytical tools to evaluate the strength and weaknesses of the military mission and finding solutions to the case.

(Source: *Class Manual Al-Ghazali Dialogue: English Communication – Unit 4, p. 37-47*)

*Figure 3: Bringing CEFR into the classroom*

In aligning the syllabus to CEFR, the team has adopted four primary principles of CEFR key messages as proposed by Cambridge English in the Cascade Training. Course designers are advised to contextualized the context according to local flavours or specialized fields i.e. military context. Focus should be on the outcomes of learning with the intention of preparing and developing the learners for purposeful communication and effective language skills.

In addition, to support formal learning in classroom, the Language Centre is also planning to organize supplementary academic English courses as well as English language activities outside classroom. Enrichment English language activities are strongly urged to support learners’ language skills. As outlined by the Ministry in ‘A Handbook for Learning English and Beyond’ (2019), a holistic approach is needed to learning English by connecting learning experiences via classrooms and virtual spaces. In line with CEFR that nurtures learner-centred Education, students may find

the activities beyond classroom to be meaningful and perhaps may enhance their Employability Skills as outlined in the *National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017*;

Personal skill	People skills	Workplace Skills	Applied Knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrity/Honesty</li> <li>• Responsibility and Reliability</li> <li>• Adaptability</li> <li>• Self-motivation</li> <li>• Self and Time management</li> <li>• A willingness to learn</li> <li>• Professionalism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Networking</li> <li>• Intercultural awareness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem solving</li> <li>• Decision-making</li> <li>• Planning and organising</li> <li>• Customer focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job specific skills</li> <li>• Technical skills</li> <li>• ICT Skills</li> <li>• Analytical and critical thinking</li> <li>• Creative thinking</li> </ul>

(Source: A Handbook for Learning English and Beyond, 2019)

Figure 4: Employability Skills

Activities such as Public Speaking via Speaker’s Corner, Debate Competition, English Language Enhancement Programme and Al-Ghazali Camp are some of the language activities conducted beyond classroom that may sustain learners’ learning of English Language and at the same time promotes “corporation and interaction and challenge students to become actively engaged, independent and lifelong learners” (p.9). Part of these activities support the Ministry’s vision in establishing the Ecosystem of English Language Learning (EcoELL) at higher education institutions, in which the students continue learning English at various “engagement sites” (Zuraidah Mohd Don, 2019. p. 22).

### Issues and Challenges in CEFR Implementation

The first challenge in implementing CEFR-aligned curriculum in higher institution is limited training sessions received by the instructors from the Ministry. Unlike school teachers at primary and secondary levels, the Ministry of Education has collaborated with Cambridge English to re-train the teachers on the manners of delivering the curriculum to learners from pre-school to higher secondary. The teachers were trained at various levels, beginning with familiarization induction course conducted either by Cambridge English experts, National Master Trainers or District Trainers. However, at higher education, the language instructors do not receive direct training from Cambridge English. Only selected numbers of instructors are required to attend

familiarization session with Master Trainers from the English Language Training Centre. The training sessions also are compressed within 2-days maximum per session. The lack of training hours undeniably does hamper the instructors' thorough understanding on CEFR. Some instructors may still remain in the dark on what CEFR is all about, thus show lack of interest in learning to adopt the framework (Farehah, 2017). All universities have different ways and methods in delivering English subjects. Thus, the ministry does not want to interfere with the university's autonomy in deciding how they want to run and manage the different English language courses. Therefore, the responsibility of relaying the information received during training falls into these selected few instructors, which there could be a possibility that the information would be miscommunicated or misinformed.

Second, in NDUM, students are only allocated 4 -credit hour (6 hours per week over two semesters) to complete their English language courses throughout their 3-5 year of study. This allocation is way too little for students to achieve mastery of the language as demanded by industry players. The students in higher education are aspired to achieve CEFR B2 level, a Vantage Upper Immediate User (Education, 2015, bk. The Roadmap). However, for learners to move up from one level to another requires minimum number of guided contact hours. CEFR proposed for learners to reach B2 level, they need to be engaged with the language between 500-600 hours (Council of Europe, 2017). This is the biggest challenge for all language instructors at NDUM in equipping learners to use English language effectively within the allocated 4-credit hour.

Third, despite having highly qualified instructors to teach English, however, many seasoned instructors are still comfortable with teacher-directed learning. Most lessons are teacher-centred based with occasional attempts to move towards learner autonomy as proposed by OBE (Outcome Based Education). The instructors still remain as “the role model for proficiency and competency” (Education, 2015, p. 259). Even at higher education institution, students are not able to break free from the mind-set to solely depending on the instructors to be responsible for their learning. Regardless, the students coming from Generation X, digital natives that are so eloquent with the usage of latest gadgets and technology, however this trait does not translate into an English language classroom as they are still reserved and less confident to communicate in English.

Finally, due to lack of unified English language curriculum, University English instructors are required to design their own teaching materials to be used in respective English language courses. Some may adopt or adapt textbooks and coming up with original materials to support

learning in class. These materials are not validated or certified to a certain standard, thus it is proposed in *The Roadmap (2015)* for instructors to ensure all their learning materials are aligned and benchmarked to international standard i.e CEFR. Due to time constraints and hampered by other responsibilities, instructors do not have sufficient time to design their teaching materials according to the required standard of CEFR. However, Cambridge English acknowledge the limited time at hand in designing teaching and learning materials yet they still encourage for instructors to develop their contents according to the course outline and the context within the capacity of resources and facilities available and be compliant to the copyright of materials (Education, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The pro-active move by the Ministry of Education in adapting CEFR to standardise and benchmark the overall English proficiency of learners to a recognised international standard is perceived with variant views. Some regard it to be an ‘expensive’ investment by the Ministry as they expect to see the return of the investment almost immediately. But many are optimistic about the move and regards it as the much-needed shift of paradigm in the national English language curriculum. There are, of course, hurdles and challenges to overcome such as competency of the instructors and diverse proficiency levels of the students. These challenges can be managed as long as all stakeholders are properly informed of any latest amendments and in-sync with the implementation on the reform of the English Language Education in Malaysia. The university management needs to give their undivided support to the effort of the Language Centres and Faculties in establishing a holistic approach to learn English as proposed in *A Handbook for Learning English and Beyond: A Holistic Learning Environment in Higher Education (2019)*. Higher education institutions need to share similar aspiration as outlined in the *Roadmap* by reviewing the credit hours for English language learning and to set the standard of having language instructors with a minimum qualification of CEFR C1. Furthermore, all English language instructors should be given the opportunity to recertify their qualifications as they are needed to be at par with the latest development in regard to English language learning. Apart from the instructors, the learners too need to play their role by empowering themselves to be autonomous rather waiting to be spoon-fed during lessons. Learners must be able to recognize their own ability and proficiency level as they conduct self-assessment on their level of English. They have to

determine the steps that they need to take in order to improve their English as well as to attain the necessary skills that will be useful during employment. With the establishment of holistic English learning environment on campus, students will be able to form a portfolio which documented their university English language experiences and achievements.

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