CERF Speaking Tests: Students' Take on Career Impact

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ABSTRACT

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) serves as a key standard for assessing language proficiency, providing a structured and uniform evaluation system. This study explores ESL students' perspectives on the significance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests. Data were gathered from 105 diploma students at UiTM Sarawak and UiTM Melaka through an online questionnaire. The results indicate strong student support for incorporating CEFR scores in academic settings, recognizing its effectiveness in highlighting language strengths and weaknesses. However, students perceived its relevance to employers as considerably lower, suggesting that CEFR is valued more for academic purposes than for professional use. This disconnect underscores the need to bridge the gap between academic assessments and industry expectations. Overall, the study emphasizes the value of CEFR-based assessments for both students and educational institutions while proposing ways to enhance their applicability in the job market.

Keywords: Importance of CEFR; english proficiency and employability; ESL teaching and learning; speaking test.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globally connected landscape, strong communication skills are essential, particularly in higher education. Within language learning programs, discussion skills play a crucial role in fostering meaningful engagement, enhancing critical thinking, and strengthening active listening. For English as a Second Language (ESL) students, effective communication is not only key to academic achievement but also an asset for future career opportunities, where English proficiency is often a requirement (Awang & Kasuma, 2008).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has emerged as a widely recognized standard in language education, offering a structured approach to assessing proficiency across various skills and levels (Council of Europe, 2001). While it has been extensively adopted by educational institutions and language professionals worldwide (Brunfaut & Harding, 2020; Zaki & Darmi, 2021), research on students' perspectives regarding CEFR-aligned speaking tests remains limited. Little is known about how students perceive the significance of these assessments in both academic and professional contexts.

This study aims to explore diploma students' perceptions of CEFR-aligned speaking tests by addressing the following objectives:

RO1: To examine the extent to which students acknowledge the importance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests in their academic studies.

RO2: To explore students' perspectives on the relevance of these assessments for their future careers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CEFR-aligned speaking assessments in Academic Environments

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was originally introduced to standardize language education across Europe, offering a clear and consistent system for assessing language proficiency (Council of Europe, 2001). Its core purpose is to support reflection, communication, and collaboration in educational settings while emphasizing proficiency across key language skills—listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing (Darmi et al., 2017). The framework classifies these competencies into six levels, ranging from A1 (Breakthrough) to C2 (Mastery) (Council of Europe, 2001).

Over the years, CEFR's impact has extended beyond Europe and is now widely implemented in regions such as the USA, South America, and Asia (Jones et al., 2016). In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education incorporated CEFR into the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025, reinforcing the country's commitment to improving English language education (Jones et al., 2016). This widespread adoption highlights CEFR's adaptability, making it a valuable framework for language learning in non-English-speaking nations (Jones et al., 2016).

Given its growing significance, particularly in academic institutions where English is the medium of instruction, research has increasingly examined CEFR's role in speaking assessments. Since speaking is a crucial aspect of language proficiency, understanding how CEFR-aligned speaking tests are integrated into educational settings is essential for enhancing students' learning experiences (Razali & Latif, 2019). Additionally, Shak and Read (2021) suggest aligning oral group test scoring criteria with the CEFR scale in English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses. This alignment helps instructors more effectively evaluate students' interactional skills in formal discussions.

Student involvement in CEFR-aligned speaking assessments

In Malaysia, the adoption of CEFR in education has mainly focused on aligning teaching methodologies and assessments with its standards. However, there has been minimal attention on how students engage with and comprehend CEFR, particularly regarding speaking evaluations. Studies suggest that while educators are well-acquainted with CEFR, they often struggle to effectively communicate its significance to students (Uri, 2023; Nawai & Said, 2020). This highlights the need for greater student involvement in CEFR-aligned assessments to optimize their language learning experiences and outcomes.

Student engagement in CEFR-aligned speaking tests plays a crucial role in influencing motivation and performance. Glover (2011) found that Turkish university students who had a solid understanding of CEFR descriptors demonstrated greater confidence and fluency in speaking. This suggests that when students are aware of CEFR's structure and relevance, they are better prepared to engage with speaking assessments and enhance their language proficiency. Similarly, Despagne and Grossi (2011) reported that implementing CEFR-based instruction at a Mexican university improved learner autonomy and overall language skills. Likewise, Nakatani (2012) observed that CEFR-driven communication strategies significantly

boosted Japanese students' English proficiency in interactive tasks.

However, research in Portugal by Albuquerque (2022) revealed that while students were familiar with CEFR levels, many lacked detailed knowledge of its objectives and descriptors. This suggests that although students recognize CEFR in language assessments, they often struggle to grasp its specific benchmarks, indicating a need for clearer instruction on its practical applications.

Encouraging student involvement through structured frameworks like CEFR helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world language use. By incorporating self-assessment and reflection, students can identify their strengths and areas for improvement, leading to more effective learning strategies (Faez et al., 2011; Glover, 2011). This aligns with Azurawati & Ramiaida (2021), who emphasized that self-assessment could aid language development when students actively apply CEFR principles. The overarching goal of CEFR is to focus on what students can do, rather than letting their weaknesses limit their progress. Across these studies, a common theme emerges—proper CEFR implementation positively impacts language learning, reinforcing the importance of student engagement for both academic and career success.

The impact of CEFR-aligned speaking tests on career preparedness

As students advance in their academic journey, the importance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests extends beyond educational settings and into their professional futures. Spoken English proficiency is not only essential for academic achievement but also a key factor in employability within a globally competitive job market. The CEFR serves as a standardized framework that allows students to assess their speaking skills, playing a crucial role in their readiness for the workforce (Darmi et al., 2017). In this sense, CEFR-aligned speaking assessments contribute significantly to students' preparedness for professional environments.

Research suggests that students who understand CEFR and its role in speaking evaluations are more likely to appreciate the importance of these skills in their careers (Faez et al., 2011). A study by Muhammad et al. (2021) involving 354 students across multiple faculties found that learners identified key speaking skills—such as confidence, negotiation, and intonation—as essential for workplace communication. These competencies align with the CEFR descriptors for formal discussions, emphasizing the framework's relevance in professional contexts. However, many students still lack awareness of how CEFR-aligned speaking tests can enhance their employability. A deeper understanding of CEFR proficiency levels can help students better prepare for the linguistic demands of their future careers.

In summary, while CEFR has been effectively incorporated into Malaysia's education system, further efforts are needed to ensure students fully grasp its significance, particularly regarding speaking assessments. When students are well-informed about CEFR, they can recognize the value of CEFR-aligned speaking test results in pursuing careers within multinational and multilingual organizations. By promoting greater student engagement and awareness, educational institutions can equip graduates with the necessary language skills for academic success and career advancement.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive quantitative approach to assess the perceived importance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests for future careers, using data from students at UiTM Sarawak and UiTM Melaka. This research design allowed for a systematic evaluation of students' perspectives through numerical data, enabling statistical analysis to identify trends and patterns (Black, 1999). By surveying a diverse sample across multiple campuses, the study ensured generalisability and a comprehensive examination of response variations (Black, 1999; Nardi, 2018).

The study involved 105 diploma students who had recently attended a webinar on CEFR applications in speaking assessments for the ELC151 course. Participants were selected from

UiTM Sarawak's Samarahan, Samarahan 2, and Mukah campuses, as well as UiTM Melaka's Alor Gajah campus. The majority were first-year, second-semester diploma students from various faculties, with proficiency levels primarily at CEFR B1, alongside some at CEFR A2 and B2 levels. The study focused on their perceptions of the relevance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests in shaping their future career prospects.

To gather data, a 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire was designed, structured into three sections:

Section 1: Student demographics
Section 2: Views on the importance of CEFR for language assessment
Section 3: Relevance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests for career readiness

The Likert scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), enabling detailed insights into students' opinions. Prior to its deployment, the questionnaire underwent a pilot study to refine its items for validity and reliability. Some questions, not directly related to the study's focus on the importance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests, were revised or excluded. The final version addressed six key items, including the role of CEFR-aligned tests in institutional assessments, global skill comparison, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and career readiness. Additionally, respondents ranked who benefits most from CEFR-aligned assessments.

Data collection was conducted among the 105 participating diploma students, with informed consent obtained via Google Forms before participation, ensuring ethical adherence and participant understanding.

ELC151 Integrated Language Skills II, a compulsory remedial course, aims to enhance students' general English proficiency by integrating reading, speaking, and listening skills. Designed to help students progress from CEFR B2 (low) to CEFR B2 (high), the course provides targeted materials and real-world scenarios to develop communicative competence. At UiTM, the CEFR framework serves as a standardised model for improving language proficiency, ensuring that assessments align with students' skill levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the results from the analysis of the 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire, which explored students' perceptions of the importance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests for their future careers. It presents both statistical frequency data and qualitative insights based on respondents' feedback. The discussion will interpret these findings to emphasize the significance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests in academic and professional settings, assessing their effectiveness in measuring language proficiency and their perceived advantages for students and other relevant stakeholders.

Table 1. Respondents' level of agreement on the necessity of requiring CEFR-aligned speaking test scores for assessing language proficiency in educational and employment settings.

Item 1	Counts	% of Total
2.Disagree	3	2.9 %
3.Neutral	37	35.2 %
4.Agree	47	44.8 %
5.Strongly agree	18	17.1 %

Comments from respondents include:

R06: I think having a CEFR score is useful because it shows exactly how well we can speak in English. If schools and employers use this, it helps them see our level clearly.

R24: I agree that CEFR scores should be required. It would make it easier for universities and employers to understand our speaking skills without guessing.

The survey findings reveal that a significant majority of students support the requirement for CEFR-aligned speaking test scores in schools, universities, and workplaces as a measure of language proficiency. A total of 61.9% of respondents expressed agreement (44.8% agreed, 17.1% strongly agreed), while only 2.9% disagreed, and 35.2% remained neutral (see Table 1). This strong endorsement highlights the perceived importance of CEFR-aligned assessments in evaluating English-speaking skills.

Qualitative feedback from respondents further reinforces this view. For instance, R06 emphasized that CEFR scores serve as a reliable indicator of language proficiency, while R24 noted that these scores offer a clear and convenient reference for institutions and employers. These findings align with Runesi et al. (2022), which reported widespread approval of CEFR as an effective assessment framework. Additionally, studies by Sarudin et al. (2013) and Zainuddin et al. (2019) highlight the role of standardized assessments like CEFR in meeting employment criteria, reinforcing their significance in bridging the gap between student competencies and industry expectations.

Table 2. Respondents' level of agreement on the effectiveness of a common framework (CEFR) in facilitating global comparisons of language proficiency.

Item 2	Counts	% of Total
3.Neutral	28	26.7 %
4.Agree	58	55.2 %
5.Strongly agree	19	18.1 %

Respondents expressed the following viewpoints:

R58: With CEFR, it's easier to know how my English level compares to others around the world. It's beneficial because it helps me see where I stand.

R34: I believe having a common framework like CEFR is excellent for comparing language skills. It's reassuring to know that, wherever you are, your English level is consistently understood.

The survey results show that a significant majority of students acknowledge the advantages of using a common framework like CEFR to compare language proficiency on a global scale. A total of 73.3% of respondents supported this view (55.2% agreed, 18.1% strongly agreed), while 26.7% remained neutral (see Table 2).

Qualitative feedback further reinforces this perspective. R58 highlighted how CEFR simplifies international comparisons of English proficiency, while R34 appreciated the consistency and reliability it provides in assessing language skills. These findings align with Muhammad et al. (2021), who emphasize CEFR's role in standardizing language assessments across different contexts, and Ch'ng et al. (2024), which supports the idea that CEFR enhances clarity and fairness in language evaluations. The strong endorsement of CEFR as a tool for global comparison underscores its importance in establishing a standardized and coherent approach to language assessment worldwide.

Table 3. Respondents' level of agreement on the effectiveness of CEFR-aligned speaking tests in identifying strengths and weaknesses compared to other speaking tests.

Item 3	Counts	% of Total
3.Neutral	29	27.6 %
4.Agree	54	51.4 %
5.Strongly agree	22	21.0 %

Insights from the respondents include:

R52: CEFR tests really help me see what I'm good at and what I need to improve in my speaking. It's clearer than other tests I've taken.

R103: I find that CEFR-aligned tests are good at showing my strengths and areas where I need more practice. They are more helpful than just general speaking tests.

The survey findings indicate that a large majority of students perceive CEFR-aligned speaking tests as effective in identifying their strengths and weaknesses in speaking skills. A total of 72.4% of respondents supported this view (51.4% agreed, 21.0% strongly agreed), while 27.6% remained neutral (see Table 3).

Student comments further emphasize this perspective. R52 noted that CEFR tests offer clearer insights into their speaking abilities compared to other assessments, while R103 valued their ability to pinpoint specific areas for improvement. These insights align with Ch'ng et al. (2024), which highlights the clarity and usefulness of CEFR descriptors in assessing proficiency, and Tajuddin et al. (2015), which underscores how structured frameworks contribute to improved communicative competence. The strong endorsement of CEFR-aligned tests reinforces their role in providing detailed feedback, facilitating targeted language development, and enhancing students' overall speaking proficiency.

Table 4. Respondents' level of agreement on the need for institutional support in providing practice opportunities for CEFR-aligned speaking tests.

Item 4	Counts	% of Total
3.Neutral	24	22.9 %
4.Agree	59	56.2 %
5.Strongly agree	22	21.0 %

Students expressed the following viewpoints:

R10: It's important for schools to give us chances to practice for CEFR tests. It helps us get ready and feel more confident.

R23: I think more practice opportunities for CEFR tests would be great. It would make us better prepared and more comfortable with the exam.

The survey results indicate that a significant majority of students believe institutions should offer opportunities to practice and prepare for CEFR-aligned speaking tests. A total of 77.2% of respondents supported this notion (56.2% agreed, 21.0% strongly agreed), while 22.9% remained neutral (see Table 4).

This strong demand for practice and preparation resources reflects students' recognition of their importance in boosting confidence and readiness. Respondents R10 and R23 emphasized the need for more structured practice to enhance their speaking skills. This aligns with Tengku Mohamed Fauzi et al. (2024), which suggests that CEFR can serve as a self-assessment tool to help students overcome challenges in complex language tasks. Similarly, Wok Zaki & Darmi (2021) highlight the importance of aligning preparation with international standards, reinforcing students' calls for better training opportunities. Additionally, Faez et al. (2011) notes that while CEFR- informed instruction enhances motivation and confidence, students often face time constraints and a lack of context-specific examples, further underscoring the need for comprehensive preparation resources to bridge these gaps.

Table 5. Respondents' evaluation of CEFR-aligned speaking tests in assessing various aspects of speaking skills (e.g., non-verbal communication, cultural fluency, grammar, vocabulary).

Item 5	Counts	% of Total
2.Disagree	1	1.0 %
3.Neutral	22	21.0 %

4.Agree	60	57.1 %
5.Strongly agree	22	21.0 %

Students provided the following feedback:

R27: CEFR tests do a good job of checking different parts of speaking, like grammar and vocabulary. I think they are quite thorough.
R60: I feel that CEFR tests cover a lot of important speaking skills. They look at things like how well we use language, which is really helpful.

The survey results reflect a high level of confidence among students in the adequacy of CEFR- aligned speaking tests for assessing various aspects of speaking skills, including non-verbal communication, cultural fluency, grammar, and vocabulary. A total of 78.1% of respondents supported this view (57.1% agreed, 21.0% strongly agreed), while 21.0% remained neutral and only 1.0% disagreed (see Table 5).

Respondents R27 and R60 highlighted the comprehensive nature of CEFR-aligned tests, reinforcing the perception that these assessments effectively evaluate multiple dimensions of speaking proficiency. This perspective aligns with Brunfaut & Harding (2019), which confirms that CEFR levels are well-established for assessing language skills across various contexts. Similarly, Van Dung et al. (2023) underscores the importance of robust assessment frameworks like CEFR in measuring language proficiency relevant to job performance. Additionally, Sidhu et al. (2018) discusses the implementation and benefits of CEFR-aligned assessments, further supporting the positive feedback from students regarding their comprehensiveness and effectiveness.

Table 6. Respondents' Ranking of Who Benefits Most from Using CEFR for Assessing Speaking Tests (1 = Most Benefited, 4 = Least Benefited).

Item 6	Employers	Language Educators	Language Learners	Schools & Universities
1. Most benefited	20	25	52	58
2. Moderately benefited	25	18	32	24
3. Less benefited	21	26	16	19
4. Least benefited	39	36	5	4

Students expressed the following viewpoints:

R11: I think language learners benefit the most from CEFR because it helps us understand our level and improve. Schools and universities also gain because they can see our progress.
R15: I think having CEFR scores is helpful because it shows how good my English is, but I'm not sure how much it matters for getting a job later. I think it's more useful for university.
R22: CEFR tests are good for knowing where I stand in my English skills. I can see how it helps in school, but I'm not sure if employers care about it as much.
R30: It's nice to have a clear idea of my English level with CEFR. For my future job, I think it might help, but I'm not sure if employers really look at these scores.
R40: CEFR helps me understand my English level now, and I think it's important for university. I don't know if it will make a big difference for jobs, though.
R56: For me, CEFR is most useful for learners and schools. Employers might not see it as important because they might not understand the CEFR system well.

The survey findings indicate that students view Language Learners and Schools & Universities as the primary beneficiaries of CEFR-aligned speaking test assessments. Specifically, 52 respondents identified Language Learners, while 58 respondents pointed to Schools & Universities as the most benefited groups (see Table 6). In contrast, Employers were

seen as the least benefited, suggesting that CEFR scores may have less direct influence on hiring decisions compared to their academic significance.

This distribution reflects students' perception that the CEFR framework is particularly valuable within academic settings, primarily for meeting institutional requirements and passing exams. However, there is a noticeable gap in its perceived relevance to employment, as highlighted by comments such as, "CEFR helps me understand my English level now, and I think it's important for university," and "I'm not sure how much it matters for getting a job later."

This aligns with Sarudin et al. (2013), which found that while English proficiency is crucial for employment, industry-specific certifications may better prepare graduates for the job market. Similarly, Zainuddin et al. (2019) noted discrepancies between students' perceptions and employers' expectations regarding language proficiency, reinforcing the divide between academic assessments and workplace requirements.

Additionally, Van Dung et al. (2023) highlighted that English proficiency contributes to job satisfaction and performance but is often integrated with vocational skills, rather than being solely determined by standardized test scores. Likewise, Kiškytė (2023) found that foreign language proficiency, including CEFR levels, is valued by employers, but must be complemented by other skills and qualifications to enhance employability.

Overall, while students acknowledge the academic value of CEFR-aligned assessments, they perceive a limited impact on their future job market prospects. The lower perceived benefit for Employers suggests that CEFR scores alone may not be a decisive factor in hiring. To bridge this gap, it would be beneficial for lecturers to explicitly highlight the relevance of CEFR-aligned skills in professional contexts and incorporate industry-related activities into coursework. These efforts could help students align their academic achievements with employer expectations, enhancing the practical utility of CEFR in career development.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that students widely acknowledge the importance of CEFR-aligned speaking tests, particularly within the academic environment. The strong support for CEFR's role in standardizing language assessment and facilitating global comparisons underscores students' recognition of its value in measuring language proficiency (Runesi et al., 2022). Additionally, students emphasize the need for institutional support and preparation opportunities to enhance their readiness and confidence for these assessments (Van Dung et al., 2023).

However, findings indicate a less pronounced perception of CEFR-aligned tests' relevance for future employment. Students perceive CEFR scores as more beneficial for fulfilling academic requirements rather than directly influencing hiring decisions, as reflected in the lower perceived benefit for employers (Muhammad et al., 2021; Zainuddin et al., 2019). This highlights the disparity between academic assessments and job market demands, suggesting a need for greater alignment.

To bridge this gap, educational institutions should implement strategies that raise students' awareness of how CEFR-aligned speaking tests can impact future careers. As Farooqui et al. (2023) emphasizes, English proficiency is critical for career advancement in a globalized work environment. Institutions can integrate career-oriented discussions into language courses and provide real-world examples of how CEFR scores are utilized across industries. This approach helps students connect their English studies with workplace demands and recognize the broader implications of their language proficiency.

Additionally, offering structured practice opportunities for CEFR-aligned speaking tests is vital to boosting students' confidence and readiness. Implementing workshops, simulated assessments, and targeted feedback sessions can enhance speaking skills and prepare students for both academic and professional evaluations. This ensures that students' competencies align with job market expectations, increasing their employability.

Supporting this, Tainer (1988) and Rao (2016) found that strong English proficiency significantly improves job prospects, enabling students to secure employment more easily. By

incorporating practical training and industry engagement, institutions can enhance the relevance of CEFR-aligned assessments for both students and employers.

These findings reinforce prior research indicating that while CEFR-aligned speaking tests are highly valued for academic purposes, their perceived value in employment settings remains limited (Awang & Kasuma, 2008; Razali & Latif, 2019). Addressing this gap requires a greater integration of academic assessments with industry expectations, ensuring that CEFR-aligned tests effectively serve both educational and professional needs.

Beyond academic success and communication skill development, it is crucial to increase students' awareness of how these skills enhance employability, apply to real-world scenarios, and align with employer expectations. Strengthening this awareness will better prepare students for future careers, ensuring that academic assessments remain relevant, practical, and beneficial.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Despite the valuable insights provided, this study has several limitations. The sample size and demographic composition may not fully represent the broader student population, which could affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focuses solely on students' perceptions, which may not provide a complete understanding of how CEFR-aligned speaking tests are utilized in professional settings. The perspectives of instructors are also important because they play a critical role in administering and interpreting these assessments. Including their views would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of CEFR implementation.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating a broader and more diverse participant pool. It would be beneficial to include students from various educational backgrounds and institutions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, exploring the viewpoints of employers, educators, and policymakers would provide a more thorough analysis of CEFR's impact on both academic success and professional readiness. Conducting such studies could offer practical recommendations for improving the alignment between CEFR assessments and industry expectations. This approach would enhance the relevance and applicability of CEFR- aligned speaking tests in the job market.

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