JTS

Journal of Techno Social

The CEFR Impact on English Language Educators Teaching Engineering Programmes at a Private University in Malaysia

Ahmad Zufrie Abd Rahman[1], Seng Tong Chong[1*], Zeittey Karmilla Kaman[1], Carol Elizabeth Leon[2]

[1]Universiti Tenaga Nasional,
 Kajang, Selangor, 43000, MALAYSIA

[2]University Malaya,
 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, 50603, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding Author

Abstract: This paper presents some preliminary findings of a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary research. It explores the experience of language educators on the newly implemented policy by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. The implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a policy that develops through a whole continuum: from primary schools to universities. The paper fills the gap in terms of impact studies of the CEFR especially on engineering programmes where the desired CEFR levels are higher. This implementation affects language educators at university in various domains such as the required CEFR levels for language educators, teaching materials and support systems. The methodological framework used in this study is phenomenological study. It aims to explore the experience of the language educators. Interviews were conducted on three language educators teaching engineering programmes at a private university. Snowballing technique was used in identifying the research interviewees. Data gathered were analysed using Atlas.Ti, a qualitative analysis software. Preliminary result indicates that language educators were positive and welcome enthusiastically the change. However, challenges were immense and critical. This paper concludes that the implementation of the CEFR is a wise move for Malaysian students towards a higher level of proficiency in English.

Keywords: CEFR, English Educator, English learning

1. Introduction

This paper presents some preliminary findings of a research project in progress. Longitudinal research explores the experience faced by language educators. This paper explicitly discusses the experience faced by English language educators regarding the implementation of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in a private technical university. The researchers explore the experience of the language educators within a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach is the most formidable in research related to experience (Groenewald, 2004).

Historically, the CEFR was developed in 2001, and soon after, it has gained its momentum throughout the world of English Language Teaching (ELT). The council of Europe develops the CEFR and describes a learner's ability to do a particular linguistic task (Council of Europe, 2001). In doing so, the CEFR illustrates global scales of a language learner. For instance, if it describes a leaner's at the B1 level, this B1 level is internationally benchmarked, albeit with some cultural differences (Abdullah,2020). It provides international corroboration among many recognised frameworks.

The theoretical framework of the CEFR has been used by major international examination bodies such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), The International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), Malaysian University English Test (MUET), among other things. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) has also done its mapping and alignment onto the CEFR (Papageorgiou, Tannenbaum, Bridgeman, & Cho, 2015) and (Educational Testing Service., 2010). The alignment of major international examinations to the CEFR indicates its vibrancy and sound sophistication. The figure below from Cambridge English shows the global scales (Cambridge English Assessment, 2020).
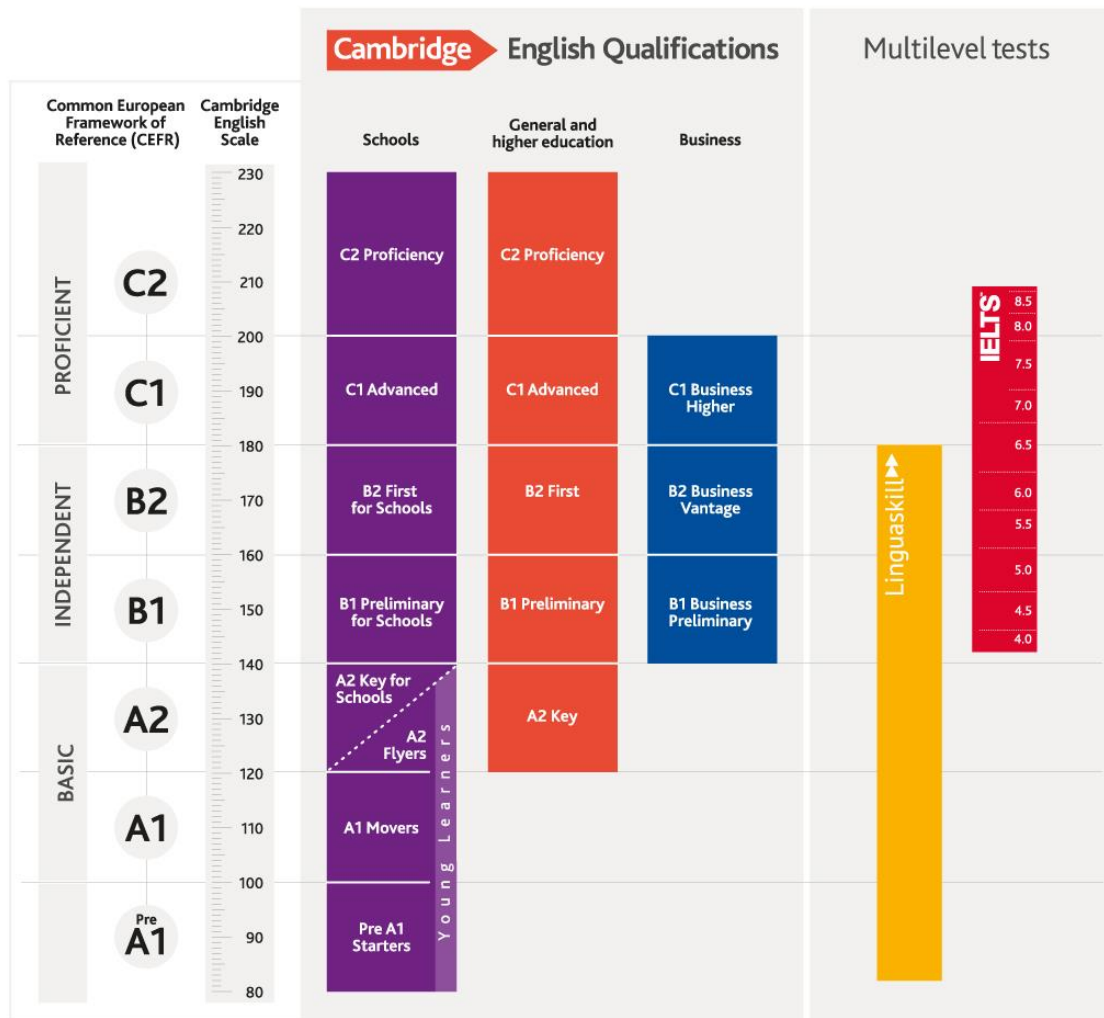

Fig. 1 - The CEFR scales

This alignment provides a standardise reference for the test takers, academia, employers, and other related stakeholders. One logical justification is that the CEFR is globally recognised, and it detailed the linguistic ability for both productive and receptive skills, i.e., writing and speaking, reading, and listening. The detailed descriptions provide a platform for English language educators to have a theoretically sound framework to guide teaching and learning matters (Ponnudurai, 2020). Besides, it also describes employers to understand the language mastery of a potential employee. Such is the impact of the CEFR worldwide, and Malaysia is following suit.

Subsequently, the CEFR has then flourished in many Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, China, and Vietnam (Uri & Aziz, 2018). Foley provided a comprehensive review on the implementation of the CEFR in some Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Korea (Foley, 2019). Similarly, Malaysia is also one of the countries that have been actively aligning its English language education to the CEFR. It is to ensure that the English education landscape in Malaysia is comparable internationally. The historical development of the CEFR in the Malaysian context will be discussed in the review section.

2. Review of the CEFR in Malaysia

This review section provides a review of the CEFR in Malaysia. The review approach is historical and development in nature to chart the landscape of the CEFR in Malaysia from its inception to the present stage.

The implementation of the CEFR in Malaysia has complicated nodes and vines as Malaysia is a post-colonial country with the English education framework's influence. The British administration left a trail of English education on Malaysian soil. However, to foster a national identity among Malaysians, the Malay language is then implemented as the medium of instruction in all education levels in Malaysia (Yahya, 2003). The Razak Report is one of the most referenced reports on issues related to language planning and policy. Along with the ways, several reforms and transformations were constructed to mould the national identity and simultaneously maintain the standard of education. All of these reforms and transformations have characterised the national philosophy of education.

Nonetheless, each has its fortress to mend. Azman (2016) traces the historical development of the Malaysian English Language Education to the current alignment of the CEFR. It can be summarised as below:

Table 1 - Educational reform in Malaysia

Reform	Year	Details
First Reform	1982	The Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary and Secondary schools (KBSR/KBSM) was introduced in 1982.
Second Reform	1997	SMART way of teaching Maths, English, Science, and Malay Languages was implemented in 1999.
Third Reform	2012	Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB).
Fourth Reform	2015 (started in 2013)	English Language Education Roadmap for Malaysia 2015- 2025, hence the introduction of the CEFR.

The fourth reform is one of the most sophisticated yet complicated reforms. The fourth reform aims to strengthen the English Language Education as learning English, especially in globalisation, is undeniable (Gill, 2014). The fourth reform stems from the third reform. It is a sequential reform. Generally, the third reform contains three phases (Uri & Aziz, 2018).

Table 2 - The phases of the English language education roadmap

Phase	Year	Details
First Phase	2013-2015	• Formation of English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) (Nov 2012) • Elevating the English proficiency of school teachers
Second Phase	2015-2016	• Set appropriate CEFR levels against each educational level, from preschool to university. • School-Based Assessment (SBA) syllabus and curricula were aligned with the CEFR. • Selected the CEFR-aligned textbooks and support materials • Validation of the CEFR levels set
Third Phase	2016 onwards	• Evaluate, review and revise the implementation of the CEFR in previous phases. • The development of CEFR – M

With the clear phases of the reform, the roadmap itself manifests three waves of implementing the CEFR. The waves here refer to the systematic planning of the CEFR in Malaysia. The CEFR Implementation plan can be viewed as a procedural operation. It can be summarised in three distinct waves. (Uri & Aziz, 2018) (Nurul Farehah Mohamad Uri & Mohd Salehhuddin Abd Aziz, 2019).

Table 3 - Waves of the reform

Wave	Year	Details
Wave 1	2013-2015	Training for English teachers Developing the descriptors

Wave 2	2016-2020	School-Based Assessment (SBA) to the CEFR
		Textbook selection
Wave 3	2021-2025	Development of CEFR-M by the CEFR special task force
		Evaluation of the selected textbooks and support materials

From the roadmap, the plans have been developed and in the pipeline of materialising them. An article written by Zuraidah Mohd Don and Mardziah Hayati Abdullah, two English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) members, has comprehensively reviewed the CEFR in Malaysia. The paper presents a comprehensive view of the CEFR and demystifies the common misunderstandings (Zuraidah Mohd Don & Mardziah Hayati Abdullah, 2019), in which several related documents and guidelines have been released by the ELSQC (Ministry of Education, 2020). The ELSQC is regularly writing and disseminating crucial information about the CEFR to the public. The publication has immensely benefited all the stakeholders. It serves as the reference and repository about the CEFR in Malaysia.

Since the CEFR-Aligned curriculum is relatively new, literature has indicated that there is a dearth of research gaps needed to be filled in. A comprehensive search on the publication database reveals that very little research has been conducted in this field. One related research article focused on forms 1 and 2 of English teachers' concerns about implementing the CEFR (Lo, 2018). Another closely related research article is the presentation done by Ahmad Zufrie and Geranpayah, which focused on the CEFR-Aligned Malaysian University English Test (MUET) (Ardeshir Geranpayeh & Ahmad Zufrie Abd Rahman, 2018). On the other hand, a study was conducted to examine the reading passages against the CEFR-aligned syllabus for secondary school (Nurul Farehah Mohamad Uri & Mohd Salehhuddin Abd Aziz, 2019). Research on the educators' experience has not been reported. Hence, this project is to fill in the research gap contributing to the educators' experience.

3. Methodology

This research project draws a phenomenological approach postulated by Creswell (Creswell, 2013). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the methodological framework for this study as this study intended to explore the experiences of English language educators. It is believed that to study experience, a phenomenological approach is the most widely recommended method (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). The use of IPA in English language education has also been conducted in Malaysian context, such as (Jeong & Juliana Othman, 2016), in which the researchers studied the issue of second language acquisition. This indicates that the phenomenological framework is an appropriate modus operandi to study the intertwining issues between English language education and management.

In terms of sampling, the snowballing method was used. Snowball method uses known informants and/or cases of interest from people who have contacts with participants with the required information (Creswell, 2013). This method is highly suggested by Creswell (Creswell, 2013) as it is one of the most practical methods of sampling. By using the snowball technique, three university English language educators were identified. The participants were three university lecturers. They are currently teaching English proficiency courses for engineering students at a private university. The lecturers teach the CEFR-aligned English courses for students from the faculty of Engineering. The reason for focusing on engineering faculty is due to the nature that generally, the engineering students are required to have a higher band of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

Data was collected through a series of interviews. Interviews were conducted to explore the experiences of educators. Upon interviewing the educators, qualitative data was analysed using Atlas. Ti. The step-by-step strategy is derived from (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and followed eclectically by the researchers. The systematic steps are:

1. reading and re-reading
2. initial noting
3. developing emergent themes
4. searching for connections across emergent themes
5. moving to the next case
6. looking for patterns across cases

After data was collected from the interviews, the qualitative data was analysed using Atlas. Ti, a software that is often used by qualitative researchers. The unit of analysis is spoken discourse, as suggested by (Gee 2014).

4. Analysis and discussion

This study focuses on the exploration of educators' experience within the domain of phenomenology. A great philosopher of phenomenology, Husser, believed that an experience's central structure is intentionality. It is being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience can then be defined as an object by its content or meaning (representing the object) and appropriate enabling conditions (Husserl, 2017; Husserl,

2001). From the definition given, each experience is a differentiated experience individually. Therefore it is neither normative nor performative. It comes in the form of a subjective evaluation of an individual.

In this study, the paper focuses on English language educators' experience in an engineering program. Language educators are teaching the CEFR-aligned curriculum. This paper shall elucidate four major themes that appeared from the analysis. These four themes are a set of representational intentionality that arise from the glen viewed. The first theme is about the insufficiency of resources. The educators commented that resources about the CEFR-aligned materials are insufficiently available in the market. More specifically, due to its new introduction to the Malaysian education context, materials specifically designed for engineering English, or English for academic purposes, are rare. There is only a textbook that fits into this description by Mark Ibbotson (Ibbotson, 2008). This book has been adapted as the primary reference for the course. However, this textbook is designed at the CEFR B1-B2 levels. Hence, the educators have to source materials for C1 levels students.

Also, in this engineering program, outcome-based education is adopted as the educational philosophy for its education. Educators are encouraged to act as facilitators rather than spoon-feeding the CEFR teaching materials. This is realised by Nambiar, Gill, Ibrahim, and Tan (2011), where educators should be facilitators who can encourage them to find avenues to learn independently. Generally, the English language educators are proactively developing supplementary materials for the students at an appropriate level. This coincides with some researchers' findings who concluded that teachers have commented on the availability of resources. (Ramiaida Darmi et al., 2017). In sum, the language educators claimed categorically that they welcome the CEFR-aligned program and send their students out to paint the town red. The educators also acknowledged that the publication of the guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2020) published by the Ministry of Education helps educators prepare and teach engineering students. However, the language educators also cautious about the materials developed by themselves. They are at times, curious if the materials are sophisticatedly aligned with the CEFR.

The second theme is about the readiness of the educators. As such, readiness here dislodged the formal credential and qualifications of the language educators. The readiness here means to what extent has the educator been exposed to the CEFR? Although the Ministry of Education has designed a mechanism for the cascading process, much is desired as such is a palimpsest for a mechanism that deals with a sea of people and layers of porous understanding. Some participants might have sufficient knowledge of the CEFR, while some educators may have little knowledge of the CEFR. Two educators mentioned that the CEFR-aligned information is cascading was occasionally misinterpreted either by the participants or the trainers. However, the language educators supplement themselves with a network of reliable educators with reading materials that are fixed at the CEFR. The primary reference (Council of Europe, 2001) always spells an excellent and objective juxtaposition on other materials. This is helpful as there is something for the educators to lean-to. The language educators also acknowledged the hard work carried out by the master trainers.

The third theme is about assessment. A language expert Mardziah Hayati Abdullah opined that there are three main pillars for the successful implantation of the CEFR: assessment, curriculum, and teaching and learning (Abdullah, 2020). This echoed the findings (Noor Azli Affendy Lee & Aini Akmar Mohd Kassim, 2019), where the researchers indicated that a proper framework on assessment is not available. This is mostly due to the newly enacted policy about the implementation of the CEFR-aligned curriculum. However, the English language educators believed that assessment at tertiary English programmes should be resilient, flexible, creative, and eclectic. Formative and summative assessments are employed to assess their students' achievements. William's (William, 2017) assessment strategies help the educators craft a holistic assessment method to gauge their students' achievement. In sum, the thematic analysis has shown that English educators are independently creative in their assessment methods subject to the theoretical framework prescribed by Black and William (Black & William, 2006). In an interview, Ponnudurai mentioned that educators and learners should focus more on learning and teaching than fixating on assessment (Ponnudurai, 2020). Hence, the language educators are willing to re-learn about assessment, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic trying time.

The fourth theme is about familiarisation. From the interviews conducted, the thematic analysis shows that out of the three educators, only one has a comprehensive understanding of the CEFR. One educator has sufficient knowledge about the CEFR, and the third educator has insufficient knowledge about the CEFR. A detailed interview indicated that the third educator did not think that the CEFR is relevant. She even believed that the CEFR is not suitable for a Malaysian context. However, the educator also acknowledged that she had not been exposed to any familiarisation. Hence, she has the stigmata. The findings of (Sidhu, Kaur, & Lee, 2018) reinforced that the idea of familiarisation of the reform must be made available. National master trainers said that the familiarisation courses conducted lack its decency and invigilancy in information dissemination (Aziz, Rashid, & Zainuddin, 2018). However, this claim is yet to be proved as little data is available. Although the third English educator lacks familiarity with the CEFR, she tried to understand and consolidate her knowledge and personal experience onto the CEFR. It seems to be a positive move, albeit the lack of knowledge may suggest a diabolical outcome.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of the CEFR in Malaysia is an educational reform aimed at strengthening the existing educational landscape. The impact of the implementation is ultimately significant. It may take years to see its impact as

it is a longitudinal event. It is an international standard that brings about a paradigm shift in the management of English language education. It echoes Lowie's suggestion that the CEFR provides a framework to contextualise learner's learning. (Lowie, 2012). Indeed, CEFR-M is a way forward.

This phenomenological study concludes that although the implementation of the CEFR is a way forward for the nation, guidance and assistance are still very much desired for educators, especially those who are not exposed to the CEFR framework. Nevertheless, this is the road not taken. The English language educators' experience is positive and constructive. The educators are nonetheless working tirelessly for the nation by educating the students. The educators also achieve sublime self-satisfaction from teaching the students who are the bright future of Malaysia.

Acknowledgement

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