Assessing CEFR-Readiness Test in Malaysian ESL Classroom: An Insight from English Language Teachers in Pulau Pinang

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Abstract

Malaysian education has undergone several changes since the implementation of Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025. The reformation of MEB has brought Common European Framework of References (CEFR) in Malaysian English Language Teaching (ELT). The implementation of CEFR was perceived as a great platform that can improve the standard of ELT in the country to be at the global standard. Realising this aspiration, the government proposed to relook and redevelop the proficiency among English language teachers. Hence, CEFR-Readiness Test was administered to measure the language proficiency level among the English language teachers in accordance with CEFR level descriptors. This paper will be looking into the awareness and the views of teachers towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. In addition, this study also will delve into looking at the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) measures that can be taken to improve the CEFR-Readiness Test based on the perspectives of secondary school teachers. The data was collected through mixed method approach by using the questionnaires and open-ended questions in the questionnaire to address the research objectives of the study. This study concluded that ESL teachers have a high level of awareness towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. However, they posited a negative view towards CEFR-Readiness initiative in measuring their language proficiency. Hence, several improvement measures like facilities improvement, task redesign, teachers' training and time allocation have been proposed in the findings of the research. The findings of the research will be useful in upgrading the quality control of assessment tools pertaining to CEFR in Malaysian education context.

Keywords: Common European Framework of References, CEFR-Readiness Test, Language proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone several changes and reformation. The introduction of Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 brought Common European Framework of References (CEFR) in the process of ELT. The implementation of CEFR in Malaysian ESL classrooms integrates an action-oriented approach in which the learners are no longer seen as a passive learner but as the active participants in the interactive process of language learning (Lowie,2013). According to the Ministry of Education (2013), the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was introduced as a way of upgrading the language learning and assessment. This amendment become a tremendous change in producing a more proficient English language speaker among the students in school. According to Cambridge ESOL (2011), the implementation of CEFR in language education is concerned with the following key aims: to establish a useful tool for communication enabling practitioners in diverse contexts to talk about objectives and language levels in a coherent way. It also aims to encourage practitioners to reflect upon their current practice as the objectives are concerned and

in tracking the headway of learners in language acquisition with the aim of improving language teaching and assessment. As far as this change is concerned, teachers who are the main stakeholders in language education must be able to adapt and adopt to the implementation of CEFR. Hence, it is very important for us to measure the language proficiency among the language teachers. Van Canh and Renandya (2017) affirmed that level of language proficiency would support and enable teachers to use the target language accurately in that it can lead to a more effective and appropriate feedback on students' language development. Thus, the government implemented CEFR-Readiness Test as a way of measuring the level of language proficiency among language teachers in accordance with CEFR level descriptors. This study will be looking into the awareness and perceived views of teachers towards CEFR-Readiness Test as a way of measuring their language proficiency and several Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) measures that can be taken in improving the CEFR-Readiness Test according to the perspectives of secondary school ESL teachers.

The CEFR framework has been adopted by many countries and there are many CEFR related studies that were conducted. For example, a study conducted by Alih et al. (2020) which determines the readiness and awareness of teachers in implementing CEFR in ESL classrooms. It has given a profound finding that most of the teachers still lack understanding towards CEFR. The findings of this study can also be supported with the study conducted by Nurul Farehah and Mohd Salehuddin (2018) where they focus on the capability of Form 5 English language teachers in CEFR implementation. They found that most Form 5 teachers still lack the readiness in implementing CEFR in their teaching pedagogy. In other aspects there were also studies conducted that focuses on the material used in CEFR-aligned curriculum. For instance, the study conducted by O'Dwyer (2014) that focuses on the implementation of CEFR in textbooks, curricula, and teaching practices. On the other hand, a study conducted by Kepol (2017) found that the Malaysian English teachers are still lacking in term of their English language proficiency, and this has affected their capability to teach the subjects in which they are qualified to do so. The author further explained that this problem happened due to the lack number of English option teachers and most of the non-option teachers are bound to teach the English subject. This issue can be supported from the findings provided by Cheng et al (2016) as he affirmed that most of the teacher are lacking in term of language proficiency in teaching as this caused by the improper training that they received. These studies conducted shows that the past literatures do not highlight on the level of language proficiency among ESL teachers in accordance with CEFR and there is a need to look for the aspect of language proficiency among the teachers in English language teaching. Hence, this study intended to fulfil the gap by looking at the views and awareness of teachers towards the language assessment tool which is CEFR-Readiness Test as a representation of the teachers' language proficiency in accordance with CEFR framework. It is increasingly important for us to investigate the capability of assessment tools like CEFR-Readiness Test to measure the language proficiency among the ESL teachers. This research will provide a clear picture on the capability of the Malaysia assessment tool to be at a global standard with CEFR level around the world.

THE CONCEPT OF COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCES (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR was formulated in 2001 and designed to establish an international standard for foreign language education to cater the needs of language learners as well as academics and other professions related to assessment, teaching, and learning of the languages (Council of Europe, 2013). CEFR specifies on what language learners are required to accomplish to communicate by using the target language. Additionally, it provides a basis for the recognition of language qualifications and helps learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to have a standardized framework (Nurul Farehah and Mohd Salehuddin, 2018). The framework has six levels of descriptors which are used to categorize learners' ability to use the target language. Language users are categorized into three main groups: Proficient users (levels C1 & C2), Independent users (levels B1 & B2) and Basic users (levels A1 & A2). The detailed descriptors of what learners can do are known as the "can do" statements for listening, writing, readings and speaking skills.

CEFR IN MALAYSIA

The implementation of CEFR in Malaysia started with the establishment of English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) in 2013. The Council aided English Language Teaching Center (ELTC) to help the Ministry of Education in enhancing the English language proficiency of Malaysian students. The council was responsible for introducing the CEFR framework onto the education system and for developing a roadmap for systematic reforms of English language education. Alignment of education system against CEFR is the important element in the Malaysia Education Blueprint with the aim to boost the level of education to international standards (Hazita, 2016). The roadmap is a long-term goal and plan which started from 2013 and expected to end in 2025 with the main aim is to provide the best language education starting from pre – school up to tertiary education. The roadmap consists of three phases. Phase 1 had taken place from 2013 to 2015 which focused on elevating the English proficiency of school teachers. The roadmap continues from 2015 until the beginning of phase 2 in 2016 since a year was allocated by the council to set appropriate CEFR levels against each educational level starting from pre – school to teacher education which will be validated in the second part of phase 2. Phase 3 is for the council to evaluate, review and revise the implementation of CEFR in the previous phases. This includes the evaluation and revision of the descriptors set in phase 2 and review of selected textbooks and teaching and learning materials. Lastly, the focal turning point for phase 3 is the development of CEFR – M based on the findings of review, re-evaluation, and revised process.

CEFR-READINESS TEST: THE FRAMEWORK OF MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS

The implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test is in the aim of monitoring the readiness of teachers to adapt and adopt towards CEFR in ELT pedagogy. According to Ministry of Education, English option teachers are advised to determine their CEFR English proficiency level before 31 December 2020. This initiative, termed CEFR Readiness (CEFR-R), is part of the Ministry's overall vision to align the teaching and learning of English language within our Education system to the CEFR framework. Under CEFR-R, English option teachers who are instructing non-teaching students are required to achieve a minimum overall CEFR level of C1, whereas English option teachers who are instructing teaching students are required to achieve a minimum overall CEFR level of C2 (ELTC,2019). CEFR-Readiness Test will assess the four skills of English language to the teachers which is Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. All these components test on grammar, vocabulary, and language skills. Tests start with general questions and then progress to more demanding tasks. Each section of the test assesses English levels from A1 to C2. Each of the components will be graded into the band stated. CEFR-Readiness Test based on its grading levels of CEFR which is C2, C1, B2, B1, A2, and A1. While C1 and C2 are gazetted as Proficient User, other categories include Independent User for B1 and B2 and Basic user for A1 and A2. This CEFR-Readiness Test is offered as a free fee for the first time of sitting this test. However, teachers can retake this test if any of the components do not meet the minimum requirement needed. CEFR-Readiness Test has the same standard level with Malaysian University English Test (MUET), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and APTIS test and it does not have the validity period where the result of the test can be used in a long period of time to show the English language proficiency level of the test takers.

METHODS

A mixed-method approach which consists of qualitative and quantitative research design were employed in this research, whereby data collection would be made up of surveys and open-ended questions in the questionnaire with the teachers involved in the overall running of CEFR-Readiness Test in secondary and primary school. According to Piaw (2016), he stated that the Survey method can become an effective method to describe the phenomenon of the area of research. This will help in shaping a better understanding of the perspectives of teachers about CEFR-Readiness Test. Hence, the researcher focuses on the population of 50 English teachers in Pulau Pinang. The Purposive Sampling method is a main sampling method to categorize the sample to represent the targeted population of the study. The teachers involved in this study have the minimum of a degree in English education. All teachers were familiar with CEFR and have at least attended CEFR familiarisation workshops organised

by the Ministry of Education and through the professional learning community (PLC) conducted in their respective schools.

This study used an adopted questionnaire from Zamnah et al. (2017) which was divided into 4 main sections that consisted of 19 close ended questions and 1 open ended question. Each of the sections in the questionnaire was arranged in accordance with the research questions of the study. Section 1 of the questionnaire used the dichotomous question related to respondents' demographic background. Section 2 of the questionnaire investigated the awareness of teachers pertaining to the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. Respondents must stimulate their responses pertaining to the CEFR-Readiness Test format. In addition, Section 3 of the questionnaire studied the views of teachers towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. Respondents must exude their responses that will provide the pictures to the researcher about the respondents' perceived views towards CEFR-Readiness Test as a way of measuring their language proficiency. Section 2 and 3 of the questionnaires employed a six - point scale response ranging from 6 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Agree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 2 = Disagree and 1 = Strongly Disagree. According to Lange and Soderlund (2004), high continuum responses would result in higher and more accurate Cronbach Alpha's result which is the main justification for choosing a six- point scale response. Section 4 of the questionnaire complies with the use of open-ended questions that embedded in the questionnaire where it addressed the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) measure that need to be done in improving the assessment conduct specifically the CEFR-Readiness Test. In this section the respondents need to give their responses and opinions about several improvement measure that can be done in CEFR-Readiness Test construct.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Salient findings gathered from the questionnaire are presented based on the questions of the study. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1) What is the level of awareness among English teachers towards CEFR-Readiness Test?
2) What are the views of English teachers regarding CEFR-Readiness Test?
3) What are the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) measures that can be taken to improve the CEFR-Readiness Test from the perspectives of English teachers?

The results of the study are the excerpts from SPSS analysis of the questionnaire. The result of the study also tabulated through the thematic analysis in looking for Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) in CEFR-Readiness Test. The following tables below describe the findings of the study.

Awareness of teachers towards CEFR-Readiness Test

This section presents the awareness of teachers towards CEFR-Readiness test. Data were analysed by obtaining the mean score for awareness of teachers towards CEFR-Readiness test in Table 1. The interpretations of mean score are outlined in Table 2.

Table 1 depicts data of the findings pertaining to the awareness of teachers towards CEFR-Readiness Test. Based on these findings, it can be noted that teachers posit a high level of awareness towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. The highest mean score (X=4.84; SD=.370) can be seen in Item 4 *(English teachers should achieve a minimum C1 band for Group 1 and C2 band for Group 2.)* However, the lowest mean score (X=3.12; SD=.558) can be seen in Item 6 *(CEFR-Readiness Test does not have the validity period).* In general, all the instruments used show a high mean score value. The measurement of the mean score value can be interpreted based on the Table 2 of Mean Interpretation by Norasmah and Salmah (2011).

Table 1. Awareness level of teachers towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test

Instrument	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Skewness
1) CEFR-Readiness Test is conducted to increase the ELT quality among English teachers.	50	3.20	.638	-.653
2) CEFR-Readiness Test used MUET format to measure the language proficiency.	50	4.30	.646	-.377
3) Teachers with English option are compulsory to sit for CEFR-Readiness Test.	50	3.72	.858	-.222
4) English teachers should achieve a minimum C1 band for Group 1 and C2 band for Group 2.	50	4.84	.370	-1.913
5) English teachers who do not achieve a minimum band required can repeat the examination based on the specific component (listening, speaking, reading, writing).	50	4.38	.490	-.510
6) Repeaters for CEFR-Readiness Test can repeat for only 1-3 component per session only.	50	3.12	.558	-.050
7) CEFR-Readiness Test does not have the validity period.	50	3.64	1.083	-.427
8)CEFR-Readiness Test has the same examination standard with MUET, APTIS, IELTS and TOEFL.	50	3.44	.972	-.032
9) CEFR-Readiness Test measure the 4 main component which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing.	50	4.24	1.022	-.748

Table 2. Mean Score Interpretation Table

Mean Score	Interpretation of Mean Score
1.00-2.00	Low
2.01-3.00	Moderately Low
3.01-4.00	Moderately High
4.01-5.00	High

Therefore, based on the Table of Mean Interpretation (Table 2) above, all the mean scores retrieved were in the group of moderately high and high. From this finding, indicates that teachers have a high level of awareness towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. This can also be supported by the skewness value for each item in the questionnaire that has a negative value, and it is skewed to the right. This shows that the respondents scored high as they were able to understand the concept and framework about the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test.

The Views of Teachers towards CEFR-Readiness Test.

This section exhibits the views of teachers towards CEFR-Readiness test. Data were analysed by obtaining the mean score for views of teachers towards CEFR-Readiness test in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers' views toward the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test.

Instrument	N	Mean	Std.Dev
1)Do you agree that CEFR-Readiness Test is made as a requirement for all English teachers to sit for the exam?	50	1.40	.699
2)Do you agree that CEFR-Readiness Test is able to enhance your professionalism in ELT?	50	1.62	1.06
3)Do you agree that CEFR-Readiness your CEFR-Readiness Test score will be a fair representation of your language ability?	50	2.00	.670
4)Do you agree that CEFR-Readiness Test will help in enhancing your proficiency in English language?	50	3.00	.953
5) Do you agree that by taking the CEFR-Readiness Test will influence you to increase the academic achievement of your students?	50	1.67	.651
6) Do you agree that CEFR-Readiness Test is made as a compulsory for all English language teachers to sit for the exam?	50	2.22	.763

Table 3 shows data tabulated that represent the views of teachers towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. Based on the table above, it can be noted that Item 4 *(Do you agree that*

CEFR-Readiness Test will help in enhancing your proficiency in English language?) posits the highest mean value which is X=3.00; SD=.953. However, Item 2*(Do you agree that CEFR-Readiness Test is able to enhance your professionalism in ELT?)* depicts the lowest mean score (X=1.62; SD=.651) among all the items in the questionnaire. The data were gathered and compared through the mean score value based on the Table of Mean Interpretation (refer to Table 2) from Norasmah and Salmah (2011). In general, all the mean scores value retrieved can be categorized as moderately low and low. Hence, from the data tabulated above, it can be noted that teachers have a negative view towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. The next research question of the study will describe the improvement measure that can be taken to improve CEFR-Readiness Test.

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) measure in CEFR-Readiness Test

To look for the CQI measure in CEFR-Readiness Test, the data was analysed through the thematic analysis. Table 4 presented the themes that emerged from the respondents' answer based on the open-ended questions of the questionnaire.

Table 4. Thematic analysis of CQI measure in CEFR-Readiness Test.

Facilities Improvement.	Redesign the test instrument.	Teachers' training.	Allocate more time in the test.
The system should be running smooth all the time, this is in term of the listening test	Designing the instrument of questions that is suitable to be applied in ESL classroom with the students but increase the level of the question when teacher answering the questions.	Need more briefing on how CEFR-Readiness Test to be taken.	Give a longer time for the teachers to prepare during speaking test.
Fix the problem of the system first	I think the only issue in CEFR-Readiness test is it is focuses on technical part but less focused on testing the language. ability of the candidates.	Make a class to teach the format how to answer the questions.	Give an extra time while in speaking test because 2 minutes is not enough
Improvement on connection of internet, improvement on the system and server	More exposure on the style of questions asked in the 4 skills. Should alter the exam as par as IELTS. Tests the proficiency and not technical part.	Prepare a module for the teachers. It does not have to be a class but a handout on CEFR guideline.	Adding more time in reading paper.
			Adding time to prepare point for speaking.

Table 4 above shows the improvement aspects that need to be taken in the CEFR-Readiness Test based on the perspectives of ESL teachers in secondary school. There are 4 themes that emerged from the thematic analysis above which are "Facilities Improvement", "Redesign the Test Instrument", "Teachers' Training" and "Allocate more time in the Test". The theme of "Facilities Improvement" the respondents believe that there is a need for the exam organiser to improve the facilities during the examination was conducted. It is because they found a distraction happened during the listening test that cause the problem to the listening audio to be heard. Fadahunsi et al. (2019) affirmed that an effective facilities management especially in educational institution plays a crucial role in increasing the productivity and increasing the educational objectives. From the excerpts below, most of the respondents posited the facilities that need to be improve during the examination were the speakers and internet server as these facilities mainly being used especially during the listening test.

"The system should be running smooth all the time; this is in term of the listening test." (Teacher 1)

"Fix the problem of the system first." (Teacher 4).

"Improvement on connection of internet, improvement on the system and server." (Teacher 5)

In addition, the respondents also believe that there is a need to "Redesign the test instrument". Respondents said that the CEFR-Readiness Test questions should address the applicability of the questions to be applied in ESL classrooms. They also added on saying that the test construct in CEFR-Readiness should focus on testing the language ability rather than focusing on the technical part of the items. The CEFR-Readiness Test construct should represent the real CEFR-aligned system in the educational context. Hence, from the responses retrieved the respondents believe it is important for the Board of Examination in Ministry of Education to standardize the level of questions paper to be at par with International English Language Testing System (IELTS). It is because, standardizing the local exam to the global state will boost the self-awareness of the test takers to have an accurate understanding of their ability (Brown, 2021).

"Designing the instrument of questions that is suitable to be applied in ESL classroom with the students but increase the level of the question when teacher answering the questions." (Teacher 7)

"I think the only issue in CEFR-Readiness test is it is focuses on technical part but less focused on testing the language. ability of the candidates". (Teacher 3)

"More exposure on the style of questions asked in the 4 skills. Should alter the exam as par as IELTS. Tests the proficiency and not technical part". (Teacher 2)

In other aspects, another improvement measure proposed by the respondents is "Teachers' Training". Respondents affirmed that teachers need to be trained and exposed to the test construct of CEFR-Readiness Test before they sit for the exam. Hence, the respondents propose that teachers need to have a briefing session about CEFR-Readiness Test. Today, the teacher's training and professional development are seen as two main mechanisms for the improvement of teachers' content knowledge and their teaching skills and practices in to meet the high educational standards (Bourdesa, 2016). From the responses retrieved, they found that it would be helpful for them to have a brief explanation about CEFR-Readiness Test that can be done through the module and guidelines.

"Need more briefing on how CEFR-Readiness Test to be taken." (Teacher 6)

"Make a class to teach the format how to answer the questions." (Teacher 8)

"Prepare a module for the teachers. It does not have to be a class but a handout on CEFR guideline." (Teacher 10)

Finally, another improvement measure proposed by the respondents is "Allocate more time in the test". Respondents said that the time stipulated for the speaking and reading paper are not enough for them to answer the questions. Most of the respondents said that the time allocated for speaking paper was too little for them to speak and prepare the notes to answer the questions. The excerpts below represent the responses from the respondents.

"Give a longer time for the teachers to prepare during speaking test." (Teacher 1)

"Give an extra time while in speaking test because 2 minutes is not enough." (Teacher 9)

"Adding more time in reading paper." (Teacher 10)

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, most of the respondents have a high level of awareness towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. Teachers shows the high level of awareness towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. They are aware towards the need of CEFR-Readiness Test to measure their English language proficiency in accordance with CEFR. The increased awareness among teachers can represent a more accurate understanding of their job scope that they need to deal in the process of enacting CEFR in ESL curriculum. This finding can also indicate that teachers also aware about the integration of CEFR in their teaching pedagogy. However, teachers have a negative view towards the implementation of CEFR-Readiness Test. The English teachers believe that the instruments embedded in the CEFR-Readiness Test are not able to really measure their capability and language proficiency in accordance with CEFR-framework. This mainly because of the test construct in CEFR-Readiness Test that is more focusing on the language functions and do not really engage to train them in using the language for communicative context of teaching pedagogy. Hence, through this point of view, there are also several measures that were proposed by the teachers to improve the test construct of CEFR-Readiness Test like enhancing the facilities, redesign the test instrument, enhancing the teachers' training in the test and reallocating more time to the test paper. This CQI measure is very useful for the government to relook to improve CEFR-Readiness Test as the assessment tool to measure the language proficiency among teachers. It will ensure that the government will be able to continuously ensure the quality of testing and evaluation in the country. Thus, it will be helpful for the government to do several changes and improvement in ensuring a more valid and reliable test.

In general, this paper was able to portray the usefulness of CEFR-Readiness Test to measure the teacher's language proficiency. The findings of this study will be useful for the government to relook and redesign this test construct to be more accurate and effective as an assessment tool. Government and policy makers can take several improvement measures that have been proposed in ensuring the quality of this test in the future use. Furthermore, through the study of CEFR-Readiness Test, it can help the government to know the needs to the current condition in English Language Teaching. Hence, it will be helpful for the government to decide on a further training program that are needed in improving the capacity of English language teachers especially in implementing CEFR in the syllabus. Through this study, it also can represent the current scenario on the capability of teachers in grasping the CEFR knowledge into their process of teaching pedagogy. This will be an important factor to look for as the reformation in English language teaching will be take over in Malaysian syllabus to be aligned with CEFR.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this analysis cannot be generalized since they are based on a limited number of English teachers from few schools in one province. The next researcher conducting this research should engage respondents in a large scale covering the Pulau Pinang population or among secondary school teachers in Malaysia. Non only that, since the measurement of the awareness and views in this study have been done quantitatively, the next research may opt for qualitative research design to study the teachers' awareness and views towards CEFR-Readiness test. This is vital for the research that the researcher will delve into the teachers' specific awareness, views, and even attitudes relative to perceptions and behaviours towards CEFR-Readiness test.

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