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**Introductory Guide to the
Common European Framework
of Reference (CEFR)
for English Language Teachers**

What is the Common European Framework of Reference?

The Common European Framework of Reference gives you a detailed description of learner level by skill, in a language-neutral format. It is a useful reference document for school directors, syllabus designers, teachers, teacher trainers and proficient learners.

The CEFR has three broad bands – A, B and C. Very loosely, you can see these as similar to Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced – though the CEFR levels are more precise than these terms (and calls them Basic, Independent, and Proficient). Each of those bands is divided into two, giving us six main levels.

| Level | | General description | Cambridge English Exam |
|------------------|----|--|---|
| Proficient user | C2 | Mastery Highly proficient – can use English very fluently, precisely and sensitively in most contexts | Cambridge English: Proficiency |
| | C1 | Effective Operational Proficiency Able to use English fluently and flexibly in a wide range of contexts | Cambridge English: Advanced |
| Independent user | B2 | Vantage Can use English effectively, with some fluency, in a range of contexts | Cambridge English: First/First for Schools |
| | B1 | Threshold Can communicate essential points and ideas in familiar contexts | Cambridge English: Preliminary/ Preliminary for Schools |
| Basic user | A2 | Waystage Can communicate in English within a limited range of contexts | Cambridge English: Key/Key for Schools Cambridge English: Flyers |
| | A1 | Breakthrough Can communicate in basic English with help from the listener | Cambridge English: Movers Cambridge English: Starters |

Why do we need the CEFR?

Even among teachers of the same language in similar contexts there can be a lot of variety in what is meant by terms like 'beginner', 'intermediate' or 'advanced'. This variability increases significantly across different languages, in different countries, with different age ranges of learners, etc. The CEFR makes it easier for all of us to talk about language levels reliably and with shared understanding.

Is it just about levels?

The CEFR has been very significant in language learning and teaching because its impact goes beyond merely describing learner levels. It has underpinned a particular approach to language learning as the one most commonly recommended or expected in language teaching today. This approach is based on the notion of communicative proficiency – the increasing ability to communicate and operate effectively in the target language. The descriptions of levels are skills-based and take the form of Can Do statements, as in the examples below. These descriptions of ability focus on communicative purpose and make for a very practical approach, which looks at what people can do – rather than on specific linguistic knowledge.

Examples of Can Do statements from the CEFR

Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. [A2, Global Scale]

Can understand enough to follow extended speech on abstract and complex topics beyond his/her own field, though he/she may need to confirm occasional details, especially if the accent is unfamiliar. [C1, Listening]

Can understand a wide range of long and complex texts, appreciating subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning. [C2, Reading]

Can write personal letters and notes asking for or conveying simple information of immediate relevance, getting across the point he/she feels to be important. [B1, Written interaction]

Can use stock phrases (e.g. "That's a difficult question to answer") to gain time and keep the turn whilst formulating what to say. [B2, Turntaking]

What is it used for?

The CEFR is used for many different practical purposes:

developing syllabuses

creating tests/exams

marking exams

evaluating language learning needs

designing courses

developing learning materials

describing language policies

continuous/self-assessment

teacher training programmes

We will look later at how it can be useful to you as a teacher.

Progressing through the CEFR levels

The CEFR helps us understand the different levels of language proficiency. It also helps us understand how learners progress through the levels.

The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) – of which Cambridge English Language Assessment is a founding member – estimates that learners typically take the following guided learning hours to progress between levels. 'Guided learning hours' means time in lessons as well as tasks you set them to do. You will notice that it takes longer to progress a level as learners move up the scale. Of course, learners will vary in how long they take depending on many factors.

| CEFR Level | Guided Learning Hours |
|------------|---------------------------|
| C2 | Approximately 1,000–1,200 |
| C1 | Approximately 700–800 |
| B2 | Approximately 500–600 |
| B1 | Approximately 350–400 |
| A2 | Approximately 180–200 |
| A1 | Approximately 90–100 |

This means that many learners will follow more than one course to progress from one level to the next. We can also use the '+' to indicate the top half of a level. For example, 'B1+' means the top half of the B1 range. You will find this convention followed on Cambridge course books.

We are also working on a project to define in more detail the linguistic knowledge typically mastered at each CEFR level – for English. This programme is called English Profile and there's more information on this later in this booklet. This more precise information helps teachers get a better idea of how to break down the learning for each CEFR level into different classes within their school or college.

The CEFR Global Scale

You will find the Global Scale is a useful starting point:

| | |
|----|---|
| C2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. • Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. • Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations. |
| C1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. • Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. • Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. • Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices. |
| B2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. • Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. • Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. |
| B1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. • Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. • Can produce simple connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest. • Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. |
| A2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). • Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. • Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. |
| A1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. • Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. • Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. |

Other CEFR Scales

But the CEFR is particularly useful because it applies the same set of levels to all the various sub-skills and areas of competence: the basic four skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening), communicative language (e.g. turn-taking, asking for clarification), types of interaction (e.g. obtaining goods and services, interviewing), and more linguistic skills (e.g. vocabulary range, phonological control). It allows you link up skills in each of these areas with the student's overall level.

This is a list of the 54 different scales available in the Council of Europe document called Structured Overview of all CEFR scales. You can get this from the Cambridge University Press site, or from the Council of Europe.

Communicative Activities

1. Overall Listening Comprehension
 2. Understanding Interaction between Native Speakers.
 3. Listening as a Member of a Live Audience
 4. Listening to Announcements & Instructions
 5. Listening to Radio & Audio Recordings
6. Audio/Visual Watching TV & Film
7. Overall Reading Comprehension
 8. Reading Correspondence
 9. Reading for Orientation
 10. Reading for Information and Argument
 11. Reading Instructions
12. Overall Spoken Interaction
 13. Understanding a Native Speaker Interlocutor
 14. Conversation
 15. Informal Discussion
 16. Formal Discussion (Meetings)
 17. Goal-oriented Co-operation
 18. Obtaining Goods and Services
 19. Information Exchange
 20. Interviewing & Being Interviewed
21. Overall Written Interaction
 22. Correspondence
 23. Notes, Messages & Forms

- 24. Overall Spoken Production
 - 25. Sustained Monologue: Describing Experience
 - 26. Sustained Monologue: Putting a Case (e.g. Debate)
 - 27. Public Announcements
 - 28. Addressing Audiences
- 29. Overall Written Production
 - 30. Creative Writing
 - 31. Writing Reports and Essays

Communication Strategies

- 32. Identifying Cues and Inferring
- 33. Taking the Floor (Turntaking)
- 34. Co-operating
- 35. Asking for Clarification
- 36. Planning
- 37. Compensating
- 38. Monitoring and Repair

Working with Text

- 39. Notetaking in Seminars and Lectures
- 40. Processing Text

Communicative Language Competence

- 41. General Linguistic Range
- 42. Vocabulary Range
- 43. Grammatical Accuracy
- 44. Vocabulary Control
- 45. Phonological Control
- 46. Orthographic Control
- 47. Sociolinguistic
- 48. Sociolinguistic
- 49. Flexibility
- 50. Taking the Floor (Turntaking) – repeated
- 51. Thematic Development
- 52. Coherence
- 53. Propositional Precision
- 54. Spoken Fluency

English Profile

The English Profile Programme involves major research projects that are all working towards a reliable, detailed description of the actual learner English that is typical of each CEFR level. Initially, the focus has been on vocabulary and grammar, and the English Vocabulary Profile is now complete for all six levels, A1-C2. A separate research team is developing a similar resource, the English Grammar Profile, which describes the gradual mastery of grammar across the six CEFR levels.

Cambridge University Press has given teachers around the world access to their research into vocabulary learning across the CEFR. Go to the English Profile website – www.englishprofile.org and click on Free Registration English Vocabulary Profile. This will allow to find out which words and phrases – and individual meanings of each word – is typically mastered by learners at each CEFR level. This is a really valuable tool to make decisions about what to teach students as they progress. Cambridge University Press authors and editors make extensive use of this research in developing their course materials.

Here are a couple of examples of what you can find in this English Vocabulary Profile online resource.

The screenshot shows the search interface for the word 'fire'. On the left, there are radio buttons for selecting CEFR levels: A1-B1, A1-B2, A1-C1, A1-C2, B1 only, B2 only, C1 only, and C2 only. Below this is a 'Browse A-Z' link and an 'OR' separator. A search box contains the word 'fire'. Below the search box is an 'ADVANCED SEARCH' section with a dropdown menu for 'Category' set to '--Any--'. On the right, a list of search results is displayed, each with a bullet point, the word, its part of speech, and a CEFR level in a colored box: 'fire noun FLAMES A2', 'catch fire B1', 'on fire B1', 'fire noun NATURAL HEAT B1', 'fire noun SHOOTING C2', 'come under fire C2', 'set fire to sth; set sth on fire C2', 'play with fire C2', 'fire verb SHOOT B2', 'fire verb REMOVE FROM A JOB B2', 'fire sb's imagination C2', and 'fire brigade noun B2'.

Some information on the how knowledge of 'fire' develops across levels.

The screenshot shows the search interface for the topic 'Relationships'. On the left, there are radio buttons for selecting CEFR levels: A1-B1, A1-B2, A1-C1, A1-C2, B1 only, B2 only, C1 only, and C2 only. Below this is a 'Browse A-Z' link and an 'OR' separator. A search box is empty. Below the search box is an 'ADVANCED SEARCH' section with several dropdown menus: 'Category' set to '--Any--', 'Part of speech' set to 'nouns', 'Grammar' set to '--Any--', 'Usage' set to '--Any--', and 'Topic' set to 'Relationships'. On the right, a list of search results is displayed under the heading 'Core results:'. Each result has a bullet point, the word, its part of speech, and a CEFR level in a colored box: 'adoption noun B2', 'affair noun RELATIONSHIP B2', 'ancestor noun B2', 'anniversary noun B1', 'aunt noun A2', 'birthday noun A1', 'bond noun B2', 'boyfriend noun A2', 'bride noun B1', 'brother noun A1', 'brother-in-law noun B2', 'celebration noun B1', 'ceremony noun B1', 'child noun A1', 'circle noun GROUP B2', and 'colleague noun A2'.

Some information on the vocabulary set for the topic of Relationships for level A1-B2.

How can the CEFR be useful for teachers?

Understanding language levels better

The CEFR helps you to understand a standardised terminology for describing language levels. National, local and school policies are increasingly being described in CEFR levels – and so it's important to understand what they mean.

Seeing more clearly what learners need to work on

The CEFR describes what learners need to be able to do to reach the next level. You will find it particularly useful in showing how different component skills are described at each level. You have an idea of what a B2 student is like, but what should they be able to do in terms of listening to lectures/speeches, or writing correspondence, or spoken fluency? The CEFR helps you see what is needed for different aspects of learning English.

Assessment grids

The CEFR scales are also very useful for creating your own assessment grids. These use the descriptors in the scales and can help teachers with assessing their students during and at the end of a course. They can also be used for self-assessment by the learners – though usually necessary to simplify them for this purpose, or even translate them in some situations. You can find links to official translations of some of the scales on the Council of Europe website: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/cefr_grids_EN.asp

Curriculum plan

If you are responsible for working out what is going to be taught in a class – just your own or for the whole school – it is very helpful to use the CEFR as a broad framework. Look carefully at the descriptors for the levels you need – not just the Global Scale, but component scales as well where relevant. What do you want your students to achieve in each course on their path to the target level? This can be further elaborated by looking at the information coming from English Profile. Of course, most teachers do not need to create their own curriculum. By choosing a course book that is aligned to the CEFR, you have a syllabus created by experts – which you may then choose to adapt for your own circumstances.

Other questions teachers ask

Which languages are covered by the CEFR?

The CEFR was designed to provide a framework for all European languages. Because it is language-neutral, it can actually be used for any language in the world. It has been produced in 38 languages, including Arabic, Chinese and Japanese.

Who developed the CEFR?

The Council of Europe led the development. This is an organisation to promote co-operation among all European countries – particularly around law and culture, which includes language. The work leading to the CEFR started in the 60s and 70s, but really became established in the 90s. Cambridge has been a key contributor to the CEFR development – through joint research projects, funding the development of parts of the project, publishing the outcomes, and the Cambridge English exams providing a concrete form of the CEFR levels for English from an early stage.

Which countries recognise the CEFR?

It's difficult to answer this question clearly, partly because the situation is changing quickly, and partly because it's difficult to say how many organisations in a country need to recognise the CEFR before we can say it has widespread recognition. We are aware of organisations in almost every country we work in making reference to the CEFR at some level. It is certainly recognised in all European countries, but is increasingly referred to at national or regional policy levels in many countries in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Australasia. Universities, schools and colleges increasingly use the CEFR as a common framework for describing language levels. You can see some information on global recognition of the CEFR at http://www.get.org.tw/get/e_GET/cefr_global.htm.

How do I know whether a course-book is properly aligned to the CEFR?

It is not easy for those involved with teaching to judge whether a publication or an exam is properly aligned to the CEFR. There is no validation body to check that such claims are well-founded. Teachers don't have the time to check claims themselves and so it can be a confusing situation. Our one comment on this is that aligning materials or tests to the CEFR requires a lot of work and research capability to do in any reliable form, and if CEFR alignment is important to you, you should ask about the level of research undertaken by the publisher or test developer.

Should I introduce my students to the CEFR?

Yes, it's very useful for students to understand how mastery of a language builds up from beginner to mastery. Of course, this needs to be suitable for their level and age, and it is probably adults and teenagers that will find it useful.

Scales – adapted to their language level – are really useful for self-assessment, which can be very helpful in developing language skills.

What about the European Language Portfolio?

This is a set of materials for a learner to use to capture their language learning progress. Different sets of materials have been developed for different circumstances and languages – but they all fit into a general approach designed by the Council of Europe. See <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/> for more information. These portfolios are becoming increasingly popular – though usually they are seen as an optional addition for learners.

Has the CEFR been translated into other languages?

The Council of Europe says it has been translated into these languages: Arabic, Albanian, Armenian, Basque, Bulgarian, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Esperanto, Estonian, Finnish, French, Friulian, Galician, Georgian, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lithuanian, Moldovan, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian (Iekavian version), Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish and Ukrainian.

Where can I find out more about the CEFR?

There is a lot of information on the Council of Europe website http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp

The key document is called The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, published by Cambridge University Press (ISBN Hardback 0521803136 Paperback: 0521005310). This is a detailed and thorough book covering all aspects of the CEFR.

Cambridge English Language Assessment have produced a very good booklet on using the CEFR - www.cambridgeesol.org/assets/pdf/.../cefr-pogp-oct-2011.pdf . This gives a much deeper introduction to the CEFR, especially as it applies to assessment.

You might also find it interesting to see examples of materials and learners speaking the different CEFR levels at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/CEFR_materials_EN.asp#TopOfPage .

Some materials for teacher training relating to the CEFR can be found on this site: http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/Elp_tt/Results/



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