

# The Impact of the CEFR on Teaching and Testing English in the Local Context

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**Abstract**—The paper presents communicative language teaching and testing in Slovakia. In the late 1990s, Slovakia as many other Central and Eastern European countries being involved in piloting the first draft of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (2001) started the reform of the school-leaving examination to change the traditional approach of testing structural aspects of foreign languages. The reform was induced by foreign language teachers who were not satisfied with the imbalance between teaching and testing as using books published in Great Britain changed their attitude to teaching. Based on a long-term study, the author of the article will discuss problematic issues concerning the changes in teaching and testing, focusing on the impact of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and its model of language use. The article underlines the importance of being familiar with CEFR descriptors and illustrative samples in order to implement the CEFR effectively. The study reveals the extent to which the CEFR has generated change and how the framework might be further exploited to improve the effectiveness of teaching and testing English.

**Index Terms**—the CEFR, an action-oriented approach, communicative teaching, communicative testing, language competence

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Slovakia, English Language Teaching (ELT) went through several significant changes in the 1990s as English used to be taught in the same way as Russian (an obligatory language in the country) when Slovak teachers focused too much on ‘native-like’ pronunciation, memorising isolated words and grammatical patterns similar to English teachers in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe (politically designated as the socialist block). Traditional teaching of target languages was oriented on teachers rather than students who were passive observers of teachers’ explanations and frightened of being corrected all the time when they wanted to say. The safest way of learning was memorising the material presented by a teacher. Despite the fact that the country had a uniformed system in which everything was managed centrally, for example, syllabuses, methods, the same course books, learning outcomes were not measured centrally. The report concerning the reform of language examinations in Central and Eastern Europe describes oral testing in schools as based on centrally devised topics that enabled teachers to set questions reflecting their own teaching and omitting entire content areas without any external check (West & Crighton, 1999).

In the mid-1990s, 11 countries participated in the regional conference in Vilnius focused on secondary education. The participants came to the conclusion that teaching should meet the demands of the marketplace and competence-based skills should be measured more reliably following the trends (throughout Europe) towards convergence in the requirements for European school-leaving qualifications.

In 1991 the outcome of the Rüsçhlikon intergovernmental symposium ‘Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe’ was the setting up of an authoring group and an international working party. The authoring group made up of Joe Shiels, the head of the Language Policy Division, and John Trim, Brian North and Daniel Coste focused on language teaching and testing as the concern was on language education 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 and to encourage practitioners to reflect upon their current practice as far as objectives are concerned and in tracking the headway of learners in language acquisition with the aim of improving language teaching and assessment all over Europe (Cambridge ESOL, 2011).

The Common European Framework of Reference: learning, teaching, assessment (Council of Europe, 2001) introduced a general model of language use, based on an action-oriented approach. The traditional four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) were replaced by communicative language activities, such as reception (aural and visual), production (oral and written), interaction (oral and written) and mediation, completed by strategies that are important for language processes and necessary for accomplishing the language performances. In ELT, approaches to defining language proficiency are influenced by theories of language and language teaching. Since the 1970s, various models of language competence, proposed by a number of applied linguists such as Carole and Swain (1981), Bachman (1990), Weir (2005), Heyworth (2009), etc., have influenced teaching and testing English. According to the CEFR (2001), the learner’s competences comprise general competences (and communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic) that include intercultural competence, strategic competence and existential competence.

The convention on recognition of qualifications (Council of Europe, 1997) became a challenge for Central- and Eastern-European countries developing their new democracies, in which learning languages, especially English, became a priority for the governments as it was demanded by parents who could see future of their children in mastering languages appropriately, accurately and naturally. In Slovakia, the pilot version of the CEFR (1996) encouraged English teachers to change their approach to teaching English, and subsequently to testing.

The model of language use presented by the CEFR is based on the action-oriented approach as well as socio-cognitive approach, highlighting the cognitive processes in language learning and use as well as the role of social context in how language is learned and used (Weir, 2005). Language user's developing competence reflects various kinds of cognitive processes, strategies and knowledge. Any time a language learner is expected to perform a task, he needs to use language that is contextualised in a certain domain. To complete a task, a learner needs to be engaged in language activities, which requires learner's cognitive skills. This leads to learning. Language activity is based on using language naturally – integrating the four skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) in their integration – to solve problems in real life situations.

Common reference levels are articulated in Can Do statements, which enable language learners to be assessed or self-assess a level of proficiency. As descriptors in the common framework scale were suggested to be context-free in order to accommodate generalizable results from different specific contexts, Slovakia decided to incorporate them into the newly-developed national curriculum, according to which English school-leaving examination tests were expected to be designed at two levels: B1 and B2. On the other hand, descriptors in the common framework scale need to be context-relevant, relatable to or translatable into every relevant context – and appropriate for the function they are used for in that context. Since the CEFR is not language or context specific and does not include the checklists of learning points or lists of specific language features, it is necessary to adapt its use to fit a particular language and context (Cambridge ESOL, 2011). The descriptors used in the Slovak national curriculum are formulated as Can Do statements and influenced the development of the test specification for school-leaving examinations in English, taking into account the local context and educational history.

## II. THE STUDY (METHODOLOGY)

The process of reform in teaching and testing English was initiated from the bottom as Slovak teachers of English using English course books, printed in Great Britain, changed their way of teaching, focusing more on communicative language activities. The teachers were intensively trained by lectures from the British Council or by local teacher trainers who were engaged in the projects related to the CEFR.

The first test in English was designed in 1997 and piloted on March 12, 1997 at 40 secondary grammar schools (1,000 students). The results were presented at a conference in Trnava on April 12, 1997. English teachers from all over the country participated in the conference that was very well supported by head teachers who became involved in the process very actively and due to whom, later, the reform got an enormous attention of the authorities. The achievements, supported by statistical analyses, raised national discussion on the necessity of introducing a valid and reliable examination in English (Béřešová, 2005).

Since then, each year a valid and reliable test in English was designed, which convinced the Ministry of Education that such a process required the changing of language policy in the country, which happened in 2004, when the Ministry of Education officially recognised language tests as part of the school-leaving examination. In spite of several changes that occurred in legislation from 2004 till now, it is possible to conclude that students' language competence in English is tested in the language tests that are available at three CEFR levels (B1, B2 and C1). Their structure and content is different as well as a number of items, taking into account the level of proficiency.

TABLE 1  
A COMPARISON OF THREE EXAMINATIONS IN ENGLISH AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF PROFICIENCY

Level	Listening	Language in Use	Reading
B1	20	20	20
B2	20	40	20
C1	30	30	30

As Table 1 shows three tests in English have the same sections concerning listening, language in use (grammar and vocabulary) and reading. Each language skill is measured as authentically as possible, using authentic texts and realistic tasks. Authentic texts are chosen due to their level of difficulty and are accompanied by the items that are attempted to be related to the CEFR Can Do statements.

To justify using the CEFR while constructing national language examinations or tests, a comparison of different tests designed for local purposes seemed to be logical. The first steps were taken in identifying constructs in particular test sections in English. Working actively with item-writers in these countries as well as searching for exact English tests on the ministerial websites, the analysis of four different tests from four different European countries such as Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia became reasonable as these countries have gone through similar developmental stages and used to have quite a similar educational history. All these countries test English at two levels: B1 and B2, only Slovakia introduced a C1 test in 2017 for those learners who study at bilingual schools.

TABLE 2  
ENGLISH TESTS AT LEVEL B2 – FOUR EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Country	Listening	Reading	Writing	Language in Use
Croatia	4 tasks	5 tasks	1 task	-
Hungary	3 tasks	4 tasks	2 tasks	4 tasks
Slovakia	3 tasks	3 tasks	1 task	3 tasks
Slovenia	2 tasks	3 tasks	2 tasks	3 tasks

Table 2 depicts slight differences between the tests of the mentioned four countries. The Croatian reading part consists of 5 tasks, including two tasks measuring language in use. Their English tests do not include an extra section that concerns to test grammar and vocabulary. Other countries use cloze tests based on gap-filling of functional words (rational cloze) as the learners need to process the text at various levels (e.g. grammar, discourse) in order to fill in the gaps, whereas the Croatian cloze test focuses on notional words, which needs a very demanding process of test design and choice of a proper text (Bérešová, 2017).

More recognisable differences are in testing productive skills. The tasks for writing are officially announced, but in some countries the students' performances are assessed directly at schools by two independent English teachers (e.g. Slovakia). In other countries, despite the fact that papers are marked by local teachers, quality of this process is assured that marking is done together, led and checked by one leading assessor.

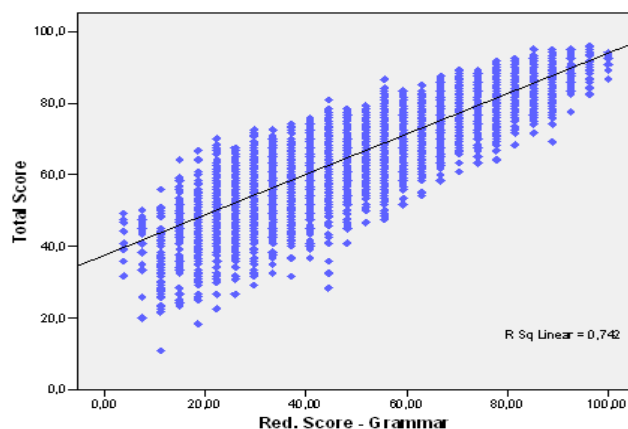
Due to the thoroughly written catalogue of requirements, Slovenian secondary-school students are trained to write argumentative essays and their tests comprise two tasks. The first task can be selected from the presented topics. The second task is based on a B2 descriptor related to reading contemporary literary prose. Therefore, students are given a list of books they are expected to read, being aware of the fact that they must be prepared to express their opinions or comments on the main characters' attitudes or actions, each time with reference to the exact book (Bérešová, 2017). Other three countries do not officially support reading books in the original language, which likely results in limited vocabulary of their English learners.

### III. THE FINDINGS

Comparing the tests designed in four above-mentioned countries, it shows that texts chosen for 18-19-year olds contain topics that are not attractive for teenagers. The tests still need trained professionals (item writers) that should be systematically led towards quality and improvement. The support from the ministries of education is a necessity, as all the processes related to test development are money consuming. Other issues that cost money are statisticians whose job is closely connected with training item-writers to help them avoid problematic issues either in testing techniques or language. Quality of English should be assured by highly educated language professionals, both local teachers of English and native speakers working as language teachers or acting as teacher trainers.

Comparing tasks design revealed that the same section names cover different constructs. For example, the test constructed in Croatia included one task concerning testing vocabulary, despite the fact that the action-oriented approaches was adopted. Three other countries had one extra section referring to testing grammar and vocabulary. This decision is based on their local policy-makers and teachers who spend a lot of time teaching grammar and vocabulary as their goal of teaching contains fluency as well as accuracy and a B-level language user is an independent user of a particular language who needs to communicate with reasonable accuracy but still using a repertoire of frequently used patterns associated with more predictable situations at level B1 and with a high grammatical control and being able to correct his/her mistakes at level B2.

One supportive argument for including testing grammar and vocabulary seems to be regression analysis that proves the relationship between language in use scores and total scores of students' performances.



Picture 1 Total score versus language in use score - regression analysis

Picture 1 shows that the relationship between one dependent variable (total score) and one independent variable (language in use scores) is strong as the coefficient of correlation between language use in scores and students' total scores is high. This relationship is not so strong between other variables (listening comprehension and reading comprehension) when using multiple linear models in a regression analysis.

The last comparison of testing English in the above-mentioned countries reveals that testing spoken production and spoken interaction still needs a lot of reform. Speaking is tested at schools without any special check and despite the fact that teachers of English are trained to be raters and use marking criteria, the content and level of proficiency is still in hands of school teachers. Teachers' judgements of students' performances are not officially recorded as are not performances of students. There is no evidence about objectivity and fairness or ethical behaviour of raters.

Despite the fact that the CEFR was supplemented by the Manual called *Relating Language Examinations and Tests to the CEFR: Learning, teaching, assessment* (2009), in which a set of five inter-related stages of the linking process are clearly presented and supplemented by professionally compiled different approaches to different aspects, many gaps are recognisable in the linking processes between the countries. These gaps can be summarized as follows:

- a lack of quality assurance in high-stakes testing in local contexts
- insufficient application of the action-oriented approach
- limited awareness of the CEFR descriptors and illustrative samples
- excessive focus on grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative language skills
- insufficient statistical data
- no training for raters
- no marking criteria.

Two issues from the list need commenting. Insufficient application of the action-oriented approach means that language teachers are aware of the philosophy that is behind the CEFR but they still focus on grammar and vocabulary too much. And when grammar and vocabulary teaching is predominant in class work, it is the focus of testing as well. Many sections of the test were intended to test communicative language skills have more tasks based on testing grammar and vocabulary, so the construct is not related to reading but to mastery of language. The second issue that needs to be mentioned is the limited awareness of the CEFR descriptors and illustrative samples that results in teachers' judgements of learners' performances based on teachers' experience in their own classes rather than done on descriptors provided in the CEFR.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

One of the most important ways of adapting the CEFR is the production of language-specific Reference Level Descriptions. These are frameworks for specific languages where the levels and descriptors in the CEFR have been mapped against the actual linguistic material (i.e. grammar, words) needed to implement the stated competences. Reference Level Descriptions are already available for several languages.

Despite the fact that descriptors are presented for various illustrative scales in communicative language activities, there are trends to link words and grammar to particular CEFR levels. English Profile helps teachers and educationalists understand what the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) means for English. It does not only describe what aspects of English are typically learned at each CEFR level, but it tells teachers, curriculum developers, course-book authors and test writers what is suitable for learning at each level (<http://www.englishprofile.org>). English Vocabulary Profile Online and English Grammar Profile Online are searchable databases based on work that has been carried out as part of a project, supported by the Council of Europe. The aim of the project was to collect enough information on what English grammar and vocabulary is suitable for teaching and testing at each CEFR level. Despite the fact that findings are based on learners' performances all over Europe, is it possible to link words and grammatical structures to particular CEFR levels?

Users of English come from different language backgrounds, and it is easier to acquire a target language from the same language family of the mother tongue, such as Romance or Germanic languages. Therefore, words or grammatical patterns officially linked to one of the CEFR levels do not have to work properly in other languages due to their closeness to each other or their distance from each other (when the mother tongue is completely different from the target language).

The most frequent question among language professionals is a question about consistency of common understanding of one particular level. Competence of a B2 learner in one country should be very similar to competence of a B2 learner in another country, despite the fact that they can be different in different communicative language skills as they have different preferences for their future studies or jobs. Different contexts that need to be taken into consideration are, for example, related to their age and experience. Adults and teenagers should acquire English at the same level, however, they are expected to perform effectively in their own contexts.

Apart from the introduction of an action-oriented approach, the CEFR changed the linguists' view on authenticity that is perceived with its two important aspects. While situational authenticity concerns the accuracy with which language tasks represent language activities from real life (e.g. listen to the weather forecast for Dubai), interactional authenticity refers to the naturalness of the interaction between a language user and a language task and the mental processes which accompany it (you travel to Dubai for a trip and need to know what to pack). Contextualisation plays

an important role in language learning, therefore classroom activities and test tasks and items should be presented in a particular context that influences language use and enables language learners to indicate what kind of language they intend to use is accurate, appropriate and natural.

What is more, the concept of validity has been broadened. The Council of Europe focus on the concept of validity claiming that “a test or assessment can be said to have validity to the degree that it can be demonstrated that what is actually assessed (the construct) is what, in the context concerned, should be assessed, and that the information gained is an accurate representation of the proficiency of the candidate(s) concerned” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 177). If the construct is clearly stated in the specification of the test, then it is not possible that different areas of the language are tested.

In the process of reporting test results in terms of the CEFR, validity serves for demonstrating that what test developers or those responsible for test administration claim is true: that students of English reported at level B2 actually are B2 users of English according to the evidence test developers or those responsible for test administration can provide. The CEFR’s model of language use is called socio-cognitive as language is viewed as an internalised set of competences and an externalised set of social behaviours. If the test focuses more on use, then validity evidence will relate to language actually being used for a range of communicative purposes, for example, a test for immigrants would probably weight ability to use language effectively to get their messages through or to comprehend others’ messages. If the test focuses more on competence, then validity evidence will relate to cognitive skills, strategies and language knowledge that support inference about potential ability for language use, for example, a school-leaving examinations, when test tasks should engage the same skills, strategies and language knowledge that would be needed in the target language use domain.

#### V. IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

A large number of European countries incorporated CEFR descriptors and an action-oriented approach into their curricula or syllabi. In testing English, item-writers are encouraged to use the CEFR scales and illustrative descriptors to construct appropriate tests that fit their context and maintain standards. In the national contexts, the views of validity in testing English and different methods of assessing validity are promoted in most European countries as tests should be validated in as many ways as possible. English language testing influences English language teaching and therefore tests of high quality can mirror current trend in teaching English. The goal of ELT in various European countries is the same – to prepare learners of English to be able to communicate in English efficiently, using accurate, appropriate and natural language.

Language users of English can differ in their profile scale skills as most students are usually better at reading rather than listening or speaking rather than writing. A great advantage of the CEFR is that skills can be tested separately and then linked to a particular level as well as skills-specific ability levels can be defined on the basis of specific-specific descriptors (Council of Europe, 2011). This philosophy has not been broadly accepted in European countries as students commonly apply for tests that are designed for a particular level, in which all the sections of the national test are obligatorily of the same level of proficiency.

Despite the fact that an action-oriented approach encourages language professionals to focus predominantly on communicative language activities and strategies, many teachers of English in different European countries do not agree about avoiding the assessment of grammar and vocabulary. They invest a lot of their time practising different grammatical patterns and words in different contexts as they have experienced how difficult it is to acquire English having a limited number of English classes per week without any other exposure to English, e.g. films in the original language. In Slovakia, all the films are dubbed and the only activity during which Slovak children do not mind being exposed to English in their free time is playing games on the Internet. Most students are engaged in communicative language activities in English three times a week during their English class.

Sharing the results achieved in the countries where native languages are quite similar to English as they are from the same family group and comparing them with the results achieved in the countries where mother tongues are different from English might provide more relevant list of words and grammatical patterns that seem to be important for Reference Level Descriptions.

However, the CEFR as an open system can be used in different local contexts. Once the national governments decide to claim that their examinations in English are aligned to the CEFR, there are several steps they need to follow:

- focusing on learning English rather than learning about English
- applying the CEFR descriptors and illustrative samples in the national curriculum design
- constructing reliable and valid tests that provide useful information about test-takers’ knowledge, skills and abilities to use English appropriately in a variety of situations and settings
- benchmarking their test-takers’ performance samples to the levels that were intended in designing the test
- establishing a decision rule to allocate test-takers to one of the CEFR levels on the basis of their performances in the English examination

To improve testing English, it would be useful to conduct surveys of relevant, CEFR-based tasks and items for assessing listening, reading, spoken production and interaction, and written production and interaction that would be available for those that would like to link their national examinations and tests to the CEFR. Collaboration between

national test developers or providers, and teachers of English should be more intensive to enable them to share the results achieved in local contexts and learn from each other. Examples of good practice can serve those who intend to demonstrate the validity of their claims.

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