

BRIEFING SHEET

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THE CEFR AND LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

This Briefing Sheet is written by UKALTA, the UK Association for Language Testing and Assessment, to answer the following questions.

- What is the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR)?
- Where did the CEFR come from?
- What does the CEFR contain?
- What is 'CEFR alignment' and why might it be useful?
- How is CEFR alignment achieved and what resources are available to enable alignment?

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WHAT IS THE CEFR?

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* – usually referred to as ‘the CEFR’ - was developed by the Council of Europe in the 1990s to help people reflect on different dimensions of language education, e.g. curricula, syllabuses, textbooks and examinations. An additional aim was to encourage a shared understanding of language education systems across the nations of Europe and beyond.

The CEFR offers a comprehensive and accessible description of language proficiency in terms of language learning and use across a range of levels. Through its common reference levels and illustrative scales it can be helpful in:

- developing curricula and syllabuses, textbooks and other teaching/learning materials, including tests and other forms of assessment
- demonstrating alignment between two or more of these aspects of language education
- showing that an existing curriculum, syllabus, textbook, test or other form of assessment is aligned with relevant parts of the CEFR’s descriptive scheme and one or more of its proficiency levels
- comparing curricula and syllabuses, textbooks and other teaching/learning materials, tests and other forms of assessment

The CEFR offers a comprehensive and accessible description of language proficiency in terms of language learning and use across a range of levels.

WHERE DOES THE CEFR COME FROM?

The Council of Europe is an international organisation founded in 1949 to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. Since the 1970s the organisation has promoted the learning and teaching of languages

- to preserve Europe’s linguistic and cultural diversity and to encourage its citizens to value them, and
- to facilitate international communication and exchange.

Over half a century, the Council of Europe worked on developing a framework to describe the nature of language proficiency, leading to the creation of the CEFR. In keeping with the organisation’s concern for the

rights and responsibilities of the individual citizen, the CEFR views the language user/learner as a social agent, i.e. a member of society who performs tasks (not exclusively language-related) in a specific set of circumstances/environment and for a particular purpose. It takes what is sometimes called an 'action-oriented' approach.

WHAT DOES THE CEFR CONTAIN?

The central component of the CEFR is a detailed description of language proficiency in terms of language use, subdivided into four modes:

- Reception (listening and reading)
- Production (speaking and writing)
- Interaction (spoken and written)
- Mediation (i.e. facilitating communication between individuals or groups who, for whatever reason, cannot communicate directly)

The CEFR's descriptive scheme, first published as [CEFR 2001](#), has two complementary dimensions:

- i) the communicative tasks that the language user/learner may need to perform, and
- ii) the competences on which successful task performance depends.

It also includes illustrative scales that use "can do" statements to describe proficiency at six levels: A1 and A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), C1 and C2 (proficient user).

In 2020 the Council of Europe published the [Companion Volume \(CV\) 2020](#) which updates and extends the earlier descriptive scheme. It includes several new features:

- the addition of new descriptors to the 2001 scales
- a handful of new scales and a new pre-A1 level
- additional scales for plurilingual and pluricultural competences (as an important part of language in social interaction)
- an extended definition of mediation with 24 illustrative scales
- replacement of the 2001 phonology scale with three new scales

It also reformulates descriptors

- so that they are gender-neutral and modality-inclusive (and thus can refer to signed as well as spoken languages),
- to adjust highly absolute statements to better reflect the competence of C2 user/learners, and
- to refer to linguistic accommodation (or not) by "native speakers" – now a controversial term since the CEFR was first published

WHAT IS CEFR ALIGNMENT AND WHY MIGHT IT BE USEFUL?

Since publication of the CEFR in 2001, educational authorities, agencies and institutions have recognized certain advantages in claiming alignment with the framework for different aspects of their educational system.

Perceived advantages include:

- achieving systemic coherence and transparency
- establishing a basis for principled comparison
- monitoring for purposes of quality assurance

CEFR alignment can encourage shared understanding and coherence among aspects of an education system, facilitate comparison between them and support quality improvement.

For these reasons, it is likely to be of interest to a range of users, including:

- agencies charged with the development of national/regional curricula and syllabuses
- agencies charged with the development and administration of national/regional language exams and other forms of assessment
- autonomous educational institutions, especially universities and private language schools
- educators who have to develop their own teaching materials and/or assessments
- language teacher educators
- language teachers working in a context that is partly/wholly shaped by reference to the CEFR and CEFR CV
- national and international language testing agencies
- national and regional ministries of education
- professional associations concerned with quality assurance and quality improvement in language education
- textbook authors and publishers

Alignment with CEFR levels is not mandatory or obligatory and the CEFR should always be regarded as a resource for consultation rather than a package for implementation. Alignment will only be meaningful and justifiable if there is sufficient construct overlap between the instrument for which alignment is sought and the CEFR.

The success of any learning system depends on the close alignment of elements that have sometimes been regarded as independent of one another: curriculum, teaching/learning materials, teaching approaches, teacher training, assessment. These elements impact significantly on one another and on learning. However, curriculum developers, materials developers, teacher trainers and assessment specialists often work independently of one another.

The need to consider these elements from a single unified perspective forms the basis of O’Sullivan’s (2021) concept of a [Comprehensive Learning System](#) (CLS).

Figure 1 highlights the three core elements of a CLS:

- **Curriculum** – informal as well as formal
- **Delivery** – includes teacher selection, teacher training, accreditation, professional development and leadership; teaching and learning materials; the physical environment in which the delivery takes place
- **Assessment** – includes developmental assessment (diagnostic, aspects of progress, formative, etc.) and judgemental assessment (placement, aspects of progress, achievement, proficiency, etc.)

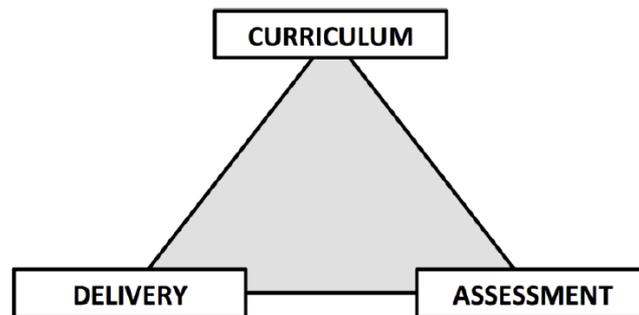


Figure 1: O’Sullivan’s Comprehensive Learning System (CLS)

The success of any learning system depends on the close alignment of elements that have sometimes been regarded as independent of one another.

If one of these elements is disconnected from the others, then the system is under threat. Here are some examples of how one or more elements may be disconnected:

Example 1: A new or revised curriculum is introduced but adequate training for teachers is not provided. It is thus very likely that teachers will not deliver the curriculum in the expected way, in which case the benefits intended by the change in curriculum will not be realized.

Example 2: The assessment does not fit with the requirements of the curriculum (e.g., a curriculum is focused on all four skills but the assessment is a multiple-choice grammar and reading test; or the curriculum is based on the needs of a particular educational context, whereas the assessment is not).

Example 3: The textbooks and materials used in the classroom do not reflect the needs of the curriculum (e.g., the curriculum calls for a communicative approach, but the materials follow a grammar-based approach; or the curriculum is designed for a particular educational context, whereas the materials are not).

HOW IS CEFR ALIGNMENT ACHIEVED AND WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO ENABLE ALIGNMENT?

Undertaking a CEFR alignment exercise involves one of two processes:



Both Process 1 and Process 2 involve a series of well-established and largely sequential steps - or sets of procedures, as illustrated in Figure 2.

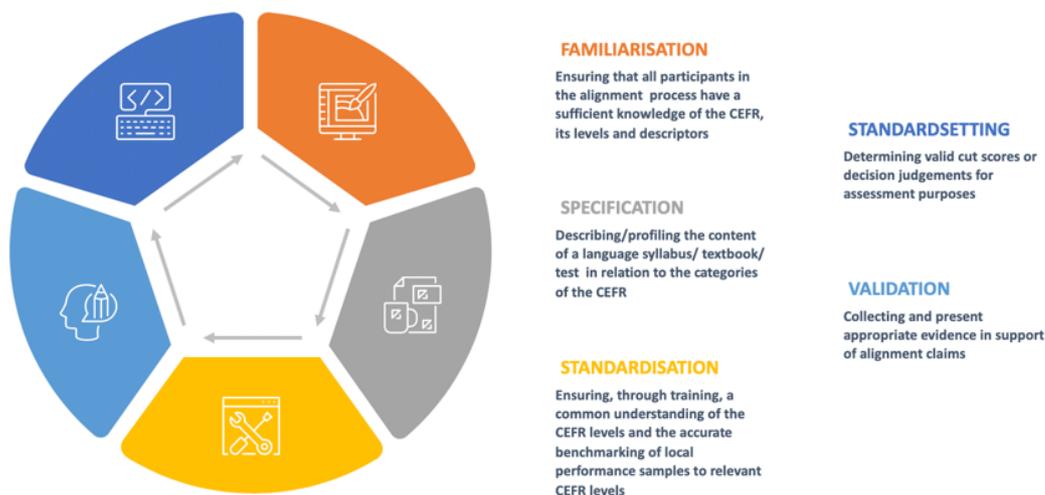
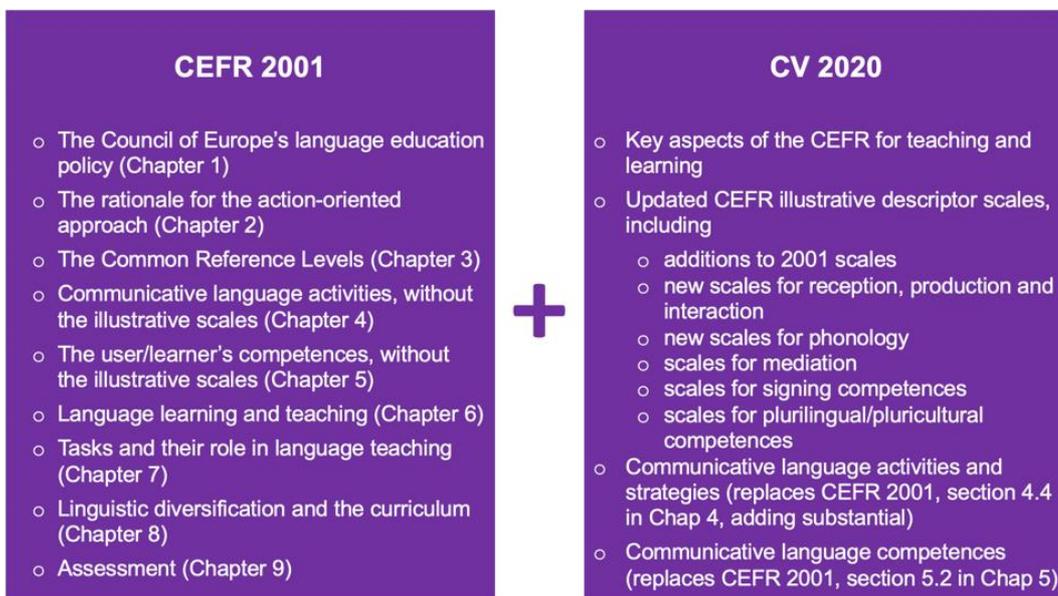


Figure 2: Steps in the alignment process

Each of these steps - and its associated procedures – is explained in detail in a freely available online publication (see more on this below).

As a useful starting point, the [CEFR 2001](#) and the [Companion Volume \(CV\) 2020](#) constitute a *single* resource to refer to when undertaking the CEFR alignment process. Here, for easy reference, is a brief outline of what each document contains:



The [searchable database of CEFR CV descriptors](#) may be useful throughout the alignment process. For those involved in creating or producing language tests, examinations and other forms of assessment aligned to the CEFR, other useful resources include the

[Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR](#) (Council of Europe, 2009) and the [Manual for Language Test Development and Examining](#) (Council of Europe, 2011). There are also publications which describe case studies exemplifying and reflecting on the test linking process and experience, e.g. [Figueras and Noijons \(eds\), 2008](#).

A recent publication entitled [Aligning Language Education with the CEFR: A Handbook](#) (ALTE/BC/EALTA/UKALTA, 2022) now provides practical and accessible guidance to assist with the process of CEFR alignment in a variety of specific contexts. This resource was produced in collaboration between the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), British Council, the European Association of Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA) and the UK Association for Language Testing and Assessment (UKALTA).

Each chapter begins with an explanation of a set of procedures and their importance (e.g. familiarisation, specification, etc), followed by general advice and practical activities relevant to all users regardless of their language education context (e.g. curriculum, teaching, assessment). The remainder of each chapter offers more targeted guidance and practical activities specific to different contexts of use and their associated subgroups (e.g. language teachers, curriculum designers, textbook writers, test producers). These can be selected according to need and illustrative scenarios help identify how best to tailor the activities to the intended context.

An appendix contains [photocopiable summary forms](#) to use and complete. This additional practical tool can assist with the ongoing monitoring and validation throughout the alignment process.

Users of the Handbook are strongly advised to tailor what they do to their specific context, as local personnel will always be the best judge of what is (and is not) possible or realistic within their specific context of operation, and taking account of resources and limitations.

The trick is not to be tempted to do too much or more than is actually required – but at the same time not to underestimate what is needed to demonstrate alignment with the CEFR!

ⁱ **Acknowledgement:** This Briefing Sheet is based upon Chapter 1 of [Aligning Language Education with the CEFR: A Handbook](#), produced in April 2022 in collaboration between ALTE, British Council, EALTA and UKALTA.