

Implementation of CEFR in Malaysia: Teachers' awareness and the Challenges

NURUL FAREHAH MOHAMAD URI
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

&
Universiti Kuala Lumpur British Malaysian Institute (BMI)
nfarehah@unikl.edu.my

MOHD SALLEHHUDIN ABD AZIZ
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study mainly seeks to investigate English teachers and Ministry of Education officials' views on the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia. It also intends to explore the challenges encountered by the stakeholders in view of the adoption of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessment. Data for this study were collected from questionnaires distributed to 331 English secondary school teachers and from in – depth interviews with two senior ministry officials. The findings revealed that most of the teachers had very limited knowledge, minimum exposure and low level of awareness about CEFR. Nevertheless, they were optimistic about the idea and believed that the framework is vital in order to improve the level of English proficiency of Malaysians. The officials in the ministry were also positive about the implementation plan despite the challenges and obstacles perceived. The teachers' resistance, lack of training and negative conception that most teachers have namely it would be difficult to incorporate CEFR in their teaching are some of the main challenges identified in this study. In conclusion, the adoption of CEFR in Malaysia is seen as obligatory but sufficient time should be given by the ministry to ensure that all stakeholders are fully prepared and familiar with the framework before it is extensively introduced and used in the country.

Keywords: CEFR; English proficiency; Malaysian CEFR; CEFR alignment; education system

INTRODUCTION

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR was formulated in 2001 and designed to establish international standards for foreign language education to cater to the needs of language learners as well as academics and other professions related to assessment, teaching and learning of languages. CEFR describes quite thoroughly what language learners are required to accomplish to communicate using a language. Additionally, it provides a sound basis for mutual recognition of language qualifications and assists learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts by using this universally recognized framework. The framework has six levels of descriptors which are used to categorize learners' ability to use a language. Language users are clustered into three main groups: Proficient users (levels C1 & C2), Independent users (levels B1 & B2) and Basic users (levels A1 & A2). Detailed descriptors of what learners are able to do are known as the "can do" statements for listening, writing, readings and speaking skills.

Common European Framework Reference for languages or CEFR has been adopted in many countries and there are lots of CEFR related studies that have been conducted by scholars covering many areas. Some studies involved in seeking out views on the acceptance and responses on the use of CEFR. Others were more interested in investigating teachers' awareness and there were also studies pertaining to textbooks, curricula, and teaching practices. Celik (2013) for example investigated the views of Turkish teachers concerning plurilingual and pluricultural competence related to CEFR. This study focuses on

determining whether foreign language teachers in Turkish schools were aware of these issues, understood the implications and made efforts to incorporate them in their teachings.

There are also studies which attempt to describe language teachers' as well as students' views on the use of CEFR in Australia and other countries (Ilin 2014, Marconnet & Bianco 2013, Kir & Sulu 2014). A review of related literature indicates there are also studies related to CEFR based programs and curricula. For instance, there was a study to investigate whether the new ELTE curriculum promotes prospective EFL teachers' awareness of CEFR by Hismanoglu (2013). In Canada, Faez, Taylor, Brown and Majhanovich (2011) were keen in examining teachers' perspectives of the role that CEFR might play in improving language learning outcomes related to French programs. Similarly, there is also a study to determine opinions, expectations and suggestions of secondary school teachers on a program developed based on CEFR (Yuksel & Demiral 2013). Papageorgiou (2010) on the other hand did a study with a different objective. Instead of asking teachers' views, he was more interested in exploring the teachers or referred to as the judges in decision- making process in the CEFR standard setting context.

Researchers also go beyond teachers and students views on CEFR, a study by Nagai and O'Dwyer (2011) conducted in Japan focuses on examining how CEFR has been applied in language education, demonstrating positive impacts as well as difficulties and potential problems. Three years later, O' Dwyer conducted another study in 2014 with the objective of providing critical but constructive assessment and discusses principles as well as practices on the implementation of CEFR in textbooks, curricula and teaching practices. Gaynor et al. (2011) conducted a study to find out the reasons behind materials use, how these materials are assessed and also the creation of an e- learning system using CEFR.

CEFR is now a familiar concept to many leading Asia countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China and Korea because these countries have adopted this framework years ago. In Taiwan, CEFR was mapped against several English proficiency tests such as General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), IELTS, TOEFL and TOEIC. Japan has used CEFR comprehensively in teaching and learning, curriculum development as well as assessments. It has also modified the CEFR global scale known as CEFR-J quite extensively to ensure that the framework fits its local contexts. In another study by Bucar et al. (2014), the objective was to review the reception and applications of CEFR by Japanese linguists, language- education specialists and institutions. Wu and Wu (2012) conducted a study in the Taiwanese context with three main objectives: 1) to review how English language tests have been applied in CEFR contexts, 2) to describe new challenges and responsibilities faced by local exam boards in helping to improve stakeholders' understanding of tests and CEFR, 3) to present a report on the experience of GEPT exam boards in aligning the test with CEFR.

CEFR influence has also reached South East Asian nations with Vietnam being the first South East Asian country to adopt it in its education system. A study conducted by Nguyen and Hamid (2015) attempted to understand the reception, interpretation and response of key stakeholders in the process of enacting CEFR in Vietnam public universities. According to Maxwell (2015) the adoption of CEFR into the teaching of English is given enormous attention and investment by the Thai government who wants to improve the level of English proficiency among the Thais. In Malaysia, 200 secondary schools English teachers acknowledge themselves to be familiar with CEFR and the concept. However, these teachers also showed high levels of concern and anxiety towards the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia because they were uncertain of their roles and lack of information about the changes (Lo 2018). A study was also conducted to compare students in polytechnic levels of English vocabulary and grammar against CEFR descriptors and the findings of the study were made a guideline for the selection of students' representative council (Majdah Mahamud 2018). There was also a study conducted to find out the views of English language

teachers at a public university involving 25 English teachers who taught English proficiency courses. It was found that the teachers' views of CEFR varied, some showed positive attitude and there were also teachers who were unsure how CEFR can fit their language courses (Ramiada Darmie et al. 2017). These studies show that there are studies conducted in local context, nonetheless it is still very limited. It is unquestionable that CEFR is now the universal standard and has been accepted by many Asian countries and is used extensively in assisting users in learning a language. The Malaysian government too has taken a bold decision to implement this framework in an effort to improve the English proficiency of its students (Zuraida Mohd Don 2015). Hence, to better understand the current situation, it is pivotal to get acquainted with the status of CEFR in Malaysia.

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 provided assistance to English Language Teaching Center (ELTC) to help the Ministry of Education to elevate and improve English language proficiency of Malaysian students. The council was responsible for introducing the CEFR framework onto the education system and also 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 aims to boost the level of education to international standards (Hazita Azman 2016). The roadmap is a long term goal and plan which started from 2013 and expected to end in 2025 with the main aim 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 two-year span was used to send teachers out for various training including Professional Up- Skilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT), the Native Speaker programme, the Fulbright English Teaching Assistant programme and the Expanded Specialist Coach (SISC) role for English (Rozana Sani 2016). The result of Cambridge baseline study which was conducted in 2013 was utilized by the council to make other preparations such as the development of CEFR descriptors, set the target for each educational level as well as capacity building.

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. School Based Assessment (SBA) syllabus and curricula were also aligned with CEFR descriptors and the council also chose and selected international CEFR-aligned textbooks and support materials in the first part of phase 2. Then the second part of phase 2 resumes with the validation of CEFR levels set for each educational stage and the implementation of the new CEFR aligned curricula starting from 2017 until 2020 (National Education Blueprint 2013). Concurrently, the teachers still attend series of trainings and workshops related to CEFR and they are expected to be very well-versed with the framework and new curricula.

Phase 3 is for the council to evaluate, review and revise the implementation of CEFR in 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, reevaluation and revised process. The success or failure of CEFR integration onto the education system is still difficult to predict since it is still too early to measure it in a short

period of time. Nonetheless, past studies have revealed some expected or unexpected problems, or issues which will arise upon the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia. Therefore, it is of utmost important that a CEFR related study be conducted locally to address the awareness and familiarity issues discussed earlier. This study is also interested in exploring the possible challenges encountered by the stakeholders in the process of adopting CEFR. The following are the research questions of the study:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the teachers and Ministry of Education officials' views on the adoption of CEFR onto the Form 5 English syllabus and assessment?
2. What are the challenges encountered by these stakeholders in the process of adopting CEFR?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

The respondents in this study involved 331 secondary school English teachers from Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Selangor since these areas were also suggested by the Council. The respondents were identified using criterion sampling and the total number of respondents was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) statistical formula. The teachers were chosen because they were the individuals who are directly involved and affected by CEFR. They are the ones responsible in introducing CEFR to students as well as implementing and integrating it into their teaching and learning processes. Moreover, the teachers also act as gatekeepers who will determine the success or failure of any policies implemented. Therefore, finding out their views on the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia is very much needed. Their feedbacks are useful for policymakers to evaluate the success or failure of a borrowed policy. In addition to the teacher respondents, in – depth interviews with the chairperson and secretariat officer of English Language Standard & Quality Council (ELSQ) were also conducted for triangulation purposes because the issue put forward has to be examined and studied from various different points of views and this included mixing several different methods of data collection. They were chosen based on stakeholders' sampling since it is commonly used in the context of evaluation research and policy analysis. This involves the process of identifying main stakeholders who were directly involved in designing, giving, receiving or administering the program and who otherwise might be affected (Palys 2008). The data obtained from them is crucial because they were the panels involved in the process of introducing and implementing CEFR onto Malaysian education system. They were involved in making decisions to adopt this language framework. Moreover, the ELSQ chairperson and secretariat officer are the key informants who could provide the right answers in terms of why and how CEFR is planned and integrated in our contexts.

INSTRUMENTS

QUESTIONNAIRE

To gather the view of the teachers, this study uses a questionnaire. The use of questionnaire is the best and most suitable research instrument when it involves a large sample size and also to get accurate results based on numerical statistical data (William 2007). The researchers

used both opened and closed- ended questions as they would complement each other (Reja et al. 2003, Zohrabi 2013). Furthermore, open- ended questions would lead to a greater discovery and wide range of responses which could not be obtained using only closed- ended questions.

Section A of the questionnaire comprised twelve classifications - type of questions and one dichotomous question related to respondents' demographic background. Unlike section A, sections B, C and D totally utilized Likert scale items. Likert scale items were chosen because they are simple to construct and analyze, and likely to produce a highly reliable scale and easy to read and complete by the respondents (Reja et al. 2003). This study 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.

The questionnaire was largely constructed by the researchers based on the objectives of the study. Nevertheless, some items in the questionnaire were adapted from two published PhD dissertations by Vallax (2011) and Kantarcioglu (2012) and a study by Kir and Sulu (2014). All the items were evaluated, checked and validated by three content and language experts with doctorate qualifications. A pilot study was also conducted to ensure the reliability of the instrument. The value of Cronbach Alpha's for section B with 39 items was .813. However, items 20, 23, 26 and 28 were removed due to low value. These items were believed to negatively affect the results of actual data gathering if they were retained. The results then improved to .886 after the test was run again (without four removed items). The value of Cronbach Alpha's for section C with 22 items was .848 and .922 for section D with 18 items. All in all, the items in this questionnaire are considered good based on the high value of Cronbach Alpha since reliability analysis with 0.8 and above is acceptable and good (Bond & Fox 2007). Final and necessary amendments were made accordingly before the questionnaires were distributed for actual data gathering process.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

A semi – structured interview with 33 questions was conducted to gain insights from ministry officials using interview protocols. There were 8 questions on participants' demographic background, 17 questions on their viewpoints and another 8 questions on the possible challenges. All the questions were constructed by the researchers based on the objectives of the study and the relevant theoretical framework. The questions were then validated by three content experts from UKM, UPM and UniKL who have many years of experience in English language teaching and actively involved in research. Necessary amendments were then made to the interview questions based on the experts' feedback before the interview protocols were used for actual data gathering process.

PROCEDURES

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

The data gathering process started with an official request from the Ministry of Education Malaysia to conduct a survey at secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Selangor. Official applications and approval were made to the Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya state education offices on March 30, 2017 and April 4, 2017. After the official letters were

issued and approval was granted, the questionnaires were then distributed to 331 secondary school English teachers from July 10 to July 14, 2017. A week was given for them to complete the questionnaire and the questionnaires were collected a week later on July 21, 2017.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The qualitative data was gathered from a semi – structured interview session with the secretariat officer of the English Language Teaching Center (ELTC). Appointment was made via email on April 4, 2017 and the interview was set on April 17, 2017. The interview session took place on the scheduled date at the interviewee’s office in the administrative block of the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) in Nilai. The interview session took 1 hour 30 minutes which started at 12.30 pm and ended at 14.00 pm. Another face to face interview was conducted with a panel member of English Language Standard and Quality (ELSQ) council. The interview was held on May 25, 2017 for about 60 minutes. Both interview sessions were audio – recorded.

DATA ANALYSIS

QUESTIONNAIRE

Raw data gathered from the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS version 23. The questionnaires were also color coded and grouped for ease of data entry process. All items in the questionnaire were then analyzed systematically.

INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIPTION STAGE

The transcription process was kept simple and straightforward since the purpose of the study was only to transfer from audio to written form of the data. Hence, the data was orthographically transcribed. Since this study is only concerned about the content of the transcribed data, any transcription conventions such as Jefferson, Dubois and others were not needed. Orthographic transcription is sufficient in analyzing the content of the interview sessions. Once the transcribing processes were done, the transcriptions were processed according to the following stages.

CODING STAGE

At this stage, the transcribed data were described or classified into several categories. Data is then coded for qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2013) using computer coding. NVivo. Qualitative content analysis involves the process of recontextualizing the meaning of data repeatedly until certain interpretation is reached. This method is known as Krippendorff’s hermeneutic loop or circle. Krippendorff (2013) approach is in this study because it is one of the well –known as well as an established content analysis method for qualitative data. Moreover, the coding is created to meet the demand of qualitative research to make it the best and most compatible coding for qualitative content analysis. This coding also works well with computer since Krippendorff has also introduced computational content analysis to aid researchers and quite a number of qualitative researchers have utilized

Krippendorff's qualitative content analysis in their research (Chu 2014, Nguyen & Hamid 2015).

VERIFICATION STAGE

Two processes were needed at this stage in order to verify the data, clear any ambiguous statements and avoid any mistakes or misinterpretations. Both processes: peer debriefing and member checking were adopted from Houghton, Casey and Shaw (2013). First process was peer debriefing in which the main research worked with another qualitative researcher to help examine some critical samples of data and the second process is member checking with the purpose to ensure credibility, validity as well as accuracy of the study. This is done by sending the transcribed data to the participants for them to cross check, seek acknowledgement and approval of the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THE ADOPTION OF CEFR ONTO ENGLISH SYLLABUS AND ASSESSMENT

The salient findings gathered from the survey were to answer research question one namely teachers' familiarity with CEFR and also their views on its adoption.

TABLE 1. Teachers' familiarity with CEFR

| Statements | Percentage | | | | | | Mean | SD |
|--|------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | | |
| Series of training and workshops on CEFR are necessary in order for teachers to fully understand and familiarize themselves with the concept and usage of this framework. | 0 | 2.4 | 4.2 | 22.7 | 38.4 | 32.3 | 4.94 | .967 |
| I am totally aware that the Ministry of Education has set CEFR levels B1 and B2 as the target levels for Form 5 students to achieve upon the completion of secondary school. | 1.2 | 2.7 | 9.1 | 31.4 | 42 | 13.6 | 4.51 | 1.007 |
| The CEFR familiarization workshop has helped me to understand and familiarize myself with this framework. | 1.5 | 3.9 | 10 | 38.1 | 36.3 | 10.3 | 4.34 | 1.025 |
| I am very familiar with CEFR. | 9 | 8.5 | 9.1 | 35 | 35.3 | 11.2 | 4.29 | 1.109 |
| I have read CEFR related documents (for instance: <i>English language education reform in Malaysia: The roadmap 2015-2025</i>). | 3.9 | 16.9 | 20.2 | 26.9 | 24.8 | 7.3 | 3.73 | 1.306 |

*Note: (n = 331), 1: strongly disagree, 6: strongly agree, SD: standard deviation

Table 1 indicates teachers' familiarity and awareness of CEFR. Out of 331 respondents, 38.4% of the teachers with the mean (4.94), SD .967) agreed that series of training and workshops on CEFR are necessary in order for teachers to fully understand and familiarize themselves with the concept and usage of this framework. Meanwhile 32.3% of them strongly agreed and 22.7% slightly agreed that series of training and workshops are necessary. However, there are 4.2% of the teachers who slightly disagreed and remaining 2.4% disagreed that they needed series of CEFR related trainings and workshops. This

illustrates that the familiarization workshops conducted were inadequate, therefore more workshops and trainings are required. Moreover, an interview with council secretariat officer reveals that the familiarization workshop was conducted to let the teachers know about CEFR. The workshop was organized only to introduce CEFR to the teachers, make them understand the six levels but not for them to start assessing students using CEFR. Nevertheless, 42% of the teachers with the mean (4.51), SD 1.007) agreed that they are aware that the Ministry of Education has set CEFR levels B1 and B2 as the target levels for Form 5 students to achieve upon the completion of secondary school. 31.4% slightly agreed and only 13.6% strongly agreed with the statements. In contrast, a small total of 9.1% of the teachers slightly disagreed, 2.7% disagreed and 1.2% strongly disagreed that they are aware of the CEFR target levels set by the ministry.

Despite, the CEFR familiarization workshop conducted by the ministry of education to expose school teachers to this framework, only 10.3% of them strongly agreed that the CEFR familiarization workshop has helped them to understand and familiarize themselves with the framework. Not even half of the 331 respondents or only 36.3% the respondents agreed with the statement. Whereas, 38.1% with the mean (4.34), SD 1.025) slightly agreed that they are familiar with the framework and understand it better after they have attended the CEFR familiarization workshops. The remaining respondents who slightly disagreed, disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statements are 10%, 3.9% and 1.5% each. The result reveals that the teachers need more series of CEFR related workshop in order for them to truly understand this framework and also to be able to integrate CEFR descriptors in their teaching and learning process. The results also indicate that the CEFR familiarization workshop attended by the teachers was insufficient for classroom implementation. When they were asked if they are very familiar with CEFR, 35% and the mean (4.29), SD 1.109) of the respondents slightly agreed with the statement. The other 35.3% admitted they agreed and 11.2% strongly agreed that they are very familiar with CEFR. The results might represent the number of teachers who at least knew this framework on a basic level. The CEFR familiarization workshops that the teachers attended could contribute to such results and have introduced them to the framework and the descriptors. They are also respondents who claim they are not very familiar with CEFR with 9.1% of them who slightly disagreed, 8.5% disagreed and 9% who strongly against the statement. Lastly, 26.9% with the mean (3.73), SD 1.306) of the respondents slightly agreed that they have read CEFR related documents, 24.8% agreed and 7.3% admitted they have read CEFR related documents particularly English language education reform in Malaysia: The roadmap 2015-2025. Conversely, 20.2% of the respondents slightly disagreed, 16.9% disagreed and 3.9% strongly disagreed that they have read CEFR related documents. It can be concluded that majority of the respondents are familiar with CEFR and they are also exposed to the framework from the familiarization workshop.

TABLE 2. Adoption of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessment

| Statements | Percentage | | | | | | Mean | SD |
|--|------------|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | | |
| The adoption of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessments is part of globalization. | 1.2 | 2.1 | 3.3 | 24.8 | 52.6 | 16 | 4.73 | .925 |
| The adoption of CEFR levels B1 and B2 onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessments is believed to prepare Form 5 students to be ready for post – secondary school. | 9 | 1.5 | 4.5 | 29.9 | 50.8 | 12.4 | 4.65 | .876 |
| Implementation of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|
| assessments help to elevate English proficiency level among Malaysian and to compete economically with other countries. | 1.5 | 1.8 | 6.3 | 27.5 | 49.2 | 13.6 | 4.62 | .963 |
| CEFR provides a workable basis for comparing the standards of proficiency achieved in different countries against Form 5 English syllabus and assessments. | 1.2 | 1.5 | 5.4 | 32.3 | 46.5 | 13 | 4.60 | .920 |
| The adoption of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessments will produce school leavers who are able to work and compete at international level due to strong command of English. | 1.2 | 2.1 | 6.9 | 29.3 | 54.4 | 6 | 4.52 | .885 |

*Note: (n = 331), 1: strongly disagree, 6: strongly agree, SD: standard deviation

Teachers' views and interpretations on the adoption of CEFR received positive feedback based on the results shown in table 2. It is clear that the respondents agreed that the adoption of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessments is part of globalization with 52.6% and the mean (4.73), SD .925). The remaining 24.8% slightly agreed and 16% who strongly agreed with the decision to adopt CEFR. Probably, the respondents believed that it was necessary for Malaysia to adopt CEFR in the era of globalization. 3.3% represent the respondents who slightly disagreed, 2.1% who disagreed and 1.2% of the respondents who were strongly against the statement. When the respondents were asked if the adoption of CEFR levels B1 and B2 onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessments is believed to prepare Form 5 students to be ready for post – secondary school, 50.8% with the mean (4.65), SD .876) slightly agreed, 29.9% agreed and 12.4% strongly agreed that form 5 students is prepared for post- secondary school with the integration of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessments. Only 9% of the respondents strongly disagreed that the adoption of CEFR levels B1 and B2 will prepare form 5 students for post- secondary school. The remaining respondents who disagreed and slightly disagreed are 1.5% and 4.5%.

Furthermore, 49.2% of the respondents with mean (4.62), SD .963) agreed that implementation of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessments help to elevate English proficiency level among Malaysian and to compete economically with other countries. 27.5% slightly agreed and 13.6% strongly agreed since CEFR is a universal standard use by many countries in language learning. Therefore, the use of a standardized framework is believed to solve the issues of low English proficiency among graduates. Nonetheless, 6.3% slightly disagreed, 1.8% disagreed and 1.5% strongly disagreed that the use of CEFR would improve graduates English proficiency. In addition, 46.5% of the respondents with mean (4.60), SD .920) agreed that CEFR provides a workable basis for comparing the standards of proficiency achieved in different countries against Form 5 English syllabus and assessments. 32.3% of the respondents slightly agreed and the other 13% strongly agreed with the statements. In total, there were 5.4% of the respondents who slightly disagreed, 1.5% disagreed and 1.2% strongly disagreed that the adoption of CEFR provides a workable basis for comparing the standards of proficiency achieved in different countries against Form 5 English syllabus and assessments.

Finally, when the respondents were asked whether or not the adoption of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessments will produce school leavers who are able to work and compete at international level due to strong command of English, 54% (4.52), SD .885) of them agreed. The other 29.3% slightly agreed and another 6% strongly agreed. In contrast, there were still a number of the respondents who refused to agree that the adoption of CEFR onto Form 5 English syllabus and assessments will produce school leavers who are able to work and compete at international level due to strong command of English. 6.9% of them

slightly disagreed, 2.1% disagreed and the remaining 1.2% strongly disagreed. In conclusion, the teachers embrace the adoption of CEFR in Malaysia positively probably because they foresee the long term effect of CEFR has on the students and the teaching and learning of English.

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS INTERPRETATIONS OF CEFR IMPLEMENTATION

The decision to adopt and implement CEFR onto the education system was made in 2013 after the Ministry of Education realized that CEFR has been globally used in neighboring countries such as Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam. One of the interviewees underscored during the interview that *“everybody is using the CEFR except us. So we don’t want to be left further behind. Because the victims will be our students”*. The other interviewee was quoted *“I don’t think it was like one person’s decision, it was a collector decision to see globally what is being used right now”*.

Findings of the interview also reveal one of the main reasons for adopting CEFR was to improve English proficiency level since vast majority of Malaysian students are still at low beginner based on Cambridge baseline study which was conducted in 2013. Another reason for adopting CEFR is to set a global standard for all assessments including SPM. The plan is to make SPM and other high stake assessments in Malaysia internationally recognized because the standard is set against CEFR. Interviewee one added that the current standard of SPM has more disadvantages than advantages. She said *“Our students go overseas, SPM A+, what is A+ don’t know. There is no standard. But if you say my SPM I got B2 and you go to university overseas, they know exactly what B2 is. So that is the rationale”*. Hence, mapping assessments against CEFR now is a common practice because many test developers and academics have mapped their assessments. Papageorgiou, Tannenbaum, Bridgeman and Cho (2015) for instance have improved the TOEFL iBT by mapping its test scores against CEFR. It was done to help decision makers and users to interpret TOEFL iBT test scores based on six levels of CEFR descriptors to improve the standard of TOEFL iBT and aligned it with CEFR. The Japanese have also taken similar steps when they started to interpret the scores of among their high – stakes English qualifications tests, Eiken and TOEIC against CEFR descriptors (Fennelly 2016). Therefore, it is a good move taken by the council to mapped SPM against CEFR so that the high stake examination for the secondary school leavers is internationally recognized.

The plan to adopt and implement CEFR in Malaysia was also done prudently. As a result, the council which was specifically set up to improve level of proficiency is also responsible to produce English roadmap which includes the three main phase of CEFR implementation from 2013 to 2025. The progress of the roadmap and its implementation is monitored by the council and ELTC. It is also considered as a systematic change by the council because it involves the examination syndicate, CDC, public university and Bahagian Teknologi Pendidikan (BTP). She shared that different divisions are assigned different tasks by the council because it takes a great team to ensure the roadmap runs smoothly. She was quoted as saying *“Ok, for the masters’ trainers for CEFR familiarization we have the list because different divisions are given different tasks. So for CEFR familiarization, ELTC was the main organizer. For material adaptation is the BTP (Bahagian Teknologi Pendidikan). They have also procured digital materials”*.

Finally, it is also found from the interview sessions that the new CEFR aligned syllabus and assessments would prepare students for post – secondary. One of the interviewees claimed that *“You know, if you are going to take papers where majority of papers will be in English, and then probably you need them to be at B2 to be able to handle university level”*.

The new CEFR aligned SPM syllabus for Form 5 students would make SPM to be internationally recognized. Consequently, students do not have to take IELTS to enable them to study abroad. It is because they can use their SPM results for application of abroad study since it is recognize worldwide. The interview stated during the interview that “*Then we don’t have to rely on IELTS. That is the whole idea. Even this CEFR, I told them, I kata, SPM English result is not recognized, she has to sit for IELTS which is another RM 1,000.00. What if I can’t afford it? I have worked hard for 11 years yet my English SPM result is not recognized. Kesian ke tak kesian pada rakyat Malaysia. You imagine it’s written there in SPM that Iam a C1, then I can go in. don’t need IELTS. That is the status it should be, baru lah betul kita help our own kids*”.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY THE STAKEHOLDERS IN CEFR ADOPTION

CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS

They are two types of challenges gathered from the survey; first the teacher themselves is considered as a challenge and second is the feasibility of incorporating CEFR into their teachings.

TABLE 3. Teachers as the challenge

| Statements | Percentage | | | | | | Mean | SD |
|--|------------|------|------|------|------|-----|------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | | |
| I see myself as one of the challenges in the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia. | 0.6 | 22.4 | 15.1 | 39 | 20.2 | 2.7 | 3.64 | 1.134 |
| I am not in favour of using CEFR in my class as it reduces my autonomy as teacher. | 6 | 36.3 | 26 | 23.9 | 6.9 | 0.9 | 2.92 | 1.095 |

*Note: (n = 331), 1: strongly disagree, 6: strongly agree, SD: standard deviation

Results in Table 3 show that 39% with the mean (3.64), SD 1.134) of the respondents slightly agreed, 20.2% agreed and the other 2.7% strongly agreed that one of the challenges that could hinder the smooth running of CEFR implementation in Malaysia would be the teachers themselves. This is probably because they were not fully prepared to embrace the new framework. Their limited understanding and minimum exposure to CEFR as well as the whole process which takes place soon could be another reason for their refusal to accept and integrate the framework. On the other hand, 22.4% disagreed, 15.1% slightly disagreed and 0.6% strongly disagreed that teachers are one of the challenges in the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia. Although 39% of the respondents chose to slightly agree that the teachers themselves could be one of the challenges, 36.3% of them however disagreed that the use of CEFR in their classroom does reduce their autonomy as teachers. 26% of them slightly disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed. These percentages most probably represent teachers who truly understand instead of intimidated by the framework. There are still some of the respondents who believe that their autonomy as teachers in class will decrease upon the implementation of CEFR with 23.9% of them chose to slightly agreed, 6.9% agreed and 0.9% strongly agreed with the idea.

TABLE 4. The challenges of adopting CEFR in teaching and learning

| Statements | Percentage | | | | | | Mean | SD |
|--|------------|------|------|------|------|-----|------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | | |
| It will be challenging for me to design class activities based on CEFR descriptors. | 0.6 | 18.7 | 24.2 | 35.6 | 19.6 | 1.2 | 3.59 | 1.059 |
| I am reluctant to accept CEFR because this framework emphasizes on student – centered approach in which I believe is less appropriate in Malaysian classrooms. | 15.1 | 32.6 | 26.6 | 18.4 | 5.1 | 2.1 | 2.72 | 1.199 |
| Teachers’ limited understanding of CEFR and a teaching approach based on “can do” tasks will be a challenge for teachers. | 0 | 6.9 | 9.1 | 31.1 | 43.8 | 9.1 | 4.39 | 1.010 |

*Note: (n=331), 1: strongly disagree, 6: strongly agree, SD: standard deviation

Table 4 illustrates some of the challenges that teacher would face in the process of adopting CEFR. Firstly, 35.6% of the respondents with the mean (3.59), SD 1.059) slightly agreed, 19.6% agreed and 1.2% strongly agreed that it will be challenging for them to design class activities based on CEFR descriptors. Most probably because the teachers are not familiar with the framework and have not received sufficient trainings on CEFR based class activities design. Nonetheless, there are 24.2% of the respondents who slightly disagreed, 18.7% disagreed and 0.6% who strongly disagreed with the statements which directly indicate that this group of teachers may be more familiar with the framework and they are able to design CEFR based class activities. In contrast, 32.6% of them with the mean (2.72), SD 1.199) were against the idea that teachers are reluctant to accept CEFR because this framework emphasizes on student – centered approach in which I believe is less appropriate in Malaysian classrooms. Adding to that, another 26.6% slightly disagreed and 15.1% strongly disagreed. There are also 18.4% who slightly agreed, 5.1% agreed and 2.1% strongly agreed with the statement. Finally, 43.8% with the mean (4.39), SD 1.010) of the respondents agreed that teachers’ limited understanding of CEFR and a teaching approach based on “can do” tasks are considered as one of the challenges the teachers must face. 31.1% slightly agreed and 9.1% strongly agreed with the idea. Only 9.1% slightly disagreed and 6.9% were against the idea that teachers’ limited understanding of CEFR and a teaching approach based on “can do” tasks is a challenge and obstacle in the CEFR adoption process.

CHALLENGES FOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

In – depth interview sessions with the ministry officials revealed some challenges encountered by them in the process of adopting CEFR onto the teaching and learning of English. The biggest challenge faced by the ministry is the teachers. The implementation plan has entered its second phase. Unfortunately, the majority of the teachers are still not ready although they have attended CEFR familiarization workshops and other CEFR related in – house trainings. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to put the blame on them since CEFR is still a new concept .Vallax (2011) found that France, UK, Taiwan, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Australia are some instances of countries which have implemented CEFR for years but still only a very small number of teachers have admitted that they have read about this framework. This finding highlights that teachers might require more time for them to really understand and be well – versed with the framework.

Additionally, resistance from the teachers is one of the challenges anticipated by the council. As mentioned during the interview, they knew that the teachers were ‘forced’ to accept and incorporate the new framework in their teachings, so resistance is unavoidable. The council however takes it positively considering it to be a normal reaction from the teachers. Even the Japanese had the same issue when lecturers at Osaka University who resisted the use of CEFR in their teaching and learning (Majima 2010). Apart from resistance from teachers the council is also facing challenges in ensuring all English teachers in the country would be at CEFR level C1 by 2025 because they are required to be one band higher than the students. One of the interviewees was quoted as saying that “*if students are at CEFR level B1 or B2, then the teachers at least have to be at level C1*”. It is important for them to achieve this target by 2025 because the 2013 Cambridge baseline results showed that some of the students were at CEFR level C1 so the teachers should be at C2. Currently, “*school teachers, 52% are at C1*” said the secretariat officer.

The officials also admitted that providing continuous trainings and workshops on CEFR to school teachers is also another challenge they have yet to come up with a solution. Currently, the schools were instructed by the council to provide 18 hours of CEFR related in – house training to their teachers. It is also required for them to complete the 18 hours of in – house training. In contrast, the council found out that many of the schools have reduced the allocated 18 hours of training to 6 hours only due to time constraint, lack of qualified CEFR trainers and other contributing factors. As a result, the council is facing the possibilities of teachers who might have very limited knowledge about CEFR or even worse they do not have any idea at all about it. Previous research done on CEFR implementation in Turkey confirms that the issue of lack of training among teachers should not be taken lightly by the council or the ministry. Various problems occurred during the implementation and application of CEFR in Turkey revealed that lack of teacher training was the main problem (Sezgin 2007).

It is also found out that other possible challengers faced by the stakeholders are issues related to resources. The main issue is the inability of the council and Ministry of Education to produce resources locally according to local contexts since they are not many CEFR experts in Malaysia as of today. One of the interviewees was quoted saying “*Actually before we started with CEFR, in 2013 we actually had a CEFR symposium. Before we had the symposium, we searched throughout Malaysia for CEFR experts. We don’t have any CEFR experts in Malaysia. We know of people who know about the CEFR but we don’t have people who can talk about CEFR or guide us with the CEFR. We don’t have*”. As a temporary solution, the council has procured CEFR aligned textbooks from Cambridge English. Consequently, the books procured by the council caused another problem which later affected the teaching and learning process. The books are CEFR aligned; nonetheless they are mainly British books and so does the content. The finding is against the common practice in which the current content of textbooks used has a localized culture. Studies on Malaysian textbooks content by Norhana and Chandran (2009) and also in Iran by Rajabi and Ketabi (2012) indicate that the content of the textbooks have been localized to accommodate learners’ schemata and background knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight teachers and government officials’ views and interpretations of CEFR implementation in Malaysia. The teachers generally accepted the framework and the roadmap developed by the council positively.

They also realized the need to improve the English proficiency of the students in order to compete globally through the adoption of CEFR.

Unfortunately, the teachers very limited knowledge, minimum exposure and low level of awareness about CEFR might hinder the smooth running of the whole process. The government officials were also optimistic about the implementation plan despite several anticipated challenges and obstacles. They strongly believed that the adoption of CEFR would result in good outcomes and would improve the education system although it takes 12 years to complete three phases of the roadmap and finally see the end results. On the other hand, teachers' English proficiency, teachers' resistance, and lacking in CEFR experts who are able to construct and produce local CEFR aligned textbooks, lack of adequate training and the notion most teachers have that it would be difficult to incorporate CEFR in their teachings are some of the main challenges identified in this study. The adoption of CEFR in Malaysia is necessary but more time should be allocated for phase one by the ministry to ensure that all the teachers are fully prepared and very familiar with the framework before it is comprehensively introduced and implemented.

REFERENCES

- Bond, T.G. & Fox, C.M. 2007. Applying the Rasch Model: Fundamental Measurement in the Human Sciences. (2nd) Ed. New Jersey: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates Incorporation.
- Bucar, C. S., Ryu, H., Skof, N. M. & Sangawa, K.H. (2014). The CEFR and Teaching Japanese as a foreign language. *Linguistica*. 54(1), 455-469. doi:10.4312/linguistica.
- Celik, S. (2013). Plurilingualism, Pluriculturalism, and the CEFR: Are Turkey's Foreign Language Objectives Reflected in Classroom Instruction. *Social and Behavioral Sciences Journal*. 70(25), 1872-1879. doi:10.1016j.sbspro.2013.01.265
- Chu, Y. 2014. A review of studies on luxury hotels over the past two decades. Published Masters Thesis. Iowa State University. Retrieved from <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=4920&context=etd> [15 January 2016]
- Faez, F., Taylor, S., Majhanovich, S. & Brown, P. (2011). Teacher reactions to CEFR's task- based approach for FSL classrooms. *Synergie Europe Journal*. 6, 109- 120.
- Fennelly, M.G. (2016). *The influence of CEFR on English language education in Japan*. Bull Shikoku University Online Repository 46(A), 109-122. Retrieved from <https://www.shikoku-u.ac.jp/education/docs/A46p109-122.pdf>
- Gaynor, B., Grave, E., Hagley, E. & Johnson, M. (2011). Toward a Cohesive Curriculum of Communicative Language Instruction at Muroran Institute of Technology. Muroran IT Academic Resource Archive. 60, 61 – 72. Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/1540889/Toward_a_Cohesive_Curriculum_of_Communicative_Language_Instruction_at_Muroran_Institute_of_Technology
- Hazita Azman. (2016). Implementation and challenges of English Language Education Reform in Malaysian Primary Schools. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*. 22(3), 65-78.
- Hismanoglu, M. (2013). Does English language teacher education curriculum promote CEFR awareness of prospective EFL teacher? *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences Journal*. 938-945.
- Houghton, C., Casey, D. & Shaw, D. (2013). "Rigour in qualitative case-study research". *Nurse Researcher*, V. 20(4), 12-17
- Ilin, G. (2014). Student-Teacher Judgements on Common European Framework: Efficacy, Feasibility and Reality. *Journal of Language and Literature Education*. 9(12), 8-19.
- Kantarcioğlu, E. (2012). Relating an Institutional Proficiency Examination to the CEFR: A case study. Published PhD Dissertation. Department of Media, Culture and Language. University of Roehampton.
- Kir, E. & Sulu, A. (2014). Language teachers' views on CEFR. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET)*. 1(5), 358 - 364.
- Krejcie, R. V. & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychology Measurement Journal*. 30, 607-610.
- Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*. Sage Publication. Los Angeles.
- Lange, F. & Soderlund, M. (2004). Response format in questionnaires: Itemized rating scales versus continuous rating scales. SSE/ EFI Working Paper Series in Business Administration. 1-16. Retrieved July 14, 2017 from

- https://www.academia.edu/18799605/Response_formats_in_questionnaires_Itemized_rating_scales_versus_continuous_rating_scales
- Lo, Y. Y. (2018). English teachers' concern on Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): An application of CBAM. *Jurnal Kurikulum dan Pengajaran Asia Pasifik*. 6(1). 46 -58.
- Marconnet, N. N. & Bianco, J.L. (2013). Importing Language Assessment? The Reception of the Common European Framework of Reference in Australian Universities. *The International Academic Forum*. Retrieved from http://iafor.org/archives/offprints/ecll2013-offprints/ECLL2013_0468.pdf
- Majdah Mahamud. (2018). The CEFR levels of English among student representatives in a polytechnic in Malaysia. *National Innovation and Invention Competition Through Exhibition (iCompEx)*. 1 – 10. Retrieved September 5, 2018 from https://upikpolimas.edu.my/conference/index.php/icomplex/icomplex_2018/paper/viewFile/382/247
- Majima, J. (2010). Impact of can do statements/ CEFR on language education in Japan: on its applicability. In Schmidt, M.S., Naganuma, N., O'Dwyer, F., Imig, A & Sakai, K. (Eds.), *Can do statements in language education in Japan and beyond* (pp. 49-65) Tokyo: Asahi Press.
- Maxwell, D. (2015). Thai schools adopt European framework to boost English language proficiency. *Asian Correspondent Online: Education Section*. Retrieved from <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2015/04/thai-schools-adopt-european-framework-to-boost-english-language-proficiency/>
- Nagai, N. & O'Dwyer, F. (2011). The actual and potential impacts of the CEFR on language education in Japan. *Synergies Europe Journal*. 6, 141 – 152. Retrieved from <http://gerflint.fr/Base/Europe6/noriko.pdf>
- National Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025: Preschool to Post-Secondary Education. (2013). Putrajaya: Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Norhana Abdullah & Chandran, S. K. (2009). Cultural elements in a Malaysian English Language textbook. 1 – 22. Retrieved from http://ddms.usim.edu.my/bitstream/123456789/713/1/CULTURAL%20ELEMENTS%20IN%20MALAYSIAN%20ENGLISH%20LANGUAGE%20TEXTBOOKS%20-%20MY_CASELT.pdf
- Nguyen, V.H. & Hamid, M.O. (2015). Educational Policy Borrowing in a Globalized World: A Case Study of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in a Vietnamese University. *Journal of English Teaching, Practice & Critique*. 14(1), 60-74. doi:10.1108/ETPC-02-2015-0014
- O'Dwyer, F. (2014). *Toward critical, constructive assessments of CEFR based language teaching in Japan and beyond*. Osaka University Knowledge Archive (OUKA), Osaka University. 4, 191 – 204. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/11094/51427>
- Palys, T. (2008). Purposive Sampling. In Given, M. L. (Ed). *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Vol. 2, 678-679. Retrieved on January 28, 2016 from <http://www.sfu.ca/~palys/Purposive%20sampling.pdf>
- Papageorgiou, S. (2010). Setting cut scores on the Common European Framework of Reference for the Michigan English Test. CaMLA Technical Report, CaMLA. http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/sites/default/files/resources/MET_StandardSetting.pdf
- Papageorgiou, S., Tannenbaum, R. J, Bridgeman, B. & Cho, Y. (2015). *The Association between TOEFL iBT test scores and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels*. Educational Testing Service. 1 – 28. Retrieved from <https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RM-15-06.pdf>
- Ramiaida Darmi, Noor Saazai Mat Saad, Norhana Abdullah, Fariza Puteh Behak, Zarina Ashikin Zakaria & Juliana Niza Ismail Adnan. (2017). Teachers' views on students' performance in English language proficiency courses via CEFR descriptors. *IJAEDU- International E-Journal of Advances in Education*. 3(8). 363-370.
- Rajabi, S. & Ketabi, S. (2012). Aspects of Cultural Elements in Prominent English textbooks for EFL setting. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies Journal*. 2(4), 705 – 712. doi:10.4304/tpls.2.4.705-7012
- Reja, U., Manfreda, K.L., Hlebec, V. & Vehovar, V. (2003). Open-ended vs close- ended questions in Web questionnaires. *Journal of Developments in Applied Statistics*. 160-176.
- Rozana Sani. (2016). Journey to master English. 18 July. *The New Straits Times Online*. Retrieved July 14, 2017 from <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2017/03/159164/journey-master-english>
- Sezgin G. (2007). *An Exploratory Study of Curricular Change in an EFL Context*, (Masters Dissertation), Ankara: Bilkent University. Bilkent University Institutional Repository. Retrieved from <http://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/handle/11693/14570>
- Vallax P. (2011). *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: A critical analysis of its impact on a sample of teachers and curricula within and beyond Europe*. PhD Thesis. <http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10289/5546/thesis.pdf?sequence=3>

- Williams. (2007). Research Methods. *Journal of Business and Economic Research*. 5(3), 65-72.
- Wu, J. R.W & Wu, R.Y.F. (2012). GEPT and English language teaching and testing in Taiwan. *Language Assessment Quarterly*. 9(1), 11-25. doi:10.1080/15434303.2011.553251
- Yuksel, I & Demiral, S. (2013). Evaluating European Language Portfolio in Turkish Context: Teachers' Views on New Secondary Education English Teaching Program. *International Journal of Social Science & Education*. 3(4), 904-916.
- Zuraidah Mohd Don. (2015). English language proficiency, graduate employability and the role of CEFR. ASEAN Seminar 2015 on "Best Practices in English Teaching in ASEAN Universities". UM repository. Retrieved from <http://repository.um.edu.my/98438/1/Asean%20Seminar%202015%20English%20language.pdf>
- Zohrabi, M. (2013). Mixed method research: instruments, validity, reliability and reporting findings. *Journal of Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. 3(2), 254-262. <http://doi.10.4304/tpls.3.2.254-262>