

CEFR IMPLEMENTATION IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A SCOPING REVIEW OF STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was introduced through the Malaysian English Language Education Roadmap (2015–2025) to elevate English language proficiency among Malaysian learners. Despite its national-level adoption, implementation within higher education institutions remains in a developmental phase. This study investigates the challenges encountered and strategies employed by Malaysian higher education institutions in aligning their curricula with CEFR standards. Employing the SLR review protocol by Hayrol Azril et al. (2020), the study followed six methodological steps: formulation of research questions, systematic literature search, screening and eligibility criteria development, data extraction, and data demonstration. From an initial pool of 90 open-access journal articles sourced from databases such as Scopus, and Web of Science, 18 articles met the inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis revealed eight key areas: policy and curriculum alignment, teacher capacity and professional development, assessment design and evaluation, pedagogical practices, cultural and contextual adaptation, institutional and structural constraints, technology integration, and learner outcomes and employability. The findings offer valuable insights to inform future policy reforms, curriculum design, and teacher training initiatives, particularly in fostering culturally responsive and context-sensitive approaches to CEFR implementation in Malaysian higher education.

Keywords: CEFR implementation, scoping review, higher education curriculum, English language education reform, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education Malaysia has initiated the adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as an effort to align national English language standards with those of European countries. The CEFR has become one of the most widely used language policy documents over the last two decades. It has had a particular impact in Asia, where

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it has been adopted in countries such as Japan, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia (Franz and Teo 2017; Read 2019; Huzaifah et al. 2025).

In line with this global shift, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has formulated a comprehensive roadmap to facilitate the systematic and coherent implementation of English language education reform. This strategic document delineates the transformation of English education in Malaysia, emphasising the adoption of a diverse range of textbooks and the enhancement of teacher professional development. Central to this reform is the cultivation of educators' understanding of the CEFR scales in their entirety, alongside the effective utilisation of instructional materials aligned with the objectives of the national education blueprint.

However, the implementation of this policy has faced considerable obstacles. Prominent concerns include insufficient teacher training and limited understanding of the CEFR framework, as well as the use of textbook content that does not adequately reflect CEFR principles. These issues have been consistently identified as significant barriers to the successful adoption of the framework (Nadrah and Harwati 2021; NurAsiquin and Masdinah Alauyah 2021; Nurul Farehah and Mohd Sallehudin 2018).

The English Language Education Reform in Malaysia; The Roadmap 2013-2025 is ending this year. It is therefore essential to examine the broader context surrounding the use, acceptance, and challenges experienced by ELT practitioners in implementing and integrating CEFR into their teaching and learning practices. This paper seeks to explore the challenges and strategies used by teachers and language practitioners in applying the CEFR framework. A review of the related literature indicates persistent concerns regarding the implementation of CEFR within language education. Numerous stakeholders have expressed reservations, disagreement and negative perceptions toward its adoption.

This study draws on a review of open-access publications from 2020 to 2025 to critically investigate the strategies adopted by the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the challenges encountered in implementing CEFR within Malaysian higher education. By synthesizing recent scholarship, the paper aims to address existing gaps and contribute to ongoing discourse on effective policy adaptation and pedagogical alignment.

Two research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the key challenges in implementing CEFR in HE?
2. What strategies are used to support CEFR implementation in HE?

Statement of Problem

The CEFR-aligned curriculum and syllabus were formally implemented across all Malaysian primary and secondary schools in 2017 under the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025 initiative. Since its implementation, numerous studies have examined the impact of CEFR on teaching, learning, and assessment practices within Malaysian classrooms. However, questions regarding the effectiveness of this initiative in improving students' English language proficiency remain under investigation.

Several studies on the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia suggest the need to explore CEFR-based teaching approaches in tertiary education (NurAsiquin and Masdinah Alaayah 2021). Limited research on CEFR alignment at the tertiary level is a concern for Malaysia, given that the CEFR curriculum was introduced at this level in 2017 (Huzaifah et al. 2025; Khan et al. 2023). In addition, studies investigating CEFR implementation reported that teachers' beliefs about CEFR do not correspond with their actual classroom practices (NurAsiquin and Masdinah Alaayah 2021; Paramjit Kaur and Mah Zhi Jian 2022; Nurul Farehah and Mohd Sallehhudin 2018).

Similarly, there remains a lack of clarity regarding the most effective and appropriate methods for identifying barriers to successful CEFR implementation. In particular, insufficient teacher training and limited understanding of the framework have been shown to hinder effective implementation (NurAsiquin and Masdinah Alaayah 2021). Other factors, such as teachers' motivation, time, knowledge in material adaptation, teachers' proficiency level and facilities, also affect the effectiveness of a CEFR-based lesson delivery (NurAsiquin and Masdinah Alaayah 2021).

The discussion presented herein highlights a discernible gap in both the utilisation and implementation of the CEFR within the Malaysian education context (Huzaifah et al. 2025; Khan et al. 2023; NurAsiquin and Masdinah Alaayah 2021; Nurul Farehah and Mohd Sallehhudin 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Review protocol

A scoping review is a type of knowledge synthesis that uses a systematic and iterative approach to identify and synthesise an existing or emerging body of literature on a given topic (Thomas et al. 2017). The general purpose for conducting scoping reviews is to identify and map the available evidence. The review protocol used for this study is based on Hayrol Azril et al. (2020) six-step review protocol. The main aspects of review protocol methodology were used, which were: (1) the development of the review protocols; (2) the formulation of research questions; (3) systematic searching strategies; (4) data extraction; (5) data synthesis; and (6) data demonstration.

The researchers conducted a literature search sourced from Scopus and Web of Science. In addition, the researchers also used Google Scholar to search for the articles as the search yielded more articles related to teaching and language learning.

Several keywords such as CEFR in Malaysia and Asia, challenges in the use of CEFR, aligning CEFR to Malaysian HE and strategies in implementing CEFR were used. Combination of these keywords were also applied to guide and refine the selection process. Altogether, 50 related studies published in the local context between 2020 and 2025 were identified.

To ensure a comprehensive yet current scope, the publication date range was confined to 2020 to 2025 to provide an overview and trace the development in the use of the CEFR framework in Malaysia over the last five years.

Formulation of the research questions

In formulating the research questions, two key sources were consulted. First, insights were drawn from existing literature, including review studies by Nadrah and Harwati (2021), Nadiah and Harwati (2023), Huzaifah et al. (2025) and Vaishnu Rao and Nur Yasmin Khairani (2025). These papers examined CEFR implementation practices in Malaysia and other international contexts. Second, the PICo framework,—comprising ‘P’ (Population or Problem), ‘I’ (Interest), and ‘Co’ (Context) (Lockwood et al. 2015), was employed to guide the development of the review framework. Based on this framework, three core dimensions were identified: research on CEFR in Malaysia (Population/Location), challenges and strategies (Interest), and curriculum and implementation (Context). These elements collectively informed the development of the study’s central research questions.

Systematic searching strategies



Figure 1. Article Selection Process

In order to carefully assess the eligibility of the papers to meet the research objectives, these characteristics were developed. Table 1 presents the criteria used in selecting the papers.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Journal Article Selection

Characteristics of the literature	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Types of publication	Journal articles, conference papers, concept papers, reports	Books, book chapters, theses, dissertations
Timeline	Articles published from 2020 to 2025	Articles published before 2020
Languages	Articles are written in English	Articles are not written in English
Subject area	English language teaching	Not related to English language teaching
Setting	Higher education	Primary and secondary education

Data extraction

The research questions played a critical role in guiding the data extraction process. The extraction process involves screening, identifying and selecting any information that contributed to addressing the research questions. To ensure accuracy and reduce the likelihood of errors during data extraction, it is recommended that data extraction be conducted independently by two researchers (Charrois 2015; Hayrol Azril et al. 2021). Two team members were assigned to each research question and the data extraction process was carried out independently. This stage was crucial for identifying relevant data. Data extraction should be performed independently by two researchers to minimise errors and bias (Hayrol Azril et al. 2021). All data that could potentially answer the research questions are extracted and organised in table format.

Data synthesis

Thematic analysis was employed to synthesise the extracted data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify and interpret patterns across existing studies by examining similarities, relationships, and recurring concepts within the available data (Braun and Clarke 2019).

The thematic analysis followed a structured process comprising three key stages (Braun and Clarke 2019). First, the researchers engaged in active and repeated readings of the entire dataset to gain familiarity and establish a foundational understanding of the raw data. Second, initial coding was conducted at a detailed level, with relevant data extracted from selected articles in relation to the main research questions. Third, themes were generated using an inductive coding framework, through which patterns, similarities, and connections within the coded data were identified and synthesised to form overarching thematic categories.

The analysis was conducted through multiple iterative rounds. Initial coding was performed independently by the researchers, guided by the two central research questions. This was followed by several cycles of cross-checking and constant comparison to ensure consistency and accuracy in the coding process. Final themes were collaboratively reviewed and agreed upon by all researchers, ensuring consensus and analytical rigour.

Data demonstration

Data demonstration entails adherence to established reporting standards that govern the presentation of the review. This study rigorously applies the systematic literature review framework proposed by Hayrol Azril et al. (2020) to ensure methodological transparency and consistency. Figure 1 and Table 1 provide input on the article selection process, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria. In addition, Table 2 provides a comprehensive list of the reviewed studies and its main findings. The table provides a clear and structured representation of the analysis, thereby facilitating interpretation and comprehension.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This systematic review synthesises studies published between 2020 and 2025 to address two research questions. First, it examines the challenges faced by Malaysian higher education institutions in implementing the CEFR within their English language curricula, with particular attention to issues frequently reported in the literature. Second, it investigates the strategic responses adopted by these institutions to mitigate such challenges. By addressing these questions, the review offers a comprehensive analysis of the barriers to CEFR implementation and the institutional responses employed in the Malaysian higher education context.

Table 2 presents the full list of reviewed articles, including article titles, authorship, and key findings for each study.

Table 2. List of Reviewed Articles and Key Findings

No.	Title	Author(s)	Findings
1	Can-Do Descriptors – Realigning English Language Curriculum at Higher Education Institution to CEFR	Erda Wati (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEFR used to realign English curriculum and improve communicative competence. • Challenges: limited instructor training, insufficient credit hours. • NDUM adopted a holistic, learner-centred, contextualised curriculum with “can-do” descriptors.
2	Should the CEFR Illustrative Scales be Localised to Malaysian Higher Education Standards? – A Conceptual Paper	Mohd Khairul and Mahani (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEFR scales are Eurocentric and do not fully represent Malaysian English use. • Framework should be adapted, not adopted wholesale. • Issues: vague wording, uneven performance conditions, inconsistent interpretation. • Calls for a unified Malaysian approach across institutions.

3	Towards a CEFR Framework for Workplace Communication: Students' Perceptions of the Sub-Skills, Use and Importance of Language Productive Skills (LPS)	Ahmad Mazli et al. (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEFR writing descriptors misaligned with workplace needs. • Further research needed to adapt descriptors to professional contexts.
4	The CEFR Impact on English Language Educators Teaching Engineering Programmes at a Private University in Malaysia	Ahmad Zufrie et al. (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators supportive of CEFR but faced immense challenges. • Beneficial for raising proficiency; assessments redesigned creatively. • Peer networks and resources used, but no structured support.
5	A Preliminary Study on Localising the CEFR Written Production Descriptor to Malaysian Higher Education Context	Mohd Khairul and Faizah (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited lecturer knowledge of CEFR; seen mainly as rubric. • Descriptors are confusing, vague, and too broad. • Recommends localisation by writing type and education level. • Emphasises expert training, analytical rubrics, and curriculum realignment.
6	Relating a Sustained Monologue Speaking Production Test to CEFR: Towards Alignment	Hazita et al. (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured development and CEFR understanding are crucial. • Test design must match CEFR levels with varied tasks. • Consistent scoring and ongoing validation needed.
7	Framing the English Language (EL) CEFR-informed Curriculum Structure: The UKM Experience	Normazidah et al. (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEFR unified reference for learning outcomes and progression. • Benefits: structured lesson planning, national consistency. • Requires continuous teacher training and resources.
8	Aligning a University English Language Proficiency Measurement Tool with the CEFR: A Case in Malaysia	Nurul Najwa et al. (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELCSA is strongly correlated with CEFR and Linguaskill. • Valid CEFR-referenced tool with structured components (LPE, CEL, LAX). • Most STEM students achieved B2, some reached C1. • The structured approach demonstrates a practical model for CEFR integration in Malaysian HE assessment
9	Aligning the Language Criteria of a Group Oral Test to the CEFR: The Case of a Formal Meeting Assessment in an English for Occupational Purposes Classroom	Shak and Read (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing marking scheme insufficient. • Revised CEFR-based scheme aligned to B2 using “can-do” descriptors.

10	Initial Insights into CEFR Adoption at a Language Faculty of a Public University in Malaysia	Khan et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift from ESP to skill-specific, integrated modules. • Benchmarks aligned with CEFR. • Challenges: lack of local resources, lack of affordable test tools, and need for continuous training. • Stresses localisation to Malaysia's multilingual higher education context.
11	Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): A Review on its Implementation in ESL/EFL Classrooms	Nadiah and Harwati (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate training, resources, and support. • Issues with assessment design, curriculum alignment, teacher autonomy. • Reliance on imported materials; rural schools lack facilities. • Need for localised resources and structured support.
12	Challenges and Frictions in the Implementation of the CEFR-M: A Conceptual Paper	Saiful Islam et al. (2025)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delay in CEFR framework release for tertiary institutions. • Lack of teaching materials, guidance, and institutional support. • Pedagogical resistance due to exam-oriented teaching culture. • Calls for clear policies and research on CEFR implementation practices.
13	Theory to Practice: Lecturers' Readiness in Implementing a CEFR-aligned Tertiary Curriculum	Sharifah Shahnaz et al. (2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation perceived as rushed and inconsistent across institutions. • Training provided but trainers' expertise is moderate. • Lecturers unclear about CEFR levels and application procedures. • Highlights lack of localised materials and communication gaps.
14	A CEFR Aligned Curriculum Framework: Through the Lens of Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi Mara	Sharifah Shahnaz et al. (2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presented insights into designing a CEFR-aligned curriculum framework for tertiary education at UiTM. • Challenges identified in teacher preparation. • CEFR integration systematic and sequential: needs analysis → objectives → framework → content → courses → learning experiences → evaluation. • Suggests systematic, sequential approach akin to the ADDIE model.
15	Mitigating Respondent Fatigue in Self-Assessment: CEFR-based Items for Malaysian Undergraduates	Tg Nur Liyana et al. (2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are communicative but weak in complex texts and writing. • Shortened CEFR questionnaire reduces fatigue. • Effective for measuring B2–C2 skills.

16	CEFR Implementation at the Post-Secondary Level: Teachers' Receptivity	Saiful Islam et al. (2025)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers are supportive but lack CEFR knowledge. • Teachers need more training and time to prepare for implementation. • Recommends targeted professional development and continuous institutional support.
17	Empowering Language Learners: Innovations in CEFR-based Language Learning Applications	Ahmad Zaki et al. (2025)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are skilled in basic tech but struggle with advanced tools. • CEFR-tech integration is crucial for language learning. • Targeted training programmes and hands-on workshops to boost students' confidence in using technology.
18	Malaysian Diploma Students' Use of Social Media and its Relationship with CEFR English Language Performance	Lau, and Hanita Hanim (2025)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media offers extra English practice opportunities. • The frequent use of non-standard language in social media messages could impact students' language proficiency.

Based on the in-depth analysis of 18 scholarly articles examining the implementation of the CEFR in Malaysian higher education, the analysis reveals that CEFR adoption is shaped by a complex interplay of challenges and strategic responses. This analysis identifies eight key thematic areas that encapsulate the core issues and approaches reported across the studies. They are:

- i. policy and curriculum alignment,
- ii. teacher capacity and professional development,
- iii. assessment design and evaluation,
- iv. pedagogical practices,
- v. cultural and contextual adaptation,
- vi. institutional and structural constraints,
- vii. technology integration, and
- viii. learner outcomes and employability.

Table 3 presents a synthesis of the challenges and corresponding strategies, summarising the key barriers and implementation approaches identified across the reviewed studies. The thematic analysis further underscores the complexity involved in operationalising the CEFR within the Malaysian higher education context.

Table 3. Thematic Summary of Challenges and Strategies in CEFR Implementation in Malaysian Higher Education

Theme	Challenges in the CEFR implementation	Strategies adopted in the CEFR implementation
Policy and Curriculum Alignment	Delayed rollout and insufficient credit hours (Erda Wati 2020; Saiful Islam et al. 2025)	CEFR as guiding framework for curriculum design and outcomes (Erda Wati 2020; Normazidah et al. 2021; Sharifah Shahnaz et al. 2024) Systematic alignment with policy directives and CEFR benchmarks (Khan et al. 2023)
	Fragmented interpretations of CEFR policies (Mohd Khairul and Mahani 2020)	
	Lack of a unified national framework and long-term planning (Khan et al. 2023)	
Teacher Capacity and Professional Development	Limited training quality, moderate trainer expertise, and restricted preparation time (Sharifah Shahnaz et al. 2024)	Continuous training to build CEFR knowledge and assessment literacy (Normazidah et al. 2021)
	Reliance on peer networks instead of structured support (Ahmad Zufrie et al. 2021)	Ongoing professional development to sustain implementation (Sharifah Shahnaz et al. 2024)
Assessment Design and Evaluation	Ambiguity in CEFR descriptors, especially for writing (Mohd Khairul & Faizah 2021)	CEFR-referenced models and revised marking schemes (Hazita et al. 2021; Shak & Read 2021)
	Misalignment with workplace communication needs (Ahmad Mazli et al. 2021)	Structured test design, task variety, consistent scoring, and validation (Hazita et al. 2021; Nurul Najwa et al. 2021)
Pedagogical Practices	Persistence of exam-oriented, teacher-centred pedagogy (Saiful Islam et al. 2024)	Redesign of curriculum around communicative, contextualised, and skill-based learning (Erda Wati 2020; Khan et al. 2023) Campus-wide English-friendly environments (Erda Wati 2020)
	Limited adoption of communicative, learner-centred teaching (Sharifah Shahnaz et al. 2024)	
Cultural and Contextual Adaptation	The European-centered framework of CEFR does not adequately reflect Malaysian English (Mohd Khairul and Mahani 2020)	Modified descriptors adapted to local needs (Sharifah Shahnaz et al. 2024)
	Lack of localised descriptors and culturally relevant teaching materials (Mohd Khairul and Faizah 2021; Nadiah and Harwati 2023)	Plans for localised CEFR-aligned materials (Khan et al. 2023)
	Absence of a nationally coordinated adaptation strategy (Mohd Khairul and Mahani 2020)	

Institutional and Structural Constraints	Universities act as implementers, not decision-makers (Sharifah Shahnaz et al. 2024)	Structured curriculum frameworks integrating CEFR, MQF, and MOHE requirements (Sharifah Shahnaz et al. 2024)
	Resource shortages, incomplete documentation, limited institutional support (Saiful Islam et al. 2024)	Regular curriculum review, external validation, and benchmarking (Khan et al. 2023)
Technology Integration	Basic digital literacy but difficulties with advanced tools (Ahmad Zaki et al. 2025)	Training programs to enhance learners' skills in using advanced technological applications (Ahmad Zaki et al. 2025)
		The role of social media for supplementary learning (Lau & Hanita Hanim 2025)
Learner Outcomes and Employability	Weak writing proficiency despite improvements in oral skills (Tg Nur Liyana et al. 2024)	Use of CEFR-based assessment tools (ELCSA, Linguaskill) to benchmark progress (Nurul Najwa et al. 2021)
	Mismatch between CEFR descriptors and workplace communication needs (Ahmad Mazli et al. 2021)	Evidence of correlation between CEFR levels and employability (Ahmad Mazli et al. 2021)

Policy and Curriculum Alignment

Within the theme of policy and curriculum alignment, the implementation of CEFR at the tertiary level has been marked by considerable delays and inconsistent adoption across institutions. While schools implemented CEFR starting in 2017, higher education institutions were urged to align their curricula to accommodate the influx of CEFR-taught students entering universities by 2022 (Erda Wati 2020; Saiful Islam et al. 2025). As a result, universities struggled to design courses that aligned with students' CEFR proficiency levels, and teaching materials and assessments were often misaligned with their actual proficiency. In addition, the framework was developed for a European context and contains descriptors and examples that are not fully applicable to Malaysia's multilingual and multicultural classroom settings (Khan et al. 2023). Furthermore, the absence of a unified national framework has allowed universities to design their own assessments, leading to fragmented and inconsistent practices across institutions.

To overcome these challenges, scholars propose more structured and collaborative reforms. The ADDIE model has been suggested as a systematic guide for curriculum design to address varying proficiency levels (Normazidah et al. 2021). Stronger coordination among universities, leadership support, and adequate instructor preparation are also critical for effective alignment (Erda Wati 2020). Equally important is the localisation of CEFR to reflect Malaysia's socio-cultural and educational context, including adapting teaching materials, learning activities, and assessment methods to suit local classroom needs (Khan et al. 2023).

Teacher Capacity and Professional Development

The second theme that emerged from the review highlights the role of educators. Although the implementation of CEFR is encouraged in Malaysian higher institutions, the literature shows that educators face difficulties in adapting to the framework. For instance, in a study conducted by Sharifah Shahnaz et al. (2024), it is found that educators received limited quality training with restricted preparation time. Educators reported notable gaps in understanding CEFR implementation due to inadequate preparation. Similarly, Ahmad Zufrie et al. (2021) emphasised the lack of formal training. Their study found that educators from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) had to rely on supplementary reading materials and networks of trusted colleagues to better comprehend the CEFR better. This creates uncertainties about the effectiveness of its implementation.

In response to these challenges, Normazidah et al. (2021) suggested an ongoing professional development for educators. This alignment requires a more systematic approach, especially in designing lesson plans and assessments. The key to implementing a CEFR-aligned curriculum is continuous training with complete access to resources, so as to ensure that educators can fully engage with and apply CEFR to its full extent. Similarly, Sharifah Shahnaz et al. (2024) proposed a similar approach, while also calling for clearer communication between stakeholders. Additionally, in-depth analysis reveals limited research on the effectiveness of systematic training for educators as a strategy to support the successful implementation of the CEFR in Malaysian higher education.

Assessment Design and Evaluation

The next theme that emerged from the review focuses on assessment design and evaluation. It is found that there is ambiguity in the CEFR descriptors used in assessment scales, particularly for written production (Mohd Khairul and Faizah 2021). The participants of the study demonstrated limited knowledge of CEFR by perceiving the descriptors as an assessment rubric. The misconception can be rooted in the descriptors themselves, which are found to be confusing for educators to understand and implement in their curriculum. Ahmad Mazli et al. (2021) also identified a gap requiring attention. The study revealed a mismatch between the descriptors outlined in the current CEFR scale and students' perceptions of writing skills for workplace communication. This suggests that the CEFR in the Malaysian context does not capture the full spectrum of writing competencies deemed important in today's context. The challenges of implementing CEFR in assessments and evaluations seem to be centered around the descriptors themselves and the need to adapt them to relevant and various contexts.

The strategies found in the literature for this theme encourage educators to improve assessment by modeling on the CEFR. Hazita et al. (2021) and Shak & Read (2021) suggest that educators should revise mark schemes based on CEFR-referenced models. Hazita et al. (2021) emphasized careful test design aligned with CEFR levels, in which task difficulty corresponds with the targeted CEFR levels. Shak and Read (2021) proposed the use of "can-do" descriptors as models for course objectives and learning outcomes. These strategies would more accurately assess students' targeted proficiencies. In addition to modeling the CEFR, some suggest that more structured test design, task variety, consistent scoring, and validation are necessary to ensure the effectiveness

and validity of assessments. Hazita et al. (2021) found that structured development, informed examiners, carefully designed tasks, consistent scoring, and ongoing validation can ensure evaluation reliability and quality. A study by Nurul Najwa et al. (2021) shows that a structured approach provides a practical model for CEFR integration in Malaysian higher education assessment. Aligning assessment with the CEFR is not sufficient without structured test designs and continuous validation. It is important to note that while current research encourages modeling assessments on the CEFR, these strategies do not address the fundamental limitations of the descriptors themselves.

Pedagogical Practices

Another theme that emerged from the review is the effects on pedagogical practices. Historically, the Malaysian education system placed greater emphasis on reading and writing skills rather than speaking and listening skills prior to alignment with the CEFR framework (Saiful Islam et al. 2024). This initial bias has directly influenced the design of school testing and evaluation. The subsequent top-down, hierarchical implementation of the CEFR meant that teachers were expected to integrate the framework without adequate ownership or full understanding of its principles. Consequently, traditional, teacher-centred methodologies have persisted alongside the new framework, ensuring that focus remains on examination success rather than on fostering genuine communicative competence (Sharifah Shahnaz et al. 2024).

Addressing these issues requires fundamental curricular and pedagogical redesign, shifting the focus to communicative, contextualised, and skill-based learning. The literature stresses the need for an effective, student-centred pedagogical system that foregrounds contextualised language use (Erda Wati 2020). Ultimately, successful reform must extend language learning beyond the classroom by actively cultivating an environment that encourages language use both within and outside the formal institutional settings (Erda Wati 2020).

Cultural and Contextual Adaptation

The theme places emphasis on the cultural and contextual factors in adapting CEFR to suit the teaching and learning context in Malaysian classrooms, especially in higher education institutions (HEI). It was found that the CEFR illustrative scales were oriented towards European languages' norms and do not account for other English varieties such as Malaysian English (Mohd Khairul and Mahani 2020). Illustrative scales of CEFR may not be able to recognise the syntactical features of Malaysian English due to its origin from Europe. In addition, Mohd Khairul and Mahani (2020) noted that the adaptation of these CEFR scales are not adapted in unison in Malaysian HEIs. As Malaysia HEIs are semi-autonomous, policy decisions are devolved to individual institutions' prerogative to adapt entirely or modify selected scales that are prescribed in CEFR. As a result, there will be a lack of uniformity in adaptation of CEFR illustrative scales across different HEIs institutional needs.

Besides, Nadiyah et al. (2023) stressed that teachers faced a difficult time adapting materials due to the foreign content that were prescribed in imported textbooks. Teachers often have to spend additional time to modify appropriate materials that suit the local context by referring to computer assisted materials such as videos and images from the internet. Additionally, contents in the

prescribed textbooks required modifications to enable understanding of topics covered for students who hail from the local communities.

In addressing the challenges above, Sharifah Shahnaz et al. (2024) suggested training programmes to equip lecturers with knowledge and competencies to implement a successful CEFR curriculum. This includes adapting and integrating materials that are tailored to the national education context. Khan et al. (2023) added that a review of language proficiency courses offered at HEI faculties is necessary. This includes incorporating new materials that are adapted and contextualised to the local environment through collaboration with the local and international publishers.

Institutional and Structural Constraints

The following emerging theme highlights the significant institutional and structural constraints faced by Malaysian universities in implementing the CEFR curriculum. Generally, Malaysian universities have institutional autonomy in running their operational activities. However, in terms of the CEFR curriculum, the literature indicates a top-down policy dictated by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to Malaysian universities. Research by Sharifah Shahnaz et al. (2024) found that universities are merely implementers rather than decision makers. The decision-making process was retained by the authorities who then delegated policy execution to universities for implementing prescribed policies. Saiful Islam et al. (2025) found that incomplete documentation that is an integral part of CEFR implementation was not readily available. Documents, such as learning standards, lesson plans as well as schemes of work, have not been rolled out in the post-secondary education sector.

In addressing the aforementioned challenges, Sharifah Shahnaz et al. (2024) advocated for a clear framework to integrate policies from the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), and individual universities. They recommended that credit hour allocation for each proficiency level be determined based on the courses offered by universities. Khan et al. (2023) emphasized the need for external benchmarking and review to assess the suitability of Malaysia's CEFR-aligned curriculum. Such benchmarking is essential for validating curriculum design, teaching and learning practices, and assessment procedures.

Technology Integration

The integration of technology into language learning has emerged as a recurring theme in the literature. Ahmad Zaki et al. (2025) stressed that effective language learning requires integrating CEFR with technology. However, while students are adept at basic technological skills, they often struggle with advanced applications, such as graphic design and multimedia editing. This proficiency gap hinders the intended integration of technology into language learning.

To address this challenge, targeted training programmes are recommended to strengthen learners' competency in advanced technological applications, complemented by hands-on workshops that foster learners' confidence and mastery in using these tools (Ahmad Zaki et al. 2025). In another study, Lau and Hanita Hanim (2025) highlighted the potential of social media as a supplementary tool for English language acquisition, particularly for reading, listening, speaking, and vocabulary development, due to the abundance of English audio-visual content shared daily on these platforms. Nevertheless, they cautioned that the frequent use of non-standard language in social

media messages, such as the use of short forms and symbols, can lead to weakened language proficiency and reduced creative writing skills in Standard English.

Learner Outcomes and Employability

Learner outcomes, particularly in relation to employability, have been consistently highlighted in the literature. Tg Nur Liyana et al. (2024) reported that although university students generally demonstrate a strong overall proficiency in English communication skills, they continue to struggle with writing proficiency, especially in producing structured and detailed texts. The schooling culture of memorisation and rote learning, which may not accurately reflect students' true abilities, has been identified as a factor contributing to this issue. Similarly, Ahmad Mazli et al. (2021) drew attention to a notable mismatch between students' perceptions of the use and importance of writing skills for workplace communication and the descriptors outlined in the current CEFR scales. The perceived reason for this gap is the absence of a clear CEFR scale for written communication in the context of formal or workplace communication.

One strategy for addressing learner outcomes involves correlating a university's internally developed English Language Competence Score Average (ELCSA) with scores from a CEFR-aligned test, Linguaskill. This approach provides indications of test-takers' CEFR levels, thus assisting universities in aligning their internally developed English proficiency measurement tools with international standards (Nurul Najwa et al. 2021). Additionally, Ahmad Mazli et al. (2021) asserted that for CEFR to fully support employability, especially in written communication, its framework needs further refinement to align with actual workplace needs.

While these strategies reflect the link between CEFR implementation and learner outcomes related to employability, the issue of inadequate writing proficiency among Malaysian undergraduates remains largely unaddressed. This highlights a critical gap in current implementation practices that warrants further attention and targeted intervention.

Limitations of the study

The study acknowledges several limitations. Due to restrictions on database accessibility, only two primary sources were used; Scopus and Web of Science. To obtain a sufficient number of papers for the review, the researchers used Google Scholar as supplementary source and the search yielded a substantial number of studies related to language teaching and learning and the use of CEFR framework. In addition, the selection of papers was further limited to open-access publications. This constraint resulted in minimal inclusion of studies from international sources, thereby limiting the global representation of the review.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the 18 papers in this review reveals that public HEIs in Malaysia have begun integrating CEFR into their English language curricula. This development represents Phase One of CEFR implementation in Malaysian HEIs through the adoption of policy and curriculum alignment. The process has been largely guided by 'can-do' descriptors, with relevant scales adapted to match targeted proficiency levels.

This review identified several challenges faced by the HEIs, which prompted the development of institutional-level strategies to overcome these obstacles. The most prominent challenge is the lack of guidance on how to use and situate the CEFR framework. The current analysis indicates that HEIs are acting as individual implementers of the framework. This fragmented approach may lead to inequity in graduate outcomes across institutions, necessitating a centralised and coordinated approach across HEIs to maintain consistency and accountability in CEFR implementation. Besides, the development of localised, culturally relevant materials and content that resonate with Malaysian learners is equally important to ensure the CEFR framework is sustainable and effective over the long term.

A standardized approach and improved materials are essential for supporting the fourth and eighth Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Quality Education and Decent Work and Economic Growth. CEFR implementation can directly contribute by ensuring equitable access to English education and equipping graduates with communication skills valued in the job market. Moreover, with rapid technological advancements, especially in artificial intelligence, the need for strong English proficiency in digital literacy and global communication is becoming increasingly urgent. Without clear guidance on CEFR implementation, Malaysian universities may struggle to adequately prepare graduates for AI-driven environments and internationally competitive careers.

Building on these findings and lessons learned from Phase One, HEIs are now ready to move to Phase Two of policy implementations. Insights from Phase One should guide revisions to policy implementation, with the ultimate goal of ensuring university graduates meet the target proficiency levels of B2/C1 (Independent/Proficient User). This requires an action-oriented approach and fostering communicative language competence and intercultural awareness among students.

In light of these findings, the adoption of the English Language Higher Education Assessment in Malaysia (ELHAM) documents on the implementation of CEFR-aligned English language education reform for assessing listening, speaking, reading and writing in universities is important to provide guidance for assessment practices, which should be implemented gradually and systematically. In addition, a new 2026 English Language Education Roadmap is envisaged to provide a more comprehensive framework to enhance the integration of CEFR policy in Malaysian higher education settings.

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