



# THE DIFFICULTIES OF ADAPTING THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR ENGLISH TEACHING IN VIET NAM

## KHÓ KHĂN CỦA VIỆC ÁP DỤNG KHUNG THAM CHIẾU NGOẠI NGỮ CHÂU ÂU TRONG GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH Ở VIỆT NAM

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**ABSTRACT.** English Proficiency tests, nowadays, popularize around the world which become a global measurement to test English language abilities for non-native English speakers. The implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) not only focuses on language testing but also spreads to teaching and learning. Because of this reason, the Ministry of Education and Training of Viet Nam (MOET) officially adopted CEFR as the national framework of reference for foreign language education in Vietnam in 2008 under Decision 1400/QĐ-TTG. Although the application of CEFR in Project 2020 promises various opportunities for changing English ability of Vietnamese learners, it still exists many challenges on learning and teaching factors. Therefore, this paper aims to find out the difficulties of adapting CEFR for English teaching Viet Nam as well as recommend some suggestions to partly solve these difficulties in English teaching and learning for Vietnamese learners.

**KEYWORDS.** CEFR, English teaching, Project 2020

**TÓM TẮT.** Ngày nay các bài kiểm tra năng lực tiếng Anh phổ biến trên toàn thế giới để trở thành một thước đo toàn cầu để kiểm tra khả năng tiếng Anh của những người nói tiếng Anh không phải bản ngữ. Sự ứng dụng của Khung tham chiếu trình độ ngôn ngữ chung của Châu Âu không chỉ tập trung vào kiểm tra ngôn ngữ mà còn dạy và học ngôn ngữ. Vì lý do đó, Bộ Giáo Dục và Đào Tạo chính thức áp dụng CEFR như một khung tham chiếu quốc gia cho giáo dục ngoại ngữ tại Việt Nam vào năm 2008 dưới Quyết định 1400/QĐ-TTG. Mặc dù sự áp dụng của Khung tham chiếu trình độ ngôn ngữ chung của Châu Âu trong Đề Án 2020 hứa hẹn nhiều cơ hội cho sự thay đổi khả năng tiếng Anh của người Việt, nhưng vẫn tồn tại nhiều thách thức trong yếu tố dạy và học. Vì thế, bài tham luận này nhằm tìm hiểu về những khó khăn trong việc áp dụng CEFR trong việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam cũng như đưa ra những góp ý để phần nào giải quyết những khó khăn ấy cho việc dạy và học tiếng Anh cho người Việt.

**TỪ KHOÁ.** CEFR, dạy tiếng Anh, Đề án 2020

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the National Foreign Language 2020 Project was established in order to achieve MOET's target. Therefore, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was officially adapted as the national framework of reference for foreign language education in Viet Nam under Decision 1400/QĐ-TTG. These policies lead to the development of Vietnamese Competency Framework for English Language Teachers, major changes in national entry and exit requirements for English language competency at all education levels, curriculum, textbooks and criteria for recognition of national and international English proficiency tests.

The implementation of CEFR not only focuses on language testing but also spreads to teaching and learning. Although CEFR promises various opportunities for changing English ability of Vietnamese learners, it still exists many challenges on teaching issues. Many teachers have been training new teaching methods and different research perspectives which all potentially contribute to the process of developing English language teaching and learning for Vietnamese learners. Different language teaching theories, approaches, and methods have been introduced into the system. Nevertheless, after more than a decade of effort, with much investment for the qualifications of English language teachers, with many new teaching methods and approaches being introduced and implemented in the system, with much

support from foreign partners, promising results are still promises. The English proficiency of the majority of students and graduates are still a minus with the great efforts. Many of them cannot appear to be confident with their English. Many of them cannot communicate fluently and naturally in English interaction. Therefore, this paper aims to find out the current situation and issues of English teaching as well as recommend some suggestions to partly solve these difficulties of adapting CEFR in English teaching in Viet Nam. In particular, teachers' qualifications, teaching methods, and language assessment would be discussed to identify some difficulties existed in English teaching when CEFR has been applied in Viet Nam from 2008 until now.

### 2. CONTENT

#### 2.1 What is CEFR?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) was launched by the Council of Europe in 2001. According to the definition of the Council of Europe (2001:1), the CEFR provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, examinations, textbooks, by describing in the

Received: June, 13<sup>th</sup> 2020

Accepted: August 18<sup>th</sup> 2020

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comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language effectively for communication. It means that language learners have to know how to use skills and language knowledge to perform the language efficiently in communicative contexts.

The development of CEFR is the result of the need for a common international framework for language learning, teaching, and assessment. It aims to achieve three main purposes (Council of Europe, 2001:2)

- To establish a metalanguage common across educational sectors, national and linguistic boundaries that could be used to talk about objectives and language levels. It was hoped that this would make it easier for practitioners to tell each other and their clientele what they wished to help learners to achieve and how they attempted to do so.

- To encourage practitioners in the language field to reflect on their current practice, particularly in relation to learners’ practical language learning needs, the setting of suitable objectives and the tracking of learner progress.

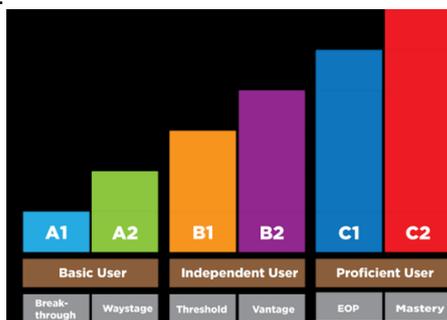
- To agree common reference points based on the work on objectives that had taken place in the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages projects since the 1970s.

CEFR was translated into more than 37 languages, and wisely adapted in many countries around the world, not only within Europe. It is used by policy-makers to make minimum language requirements for a wide range of purposes, including curriculum planning, preparing textbooks and many other contexts.

In spite of these common applications, Cambridge ESOL (2011:2) argues that CEFR is not an international standard or seal of approval. It can be a valuable tool for all of purposes, but users need to understand its limitations and original intentions. Indeed, the adoption of CEFR should depend on the purposes of application and specific contexts. Different countries or regions might have different learning background, culture, or levels of learners with the original framework. Hence, adapting CEFR should be taken to appropriate with a wide range of purposes from policy-makers or the need of users to achieve the language proficiency.

## 2.2 Common reference levels

The CEFR contains six main levels of language proficiency from A1 (the lowest level) to C2 (the highest level) which aims to describe language ability through existing standards, tests or examinations to facilitate comparisons between different systems of qualifications. These levels were designed basing on the action-oriented approach and the notion of plurilingualism which language users are seen as members of society who have tasks to accomplish including those that are not language-related (Council of Europe, 2001:9). The picture below shows the set of common reference levels: global scale from the CEFR (2001:24).



The CEFR divides language proficiency in six levels, A1 to C2, which can be regrouped into three broad levels: Basic User, Independent User and Proficient User, and that can be further subdivided according to the needs of the local context. The levels are defined through ‘can-do’ descriptors. The detail framework for every language skill is also presented from A1 to C2 levels, including reading, listening, writing, spoken interaction, and spoken production (Council of Europe, 2001: 26-27).

The levels of language proficiency reflect what test takes can do if they gain these levels. At Basic User Level (A1 and A2), learners can understand, communicate, and describe language in simple and familiar matters like daily activities, background description. At higher level B1 and B2, Independent User can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects, explain their view points or issues, and interact in regular interaction with native speakers. The highest Level C1 and C2 require learners can recognise implicit meaning, summarise information, and express themselves spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, in more complex situations.

The levels of CEFR can ‘describe in a comprehensive way objective that learners can set to achieve at different level of language proficiency’ (Coombe et al, 2012: 85). Hence, users of CEFR can assess positively their level through what they can actually do in the target language. With realistic scales of proficiency, the CEFR can be used popularity in many different ways and many different language contexts to gain the opportunity for a common standard.

## 2.3 The application of CEFR in Viet Nam

### 2.3.1. Background of English language teaching and CEFR in Viet Nam

Along the history of education, Viet Nam was dominated by many foreign languages through wars, such as Chinese, French, Russia, and English. Since 1990s, because of the impact of English as a global language, English was introduced as an optional foreign language in many primary schools, especially those in economically advantaged areas such as Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh (Nguyen, 2007). At the beginning of 2000s, English became a compulsory subject at primary level and upper secondary level. During this long period, the orientation of teaching methodology or text books focused mainly on grammar-based which language was taught systematically by rules of grammatical structures. According to Hoang (2010:10), while they take cognizance of the significant place of reading comprehension and oral skills, the grammar sections in each unit tend to dominate.

Until 2008, Viet Nam aims to an ambitious project to increase foreign language proficiency for Vietnamese learners. The National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFL 2020) was initiated with the target “to renovate the teaching and learning of foreign languages within the national education system” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2008). As mentioned above, the MOET aims to make English language teaching and learning in Vietnam more relevant, efficient, and productive. It is expected that by 2020, most Vietnamese students graduating from secondary and vocational schools, colleges, and universities will be able to use efficiently a foreign language for the workplace, for studying abroad and for becoming global citizens.

As a part of the Project 2020, CEFR was adapted in Viet Nam under Decision 1400/QĐ-TTG as a benchmark program for measuring and assessing language proficiency

including 6 levels of criteria from A1 to C2. In terms of learners, the project indicates target levels set for the primary stage (CEFR's A1 level), junior high school (A2), senior high school (B1), university students with non-English majors (B2) and university students with English majors (C1). For the EFL primary and lower secondary school teachers, they were required to reach CEFR's B2 level of English proficiency, while upper secondary and high school teachers are expected to have language skills at C1.

The purposes of using CEFR were launched for all foreign languages in Vietnamese educational system under Decision 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT by MOET in 2014, including five main targets.

1. To standardize the basis of capacity requirements for all foreign languages taught in the national education system.

2. To standardize for organizing program, compiling or choosing curriculum, textbooks, teaching plan, other foreign language teaching materials and establishing criteria of testing, examination, and evaluation of each level of education, level of training in order to ensure the connection between the foreign language teaching among educational levels and training level.

3. To standardize for teachers or trainers to select and deploy content, teaching methodology, examination and assessment for learners to achieve the requirements of the curriculum.

4. To help learners understand the content and requirements for each level of language skills and self-assessment of their capacity.

5. To take advantages for cooperation, educational exchanges, recognition of diplomas and certificates with countries adopting Common European Framework (CEFR).

In order to achieve these purposes, many policies were taken to create a new way for foreign languages teaching system in Viet Nam. It promises many opportunities for Vietnamese learners to attain language proficiency by the international standard. However, there are many difficulties accompanying with benefits of CEFR in Viet Nam which will be analysed in the next part.

### 2.3.2. Difficulties of adapting CEFR for English teaching in Viet Nam

Obviously, after nearly 12 years performing Project 2020, there are many renovations for English language learning in the whole country. Curriculum, teaching materials and learning program have a significant change to adapt with the CEFR in order to engage Vietnamese learners to international standard. In recent years, almost Universities in Viet Nam apply TOEIC, IELTS, or TOFEL to English program for students. For example, the requirement of English proficiency for students is IELTS 4.5 and TOEIC 450 at Ho Chi Minh University of Science. Inspire of the opportunities of adapting CEFR, there are some difficulties for English teaching in Vietnamese context.

#### 2.3.2.1. Teachers' qualification

As mentioned above, the English proficiency for the EFL primary and lower secondary school teachers requires at CEFR's B2 level, while upper secondary school teachers are expected to have language skills at C1. These levels are equivalent with First Certificate in English (FCE for B2 level) and Cambridge English Advanced (CAE for C1 level) which are developed by Cambridge English Language Assessment. However, English teachers in Viet Nam who

firstly employ the language proficiency assessment have not yet met the expected standard of CEFR, while they are important keys to transmit directly the language to learners. A study of Nguyen (2015) shows statistics of Vietnamese teachers' proficiency in English from 2011 to 2012.

**Table 1.** Review of teacher proficiency in English. (Nguyen, 2015:63)

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Primary school English teachers	21.1%	30.6%	30.3%	8.9%	0.3%	0%
Lower secondary school English teachers	14.5%	33.9%	38.7%	7.7%	0.4%	
Upper secondary school English teachers	3.6%	17%	47.7%	23.5%	5.2%	0.1%

As seen from table 1, 83% of primary school teachers and 87% of lower secondary school teachers could not reach the B2 level, and about 92 percent of upper secondary school teachers are under C1. Another report of Huong & Giang (2012) (cited as Ngoc, 2014) provided the shocking results of a nation-wide teachers' language proficiency assessment test in which, in big cities like Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh, only a fifth of those tested achieved the CEFR's B2 level of language proficiency. Obviously, teachers' proficiency in English still unqualified to the national standard. According to Van et al. (2006), the quality of teaching and learning foreign languages at both general and tertiary levels in Viet Nam is still very low, which is far from meeting the demand of socio-economic development of the country at the moment (cited as Le, 2013). This problem could be a bell for English teaching in Viet Nam when we desire to apply the international framework for educating language system. If teachers don't master at their level of language standard, they could not help their students to achieve the language. Hence, teachers' qualification should be considered as the first step to standardize the national policies of formulating foreign language teaching in Viet Nam.

#### 2.3.2.2 Teaching methods

Methods in language teaching are always indispensable factors which impact on the success of teacher to convey the language knowledge for learners. As briefly mentioned above, CEFR were designed basing on the action-oriented approach and the notion of plurilingualism. This approach views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents' (members of society) who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action (Council of Europe, 2001:9). It means that language users should know how to depend on their language contexts (tasks) to perform the language. The way they engage in language activities to deal with their tasks is a cognitive process which help them to learn the language. In general, approach from CEFR aims learners to be a part of the target language which they can use language naturally in communicative competence.

In Viet Nam, the aims of English language teaching also orient to 'use English as a mean of communication at a certain proficiency' or 'to become aware of cross-cultural differences in order to be better overall communicators'

(MOET, 2007). However, Vietnamese teaching methodology in English language still focuses generally on grammar-based. According to Le (2013), the widely accepted method is traditional which focuses on the teaching of grammar rules with a heavy load of grammar exercises and reading, rote learning of sentence patterns and vocabulary. It can be easily seen that Vietnamese learners in English language can do very great job at grammar exercises, but they cannot apply their language for communication. In order to adopting CEFR for English proficiency, teaching methodology should be changed to meet the aims of English language teaching which offer Vietnamese learners to confidently act their language out in real-life contexts.

### 2.3.2.3 Language assessment

Along the side with language learning and teaching, language assessment is an important factor of CEFR. Testing and assessment in English language in recent years have a big step in Viet Nam when international certificates widely apply in many universities and colleges as exit examinations, such as TOEIC, TOEFL or IELTS. Besides, the requirement of CEFR level for working in international trade also promotes Vietnamese workforce to update their language proficiency. Hence, university students normally pay more attention to achieve English proficiency of CEFR levels in order to get international exchange for a better job after graduation.

Unlike language assessment for tertiary level, language testing and assessment for general education are still loyal to traditional manner which focus on grammatical knowledge, writing and reading. Le (2013) indicates that testing emphasize only on checking language knowledge rather than language skills. Indeed, speaking and listening skills which are keys for communication still underestimate in language assessment in Viet Nam. Hoang (2010) also argues that there is a mismatch between testing and teaching in English language in Viet Nam. Sometimes, teaching methods have changed from grammar-based to communicative approach in some places, but testing still measures students through lexicogrammatical knowledge. In particular, national examinations are just paper tests to assess language knowledge and reading comprehension. It's not so strange that many students cannot communicate with foreigners after years learning English even if they can do grammar test very well. Language assessment should be totally changed on both lower and higher education in order to develop equally a certain level of proficiency in four micro-skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) for Vietnamese learners.

## 3. RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

The three difficulties above are just some typical issues from adopting CEFR in Viet Nam. It should be admitted that these difficulties cause from the limitation of national education system in language education. There are some recommendations which expect to renovate the language proficiency for Vietnamese learners basing on the CEFR standards.

Firstly, training English teachers should be the most prior target of adopting CEFR in Viet Nam. Teachers should be trained to attain their certain level of English proficiency before their teaching career. Richard (2002) suggested that a language teacher should get sufficient training at the beginning of their teaching career, retraining and self-professional development throughout their professional

practice process (cited as Le, 2013). According to Nguyen (2015), teachers will be expected to have a working knowledge of CEFR and be able to apply it to their teaching practice. The language knowledge of teacher is a bridge for learners to attain their success of language learning.

Besides, renovating teaching methods should be taken along the side with training teacher. Traditional methods need to be replaced by new approaches which not only develop learners' language knowledge, but also their language abilities. The MOET can take chances for English teachers to update new approaches through celebrating workshops or TESOL conferences, especially teachers in some countryside areas. In order to appropriate with the CEFR standard, teaching methodology in Viet Nam generally should aim to assist learners how to expose language naturally as well as to use the target language effectively in social contexts.

Last but not least, language testing and assessment should be standardized by the Common Reference Levels not only for tertiary education, but also for general education. It means that learners should be measured all four micro-skills depending on their certain level. The target levels for the primary stage (CEFR's A1 level), junior high school (A2), and senior high school (B1) can be assessed by Starters, Movers, Flyers, or KET (Key English Test) to guarantee for the international standard. Besides, traditional assessment like paper testing can be replaced for some modern assessment which can measure language ability through the whole learning process, not only through one-day exams.

All things considered, CEFR might not establish a completely perfect standard for language proficiency in every country around the world, but it can generate a success path if it meets the right adoption. The CEFR is useful to you if you are involved in learning, teaching or assessing languages (Cambridge ESOL, 2011: 2). In spite of some difficulties in Viet Nam, CEFR is still expected as a good application for the development of foreign language standard in the country. The renovations of language learning, teaching and assessment hopefully make a great contribution for CEFR adoption in Viet Nam as well as reach the success of language proficiency for Vietnamese learners in the global world.

## 4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My paper could never have been completed without support and contributions from many people. I would like to take this acknowledgement to express my sincere gratitude to them.

Foremost, I would like to thank to Prof. Le Nguyen Minh Tho for the useful comments and engagement through the learning process of this research. I have been learned the great knowledge from the best guidance in making sense of research and writing process.

Finally, my appreciation to Faculty of English Language at Lac Hong University, especially my colleagues who have supported me throughout entire process, both by keeping me harmonious and helping me putting pieces together. I will be grateful forever for your help.

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