IMPACTS OF CEFR-ALIGNED LEARNINGOUTCOME IMPLEMENTATION ON ASSESSMENT PRACTICE AT TERTIARY LEVEL EDUCATION IN VIETNAM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract. This article reports the initial findings on the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages at tertiarylevel educationin Vietnam. It explores the impacts of CEFR-aligned learning outcome implementation on assessment practice for non-English major students at a university in Central Vietnam. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed. Eight general English (GE) teachers, who were teaching non-English major students at the home university participated in this qualitative study. The findings showed that GE teachers modified the assessment activities in such a way that could aid their non-English major students to achieve the required learning outcomes. The strong impact of CEFR-aligned outcomes on the assessment practice could be seen in *the appearance of CEFR aligned tests* and *the focus on students' self and peer assessments*.The long-term effect of the activities, which is students' language proficiency improvement, was difficult to achieve. The issue of extra training on capacity building and professional development for GE teachers at the home university was thus put forward.

Keywords: CEFR, learning outcomes, assessment practice, implementation

1.   Introduction

In the era of globalization and integration, English is more and more indispensable to the development of any country. It has become the first foreign language to be taught and a compulsory subject for both undergraduates and graduates at tertiary level education in Vietnam[22]. Nonetheless, English language education has encountered great difficulties in catching up with society need. The heavy reliance on the explicit teaching of grammatical rules and grammar-based testing, which have long characterized English teaching in Vietnam, has been proved to be very resistant to change [16]. As a result, Vietnam was grouped into "low proficiency" countries in terms of English [9].

To change the situation, various attempts have been made to reform the foreign (especially English) language teaching system, among which is the adoption of CEFR, a global

frameworkinto the Vietnamese local context of language teaching and learning as a "quick-fix" [32] solution to restructure the national foreign language education system. Specifically,the use of CEFR has been recognized in different domains from setting teacher professionalism standards, setting student learning outcomes, renewing language curriculum, adapting teaching materials to modifying language assessment practice [22]. Nearly 10 years after its first introduction in Vietnam, the adoption of CEFR still faces challenges and obstacles from "limited human resources" [29] to "deficits in teacher professionalism" [26]. The need for more study on CEFR adoption in Vietnam, its impacts on teachers, students and English language teaching and learning process, its successes and limitations has never been ceased for the benefits of its future practices.

The present study was carried out to partly fulfill the aforementioned needs. It examined the GE teachers' implementation of CEFR-based A1- B1 learning outcomes for non-English major students at a university in Central Vietnam, within the framework of the 2020 Project launched by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam. Specifically, it pinpointed the impacts of the implementation on the classroom assessment practice renewal.

2.   Context of the study

In Vietnam, after its first introduction in September 2008 through Decision No. 1400/QD-TTG by the Prime Minister, CEFR has been widely applied as a language education innovation policy via the 2020 Project. In effect, this has led to the renewal and modification oflanguage curricula, language teaching materials, as well as testing and assessment in different levels of education, for different types of learners, and at different schools, universities and institutions nationwide.

The home university, where this research was conducted, is a regional university in central Vietnam. Its non-English major students come from the Central Highlands and the provinces and cities in the centre of the country. They vary in terms of social backgrounds, major fields of study chosen, and English proficiency. According to their major field of study, students attend different colleges of the home university with University of Foreign Languages having full responsibility for English teaching to students from all colleges.Teachers also differ in origin, experiences, qualifications, and expertise.

MOET mandated that, as a state-run university, the home university must have its non-English major students achieve CEFR B1 level as one condition for being granted a university graduation degree.Since the setting of English learners' learning outcomes by MOET is independent ofcurricula and teaching materials, the burden on the shoulders of state-run universities, teachers and students becomesheavier. In effect, they have to innovate all those

related domains to meet the new learning outcomes, including the classroom assessment practice.

3.   Literature review

3.1.   *The spread of CEFR*

CEFR, as its full name (The Common European Framework of Reference: Language, Testing and Assessment) suggests, was designed to assist the development of learning, teaching, curricula, and assessment. It gained attention and respect not only in Europe but also in the rest of the world very soon after its publication [1],[4],[17],[31]. It has exerted large-scale influences on both European and non-European languages, for both L1 and L2 teaching/ learning, at all educational levels with different stakeholders all over the world [19],[27],[13],[5].Evidence is shown below.

Firstly, among different domains of language education, CEFR has an impact on assessment [2], [13], [18], [19], [20], [30], which is claimed to "far outweigh" its impact on curriculum design and pedagogy ([20, p.648]. Evidence is the appearance and development of DIALANG, the free-of-charge online self-testing service, available in fourteen European languages aiming at helping learners to familiarize themselves with the six- reference- level tests [12], [20].

In terms of curriculum design, until the mid-twenties of the 21st century, Little[19] noticed that the impact of CEFR was not so strong and the reconstruction of curricula using CEFR's descriptive apparatus was scarce despite its declared purposes of "elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines" [6, p.1]. However, in contexts where CEFR as a global framework is adopted as a local standard in language planning policy, its impact on curriculum development has been observed to start prevailing. Specifically, the influence of CEFR on curricula is mainly related to setting desired language learning outcomes aligned with CEFR in Japan [24]) or Vietnam [28]. For teacher education and pedagogy, its impact has been sparse [19],[26],[34].

Particularly, CEFR has been observed to have such major influences in language policy planning [3],[4],[20],[27],[26] that it is called a "supranational language education policy" [20, p.645], especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Specifically, a number of countries such as Japan, Vietnam, Canada, Mexico, etc. have witnessed the implementation of CEFR in national contexts as an attempt to reform the system of language teaching in the country [8],[10],[11],[21],[29],[31].

Since 2011, three years after its first introduction in Vietnam, CEFR has been widely applied in language education from setting teacher professionalism standards and student learning outcomes to renewing language curriculum, adapting teaching materials and modifying

language assessment practice. With an aim to reform learners' language proficiency, MOET also states the language proficiency requirement for different school levels. Accordingly, high school leavers and learners of non-English major university students need to achieve B1 CEFR-aligned learning outcome [22], which has effects on different domains of language teaching and learning, especially the assessment practice. The present study was conducted to explore the impacts of the required CEFR-aligned learning outcome on assessment practice at a university in Vietnam.

3.2. Related studies

Since its publication, CEFR has been popularly implemented in numerous countries. A number of empirical projects and studies on CEFR and its implementation have thus been carried out. The review of literature indicated that although the focus was on the level of its impacts, interests in CEFR varied from the domains to the contexts of its implementation. For instance, to Faez, et al. [10], [11], the focus was on students' learning outcomes whereas curriculum design and development were the concerned issues in Moonen, Stoutjesdijk, Graaff and Corda [23] and Valax's studies [33].While Despagne&Grossi[8] and Nakatani[25] paid attention to learner autonomy and learners' proficiency respectively, Glover [15] was concerned with the use of CEFR for learners' self-assessment.

The first two studies on CEFR that are worth mentioning belonged to Faez, Majhanovich, Taylor, Smith and Crowley [10] and Faez, Taylor, Majhanovich, Brown, and Smith [11]. While Faez, et al. [10] presented the impact of CEFR-informed instruction (action-oriented instruction focusing on language use) on second language (L2) instruction and learning outcomes in French as a second language (FSL) programs in Ontario, Canada;Faez, et al. [11] discussed the potential of communicative teaching inspired by CEFR's task-based approach in FSL classrooms. Despite the different data collection methods, results emerged from the voices of the participating teachers of the two studies were predominantly positive. Faez, et al. [10] revealed that challenges of implementing CEFR-informed instruction included time restriction and lack of understanding CEFR and its applicability in FSL classrooms.Faez, et al. [11] suggested that key teaching and learning resources that promoted classroom teaching approaches aligned with the communicative learning outcomes specified by CEFR need to be developed, curricula have to be modified, and applicable resources and materials have to be made readily available to teachers. Conclusion drawn from the two findings of Faez, et al. [10], [11] was that with a careful adaptation and implementation of CEFR, the goal of increasing the French proficiency of high school graduates can be achieved.

Next, both Moonen, et al. [23] and Valax[33] were interested in CEFR and its impacts. While Valax[33] focused on CEFR and curriculum design only, the interest of Moonen, et al. [23] varied from foreign language teachers' teaching, assessment practice and curriculum develop-

ment. Valax[33] reported that there was little enthusiasm for CEFR among teachers. As for curriculum design, Valax[33] therefore concluded that CEFR promised considerably more in the area of language curriculum design than it was capable of. Compared to Valax's [33], Moonen, et al.'s findings[23] were more positive. They found that there was a shift towards the use of CEFR in formative assessment of learner performance. CEFR was referred to as a practical tool to assess oral and writing skills. In general, although CEFR was part of the school's examination program, it can be quite difficult to turn theory into practice. Moonen, et al. [23] summarized that factors determining the extent to which CEFR has an impact as educational innovation included compatibility and adaptation.

The next three studies on the impacts of CEFR belonged to Glover [15],Despagne&Grossi[8], and Nakatani[25]. The contexts and subjects of the study were much different. For Despagne&Grossi [8], it was a case study in a Mexican university context with a strategy-based instruction being adapted to initiate CEFR implementation. Nakatani[25] and Glover's [15] studies took place in Japan and Turkey respectively with the same focus on communication strategies and speaking skills. The findings shared one thing in common: if well implemented, CEFR can bring about positive changes in language learning such as fostering language learner autonomy [8], improving learners' English proficiency in communicative tasks [25] and scaffoldingstudents' self- assessment activity [15].

In Vietnam, two studies on CEFR worth mentioning were those by Nguyen Van Huy & Hamid [26] and Pham Thi Hong Nhung[28]. Pham Thi Hong Nhung[28] reported non-English major students' voices to setting CEFR-B1 level as their learning outcomes. The findings showed students' limited understanding of the expected learning outcome, their concerns and problems of how to achieve those learning outcomes, and their needs for improving learning achievements. Also concerning the process of adopting and accommodating CEFR, a global language education framework in the context of Vietnam, Nguyen Van Huy & Hamid [26] focused on how a global language policy is adopted and appropriated at the grass-root level. The study argued that the adoption of CEFR is a "quick-fix" [32] solution to the current problem of English language education in Vietnam, yet failed to address some critical issues in the practice of language teaching and learning in the country. It has contributions to the understanding of how a global language policy is adopted and implemented in a local context.

In short, the current literature does an extensive job in discussing the attributes and role of CEFR, its implementation and impacts. Although the afore-mentioned studies varied from the extent to which CEFR was accommodated, the languages it was adopted, the domains it was applied to the countries it was implemented, their findings and implications shared some big things in common. Firstly, the impact of CEFR in different countries has been documented to be diverse and partial [20], on various domains in language education. Secondly, there is a

consistent trend in CEFR implementation regardless of its context: if well implemented, CEFR is useful and beneficial as it renews curriculum, emphasizes learning outcomes, evaluates teaching materials and guides assessment which facilitates the achievement of learning outcomes. However, this can happen only when the interaction with and the use of CEFR is implemented properly.

In the context of Vietnam, the fact that CEFR was adopted for English language curriculum innovation of different school levels [22] has resulted in its strong impacts on different domains from pedagogy, materials, learning outcomes to assessment practice. Due to its late implementation compared with other countries, research on CEFR and its issues in foreign language education in Vietnam is still sparse [29]. The need for more research of CEFR and issues of its implementation in Vietnamese contexts is unquestionable. The present study thus reported the impacts of implementing CEFR-based A1 B1 learning outcomes on non-English major students at a university in Central Vietnam.

4.   Methodology

4.1.   Research question

The article reported part of the study exploring the implementation of CEFR-aligned curriculum for non-English major students at a university in Central Vietnam. It aimed to address the following question: What are the impacts of CEFR-aligned learning outcome implementation on assessment practice at tertiary level education?

4.2.   Instruments

To answer the research question, an in-depth semi-structured interview protocol was designed. The full interview protocol had two parts. The first part consisted of a preamble and demographic questions. The main part of the interview included 8 major questions exploring teachers' perceptions and responses toCEFR-aligned curriculum renewal. For the purpose of the present article, two main questions delving into the practice of renewing the classroom assessment practice aligned with CEFR were chosen for analysis. The data provided an insightful exploration of what impacts CEFR implementation may have on general English teachers' teaching process.

4.3.   Data collection and analysis

The data collection procedure of the present study took place in December, 2017. Ten teachers were invited to take part in the one-to-one in-depth interviews. Eight interviews were actually carried out in December 2017. The interviews took place at a time and place of convenience for the participants, either at coffee shops, classrooms or their home. Although the inter-

views took place only after having teachers' agreement, informed consents were obtained in written form before the interviews were started. Each interview lasted from thirty to forty-five minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and recorded for later transcription. The interviews were then transcribed, coded and analyzed. Two or three weeks after the interviews, the researcher sent the transcripts to those participants to do member-checking. No participants requested any changes to the transcripts.

Data analysis was conducted carefully and with consideration to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. After being transcribed and sent back to the interviewees for accuracy checking, interviews recordings were listened to many times and the transcribed notes were read and reread, assisting in assuring the accuracy of the languages captured in the transcribed notes. Simultaneously, participants' voices and tones were captured to more deeply understand their perceptions and attitudes to the issues under investigation. As themes emerged from data analysis, an individual list of corresponding themes was created. Coding techniques were implemented to organize data from the interviews analysis and determine the overriding themes. Specific themes were determined and codes established. Information was merged into one document with all themes and supporting phases made by the participants. Valuable concepts became categories, some were placed under other sub-headings and minor ideas and concepts were excluded from the coding process.

4.4. *Research participants*

For qualitative in-depth interviews, issues to ensure the richness and comprehensiveness of data were more focused [7]. Ten teachers who have experience in teaching general English for non-English major students for at least a semester were thus recruited on a voluntary basis for the semi-structured interviews.In other words, those who participated in the present study were willing to share information on the issue under investigation and thus, their willingness demonstrated an evidence to contribute reliable and constructive information. Eight of them did participate in the interviews. The two remaining teachers refused due to their businesses. Since data analysis showed the repetition of stories among participants after eight interviews, the data reached the "saturation point" [14]. The researcher stopped selecting new participants for their study.

5.   Findings and discussion

All eight teachers paid much attention to the assessment activities in such a way that could aid their non-English major students to achieve the required learning outcomes. From the interviews, the strong impact of CEFR-aligned outcomes on the assessment practice could be seen in the appearance of CEFR aligned tests and the focus on students' self and peer assessment.

5.1. The appearance of CEFR-aligned tests in the assessment practice

In response to CEFR implementation, GE teachers did some changes in both the content and format of formative classroom assessment. The first change was the frequent appearance of CEFR-aligned test formats such as KET, and PET in assessment. All GE teachers used CEFR-aligned practice test books for A1-B1 levels, namely Key English Test (KET) and Preliminary English Test (PET) as supplementary materials and in formative assessment practice. All eight teachers admitted that their teaching and assessment became test-oriented.

Overall, it is worth noticing the appearance of some complete CEFR-aligned tests in the classroom assessment practice, either as placement tests, mid-term tests or formative assessment activities. Take a junior teacher as an example. At the beginning of each course, she used a CEFR-aligned test taken from KET, and/ or PET as a placement test so that she could have an overview of the students' proficiency in the class. She kept on giving A1-B1 aligned tests during the course. The number of practice tests, however, varied among classes, mainly because of students' proficiency levels and time allowance. Four teachers provided at least 2 or 3 CEFR-aligned tests for each class. Students were asked to do the tests at home or in class. Teachers then spent time providing keys and explanations for these tests and assessing students' work as well.

In addition, CEFR-aligned tests and/ or tasks were also popular. Many teachers did not provide students with complete practice tests as appeared in KET, and PET. Instead, they cut the tests into parts and combined or replaced them with the tasks in the textbooks. One teacher explained:

> *I always try to find tasks aligning with the theme or topics in the textbook. For example, in Life unit 5 for A1 level, the unit title is Food. So I try to find a task from KET, either reading or listening, about food for my students. Or unit 2 reviews numbers, so I provide the listening tasks about numbers in which students have to listen and take notes about telephone numbers, room numbers, addresses, numbers or prices of tickets bought, which was available in part 4 and 5 of the listening test for KET level.*

Findings from the interview sessions and the collected artifacts showed that the Can-do descriptors of CEFR for the respective levels were inadequately taken notice. GE teachers were more concerned with students achieving the required learning CEFR-aligned A1-B1outcomes than students improving their language proficiency.

Given that topics and themes for speaking activities were chosen and provided by the Faculty, a typical example of how GE teachers dealt with speaking is shown in the following description:

> *We have a detailed outline with essential topics for each level. At the beginning of the course, I'll assign them to my students, usually each student in charge of one topic.*

*After two or three weeks, students take turns to present their topic in the first 15
minutes of each period. Grading is applied for this activity.*

Those teachers admitted that they had to spend much time and energy doing this way. Although the number of tasks and tests they could provide students was not as many as those by the afore-mentioned teachers, they thought their teaching and assessment became closer-interdependent. Besides, by doing so, teachers could introduce CEFR-aligned test format in a more relevant and meaningful way.

In sum, teachers either provided complete A1-B1 aligned practice tests or broke them into tasks and exercises for students' practices. It is of note that the appearance of CEFR-aligned tests outweighed other types of formative assessment, making assessment more test-oriented. The classroom assessment practice thus focused on the rise in the number of students reaching CEFR B1, the minimum language proficiency requirement for students being conferred the university graduation. Yet it may not necessarily improve students' language proficiency.

5.2. The focus on students' self and peer assessments

Due to time constraints, teachers had strategies in assessment practice. Findings from the interviews revealed that self and peer assessments were favored. Together with assigning tasks and exercises for students' preparation at home, applying self and peer assessments for students' correction and feedback activities was one strategy GE teachers applied to deal with under the pressure of time. It was noticed that the current application of self and peer assessments for non-English major students was mainly as coping strategies. The preference of GE teachers to the activities was the result of the limited timeframe curriculum and large classes rather than the method values, principles or effectiveness of the activities. An example of how these activities were often carried out can be visualized from the following reflection:

*I found self and peer assessment extremely practical in the current context. On average,
we [GE teachers at The home university] are in charge of five to six classes per semester,
equivalent to 200 to 250 students. Grading students' work is really challenging. Instead
of teachers grading and marking students' work, some reading and listening tasks can
be assessed by students with the teachers' support. I often provide answer keys with
necessary explanations. Students assess their friend's or their own work with the given
keys by counting the correct answers. By doing so, I can save time for explanation and
writing tasks.*

The present reflection echoed that GE teachers focused more on keys and answers for specific exercises and/ or tasks than on CEFR can-do descriptors for students' self and peer assessments. The activities were thus limited to the issue of correctness. The long-term effect of the activities, which is students' language proficiency improvement, was difficult to achieve. This is also the limitation of the current self- and peer assessment application because the activi-

ties would be definitely more beneficial for non-English major students if GE teachers developed students' self-assessment ability with reference to CEFR can-do descriptors.

In brief, due to time constraints and the large classes, GE teachers at the home university preferred self and peer assessments and used these two activities frequently. The original purpose of self and peer assessments in the current context, however, was not from CEFR values or assessment principles, and thus can be recognized not to be able to fully achieve its overall aims of students' autonomy and proficiency improvement. The achievement, if there was any, is short-term and temporary. What GE teachers have tried in assessment practice might raise the number of non-English major students passing the required CEFR-aligned A1 B1 examinations. However, the long- term effect of self- and peer assessments to improve students' language proficiency is hard to achieve.

6.   Conclusion

The findings show that teachers associated CEFR-aligned curriculum with its learning outcomes and assessment practice. They thus modified the assessment activities in such a way that they could aid their non-English major students to achieve the required learning outcomes. The impact of CEFR-aligned outcomes on the assessment practice could be seen in *the appearance of CEFR aligned tests* and *the focus on students' self and peer assessments*.

Firstly, GE teachers made some changes in both the content and format of formative classroom assessment to help their non-English major students pass the required CEFR-aligned A1-B1 examinations. All the assessment practice renewal and adaptation revolved around the format and requirement of those exams and became very test-oriented. However, the activities were mainly as coping strategies. GE teachers were more concerned with students achieving the required learning CEFR-aligned A1-B1outcomes than students improving their language proficiency. They did not pay adequate attention to the can-do descriptors of CEFR A1-B1 to improve students' language proficiency.

Also, the findings from the interviews revealed that self- and peer assessment was favored. The choice of the activities, however, was due to time constraints and large classes rather than the method values, principles or effectiveness of the activities. The long-term effect of the activities, which is students' language proficiency improvement, was difficult to achieve. The activity was thus not to be able to fully achieve its overall aims of students' autonomy and proficiency improvement.

The issue of extra training on capacity building and professional development for GE teachers at The home university was thus put forward. GE teachers need support from the home university, the faculty and from their peers so that their modifications and adaptations can take effect. Especially, GE teachers need further training on assessment of language learning in relation to CEFR. Once provided with theories and techniques, together with their classroom

experiences, GE teaches are more likely to have practical solutions in renewing current assessment practices so that all components of the curriculum can become more consistent. As such CEFR expected learning outcomes can be achieved.

The findings of this study also show that further studies on the impacts of CEFR-aligned learning outcome on other domains of the language teaching and learning such as teaching methodology, and material adaptation should be conducted.

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