

Initial Insights into CEFR Adoption at a Language Faculty of a Public University in Malaysia

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Abstract	The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages, which was originally meant for the European context is now being widely accepted by many non-European countries. The education system in Malaysia, as outlined in the English Language Education Roadmap for Malaysia (2015-2025), has adopted the framework. Although this has taken place at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, the present study zooms in on the tertiary level only. Specifically, it offers a critical analysis of implementing CEFR at a language faculty of one of the public universities in Malaysia. In doing so, it has drawn on Phillips and Ochs's (2003) framework of education policy borrowing. As CEFR is still at an embryonic stage of implementation in many higher learning institutions in the country, it is hoped that the initial steps undertaken, and the challenges reported in this study could inform educational authorities in the country and other similar education systems elsewhere.
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1. Introduction

Assessment has always been at the forefront of every education system. A comprehensive review of related literature reveals that assessment in schools and higher learning institutions (hereinafter HLIs) is consistently reformed to ensure learning outcomes are reliable and valid (Berry, 2011). Malaysia in its attempt to deliver quality education has implemented many significant educational reforms in schools and HLIs over the decades. In 2012, the Malaysian government launched the new Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB) which focuses on educational reforms at all levels in the country. Its implementation consists of three waves starting from 2013 until 2025, and it aims to raise the Malaysian education standard to an international level and prepare Malaysian children for the needs of the 21st century (Shan et. al., 2016). In relation to English language teaching and learning, the introduction of the CEFR in the country was part of the MEB. To this end, the first step taken by the MOE was appointing a task force i.e., the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) to ensure its smooth implementation into the curriculum. The ELSQC came up with the English Language Roadmap 2015-2025 which takes into consideration aspects of teaching, learning, and assessment of the English language based on the six CEFR levels at schools and HLIs. The implementation of CEFR in schools is different from HLIs. There are two central bodies, namely the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate (MES) and the Malaysian Examinations Council (MEC), that handle assessment matters in schools. There are three major examinations which Malaysian students are required to sit throughout their school lives. At the primary level, students are required to undergo six years of schooling. At the end of year six, Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah or the Primary School Assessment is conducted. However, it is noteworthy that effective 2021, the summative-oriented examination at the end of the primary level is replaced with a synergistic (formative-summative) one. At the secondary level, students are required to undergo five years of schooling. Students are required to sit for the Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3 (PT3) or Form 3 assessment at the end of lower-secondary level (9th year of schooling), which is also a synergistic (formative-summative) one and the

Malaysian Certificate of Education or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) in the fifth year of secondary level (11th year of schooling). These examinations are handled by the MES. On the other hand, the Malaysian Higher School Certificate (STPM) or Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia and Malaysian University English Test (MUET), which are sat by sixth-form, or the pre-university (12th and 13th year of schooling) students are handled by the MEC (Baksh et al., 2016; Ong, 2010).

In Malaysia, there are 20 public universities (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021), which are presently under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). The public university in this study is a public research university in Malaysia. It is noteworthy that within every public university, there is a language faculty that serves as a servicing center. Undergraduate students from every other faculty are required to sit for English language proficiency tests as part of their graduation requirements. These proficiency tests are high stakes in nature as students are not allowed to graduate without passing them. Language faculties in HLIs, unlike schools, develop their own language tests as they are autonomous compared to schools. For example, the language faculty in the present context develops its language proficiency tests by complying with the requirements of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). In this regard, language faculties in HLIs will need to respond to the English Language Roadmap 2015-2025 by aligning their English language tests to the CEFR.

The practice of borrowing educational policies from one country to another is widespread, driven by a desire to learn from international successes and address common challenges. Numerous examples illustrate this trend, such as the influence of the German vocational education system on British policy discussions since the 1980s, highlighted in the Ofsted reports (Philips & Ochs, 2003). Similarly, the adoption of the Finnish model of early childhood education and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by various countries worldwide exemplify this phenomenon. However, borrowing educational policies, particularly those with significant implications, necessitates rigorous scrutiny by

borrowing education systems by means of their implementing institutions. In this regard, compatibility with the existing system and the feasibility of smooth implementation must be thoroughly assessed.

The increasing prioritization of international education standards has spurred the adoption of frameworks like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Originally meant for adult foreign language learners in European contexts (Figueras, 2012; Tono, 2017), CEFR has steadily gained traction in diverse educational systems worldwide, albeit not without reservations. This study examined the case of a language faculty within one public university, serving as a microcosm of national level CEFR implementation efforts. Specifically, the authors investigated the sequential alignment of the MUET with CEFR, followed by the subsequent adoption of English language proficiency courses within the faculty to cater to the CEFR-aligned MUET cohort. By meticulously documenting this process, this study aimed to provide valuable insights and practical guidance for similar institutions both within Malaysia and other nations navigating the complexities of CEFR adoption. To this end, the authors employed the framework of education policy borrowing proposed by Philips and Ochs (2003) to report the initial steps undertaken in the present context.

In the following section, a panoramic view of the CEFR (Philips & Ochs, 2003) is presented first before the steps of adoption at the national and subsequently at the faculty level are presented.

2. Literature Review

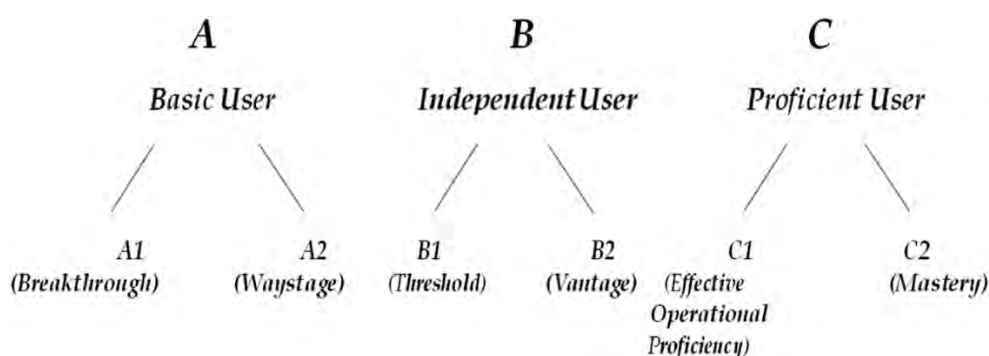
2.1 A Panoramic View of the CEFR

The CEFR presently does not need any explanation for individuals involved in the teaching profession—be they teachers, teacher trainers, textbook writers, or curriculum designers. Although some variations are observed in terms of its pronunciation, it is presently known throughout the world (Byram, 2020).

Historically, the early drafts of it appeared in the early 1970s, and its complete version was only released after 30 years. Since its publication in 2001, “the CEFR has been translated into 39 languages and its use has spread outside Europe, from Asia to Latin America, as an aid to defining levels for learning, teaching and assessment” (English Profile, 2015). A clear understanding of the CEFR’s horizontal and vertical dimensions, which complement each other, is necessary to ensure that the descriptors are used accurately. The horizontal dimension refers to the domains of language use such as the context (personal, educational, etc.), language activities (reception, production, interaction, or mediation in texts in oral or written form or both), strategies (reception, production, or interaction) and the users’ language proficiencies needed to carry out language activities. The vertical dimension, on the other hand, refers to the “can do” statements. It describes the language ability of learners on a six-point scale (Diez-Bedmar, 2018). Specifically, the abilities of language learners under this framework are categorized into three main groups: basic users, independent users, and proficient users, as diagrammatically shown in Figure 1. It is also worth noting that these levels can be broken down further in the process of aligning the tests with the CEFR scales (Shillaw, 2017).

Figure 1

The Vertical Dimension of CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p.23)



Since the CEFR labels along with their descriptors were introduced, teachers and learners now seldom use terms like “beginner,” “intermediate,” or “advanced,” as they have been replaced with A1, B1, and so on (Figueras, 2012).

In an attempt to ensure continuous improvement, another new document entitled Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment Companion Volume was released by the Council of Europe in 2017 with new descriptors. It was stated in the document that the CEFR will be continuously updated and upgraded (Council of Europe, 2020). Ahmad Afip et al. (2019) reported in their study that the CEFR levels of language proficiency description has widely been used by language testing agencies for global English language tests. They also reported that “the growing alignment of language exams around the world to CEFR levels gives it global currency” (p. 379).

The literature reveals that one of the goals of the CEFR is to rely on the same proficiency levels with the expectation that such a practice would culminate in the free movement of both people and ideas (English Profile, 2015; Van Ek, 1975). Therefore, CEFR is employed in contexts beyond the European member states of the Council of Europe (COE), namely non-European countries and countries in the inner circle such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand; the outer circle such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana; as well as the expanding circle such as Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea (Ali et al., 2018; Kachru, 1992). In Asia, some CEFR familiarization and alignment studies were conducted in Japan (Mayor et al., 2016; Negishi et al., 2012; Tono, 2013, 2017) and Taiwan (Wu, 2007, 2008; Wu & Wu, 2010). It is worth noting that Thailand (Hiranburana et al., 2017) and Vietnam (Hung, 2013) in the Southeast Asian region have developed their own frameworks based on the CEFR scales. In Malaysia, as a reform has recently been introduced, research into familiarization and alignment of CEFR is still at the embryonic stage. Notwithstanding, some studies have already been conducted such as Ali et al. (2018) who investigated how to develop English placement tests and align them with the CEFR and Darmi et al. (2017) who investigated the teachers’ perspectives on their students’ performance in English language proficiency tests with reference to CEFR descriptors. With the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) now fully

aligned with CEFR scales and CEFR-aligned scores serving as a key prerequisite for admission to HLIs in Malaysia, a surge in empirical studies is inevitable. This new landscape necessitates further investigations to explore the impact of CEFR-aligned MUET on various aspects of language learning and assessment within these institutions.

In the following section, building upon the national framework for CEFR adoption in MUET, the authors report the steps taken at a university language faculty that subsequently adapted its English language proficiency courses to align with the CEFR-equipped student cohort.

2.2. Borrowing of CEFR at HLIs in Malaysia

The Malaysian government, like other education systems in Asia decided to borrow the CEFR framework into its own education system. To this end, as it was mentioned earlier, in 2013, it formed a taskforce, i.e., ELSQC, to help the MOHE implement this new policy at HLIs nationwide. ELSQC is an independent panel, which consists of seven individuals who are considered experts and practitioners in the field of English language teaching (Don et al., 2015). This taskforce was assigned to help the MOHE in terms of setting the standard and ensuring quality in the teaching of the English language at HLIs in Malaysia. However, their input is subject to the endorsement of the education minister (Ahmad Afip et al., 2019). Upon being appointed, the taskforce immediately came up with the English Language Roadmap 2015-2025, in which guidelines for curriculum development, teaching, and assessing language proficiency (aligned with the CEFR scales) from preschool to tertiary level, including teacher education, are outlined. The document (roadmap) itself is divided into three sections. The first section (A) offers some background information about teaching, learning, and assessment in Malaysia. The second section (B) assesses English language education from preschool to tertiary education, including teacher training programs. The last section (C) offers ELSQC's recommendations to formulate new policies in the future (Don et al., 2015).

At this point, it must be noted that MUET at the post-secondary level plays a crucial role as universities use the MUET results to place Malaysian students into English language proficiency courses offered within their respective language faculties. In 1999, MUET was introduced by the MEC, the purpose of which was to gauge the language proficiency of STPM students before they enroll in university (Don et al., 2015). The test, which ended in 2020, assessed all four macro-skills, namely reading, listening, speaking, and writing and aggregated the scores on a six-point scale (Band 6 – excellent user, Band 5 – very good user, Band 4 – good user, Band 3 – modest user, Band 2 – limited user, and Band 1 – extremely limited user) (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019). In 2021, MUET was aligned with CEFR scales as shown in Table 1. The four language skills carry 90 points each. Depending on the students' score on each skill, the total (aggregated) score of all four skills will belong to one of the bands, one of the user categories, and the CEFR scale, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

CEFR-Aligned MUET Scores (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019)

Aggregated score	Band	Users	CEFR Scale (A1 – C2)
331 - 360	5+	Proficient	C1 & C2
294 - 330	5.0		
258 - 293	4.5	Independent	B1 & B2
211 - 257	4.0		
164 - 210	3.5		
123 - 163	3.0		
82 - 122	2.5	Basic	A1 & A2
36 - 81	2.0		
1 - 35	1.0		

Consequently, language faculties at HLIs began placing their new batch of students with CEFR-aligned MUET into their language proficiency courses

effective 2021. Language faculties in HLIs will need to respond to the English Language Roadmap 2015-2025 by aligning their English language courses to these standards. In addition, as per the recommendations by the ELSQC in its roadmap, students at the post-secondary level are required to achieve B2 proficiency level, whereas students at HLIs are expected to achieve at least B2 or above by the year of 2025, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Cambridge Benchmarking Results, CEFR Targets, and Common-Sense Targets (Don et al., 2015)

Stage of education	Cambridge Benchmarking 2013	CEFR Targets 2025	Common-sense targets
Preschool	Below A1	A1	Raised awareness of English, ability to say simple things in English, first step to English literacy.
Primary School	A1	A2	Basic functional English literacy and some limited ability to communicate using English in familiar social situations.
Secondary School	A2	B1/B2	Ability to use English progressively in everyday situation with the potential to use English at workplace.
*Post-Secondary	B1	B2	Sufficient command of English to prepare students for university
*University	A2, B1	B2/C1	Skilful in using English in both employment and academic contexts.

Stage of education	Cambridge Benchmarking 2013	CEFR Targets 2025	Common-sense targets
Teacher Education	B1, B2	C1	A high level of English proficiency combined with pedagogical expertise to ensure effective English teaching in the classroom.

2.3. The University and The Language Faculty in The Context of This Study

As it was mentioned in section 1, there are 20 public universities in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). The university in this study is one of the research universities. As a public university, it offers a wide range of courses both in the areas of sciences and non-sciences through its 26 academic schools and 17 research centers. It is noteworthy that this is the first university in the country to be selected by the Malaysian government to participate in the Accelerated Program for Excellence (APEX), a fast-track program that helps tertiary institutions achieve world-class status (Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2024).

Consistent with the observation presented in Section 1, a ubiquitous feature of public universities is the presence of a language faculty, functioning as a centralized resource for delivering essential language proficiency courses that benefit the entire student community. The faculty in the present study plays such a role. In 1972, it was established as a Language Unit under the School of Education, and it has provided language learning for the campus community since then. At that time, Bahasa Malaysia and English were the main language courses offered, whereas Thai, Korean, Vietnamese, and Tagalog were offered as foreign language courses. Since then, Bahasa Malaysia has become a compulsory course for all undergraduate students, while foreign languages have been listed as elective courses. In 1985, the Language Unit was upgraded to the Center for Languages and Translation (CLT). It subsequently became a faculty in 2008. Other

than its own programs at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level, it mainly offers Bahasa Malaysia and English language courses which are compulsory for students at the Bachelor's degree level across the university for graduation purposes. Besides, it also offers foreign languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, German, Korean, French, Spanish, Tamil, Russian, and Thai. These courses are offered as elective/optional courses to provide students with more opportunities to learn new languages to widen their career prospects (School of Languages, Literacies, & Translation, n.d.). Given the focus of this study on English language courses offered at the faculty, Tables 3 and 4 respectively detail the pre- and post-CEFR alignment placement criteria for the courses offered. These tables comprehensively depict the placement tests utilized, required proficiency levels (including IELTS and TOEFL equivalents to cater to the faculty's international student cohort), and corresponding course assignments. This dual presentation allows for a clear comparison of student placement practices before and after the MUET's alignment with CEFR.

Table 3

Placement of Students into Courses Before CEFR-Aligned MUET

Entry Requirements	Course Codes	Course Titles
MUET Band 2.0-3.0	LMT100	Preparatory English
	LSP300	Academic English
	To select one from:	
	LSP401	General English
	LSP402	Scientific and Medical English
	LSP403	Business and Communication English
MUET Band 4.0/ IELTS 5.0-5.5	LSP404	Technical and Engineering English
	LSP300	Academic English
	To select one from:	
	LSP401	General English
	LSP402	Scientific and Medical English
MUET Band 5.0/	LSP403	Business and Communication English
	LSP404	Technical and Engineering English
	To select one from:	

Entry Requirements	Course Codes	Course Titles
IELTS 6.0-8.0	LSP401	General English
	LSP402	Scientific and Medical English
	LSP403	Business and Communication English
	LSP404	Technical and Engineering English
	To select one from:	
	LHP451	Effective Reading
	LHP452	Business Writing
	LHP453	Creative Writing
	LHP454	Academic Writing
	LHP455	English Pronunciation Skills
	LHP456	Spoken English.
	LHP457	Public Speaking & Speech Writing
	LHP458	English for Translation
	LHP459	English for Interpretation
MUET Band 6.0/ IELTS 8.5 and above	To select two from:	
	LHP451	Effective Reading
	LHP452	Business Writing
	LHP453	Creative Writing
	LHP454	Academic Writing
	LHP455	English Pronunciation Skills
	LHP456	Spoken English.
	LHP457	Public Speaking & Speech Writing
	LHP458	English for Translation
	LHP459	English for Interpretation

Table 4*Placement of Students into Courses After CEFR-Aligned MUET*

Entry Requirements	Course Codes	Language Proficiency Courses	CEFR Exit Requirements
MUET 3.5 & Below	LSP101	Progressive English	
IELTS 5.0	LSP201	General English I	B2
TOEFL 35-45	LSP301	General English II	
	LSP201	General English I	

Entry Requirements	Course Codes	Language Proficiency Courses	CEFR Exit Requirements
MUET Band 4.0-4.5 IELTS 5.5-6.5 TOEFL 46-79	LSP301	General English II	B2
MUET Band 5.0 IELTS 7.0-7.5 TOEFL 80-109	LSP301 LHP (400) series	General English II To select one from: LHP 410 - Effective Reading LHP 411 - Effective Writing LHP 412 - Effective Oral Presentation LHP 458 - English for Translation LHP 459 - English for Interpretation	C1
MUET Band 5+ IELTS 8.0-9.0 TOEFL 110-120	LHP (400) series	To select two from: LHP 410 - Effective Reading LHP 411 - Effective Writing LHP 412 - Effective Oral Presentation LHP 458 - English for Translation LHP 459 - English for Interpretation	C1

With reference to Tables 3 and 4, some observations can be made. First, before CEFR alignment (Table 3), the courses offered were numerous, and they were more English for Specific Purposes (ESP) based as students majoring in different courses attended different language proficiency courses. For instance, a

student majoring in social sciences with a MUET band score of 3 and below would be enrolled in LMT 100 (Preparatory English) and proceed with the two other levels, namely LSP 300 (Academic English) and LSP 401 (General English). In contrast, with the CEFR-aligned MUET, the same student with a MUET band score of 3.5 and below would be enrolled in LSP 101 (Progressive English) and proceed with LSP 201 (General English I) and LSP 301 (General English II). On the other hand, a student from a sciences background with a MUET band score of 3 and below before the MUET was aligned with CEFR would be enrolled in LMT 100 (Preparatory English) and proceed with the two other levels, namely LSP 300 (Academic English) and LSP 402 (Scientific and Medical English). In contrast, with the CEFR-aligned MUET, the same student with a MUET band score of 3.5 and below would be enrolled in LSP 101 (Progressive English) and proceed with LSP 201 (General English I) and LSP 301 (General English II). Those with a MUET band score of 4 before the alignment attended LSP 300 (Academic English) before attending the designated courses based on their specialized field (sciences/non-sciences). Upon the alignment, however, those with a MUET band score of 4-4.5 attended General English I and proceeded with General English II. It can be seen that the CEFR-aligned MUET caused the courses offered at the faculty to move away from its original ESP-based approach as no field-specific courses are listed in Table 4. Second, skill-specific courses are presently offered after the MUET alignment with CEFR. Specifically, the presence of courses like “Effective Reading” and “English Pronunciation Skills” in Table 4 indicates a clear shift towards skill-specific development at higher levels. In addition, lower levels in Table 4 (LSP 101-301) employ integrated courses combining skills like reading, writing, and speaking instead of being offered separately. This suggests a focus on communicative competence from the beginning. More importantly, a CEFR target level has been designated for students upon graduation as reported in Table 4, which was not available before the MUET-CEFR aligned cohort enrolled themselves in the English language proficiency courses.

In the following section, the steps taken at the faculty in relation to aligning the existing English language courses (Table 3) with the CEFR are discussed in as much detail as possible.

2.4. Analysis of CEFR Policy Borrowing in the Present Context

According to Don et. al., (2015), at present, English language education in universities is generally offered in three categories, namely English language proficiency courses, English language degree programs, and Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) degree programs. The language courses offered range from general English courses to skill-based or a mixture of the two. The literature reveals that there is no common curriculum or standards across public universities. As the courses offered vary from one university to another, the assessment methods also equally vary, and the grades are not always reflective of the students' communicative competence. Don et al. (2015) also emphasize that such a scenario points to the need for a common framework of reference for assessing English language proficiency across all universities. It is also of utmost importance to ensure that the assessment instruments and the results (qualifications) are benchmarked against international standards such as the CEFR. To overcome issues like these, among others, CEFR for English language education in universities was introduced. In the following sections, the CEFR borrowing at the language faculty in line with the four different stages of policy borrowing in Phillips and Ochs's framework is discussed.

There are four stages of policy borrowing discussed in Phillips and Ochs's (2003) framework, namely:

- (i) Cross-national attraction: impulses and externalizing potential,
- (ii) Decision making,
- (iii) Implementation, and
- (iv) Internalization/Indigenization.

2.5 Cross-National Attraction: Impulses and Externalizing Potential

Philips and Ochs (2003) in their framework discuss two interrelated constructs in the first stage, namely 'impulses' and 'externalizing potential.' The former refers to the poor conditions within a sector (education, for example) that lead to borrowing policies from outside (of a country). According to them, there are eight potential conditions, namely internal dissatisfaction by the stakeholders of an education system; systemic collapse, which refers to some weaknesses within an education system that require immediate attention; negative external evaluation, which refers to the findings of studies at international levels; economic change/competition among nations; political change within a nation; new developments at local/regional/international levels; and innovations in knowledge and skills and political change around the world. Such impulses for change, according to them, can inspire the search for foreign models which might solve existing, emerging, or potential problems.

Internal dissatisfaction, as defined by Phillips and Ochs (2003), appears to be a key driver behind the adoption of the CEFR by both Malaysian HLLs and the language faculty in particular. Recent findings by Cambridge English highlighting the inadequacy of Malaysia's English curriculum for global communication (Don et al., 2015) resonate with these internal concerns. This dissatisfaction mirrors trends highlighted by Figueras (2012), who observed a growing desire among governments and linguists to align language learning, teaching, and assessment with real-world needs through a common currency of terminology and levels. The CEFR, with its emphasis on practical communication and internationally recognized standards, has emerged as a timely solution, acting as a catalyst for the faculty's initial interest in adopting it. Recognizing its potential for external benchmarking and international comparison, the faculty saw the CEFR as a means to address internal concerns and enhance its English language proficiency courses. The CEFR-alignment activities presented in the following stages further illustrate this evolution of the faculty's position.

2.6 Decision Making

The second stage concerns “a wide variety of measures through which government and other agencies (such as universities and faculties within them) attempt to start the process of change” (Philips & Ochs, 2003, p. 453). In this regard, four types of decisions are discussed here. The first is theoretical, which to the understanding of the authors, the policy ambition may not result in successful implementation. The second type, realistic/practical decisions, are usually evidence-based, although mediating factors may not be considered in such decisions. The third type is quick-fix decisions, which are often responses to necessities that arise immediately. In such a situation, external sources are consulted, and the outcome is adopting foreign models. Philips and Ochs (2003) consider this as a dangerous form of decision-making. Finally, “phoney” decision-making refers to the act of politicians in a country upon being inspired by the success of educational reforms in other countries attempting to follow suit without giving much thought into the present context (Phillips 2015; Philips & Ochs, 2003).

For the second stage, the university’s and the faculty’s decision to consider accepting the idea of borrowing the CEFR by the MOHE can be seen as realistic/practical and the evidence for this is the faculty’s decision to agree to follow the ELSQC’s Roadmap. This is because the ministry has appointed ELSQC to help ensure a smooth implementation of aligning the English language courses in HLIs; therefore, the university and the faculty as part of their CEFR-alignment efforts, decide to adopt CEFR (a foreign model), which has been contextualized to the local environment. Specifically, the CEFR alignment efforts at the faculty, which involves decision making at various levels, are presented in the form of a timeline in Table 5. Another requirement that the faculty has tried to fulfil is reviewing the language proficiency courses offered in light of the CEFR (Don et al. 2015). Consequently, new materials to suit this change are necessary. To this end, the faculty, considering the paucity of CEFR-aligned materials from local publishers, has reviewed various materials and selected relevant materials from international publishers as shown in Table 5.

Table 5*Existing Vs. Proposed Courses and Materials*

Existing Courses	Existing Materials	New Courses aligned with CEFR	New Materials
LMT 100 Preparatory English		Level 100 Foundation English (Prerequisite Course)	Scope 2 Publisher: Oxford
LSP 300 - Academic English		Level 200 General English I	International Express (Intermediate) Publisher: Oxford
LSP401/402/403/404 - General English - Scientific and Medical English - Business and Communication English - Technical and Engineering English		Level 300 General English II	International Express (Intermediate) Publisher: Oxford
LHP 451/452/453/454/455/ 456/457/458/459	Materials compiled by teachers (unpublished)	Level 400 (Higher Proficiency) Effective Reading	21 st Century Reading Creative Thinking and Reading with TED Talks: National Geography Publisher: Cengage Learning
- Advanced language courses		Level 400 (Higher Proficiency) Impactful Writing	Business Advantage Publisher: Cambridge
		Level 400 (Higher Proficiency) Constructive Discourse	21 st Century Communication: Listening, Speaking and Critical Thinking Publisher: Cengage Learning

2.7 Implementation

At this stage, Philips and Ochs (2003) argue that any foreign policy borrowed will be subject to adaptation within the system (for instance, education) to which it is borrowed. This adaptation depends on various contextual factors. They also discuss the significant role played by key personnel within governments and its associated agencies in ensuring the success of policy implementation.

In attempting to link this construct of the framework with the present context, the borrowed policy is implemented at the language faculty in this context. Specifically, under the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) and the Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017), the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia is divided into four phases at all HLIs. In this regard, the implementation process started in 2015 and is expected to end in 2028. Throughout the four phases, all the HLIs in the country including the present one, are highly recommended to implement the policy, which is borrowed by the ministry and the recommendations made by the ELSQC through its roadmap. Therefore, it is about describing what has happened at the language faculty since 2015 and what changes are expected to occur until 2028 at the language school in USM. To this end, as part of the CEFR-alignment efforts, the Head of the English Language Unit and English language teachers, who are seen as significant actors and gatekeepers for introducing CEFR to students are expected to translate and integrate it into their teaching practices. In other words, they are relied upon in actualizing the CEFR policy implementation at the language faculty.

In the first phase “Preparing for Structural Change” (2015-2016), the language faculty attempted to establish the CEFR as a common framework for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in line with the ELSQC’s recommendations. To this end, as part of fulfilling the requirements of the roadmap, selected English language teachers were assigned to attend CEFR familiarization workshops conducted by the chair of ELSQC. In addition, either the same or some additional teachers were assigned to attend training activities as Master Trainers. Upon

returning from the training activities, they were required to carry out in-house training to explain how the CEFR descriptors could be used to assess the four language skills. At this stage, it was recommended by the ELSQC to use a CEFR-benchmarked test to determine baseline proficiency of students at graduation. In addition, the current language qualification for teachers was also reviewed, followed by the introduction of C1 as the minimum proficiency level. In other words, new language teachers were required to achieve a C1 level of proficiency before being appointed as full-time employees at the school.

The second phase “Implementing and Monitoring Structural Change” (2017-2020) concerns the implementation, development, and monitoring of the activities in the first phase. As per the recommendations of the ELSQC, new teaching materials that were CEFR-aligned and considered suitable for higher education in Malaysia were adopted (see Table 4). In addition, selected teachers were assigned to attend continuous professional development workshops both organized by the ELSQC and by the faculty itself to improve the quality of teaching. Similarly, as recommended by the ELSQC, efforts were made by the faculty to develop and pilot a placement test that was aligned with the CEFR. Such a test would help the faculty monitor the English language curriculum reform.

The third phase “Scaling up Structural Change (2021-2025)” concerns the evaluation of the previous phases (1 and 2) and graduate attributes. Effective 2021, English language teachers are strongly encouraged to undergo upskilling training activities throughout the year. In addition, the faculty has also begun reviewing the existing curriculum based on the feedback from the training activities thus far. It has been found that teachers’ awareness and understanding has yet to reach a satisfactory level.

At the post-MEB phase (2026-2028), a validation into the suitability of the Malaysian CEFR-aligned curriculum, teaching and learning efforts, and assessment procedures will be carried out. At this point, the language faculty in

this university is expected to establish an external validation of the CEFR-benchmarked test, the results of which will help validate the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment. Also, the university at this point is considering accepting students with a low B2 level with an expectation that they will be above this level before graduating. In the following table (Table 6), a timeline of the activities discussed in the foregoing are presented.

Table 6*Progression of Implementing CEFR at the Faculty Level*

Timeline	Activities
December 2016	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CEFR Familiarization Program at faculty level by Master Trainers 2. Two representatives were involved, and they were trained by the Higher Education Department of the Ministry
July - October 2019	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CEFR Familiarization at the Higher Education Department of the Ministry 2. Appointment of a subject matter expert 3. Briefing on the Roadmap was conducted by the subject matter expert.
May 2020	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CEFR Familiarization Program at the faculty. 2. Course coordinators reviewed old courses.
September 2020	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CEFR auditing program
July 2021	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CEFR Taskforce Committee was formed. 2. The Taskforce designed outline of the courses aligned with the CEFR
January 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CEFR auditing program
August 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CEFR auditing program 2. Approval from the English language section at the faculty 3. Approval from the faculty's board

Timeline	Activities
	4. Approval from the Academic Planning Committee 5. Approval from the University's senate
September 2023 - January 2024	1. Implementation of fully aligned CEFR courses (Table 4) with the newly adopted materials

2.8 Internalization/Indigenization

The final stage by Philips and Ochs (2003) concerns the sustainability of the borrowed policy, in this case, the CEFR in the system/country. They spell out four constructs under this stage, namely i. *impact on the existing system/modus operandi* which concerns the motives and objectives of policymakers in conjunction with the existing system, ii. *the absorption of external features* which refers to a close examination of the context (borrower) to understand how and the extent to which other features from another system (borrowed policy) can be adopted, iii. *synthesis* which refers to the process through which educational policy and practice become part of the overall strategy, and iv. *evaluation* which concerns the reflection and evaluation to best discern the realistic, or unrealistic, expectations of borrowing.

The implications of the constructs under this stage in the present context are about sustaining the borrowed policy, i.e., CEFR at the language faculty in the long run. This is important as there can be unique challenges between one HLI and another; therefore, they may require different solutions. Ahmad Afip et al. (2019) discuss a few issues that may hamper the smooth implementation of the CEFR policy in HLIs in Malaysia. They express concerns about high cost, foreign elements, and teachers' dilemmas in using imported textbooks and the challenge of regular monitoring of the CEFR policy implementation. With regards to the issue of using imported course materials in the case of the language faculty in the present context, the contents of the CEFR-aligned materials which are completely Malaysia-oriented may not be suitable as the number of international students' enrollment in Malaysia and the faculty in particular has been on the rise. In

addition, such imported materials may help Malaysian students to get more exposure to the outside world and important developments. In terms of regular monitoring, Don et al. (2015) argue that regardless of how meticulously a program is designed, problems in relation to implementation are inevitable. They also suggest that assumptions about innovations' success or failure do not serve anything meaningful but testing them out does. The authors of the present study agree with Ahmad Afip et Al. (2019) that teachers are invited to report their problems to receive advice from experienced teachers, who in this case are the CEFR Master Trainers at the university, or better still, experts from the ELSQC.

3. Challenges

Although CEFR has widely been borrowed by different education systems around the world, it is not, like other previous educational policies, exempt from challenges (Ali et al., 2018; Harsch, 2018). Various issues related to CEFR include test comparability, validity of tests aligned with the CEFR (Wu, 2014), and CEFR's suitability for English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts rather than English as a Foreign language (Tien, 2013). The authors of the present study focused on selected challenges that mainly concern the present university and the language faculty in this study as this study was conducted at the very beginning of CEFR alignment both in MUET and the language courses at the faculty.

First, as it has been highlighted by Ali et al. (2018), the CEFR has been translated into many languages such as Arabic, Japanese, and Korean, adopted in many countries within and outside of the European context, and adapted by numerous institutions and examination bodies. Notwithstanding, it has not been translated into Malay, a language that is widely spoken in the Southeast Asian region and an important language among the Association of the Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) member countries especially in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore. This is important as the CEFR descriptors are said to be language- and context-independent (Harsch, 2018). In other words, in the context of the language

faculty in the present context, it can be used to assess other languages such as the Malay language and other foreign languages offered.

Second, the placement of Malaysian and international students into the existing language courses at the language faculty in the present context may experience compatibility issues at the beginning. Specifically, effective 2021, Malaysian students with CEFR-aligned MUET have enrolled themselves in language courses at language faculties including in the present context. The registration fee for well-established international proficiency tests such as the IELTS and TOEFL may well be beyond the reach of some international students especially those who need to repeat the test due to failure of achieving the target band score (band 6 for instance). Therefore, they may consider other alternatives such as the English Placement Test (EPT) offered by language faculties in HLIs. In this regard, there is an urgent need for the university and the language faculty in the present context to devise an EPT benchmarked against CEFR to help international students sit a language proficiency test which is affordable. Such a test with a reasonable price or fee would be welcomed by students who fail to pass or fulfill the required level for different courses on their first attempt. Such plans are underway at the faculty.

Lastly, the possibility to expand the proficiency levels within the CEFR when it gets implemented fully at language faculties in HLIs is expected (Tono, 2013, 2017). For instance, it has been discovered in Japan that the six-level proficiency propagated by CEFR as inadequate in representing all levels of proficiency among university student, hence its adaptation into 12-levels. Similarly, Thailand too has transformed the CEFR into 10-levels. Malaysia and Vietnam thus far have retained six levels of CEFR. As the courses are now fully CEFR-aligned, the faculty may find itself in a better position to discover if the existing six levels in the CEFR need to be broken down further. The CEFR-alignment efforts thus far, i.e., adopting CEFR-aligned materials, is not considered enough to foresee such developments.

4. Conclusion

In this study, the authors have discussed the borrowing of the CEFR at a language faculty in a higher learning institution in Malaysia. To this end, they have employed Philips and Ochs' (2003) policy borrowing framework. The authors have attempted to link each stage within this framework with the present context. It is noteworthy that the policy on CEFR is borrowed by the Malaysian government through the MOHE. HLIs which are under the supervision of the MOHE implement the borrowed policy by following the guidelines provided by the MOHE through ELSQC's roadmap. In this regard, the language faculty in the present context has agreed to align the language courses offered with the CEFR. Considering the paucity of CEFR-aligned materials from local publishers, the faculty has adopted CEFR-aligned materials from international publishers (see Table 4). Upon having used such materials, the faculty intends to proceed with other steps as recommended by the ELSQC. For instance, the faculty plans to develop its own materials by integrating contents beyond the Malaysian context to help both Malaysian and international students relate better. As the implementation of the CEFR at language faculties of HLIs in Malaysia is still at the embryonic stage, the language faculty in the present context is still studying ways and means to gauge many aspects of it to ensure a better understanding and a successful implementation of it. The authors have also discussed the challenges of implementing this borrowed policy at the language faculty such as the CEFR document not being available in the Malay language, the need for an EPT at the faculty to mainly serve the international students in USM, and the possibility of subdividing the existing CEFR levels further.

It is also worth highlighting the limitations of the present study. As CEFR is considered relatively new, there are many uncertainties about implementing it in education systems around the world including in the present study. This study has zoomed in on one of the public universities in Malaysia, so caution has to be exercised by researchers in generalizing the findings in terms of the adoption of materials and aligning existing language proficiency courses with the CEFR scales.

Notwithstanding, the authors strongly believe that the steps reported in this study would be favourably welcomed by education systems particularly those who are on the verge of implementing it but are looking for some insights to model on.

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