

## Teaching CEFR-aligned Writing to Young Learners: Practices and Voices of Teachers

Mohd Dzaquan Imran Mohd Alias<sup>1</sup>, Abdul Halim Abdul Raof<sup>2\*</sup> and Tina Abdullah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Language Department, Centre for Foundation Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gambang, 26300 Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

### ABSTRACT

The introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)-aligned English syllabus into the Malaysian education system is a welcome initiative taken by the government as a part of “*memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu, memperkukuhkan Bahasa Ingeris*” to empower Malaysian citizens to compete in this era of globalization (Ministry of Education, 2015). The new initiative has also brought forth shifts in teaching approach and technique, and assessment method. Teachers must incorporate in their teaching, among others, formative assessment and differentiation techniques. It prompted a study to be carried out to obtain insights into the practice of teachers teaching CEFR-aligned syllabus. Five primary school teachers teaching five different writing classes to nine-year-olds participated in the study. Classroom observation protocol and guided reflective interview were used to obtain data for the study. The findings revealed that the classes were mainly teacher-centered, and teachers hardly used differentiation techniques. Several formative assessment elements were exhibited but not comprehensively. Teachers’ lack of training in CEFR and ineffective training system may be the cause of this observation.

*Keywords:* Common European Framework of Reference, differentiation techniques, formative assessment, teaching writing, young learners

### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received: 16 July 2021

Accepted: 04 October 2021

Published: 30 November 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.S3.18>

*E-mail addresses:*

dzaquanimran@iium.edu.my (Mohd Dzaquan Imran Mohd Alias)

m-halim@utm.my (Abdul Halim Abdul Raof)

tinaabdullah@utm.my (Tina Abdullah)

\* Corresponding author

### INTRODUCTION

English language education for a primary school in Malaysia aims to provide students with a strong foundation in English to make them proficient, articulate, and

confident users of the language through the implementation of the Standards-Based Curriculum for Primary School or the KSSR syllabus (Ministry of Education, 2015). However, a Cambridge baseline study in 2013, two years after the implementation of KSSR, showed that slightly more than half of the students achieved A1 or A2 (Basic User level) after they completed Year 6. Another one-third did not even get as far as A1 (Cambridge, 2013). It is indicative of the outcome of the previous KBSR English Language curriculum as it did not produce exemplary results (Gill, 2013). It shows that a significant amount of effort towards reform is needed to help these students move beyond the basic user level. The Cambridge baseline study (2013) revealed that students' performance is alarming and has raised concern among educators and policymakers. As a part of educational reform that started in 2015, the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in English language education was done with the hope to produce students who possess English language proficiency that will enable them to communicate effectively in both professional and social contexts (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Perhaps the most familiar feature of the CEFR is its six reference levels or scales, ranging from A1 and A2 for basic users, B1 and B2 for independent users, and C1 and C2 for proficient users. This scale acts as an identifier for language users, a basis for an internationally recognized scale for language users, and most importantly, a map to chart language learning (Council of Europe, 2001). Apart from recording

students' progress, the CEFR is distinct from other scales; it helps frame the syllabus and curriculum and related teaching techniques to map students' progress in language learning (University of Cambridge, 2011). For this purpose, formative assessment was adopted into teaching practice. Teachers are expected to exhibit the nine elements of formative assessment in their teaching and utilize differentiation techniques for their students. So, it is with the hope to produce autonomous learners who can take charge of their learning. As argued by Fullan and Stigelbauer (2016), teachers are the agents of innovation and reformation, and as such, the success of reform depends on them (Bantwini, 2009; Wang, 2013). There is thus a need to look into its implementation in schools, particularly on teachers' teaching practices and their concerns, as they are the main determiner to the success of our education reform.

Among the transformations listed in the Wave 2 of education transformation is to enhance teacher coaching and support to improve teachers' delivery of knowledge and effectiveness (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). As 2020 marked the end of this wave, the need to check how much has been achieved is of the utmost importance. There is then a need to listen to teachers to gain insights on what is happening to gauge the implementation of the CEFR-aligned syllabus in Malaysian classrooms and highlight problems found, if any. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to examine the practice of teaching English writing to young learners. The writing class was chosen as writing is

often considered a difficult skill for second language learners to master (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Therefore, shedding light into the practice in the classroom in regarding this skill can be beneficial. This study also probed into the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the syllabus in their classrooms.

### Research Questions

This paper reports on a study that investigated the following research questions:

- 1) What is the practice of teachers teaching CEFR-aligned writing syllabus in Year 3 classes in terms of:
  - a) the teaching techniques used.
  - b) the differentiation techniques used.
- 2) What are the challenges that teachers face in teaching CEFR-aligned writing syllabus to Year 3 students?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Formative Assessment in Classrooms

Little (2013) highlighted that the CEFR-aligned syllabus for primary school emphasizes developing learner autonomy via “democratization” of second language learning. An important step to allow for the democratizing of a classroom is through the application of formative assessment. William (2018) defines formative assessment as an assessment that helps teachers and learners be informed of learning progress by looking at the evidence obtained before moving on to the next step. In other words, an assessment is formative if used to identify

the learners’ needs and chart the next course of action (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). Grades are of least importance as what teachers plan to do with the evidence collected is much more important. The evidence collected is interpreted to identify learners’ needs and the progress of their learning. To do so, William and Thompson (2007) proposed three central processes to build a comprehensive formative framework. They are:

1. establishing learners’ position in their learning,
2. establishing where they need to go, and
3. establishing ways to go there.

From these processes, William (2018) proposed five key strategies to form formative assessment, namely:

1. clarifying, sharing, and understanding goals and success criteria with learners
2. creating effective classroom discussions, questions, activities, and tasks that could give evidence of students’ learning
3. providing feedback that pushes learning forward
4. activating learners as owners of their learning, and
5. activating students to be resources for one another.

Adopting these principles, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (2018) formed nine building blocks for formative assessment that must be present in teachers’ teaching and lesson. The building blocks are shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Formative assessment building blocks*

Building block	Explanation
Sharing learning objectives and success criteria	In line with making learners aware of their current standing, teachers need to explain what their students expect to achieve and do in class.
Exemplars	Examples can be used to give students ideas on where they are going with their learning. Modeling skills show students what is expected of them.
Starters and plenaries	Starters show learners where they are going with their learning by activating students' schemata through set induction, while plenaries allow teachers to check students' progress.
Questioning	Different types of questions help teachers determine their students' understanding level and be aware of their performance.
Discussion	Teachers can assess students by making students discuss with each other. Through discussions, students also actively assess themselves and their peers by comparing responses.
Quick scans	Teachers gather the majority of responses by asking questions to the whole class or doing activities that require a response. The responses received can be used by teachers to plan the next steps for their students further.
Self-assessment and peer assessment	Involving students in assessment enables them to help each other with their learning. Students' active participation in assessing themselves is a vital piece in formative assessment.
Feedback	Feedback provides the teacher a view on students' progress through planned formative assessment activities and lessons. It recognizes what students did well and what challenges they faced and leads to the next step for teachers to take.

These formative assessment tools then served as the guide for teacher's teaching, acting as the elements that must exist in the writing process stages.

### **The CEFR-aligned Classroom**

Differentiation techniques have been used widely in the field of language teaching. Morgan (2014) pointed out that this technique is partly based on Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (1983) and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978). Instead of focusing on a rigid set of plans, this technique puts students and their different needs at the center of the lesson. Tomlinson (2000) argued that all students are unique, each with different backgrounds,

impacting their learning experience. In turn, it serves as the basis of differentiation techniques in the classroom. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) argued that the core of differentiation practice is to amend the four elements for curriculum: content, process, product, and affect. Modifying these four elements allows teachers to produce personalized lessons that will maximize students' academic growth. Maximizing the growth through personalization also requires assessment (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). In the case of the CEFR syllabus, it focuses on assessment for learning that emphasizes peer and self-assessment, a shift from the traditional assessment of learning (Sidhu et al., 2018). Peer and self-assessment

are necessary components in producing autonomous language learners and teachers. The differentiation techniques also need peer and self-assessment in their lessons to achieve the CEFR-aligned curriculum.

The reality, however, is far from ideal. Cambridge's (2013) baseline study of the CEFR revealed that teachers observed focused strongly on examination, causing them to revert to the assessment of learning, with some even going as far as not focusing on listening and speaking skills as they are not the focus of examinations. In terms of differentiation techniques used in the classrooms, observers in the Cambridge baseline study found that most of the lessons were too easy for the students as the teachers observed were not sure how to differentiate tasks according to learners' level in the classroom (Cambridge, 2013).

### Teaching Writing to Young Learners

Chitravelu et al. (2005) pointed out that one of the points emphasized the writing program in Malaysian schools in the various stages of the writing process. There are five general guidelines in teaching writing to Year 3 pupils, who are at the early writing stage (Chitravelu et al., 2005):

1. Showing meaningful context to teach the mechanics of writing
2. Using students' oral compositions to provide them insights into writing
3. Presenting the benefits of learning to write before them
4. Practicing reading to students various media and forms of writings
5. Developing students' thinking skills

The guideline stated above aims to develop students' autonomy towards learning. If used alongside the formative assessment building blocks, students will have a greater say in shaping their learning, an aim stated in the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2012). For example, showing students a real-life language context and sharing learning objectives and success criteria, would gauge their learning. Furthermore, it implies that the formative assessment and the general guidelines of teaching writing are in accord with each other, prompting the need to investigate how teaching writing is conducted in classes.

Benigno and de Jong (2016) described the standardization of English levels for young learners as often chaotic. It may be because the various English programs have different standards and support (McKay, 2006). The standards are often used to refer to the CEFR as the base for their learning objectives and assessment (Benigno & de Jong, 2016). The need for creating a scale for young learners arose as they argued that CEFR is adult-centric and did not consider their primary and lower-secondary education as there were almost no descriptors for below A1 level despite the majority of a communicative act done by young learners are between the levels below A1 and A1. They first turn into Pearson's (2010) PTE Academic scale used to report the Global Scale of English (GSE) progress. GSE is different from the CEFR scale in which it is more granular in which it has a wider numerical scale ranging from 10 to 90, covering CEFR levels from below A1 to low

C2. In assessing young learners, GSE scales can be used alongside the CEFR scale and not replacing it as GSE's continuous scale allows teachers to record students' progress in series of smaller gains (Benigno & de Jong, 2016). Hasselgreen (2013) attempted to expand the scale for young learners' writing through the Assessment of Young Learner Literacy program (AYLLIT) and proposed that feedback can contribute to writing assessment validity. She then further argued that feedback enables students to see their progress and standing in learning.

### **Studies on Teaching CEFR-aligned Syllabus in Malaysia**

Past studies on the implementation of the CEFR in Malaysia include teachers' concerns on the CEFR at various levels of education, implementation, and challenges. Fatima (2019) identified the view of teachers towards *Pentaksiran Tingkatan Tiga* (PT3) (Form 3 Assessment) for the English language. The study elicited information using the semi-structured interview with five teachers involved in the study utilizing a case study approach with a qualitative research method. Teachers were generally positive and highlighted the need to tailor the CEFR-aligned language according to students' proficiency levels. The study also uncovered the challenges faced by teachers, namely the lack of teaching materials, technological resources, and students' proficiency levels.

The challenges found by Fatima (2019) was echoed in a study by Uri and Aziz (2018), citing inadequate teachers' training,

knowledge and awareness on the CEFR, their resistance and negative sentiment on incorporating the CEFR in their teaching as the challenges faced in implementing the CEFR-aligned syllabus. This study instead used a mixed method approach by interviewing two senior officials in the Malaysian Ministry of Education and employing a questionnaire to 331 English language secondary school teachers from Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Selangor. Another research that examined the implementation of the CEFR-aligned syllabus and the challenges that teachers faced was conducted by Sidhu et al. (2018). A three-pronged procedure that utilized surveys, interviews and document analysis was used in this research. The major findings revealed that teachers had positive opinions on the CEFR though they lacked full understanding of assessment used for the CEFR and CEFR-aligned curriculum altogether. Document analysis in this study also highlighted the lack of teachers' encouragement to self-reflect with little to no constructive feedback in their work. The interview sessions, time constraints, class enrollment, heavy workload, and lack of training were challenges to effectively implementing the CEFR-aligned syllabus in classroom.

Another study by Alih et al. (2021) also discovered that though teachers were found to have positive opinions on the implementation of the CEFR, teachers' low motivation, insufficient materials, facilities, and time, as well as students' low proficiency level, were found to be

the main challenges that teachers faced in implementing the CEFR-aligned syllabus in schools. The mixed-approach study employed a questionnaire to gauge teachers' readiness and a semi-structured interview to elicit the challenges from purposively sampled teachers.

It is important to look at it on the ground where it all happens to gauge the success of reform and look at the preparations that lead to its implementation. The CEFR-aligned syllabus training for teachers in Malaysia was done through the Cascade Training Model, which started with a small group of trainees to progressively larger groups (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The initial group of 200 National Master Trainers trained by Cambridge English experts, was responsible for training 6000 District Trainers. These district trainers then continued to train other teachers in their district (Aziz et al., 2018). For cascade training to be successful, Hayes (2000) pointed out five criteria that need to be present:

1. The training method should be experiential and reflective, not transmissive
2. The training must allow for reinterpretation as rigid ways of doing things should not be expected
3. The knowledge and expertise shall not be concentrated at the top, and instead, it should be spread as widely as possible
4. Multiple stakeholders of different levels must be involved in the preparation of training materials
5. If possible, responsibilities within the cascade structure should be decentralized.

However, as argued by Aziz et al. (2018), the cascade training model did not meet all the criteria outlined by Hayes (2000) as it was littered with issues such as one-way communication training (lecture-style) and watered-down information being passed down.

As the Cambridge baseline report came out in 2013, naturally, there is a need for a more recent study that investigates the teaching techniques (differentiation) and assessment in a CEFR-aligned class to gauge the current syllabus's implementation. Therefore, the current work implemented a case study with a mixed approach method using previous studies as precedent to evaluate the implementation of the CEFR-aligned syllabus and the challenges teachers faced in implementing it.

## METHODS

An exploratory case study with a mixed-method approach was selected to address the aim of this study. It was done to obtain information and insights on the subject matter discussed. This study involves cases in an actual context and setting, so this approach is deemed suitable (Yin, 2009). The use of the case study method is also apt as it was intended to explore the scope of study through in-depth data collection from multiple sources of information (Cresswell, 2013).

The scope of coverage of the study was teachers' teaching technique, focusing on

the nine blocks for formative assessment and the differentiation techniques that they employed in teaching writing to young learners. There were three main instruments in eliciting information required to answer the research questions: classroom observation, guided semi-structured reflective interview for collecting qualitative data, and a questionnaire to collect quantitative data.

The classroom observation protocol was adapted from Kotula and Aguilar’s (2014) Writing Instruction Observation Protocol as the observation form embodies the criteria of an effective writing classroom in the Year 3 Scheme of Work from the Malaysian Ministry of Education. Moreover, the items in this checklist reflect the nine blocks of formative assessment and the differentiation technique that teachers need to integrate into their lessons as outlined in the scheme of work. It is divided into four sections: introduction stage, skills instructions and practice, composing, and miscellaneous. Data collected were in the form of the nine blocks of formative assessment teachers used and the differentiation techniques teachers used in teaching the class. After each observation session, teachers

participated in a guided reflective interview, using the items taken from the Teacher’s Guide to Common European Framework of Reference, and were aligned with the Scheme of Work from the Malaysian Ministry of Education. It served to detect the challenges teachers face in writing lessons as well as the differentiation techniques used. After all, observations were completed, a questionnaire adapted from Uri and Aziz (2018) was then prescribed to teachers to elicit information on the challenges they faced in teaching writing. The reflective interview was also used to triangulate the findings obtained from the classroom observation and questionnaire.

The participants were five English language-trained teachers teaching the CEFR-aligned writing to Year 3 students. There was five Year 3 classes in the school. Thus, all teachers teaching English to Year 3 were involved in this study. The number is sufficient as Creswell (2013) argued; qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the subject matter. Details of the participants are presented in Table 2.

While most of the teachers had similar teaching experience in terms of years, except Teacher E, they all had the same

Table 2  
*Background of participants of the study*

Participant	Gender	Teaching experience (years)	Teaching CEFR-aligned syllabus experience (years)	Undergone training in the CEFR
Teacher A	Male	6	2	Yes
Teacher B	Female	8	2	No
Teacher C	Female	7	2	No
Teacher D	Female	8	2	No
Teacher E	Female	15	2	No



years of experience teaching the CEFR-aligned syllabus. Regarding the CEFR-related training, only Teacher A had some experience of attending one while the others had no such training. The training Teacher A had was conducted by the state education department.

Since the focus of the study was on teaching writing, observations were all on writing lessons carried out in each of the five English language classes. The topics covered in the lessons observed are shown in Table 3.

Each participant was observed three times, with each session lasting approximately 50 minutes. Though there was no discerning pattern, observation sessions were spaced not too far apart between one another. On average, it was five days; this would allow the teachers flexibility if they could not teach their class and the researcher ample time to compile notes on the previous observation session. At the end of each session, a guided reflective interview session was conducted with each teacher. Each interview session lasted approximately 30 minutes. The questions covered aspects of the nine building blocks of formative assessment and how the teachers were applying them in the class, together with the problems

they may face in teaching writing in their classes. Figure 1 shows the procedure of data collection.

As shown in Figure 1, each teacher was observed and interviewed three times. The rationale for having three observations and three interview sessions is how the syllabus was arranged. Each chapter in the book contains three different writing lessons: the first lesson deals with writing at the word level before moving to sentence and paragraph level in lessons two and three, respectively.

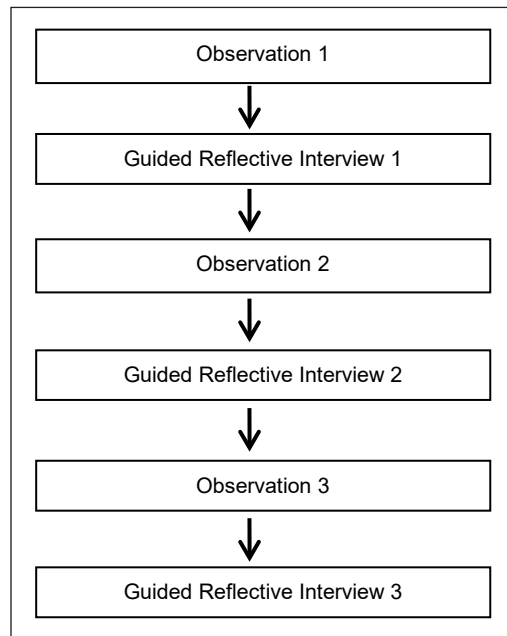


Figure 1. Data collection procedure

Table 3  
Topics of writing lessons observed

Lesson	Focused item
Writing lesson 1	'There's' and 'There are some'
Writing lesson 2	'There isn't any' and 'There aren't any'
Writing lesson 3	Freewriting - Describing the toppings of pizzas or the content of salads using 'There's and There are' and 'There isn't any' and 'There aren't any'

The data obtained from all three instruments were then processed. From the observation checklist, formative assessment building blocks from each section exhibited by all teachers were grouped and compared. The data were first grouped according to the stages listed in the observation checklist. After that, teachers' actions and teaching methodology in each stage recorded on the checklist were then compared to one another and matched to the formative assessment building blocks and the differentiation techniques as listed in the Year 3 scheme of work. Concerning the reflective interview, the sessions were recorded and later transcribed. From the transcription data, two patterns emerged, namely teachers' concerns and challenges and their needs. The questions were first grouped into teachers' understanding of the CEFR and the challenges teachers faced in implementing

the CEFR-aligned syllabus to analyze the data from the questionnaires. From these two groups, the mean average for the items was then processed using SPSS version 22.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, teachers observed exhibited acceptable teaching techniques in applying formative assessment but did poorly on the differentiation techniques in their classrooms. Table 4 summarizes the teaching techniques used by the teachers concerning the formative assessment building blocks.

There were several formative assessment building blocks that all teachers exhibited in their lessons. For a start, all five teachers shared the learning objectives and success criteria by writing them on the whiteboard at the beginning of a lesson. Most, however, neglected to explain their expectations of the students in the lesson taught.

Table 4  
*Teaching techniques observed in relations to the formative assessment building blocks*

Building blocks for formative assessment	Summary of findings
Sharing learning objectives and success criteria	All teachers shared the learning objectives. However, the importance and significance of learning objectives and success criteria were not fully explored and explained to students.
Exemplars	All teachers gave examples for students to model.
Starters and plenaries	All teachers used starters in all of their lessons observed, but only Teacher A used plenaries.
Deliberate practice	All teachers gave practice on the lesson that they taught.
Questioning	Two forms of questions were detected from all teachers: open-ended and closed questions.
Discussion	There was no discussion among students initiated by the teachers except for Teacher A.
Quick scans	Only Teacher A exhibited this.
Self and peer assessment	None of the teachers employed this in their lessons. Teacher A attempted incorporating peer assessment.
Feedback	All teachers provided feedback to students.

Teachers also observed the applied exemplars in the lessons. For instance, when Teacher B wanted the students to select the correct be-verb between 'is' and 'are,' she referred students to her slides by asking them to look at the given sentence structure and pictures before making them connect between them the examples and questions posed. On the other hand, Teacher E gave examples with correct sentence structures before giving sentences with errors in the use of be-verb for students to detect and correct.

In terms of starters and plenaries, all teachers used interesting and colorful starters, from making students count the food item shown (Teacher A), playing hangman (Teacher B), to guessing the pictures shown (Teacher D).

Teachers observed also worked closely with the textbook and workbook prescribed as all of them used the practice exercises in the books for students to work on as deliberate practice. Teacher E, in particular, tried to spice things up by making copies of worksheets from other sources (CEFR websites) and giving them to her students. However, most of the time, the teachers used books as the primary source of resources for practice.

In implementing questioning, the teachers observed had only used open-ended and closed questions. Open-ended questions given were usually simple but appropriate to the students' level like "What fruit do you like?" (Teacher B & C), "Why do you like it?" (Teacher B & C), similar to the closed questions "Do you eat fruits?" (Teacher A).

Teachers gave feedback mostly on the use of be-verb in sentences that the students filled in the blanks with or on the correctness of sentences that they wrote. Teacher E, for instance, made students come up with reasons why the answers they selected were wrong by leading them to look at the noun in the sentences before making them aware of the grammar rules by themselves.

A closer inspection of the data revealed formative assessment criteria only present in the CEFR-trained teacher's lessons. Quick scan, for instance, is a method used to help teachers quickly gauge students' understanding, and this was only practiced by Teacher A. To illustrate, Teacher A asked students to raise their hands if they knew how to pick the correct be-verb in any situation given and counted the number of hands before quickly jotting down the number in his lesson plan to be used as his teaching reflection.

The use of plenaries is next, and it was not prominent as only Teacher A used it to 're-energize' his classroom by asking students to clap and spell words chosen to gain back their focus. The other teachers just asked them to calm down.

For discussion, only teacher A tried to initiate students' discussion by making them work in pairs to identify the sentence that used the correct be-verbs. Other teachers mostly focused on the discussion between teachers and individual students. Peer assessment is the other element that was only present in Teacher A's lesson as he made sure that students would be paired in every class. Students were asked to check

each other’s work and give ‘stars’ on their friend’s work through pair work. He also encouraged them to explain wrong answers, if any, to their partner.

It was noticed that none of the teachers incorporated the element of self-assessment in their lessons. Students were not guided to assess the errors themselves, while students were made aware of their errors, either by their partners (Teacher A) or the teachers (Teacher B, C, D, E). Students were often told of their errors but never on making them aware of their progress.

As stated before, only two differentiation techniques could be observed in all teachers’ lessons (Table 5). This trend applied to all teachers in all three lessons observed. Teachers started the lesson by first working with the whole class in the introduction stage and skills introduction. In later stages of the lesson (practice and composing) it is observed that teachers gave more attention to lower proficiency students, usually by catering their individual questions at their place. During the initial stages of lessons (introduction stage and skill instructions), teachers also used different types of questions depending on the students’ proficiency, with close-ended questions asked to both students with higher and lower proficiency and open-ended only for students with higher proficiency.

The second set of data came from the last session of the guided reflective interview. The last session is highlighted as it was the session where the teachers had completed all three lessons, allowing their reflection to be more comprehensive. It yielded the voices of the teachers mainly on their concerns, hopes, and the challenges they faced.

An emerging pattern can be observed from data obtained from the guided reflective interviews. All teachers voiced out their lack of confidence in teaching, and the uncertainties faced. The other concern that all teachers had stated is students’ proficiency level about the difficulty of the syllabus. One of the participants aptly stated, “...*I think the new syllabus is too hard for some students*” (Teacher A). Teacher B also shared the same concern “...*They don’t respond much since it’s hard. And I’m afraid that I teach them wrongly because it is hard*”.

Teachers’ lack of confidence may be attributed to the lack of training related to the CEFR-aligned syllabus implementation. As stated by Teacher D, for instance, “*I have been teaching for quite some time, but this new syllabus makes me lack confidence.*” Similarly, Teacher C shared the same sentiment: “*So many times I would think that my teaching method is not*

Table 5  
*Differentiation techniques observed*

Differentiation technique	Explanation
Type and amount of support	Teachers mostly worked with the whole class and catered to weaker students individually.
Types of questions asked	Teachers used open-ended questions for the more proficient students and close-ended for the weaker ones.

*correct....*” Despite having undergone the CEFR training, Teacher A had this to say on incorporating the CEFR in his lesson: *“I am not sure whether I’m teaching [it] correctly.”*

Based on the teaching and differentiation techniques observed, the best statement to summarize the teachers’ teaching technique is that the lessons conducted were heavily teacher-centered. Teachers gave feedback on their students’ writing, and teachers did not attempt to allow students to help each other. The concerns and challenges in Table 6 could be due to the teachers who were not confident with what they were doing in the classroom about the CEFR-aligned syllabus. Consequently, the discussion among students did not happen, nor was it encouraged, as teachers had complete control of the lessons. The lessons were

conducted in one-way communication, with students contributing minimally towards their learning. Developing students’ autonomy, which is one of the goals for adapting the CEFR-aligned syllabus, was not seen in the lessons observed. Students were passive receivers; they were not guided to evaluate themselves to become active participants in their learning. Teachers did not emphasize the importance of success criteria and quick scans.

Another finding describing the teachers’ teaching technique is that they lacked variety in differentiation techniques used. Differentiation techniques are what teachers need to infuse in their teaching to provide a personalized learning experience as different students have different needs when it comes to learning. In this study, the teachers observed utilized only two kinds of

Table 6  
*Concerns and challenges, and needs of teachers*

Teacher	Concerns and challenges	Needs
A	<input type="checkbox"/> Books used in Year 1 & 2, and Year 3 not from the same series <input type="checkbox"/> The new syllabus <input type="checkbox"/> Students’ low proficiency level <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher’s lack of confidence in teaching <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching writing is difficult	<input type="checkbox"/> Books for students should be taken from the same series.
B	<input type="checkbox"/> The difficulty of the syllabus <input type="checkbox"/> Students’ low proficiency level <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher’s lack of confidence in teaching	<input type="checkbox"/> Able to teach appropriately and for students to be able to respond
C	<input type="checkbox"/> Grammar items covered in the book <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher is not familiar with the CEFR <input type="checkbox"/> Students’ understanding <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of confidence in own proficiency	<input type="checkbox"/> Students can understand the lessons
D	<input type="checkbox"/> The new syllabus <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher’s lack of confidence in teaching	<input type="checkbox"/> To match the teaching techniques to the new syllabus
E	<input type="checkbox"/> The assessment for Year 6 students according to the new syllabus <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure how to prepare students for examinations	<input type="checkbox"/> To get information on public examination for Year 6

differentiation techniques: questions posed and the amount of support given to students. While this can be helpful, especially to weaker students, differentiating the task and outcome expected from students, for instance, can help teachers to control their classroom better and help to enrich the more advanced students. Teacher A, for instance, stated, *“The good students will often finish their work quickly. So, for them, I challenge them to write more sentences or use two grammar items in a sentence. Or else they will go around the class and play.”* Each student has unique experiences and background knowledge, and it is only suitable that their learning experience reflects that (Tomlinson, 2000). As Morgan (2014) pointed out, it is significantly more important nowadays as the world is getting even more diverse with students having varying needs.

Table 6 summarizes the findings on concerns and challenges and the needs of the teachers involved in the study.

In discussing the findings in the light of current literature on the CEFR implementation in Malaysia, we consider the voices and practices of teachers gathered within a similar setting. Data obtained from the guided reflective interview of this study suggest that teachers found the new syllabus too difficult both for them and their students. This finding concurs with Alih et al. (2021), in which the study pointed out the mismatch between the syllabus and students' proficiency levels. In addition, teachers were also found to be lacking in confidence to teach the syllabus. Teachers' lack of confidence is echoed in the study

by Sidhu et al. (2018), in which they found that teachers cited insufficient training as one of the major obstacles in implementing the CEFR-aligned syllabus. Similarly, the study by Uri and Aziz (2018) found teachers lacking in training and understanding of the CEFR in general, inhibiting their ability to incorporate the CEFR in their teaching successfully.

Resonating similar findings was the study by Kok and Aziz (2019), which revealed teachers needed guidance in formulating lessons, citing a lack of training and resources such as ICT and teaching and learning supplementary materials. They further found that teachers had issues with using the recommended textbooks, which were not local products. It was also a concern raised by the teachers in Mohammed's (2020) and Alih et al. (2021) studies which highlighted that the contents of the textbooks are international, making it more difficult for less proficient students to comprehend. In the rural areas, the situation is worse, as Nawai and Said (2020) pointed out that not only teachers were found to be lacking in confidence in teaching the new syllabus, they were also reluctant to implement the CEFR in the classroom, which possibly stemmed from inadequate training and unavailability of suitable resources, including textbooks.

The issue of the teacher-centeredness approach is another main finding of this study. Coupled with the lack of differentiation techniques, it mirrors the findings of the Cambridge baseline study (2013), where teachers' presence was found to be too dominant with almost no

practice towards using the language in the real context. Moreover, just like in the baseline study, teachers were unsure how to use differentiation techniques in class (Cambridge, 2013). It is alarming as this may suggest that despite many years having passed since the initial baseline study, only minimal changes could be observed.

## CONCLUSION

Teachers' lack of knowledge on the CEFR and, ultimately, the proper teaching techniques for the CEFR-aligned syllabus was found to be the main hurdle of its implementation. The findings of this study show that there is more to be done before the impact of the implementation of the CEFR in the education system can be seen. Though this was a small-scale study, from the findings, we know a little bit more about the practices of teachers, their concerns, and the challenges they faced in trying to facilitate the reform in teaching and learning.

This study has shed some light for education stakeholders in Malaysia to investigate the issues surrounding the implementation of the CEFR-aligned syllabus about the lack of training provided. Cascade training model was chosen for the CEFR-aligned syllabus in Malaysia (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). A selected small group of teachers was trained, and they later trained other teachers who themselves became trainers to more teachers in their school or district. However, the cascade training model, despite being considered to be the best choice when it comes to implementing training for teachers

in large numbers (Karalis, 2016), has been criticized for failing to deliver effective training (Bett, 2016; Dichaba & Mokhele, 2012; Robinson, 2002).

The cascade training model used to train teachers also needs to be revisited to check for its effectiveness. For example, Aziz et al. (2018) argued that it was hard for trainers to share the information with other teachers as the trainers themselves were also teachers, with their main business being teaching. At the same time, it is understandable that the cascade training model was chosen to alleviate budget constraints, the fact that even specialist teachers feel insufficient. However, the superficial nature of the training suggests that an online portal should be made available to allow teachers from all over Malaysia to support each other. In addition, more funding and materials should be given to help teachers resolve problems by themselves.

Other initiatives to assist teachers include a mentor-mentee system that pairs up teachers can be created provided that the mentor has received enough support in the form of materials and training. This system can also share, give, and receive feedback on lesson planning at the school level.

In addition, support to teachers in terms of specific training such as on how best to incorporate innovative, learner-centered techniques in their lessons should be given. Likewise, exposure to students on this new change is to be provided to be more receptive and eventually benefit from it. After all, it is their performance that would reflect the success of the reform.

In preparing our students to be more able to compete in this globalized world, implementing the CEFR-aligned syllabus is considered a step in the right direction. However, by focusing on communication competence, our students must be developed in this aspect. In order to envisage this, the implementation of the CEFR in Malaysia needs improvement. All stakeholders involved must be alert on this and are up-to-date with the latest information to implement the CEFR, a promising reform towards English education in Malaysia.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank the Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching Research Group, Language Academy, and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, for the support and encouragement.

## REFERENCES

- Alih, N. A. C., Raof, A. H. A., & Yusof, M. A. M. (2021). Policy change implementation: The case of the CEFR in Malaysian ESL classrooms. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 6(2), 296-317. doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol6iss2pp296-317
- Aziz, A. H. A., Rashid, R. A., & Zainudin, W. Z. W. (2018). The enactment of the Malaysian Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): National master trainer's reflection. *Indonesia Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8(2), 409-417. https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v8i2.13307
- Bantwini, D. B. (2009). District professional development models as a way to introduce primary school teachers to natural science curriculum reforms in one district in South Africa. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 35(2), 169-182. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470902771094
- Benigno, V., & de Jong, J. H. (2016). The global scale of English learning objectives for young learners: Basic inventory of descriptors. *Assessing Young Learners of English: Global and Local Perspectives*, 25, 43-64. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22422-0\_3
- Bett, H. K. (2016). The cascade model of teachers' continuing professional development in Kenya: A time for change? *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1139439
- Cambridge. (2013). *Cambridge baseline 2013: English language in Malaysian schools*. Cambridge English Language Assessment.
- Chitravelu, N., Sithamparam, S., & Teh, S. C. (2005). *ELT methodology: Principles and practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cresswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Dichaba, M. M., & Mokhele, M. L. (2012). Does the cascade model work for teacher training? Analysis of teachers' experiences. *International Journal of Educational Sciences*, 4, 249-254. https://doi.org/10.1080/09751122.2012.11890049
- Fatima, S. (2019). Perceived view of teachers towards Pentaksiran Tingkatan Tiga (PT3) [Form Three Assessment] English language: A case study. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 15(3), 34-44. https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v15i3.7819
- Fullan, M., & Stiegelbauer, S. M. (2016). *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.



- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. Basic Books.
- Gill, R. S. (2013). *Enhancing English teacher language proficiency: The Malaysian experience*. British Council.
- Hasselgreen, A. (2013). Adapting the CEFR for the classroom assessment of young learners' writing. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 69(4), 415-435. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.1705.415>
- Hayes, D. (2000). Cascade training and teachers' professional development. *ELT Journal*, 54, 135-145. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/54.2.135>
- Karalis, T. (2016). Cascade approach to training: Theoretical issues and practical applications in non - formal education. *Journal of Education and Social Policy*, 3, 104-108.
- Kok, N. M., & Aziz, A. A. (2019, March 27). English language teachers' perceptions on the implementation of CEFR-aligned curriculum among primary schools in Malaysia. In *Seminar Wacana Pendidikan 2019 (SWAPEN 2.0)* (pp. 212-222). Kedah, Malaysia.
- Kotula, A. W., & Aguilar, C. M. (2014). *Developing a writing instruction observation protocol: Implications for practice, research, and policy*. Education Development Center Inc.
- Little, D. (2013, October, 29-30). *The Common European Framework of References for Languages: Purpose, origin, ethos and implications* [Paper presented]. CEFR Conference. Putrajaya, Malaysia.
- McKay, P. (2006). *Assessing young language learners*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511733093>
- Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2012). *Preliminary report - Malaysia education blueprint (2013-2025)*. Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2015). *English language education reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025*. Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2018). *Teacher handbook: Formative assessment principles and practices*. Cambridge Assessment English.
- Mohammed, N. A. (2020). Teachers' views and challenges in using CEFR to teach English language in primary school [Unpublished Master's thesis]. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.
- Morgan, H. (2014). Maximizing student success with differentiated learning. *The Clearing House*, 87, 34-38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2013.832130>
- Nawai, R., & Said, N. E. M. (2020). Implementation challenges of Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) in a Malaysian Setting: Insights on English Teachers' Attitude. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(7), 28-41. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v10-i7/7394>
- Pearson. (2010). *Aligning PTE academic test scores to Common European Framework of Reference for languages*. [http://pearsonpte.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Aligning\\_PTEA\\_Scores\\_CEF.pdf](http://pearsonpte.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Aligning_PTEA_Scores_CEF.pdf)
- Richards, J. C., & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667190>
- Robinson, M. (2002). Teacher reforms in South Africa: Challenges, strategies and debates. *Prospects*, 11, 289-299.
- Sidhu, G. K., Kaur, S., & Chi, L. J. (2018). CEFR-aligned school-based assessment in the Malaysian primary ESL classroom. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8(2), 452-463. <http://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v8i2.13311>
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2000). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. ASCD.

- Tomlinson, C. A., & Imbeau, M. B. (2010). *Leading and managing a differentiated classroom*. ASCD.
- University of Cambridge. (2011). *Using CEFR: Principles of good practices at University of Cambridge*. Cambridge ESOL Examinations.
- Uri, N. F. M., & Aziz, M. S. A. (2018). Implementation of CEFR in Malaysia: Teachers' awareness and the challenges. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 24(3), 168-183. <http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2018-2403-13>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wang, W. (2013). Teachers' stages of concern and levels of use of a curriculum innovation in China: A case study. *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, 1(1), 22-31. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijelt.v1n1p22>
- William, D. (2018). Classroom assessment and pedagogy. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 25(6), 551-57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2018.1441807>
- William, D., & Thompson, M. (2007). Integrating assessment with instruction: What will it take to make it work? In C.A. Dwyer (Ed.), *The Future of Assessment: Shaping Teaching and Learning* (pp.53-82). Routledge & CRC Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315086545-3>
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Sage.