# Navigating Language Education: Embracing the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in Higher Education Language Programs

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the relevance and feasibility of integrating the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into tertiary-level English language programs in India. The CEFR offers a comprehensive, action-oriented model for assessing language proficiency across six levels and emphasizes learners as active agents in communication and meaning-making. Drawing on constructivist theory, the framework aligns with the evolving expectations in higher education that demand creativity, critical thinking, and effective communication skills. The study employs a mixed-methods approach involving surveys, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews conducted with undergraduate students and faculty members from Lady Doak College, Madurai, and SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur. Participants were chosen from both Arts and Engineering streams, as English is a mandatory course across disciplines during the first year. The data revealed limited awareness of CEFR among both students and teachers, despite a strong acknowledgment of the need for targeted language development and global competency. Students often felt disconnected from the current English curriculum, which they perceived as repetitive and misaligned with real-world language needs. The study argues that integrating CEFR into the curriculum can provide clearer learning outcomes, more objective assessment tools, and prepare students for international language proficiency exams like IELTS and TOEFL. However, successful implementation requires contextualization, adequate teacher training, and continuous evaluation. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of a student-centered, level-based approach in English language education to address varying learner needs and promote equitable, globally relevant language instruction.

**Keywords:** common European framework of reference, learner agency, instructional design, curriculum, assessment, teaching, learning

## 1. Introduction

The English language has become the most vital means to acquire and access information across the globe. Career opportunities, the internet, media, travel, and business heavily rely on English language use. In countries like India, having the English language in school and college curricula has widened access to learning the language. The language has been systematically introduced through the curriculum and practiced for more than a decade. The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has been contributing various approaches and methods to language teaching and learning to make the process effective. Nowadays teachers have become eclectic in their approach and experiment with various methodologies and approaches in their classroom. In tertiary-level education, language courses are offered to students in almost all fields of education. At this level, the language courses are designed to cater to the professional needs of the students (Valledor et al., 2023).

In recent years, English Language Teaching has undergone a paradigmatic shift by turning the classroom and teaching methodologies learner centric. Learner agency is encouraged, and they are taught to construct knowledge by themselves. Hence, the needs of the learners have become the priority but along with teaching and learning, assessment is an important aspect (Fisher & Bandy, 2019). Assessment plays an important role in instruction. The process of language acquisition will be effective only if the assessment aids the students' needs (Tosuncuoglu, 2018). The instructional design should be in such a way that it prepares the students for an authentic assessment. This means educators must consistently consider whether their assessment tools measure the desired results and offer a reliable picture of students' progress and the impact of the instruction (Frank, 2012). Assessment is the process through which the teacher or language instructor identifies the needs of the learners, record their progress and analyse their planning and methodology. Assessment could perhaps be considered one of the most difficult and important parts for the teachers and the institution. Assessment is as important as teaching and learning because it determines the efficacy of both teachers and learners. An effective assessment can help the learner identify the areas of improvement and work specifically. It helps the learners to analyse their level of qualification. Therefore, the assessment must be authentic, reliable, and transparent.

Frey et al. (2012) affirmed that language educators and researchers agree that the practice of assessment has to be authentic but what determines the authenticity of the assessment is still a question to many (Assessment in language learning, n.d.). The measure can be considered authentic only when students recognise its relevance to their lives, goals, structure, content, process, or any other aspect they find meaningful. Guliker et al. (2004) emphasised that effective assessment should engage students in demonstrating the same combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are essential for real-world professional contexts (Pressbooks, n.d.). An effective assessment not only reflects students' abilities but also functions as a valuable learning tool. According to Litchfield and Dempsey (2015), authentic assessments enable students to apply knowledge instead of relying on rote memorisation, fostering deeper learning. These assessments also promote the development of metacognitive strategies, enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills, encourage engagement in meaningful and collaborative tasks, and increase students' confidence, satisfaction, and active participation.

However, Cummins (2007) pointed out that despite being essential to ELT, assessment and evaluation have frequently been seen as an exclusive domain of experts detached from the real-time classroom practices. Historically, assessments have been delivered after instruction, using rigid statistical frameworks and technical jargon, leaving teachers and learners with little room to interpret or challenge results. As a result, assessment has often been misunderstood and it has been rarely included in teacher training, and hardly examined critically by stakeholders.

Recognising the need for a transparent and learner-oriented framework, the Council for Europe (CoE) launched The Common Framework of Reference (CEFR) in 1991 during a symposium to provide a common basis for describing objectives, content and method, and foreign language. CEFR is formed based on an action-oriented approach. It describes language learning outcomes in terms of language use (Little, 2011). Language activities are basically divided into four kinds as reception, production, interaction, and mediation. The three principal dimensions are language activities, the occurrence of language in specific domains, and the competencies the user draws while engaging in those domains. Language proficiency tests like IELTS, TOEFL, GRE, GMAT, SAT, PTE, DELF, etc that make the user globally competent rely on the CEFR. Learners who wish to study abroad, take one of these courses depending on the university they wish to pursue their studies. They usually get training through special programs or through coaching centres. This access to training is not sometimes affordable to many aspiring learners. In fact, many potential learners are not aware this framework. Therefore, if this authentic framework of assessment is introduced at tertiary level language instruction, the learners will be equipped globally. The use of authentic assessments, which are meant to replicate real-world tasks, the widely accepted best practice. Frey, et al.(2012) highlight that authentic assessment involves several distinct dimensions, with realism being just one among them. Other key aspects includes its relevance to leaners, the cognitive complexity of tasks, and the extent to which learners exercise autonomy. In this context, integrating the CEFR into language instruction offers an effective and authenticate framework for assessment that is grounded in real-world communication goals and leaner development. Teachers, researchers, institutions, and stakeholders must realise the importance of CEFR and provide the leaners to use and practice language effectively. Preparing the students for this type of assessment also increases the learner agency.

*1.1 Research Questions*

This paper aims to analyse the relevance and effectiveness of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in tertiary-level English language education, with a focus on awareness among the-learning community and need for its systematic integration into curriculum design. The main objectives of the study are to examine the level of awareness about the CEFR among teachers and students in Tamil Nadu, to evaluate the applicability of CEFR in teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education institutions, to explore the potential benefits of integrating CEFR into Part-II English curriculum to improve student' language proficiency, particularly in LSRW skills. It attempts to answer the following research questions:

1) What is the level of awareness and understanding of CEFR among students and teachers in tertiary education in Tamil Nadu?

2) How can CEFR be effectively applied to enhance teaching, learning, and assessment in undergraduate English language classrooms?

3) In what ways can CEFR integration address individual learner needs and improve systemic development of LSRW skills through the Part-II English curriculum?

*1.2 Literature Review*

A recent systematic review by Hamid et al. (2025) studied 40 peer-reviewed studies published between 2017 and 2023 on CEFR-aligned English language curricula across ASEAN ESL/EFL contexts. The review identified limited teacher training in CEFR concepts and practices as a major hindrance to effective implementation, whereas coherent alignment of curricula, materials, and assessment with CEFR levels was found to be a key facilitator of improved learning outcomes. The included studies, which predominantly employed surveys and interviews, showed that although CEFR is widely adopted at policy level to enhance regional communicative competence, classroom-level enactment often remains partial and uneven because of teacher readiness issues and inconsistent integration of CEFR descriptors into instructional and assessment practices.

English teachers' perception of CEFR was studied in Thai context using mixed methods by Phoolaikao and Sukying (2021). Both quantitative and qualitative method was used to collect data and study a sample of 200 preservice English teachers. While the former showed that the teachers had a high level of understanding about the CEFR, the latter revealed that the level of understanding was low.

However, the majority of them agreed the importance of implementing CEFR in the curriculum. The study sought to inform Thai stakeholders about the structured integration of CEFR in accordance with national curriculum.

Jeon (2022) conducted a comprehensive review of approximately 30 studies on CEFR-aligned English education in South Korea published between 2000 and 2020. The review showed that, following the 2015 national curriculum revision, CEFR-related research activity increased by about 70%, with quantitative designs accounting for roughly 60% of the work. Studies covered a range of CEFR levels at both elementary and university tiers, mainly examining curriculum design and assessment practices informed by CEFR-based corpus data. Jeon argued that more fine-grained research is still needed to support the academic implementation of CEFR and to adapt the framework more effectively to the Korean EFL context, particularly in relation to the pluricultural skills expected of L2 learners.

Jong and Benigno (2016) developed domain-specific descriptors of academic English to extend CEFR to the higher-education context. Using Brian North's procedure, they created 337 descriptors across proficiency levels in a three-stage process that first critiqued the original, speaking-biased CEFR "can-do" statements, then formulated new objectives for learning, teaching, and assessment, and finally validated the descriptors with 6000 teachers worldwide using GSE and IRT-based rating. The resulting scale more accurately captured academic language needs in higher education and demonstrated how CEFR can be adapted for academic settings beyond its original purpose.

Miller (2019) studied the issues of adopting CEFR in an English language program at an university in Western Japan. The study showed that there is a common misconception about the positive impact of CEFR in language programs. CEFR was adopted in the curriculum due to its transparency and coherence but however, there is a misinterpretation and misapplication of it. The paper analyses various issues and questions the assertion that CEFR has been implemented and achieved successfully. The study concluded that the university needs to revisit its claims about the integration of CEFR in language programs and adequately address the key issues in its adoption.

Existing studies across ASEAN and East Asian contexts highlight policy-level enthusiasm for CEFR but also reveal persistent gaps in teacher readiness, assessment alignment, and classroom enactment. At the same time, work on the action-oriented approach and CEFR-informed curricula increasingly conceptualises learners as social agents who mobilise linguistic resources to participate in academic, professional, and intercultural domains. Yet, there is little empirical research on how CEFR might enable such learner agency within postcolonial ELT settings, where English functions simultaneously as a global resource and a marker of internal inequality. In the Indian higher education context, including institutions in Tamil Nadu, CEFR has only recently begun to feature in discussions of curriculum and assessment, and there is still limited empirical work on how it might support students in negotiating global aspirations (such as study abroad and high-stakes exams) while also acknowledging their locally shaped linguistic trajectories.

Positioning CEFR at this intersection, the present study moves beyond documenting its limited institutional uptake to explore how a CEFR-aligned, action-oriented framework can make assessment more transparent, recognise diverse proficiency profiles, and offer learners a clearer sense of direction and control over their language development. By foregrounding students' and teachers' perceptions of levels, assessment practices, and curricular expectations, the study seeks to illustrate how CEFR may be re-interpreted as a resource for learner agency in a postcolonial tertiary ELT context rather than as a purely European import.

*1.3 Theoretical Framework: Learner Agency*

Learner agency refers to the students having their voice and contribution to the process of learning. Students become active contributors to knowledge rather than simply consuming what is taught. In simple, the learners take ownership of their learning process. They become decision-makers in their learning experience. In this way, they take responsibility for their language experience. They have the power to intervene in the learning process and affect the outcome. The power combined with choices to take meaningful action, acts as a catalyst for transformation. When students have agency, they have voice, choice, and ownership. The relationship between teacher and students becomes a partnership. Self-efficacy is yet another important aspect when it comes to learner agency. Self-Efficacy is a set of beliefs that an individual possesses to execute a plan of action in a certain situation (Lopez-Garrido, 2025). In short, self-efficacy means an individual's belief in their own capacity to discharge an action. In terms of language learning, self-efficacy is the learner's belief in their own capacity to draw on their competencies and perform linguistic activities. When students have a stronger sense of self-efficacy, they have a stronger sense of agency. In CEFR, the learner is seen as a social agent (Council of Europe, n.d.-d). It views learners as independent and responsible participants in society. These social agents communicate using language in the real-world context to create and mediate meaning. Since language is both a cognitive and social activity, it is not a tool to obtain and share information but to interpret the world through interaction and dialogue. Hence, the language community should create contexts where the learners are social agents, autonomous learners, and responsible language users. In that way, they become powerful lifelong learners which is ultimately the goal of education.

1.3.1 Action-Oriented Approach (AOA)

Communicative language teaching brought a paradigmatic shift in language education. It focused on the primary objective of language and helped the learners to participate in the process of learning. At the same time, Vygotsky with his 'Theory of Child Development' viewed language as an essential communicative tool and that culture and behaviour are understood through it. He also highlighted the inevitable role language plays in cognitive development. With this, the teaching methodology integrated an interactive and sociocultural aspect that compelled an active attitude of the students to the language learning process. Later this developed into the action-oriented approach, which views learners as 'social agents'(Germain-Rutherford, 2021). It encourages learning through realistic scenarios involving a wide range of lessons leading to a collaborative task in the end. Engaging in such real-life situations helps the learner to respond in a both cognitive and emotional manner. In this way, their linguistic and sociocultural repertoires are mobilized. The action-oriented

approach is developed through inspirations drawn from CEFR descriptors. This lays the conceptual basis for CEFR in general. This approach postulates learning objectives in terms of competencies. The learner develops linguistic skills and pragmatic skills apart from communicative skills (Delibaş & Günday, 2016). Here, communication is not the goal but the means to achieve critical thinking, introspection, innovation, and adaptability to clear the task. In an age dominated by media, the problem is not communication but collaboration with the 'other'. The action-oriented approach serves as a catalyst in taking the learner closer to the authentic experience of learning language because conceptually it is grounded in the contemporary complexes of sociocultural realities of the learners. The learners intellectually engage in a process of searching for information by cognitively challenging the content. To achieve this, the syllabus, curriculum, and instructional design must be organised in way that presents language use within a sociocultural context (Kaliska, 2016). An instructional design that is removed from the methodologies that involve meaningful social interaction will not benefit the learners. The instruction needs to have core components of an action-oriented approach that transforms students into social agents, instructors into facilitators, and assesses learning effectively (Council of Europe, n.d.-a).

*1.4 Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)*

Between the year 1993 and 1996, the Council of Europe (CoE) managed The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The overall objective of the proposal was to develop a common framework within the European context that would be comprehensive, transparent, and coherent, and help language users to learn, teach, and assess objectives. It provides the basis for language syllabi, curricula, instructional designs, assessments, etc in Europe. It specifies the tasks a language user must undertake to communicate effectively, as well as the essential knowledge and skills needed for proficient performance (Council of Europe, n.d.-b). The descriptive scheme divides language use into domains, activities, and competences, offering a language-neutral template that can be applied to any target language (Hulstijn, 2007).

It also describes the social and cultural domains in which the language is present. Most importantly, the framework defines the levels of proficiency which helps to measure the progress of the learners at each learning stage. In the modern days, it is important to have a common framework to overcome barriers to communication from various educational systems, CEFR helps to do that. It makes the instructional designers, course developers, teachers, trainers, and institutions to revisit their objectives and practices and thus making them realise if they are catering to the needs of the learners. This common basis of language description, objective, content, and method increases transparency and promotes cooperation. The objective proficiency criteria help in European mobility by mutually recognising the qualifications earned in different learning contexts. The symposium on "Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe: Objectives, Evaluation, Certification" held at Switzerland identified the need of having CEFR as follows: Language learning among the neighbouring countries must be intensified for greater mobility and international communication without disrupting the identity and cultural diversity, access to information, and intensive personal interaction. This cannot be achieved unless the policymakers and educational institutions recognize language learning as lifelong process that must be systematically supported. By doing so, it will encourage and aid co-operations among educational institutions across countries. It will help in mutual acceptance and recognition of language proficiency. CEFR is useful for planning language learning programs, language certification, and self-directed learning. CEFR is comprehensive, transparent, and coherent in fulfilling its functions, which are also the key aspects of the framework. 'Comprehensive' refers that the framework specifying an entire range of language skills and knowledge by which the language user describes their objectives. 'Transparent' means that the information must be explicitly available and readily comprehensible. 'Coherent' means that the descriptions are free from ambiguities and contradictions. Commentaries on the CEFR reiterate that these three criteria, comprehensive, transparent, coherent are essential if the framework is to serve as a shared basis for learning, teaching, and assessment across diverse systems (Weir, 2005). In the educational system, needs, objectives, content, material creation, teaching and learning programs, methodologies, evaluation, testing, and assessment should have a harmonious relation for coherence. It does not imply an application of a single uniform system but an open and flexible one that paves the way for immediate and successful implications (Council of Europe, 2001).

1.4.1 CEFR for Tertiary – Level Language Courses

CEFR plays a vital role in framing language policies and design instruction. It is an available tool that would enhance the teaching and learning experience, but many language professionals find it difficult because it is difficult to use without proper guidance. When implementing the CEFR within an educational context, it is important to recognize that it is not directly transferable and must be adapted to the specific sociocultural and institutional context. The CEFR is a transparent, logical, and comprehensive reference instruments. The CEFR is a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and other countries. It was established by the Council of Europe between 1989 and 1996 as the primary component of the "Language Learning for European Citizenship" initiative. Its primary goal is to offer an approach to teaching, learning, and evaluation that works for all European languages. Subsequent empirical and policy analyses document how CEFR has been borrowed into diverse higher-education systems, where it serves as a reference for curriculum reform, level descriptors, and proficiency benchmarks, while also raising questions about localisation and equity (Afip, 2019). In November 2001, a European council Resolution recommended using CEFR to set up systems of validation of language ability (French Toast Language Centre, n.d.).

Students' marks play an important role when it comes to language learning. The grades that students acquire must reflect the specific skill and ability rather than the score itself. A standard framework should let the learners set goals and work towards them. As individuals, each of the learners will have their own optimum level at which they will work. The teaching will focus more on the strength and weaknesses

of students. The teacher will be able to recognise the hindering factors. Classroom-based work in Japanese universities illustrates how CEFR-based activities can help students construct personal English-learning goals and maintain strategy use over time (Taniguchi & Jones, 2022). Research on CEFR-based self-assessment at university level shows that when students rate themselves against level descriptors and discuss results with teachers, they become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and are better able to set realistic learning goals (Piamsai, 2023). Recent work on self-regulated learning further suggests that integrating CEFR-linked goal-setting into tertiary classrooms can strengthen students' ownership of progress and foster more sustained engagement with language learning tasks (O'Dwyer & Runnels, 2014). In this way, the learners can set achievable realistic goals and determine what they can do next.

### 1.4.2 CEFR Levels

The Common European Framework of Reference describes language ability on a six-point scale from A1 to C2, with C2 being the highest achievable level (Cambridge English, n.d.). Through this, it makes it easy for the learners and teachers of language to identify the level of qualification. The learners get to understand where they stand, which helps them to specifically understand where they have to improve. It helps the teachers to understand the level of their students and cater to their needs (Council of Europe, n.d.-c). Beyond providing a common descriptive scale, CEFR levels have become central to how universities and examination boards define entry and exit standards, particularly in systems expanding English-medium higher education (Deygers, 2018). Each of the levels of CEFR is explained as follows:

"A" Level: Basic User

A1 / Breakthrough / Beginner – In this level, the learner can understand basic and common expressions to meet concrete needs. They will be able to introduce themselves, ask for personal details, and hold conversations as long as the other person speaks slowly with clarity.

A2 / Waystage of elementary – This level shows that the learner can understand everyday use of words, familiar expressions, and frequently used words in scenarios such as shopping, job, etc. They will be able to engage in a direct exchange of information and describe matters in simple words.

"B" Level: Independent User

B1 / Threshold / Intermediate – In this stage, the learner can understand points pertaining to work, college, and other common places. They will be able to manage travel-related situations. Based on personal interest they will be able to create basic texts. They will be able to explain dreams, experiences, ambitions, and opinions in a simple way.

B2 / Vantage / Upper Intermediate – At this level, the language learner will be able to have spontaneous conversations without much strain even with the native speaker about both abstract and concrete matters. They will be able to understand the technical texts of their fields and further produce text on various subjects.

"C" Level: Proficient User

C1 / Advanced - This level shows that the learner will be able to comprehend a wider range of demanding texts and conversations. They will be able to express ideas effectively and constructively use language for social, academic, and professional scenarios. Produce well-structured and detailed writings on complex topics.

C2 / Proficiency – In this stage, the user possesses a good receptive and understands it with ease. They can summarise information from different sources coherently and express themselves precisely in complex situations (Go Study Link n.d.).

### 1.4.3 Relevance and Application of CEFR

The Common European Framework of Reference plays a vital role in unifying language learning, teaching, and evaluation across diverse linguistic and educational contexts. It is extensively used by organisations and employers globally and its significance extends beyond Europe. In academic setting, CEFR aids curriculum designers to align learning outcomes with measurable and objective proficiency levels that supports transparent assessment and learning goals for learners. It also helps students in identifying their strengths and areas for improvement, which fosters autonomous learning (Kandaswamy, 2024). Recent classroom studies in Asian EFL contexts further report that CEFR-based self-assessment grids enhance learner reflection and goal-setting when integrated into regular instruction (European Commission, 2020).

In professional context, CEFR-based certification serves as a reliable proof of language competence for higher education, job applications, and immigration. Employers value CEFR as it provides a common scale to evaluate candidates from different backgrounds as it ensures consistency in recruitment (Kennedy, n.d.). Employer-facing guidelines now recommend CEFR-referenced English tests when defining job profiles, especially in globally networked sectors such as IT and customer support (Testlify, 2024). Research on language-linked employability further underscores that CEFR levels offer a transparent way to articulate the communicative demands of specific occupational roles and training pathways (OECD, 2023).

Further, CEFR levels are increasingly used for university admissions, especially for foreign courses, and professional certifications where language is crucial. Many major proficiency tests used in India, such as IELTS and PTE Academic, publish concordance tables that link their score bands to CEFR levels, which helps universities set transparent admission cut-offs and scholarship thresholds (LeapScholar, 2025).

The adaptability and flexibility of CEFR make it a valuable tool for self-assessment, lifelong learning, and tracking progress across time. Official self-assessment grids and checklists enable learners to assign themselves approximate CEFR levels in each skill and to plan subsequent learning steps accordingly (Europass, 2020). In the increasingly globalised academic and professional environments, its

systemic and transparent descriptors promote learner motivation and facilitates easier transition between institutions, systems, and even countries. Emerging frameworks for micro-credentials and digital badges in higher education also recommend referencing CEFR levels so that short language courses and stackable credentials are readable across institutions and national systems (EU-CONEXUS, 2023).
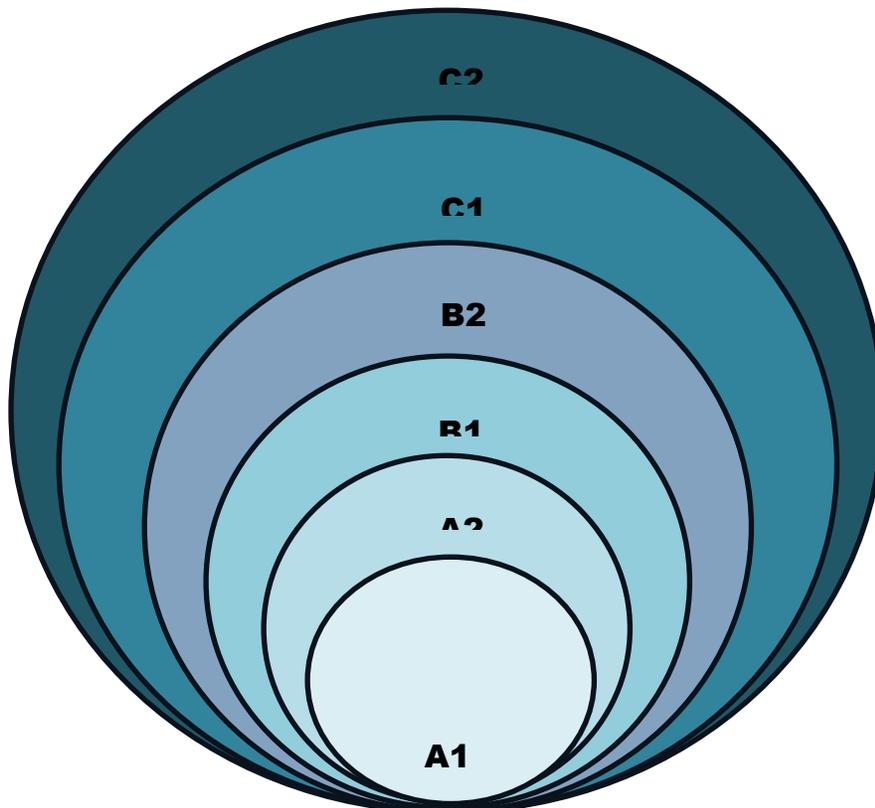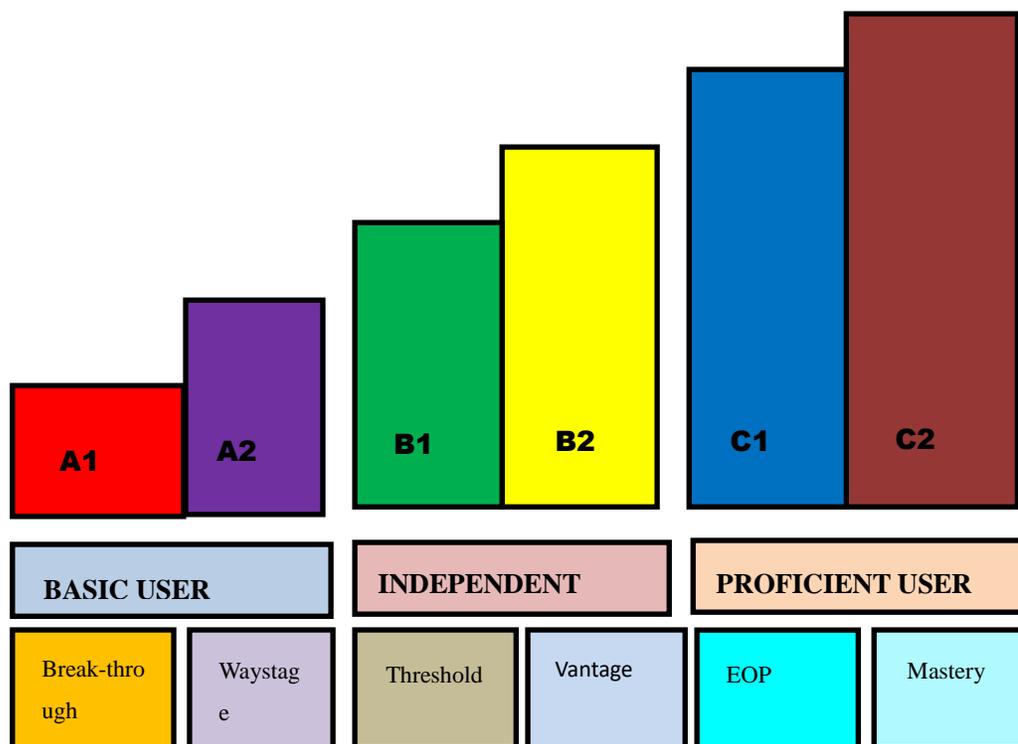


Figure 1. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)



Figure 2.

CEFR Level

## 2. Method

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used to get a comprehensive understanding of the current instructional design and assessment patterns. A descriptive style research questionnaire was developed after referring to various existing literatures and circulated to the undergraduate students of various disciplines. The questionnaire was a mix of both closed questions (Yes/No and multiple-choice items) and a small number of open-ended prompts inviting students to comment on their experiences of assessment and the syllabus. For certain constructs, such as perceived usefulness of the course and evaluation methods, Likert-type items were included and later combined into simple scale scores. The draft questionnaire was reviewed by an English language expert for content validity and piloted with a small group of students to check clarity and completion time; minor wording changes were made before final administration.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with both the teachers and students to know their views, perspectives, challenges, and suggestions for framing a new instructional design for English language courses. The interview and focus group guides were developed from the same theoretical frameworks (CEFR, AOA, Learner Agency) and from initial questionnaire findings, ensuring that all instruments addressed common domains (awareness of levels, perceptions of assessment, role of literature, and need for CEFR alignment). During the qualitative sessions, the researcher took detailed field notes during and immediately after each discussion/interview; due to contextual constraints, audio-recording was not used.

### 2.1 Purpose and Participants

First-year undergraduate students belonging to both Arts and Engineering fields of Lady Doak College, Madurai and SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur were chosen for survey. These students were chosen because English language courses are mandatory across all disciplines during the first two semesters of their higher education. This requirement underscores the essential role of English in global communication and competency, regardless of students' specific disciplines. By integrating English language education at an early stage, the curriculum aims to equip students with language skills that enhance their competitiveness in a globalised world. Additionally, proficiency in English is critical for success in competitive exams, which often serve as gateways to further academic and professional opportunities. The teachers handling English language classes for them and the students in the senior years were also interviewed to get their perspective on the existing English language curriculum. In total, the questionnaires were distributed to 110 participants via an online Google Forms link, and 70 complete responses were obtained for analysis. For the qualitative component, three student focus groups (eight participants each) and 10 individual student interviews were conducted, along with 30 short interviews with English language faculty members across the two institutions.

### 2.2 Sampling Technique and Rationale

The study employed a purposive sampling technique, selecting first-year undergraduate students from both Arts and Science disciplines across two institutions, Lady Doak College, Madurai, and SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur. This sample was intentionally chosen because English language instruction is mandatory in the first year across all streams, making it an ideal stage to evaluate foundational language learning. Including a heterogeneous mix of disciplines ensures a more representative understanding of student experiences and learning needs. Teachers of English and students in senior years were also purposively sampled to gain a longitudinal perspective on curriculum effectiveness, assessment challenges, and the potential for integrating CEFR-aligned frameworks. This approach allowed the researcher to capture varied viewpoints within a relevant educational context, thereby enhancing the depth and applicability of the study's findings. Participants were invited through class announcements only those who provided informed consent for interviews/focus groups were included.

### 2.3 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design underpinned by key theoretical frameworks such as Learner Agency, the Action-Oriented Approach (AOA), and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and its proficiency levels. These frameworks emphasize learner participation, autonomy, and communicative competence, aligning with the study's aim of evaluating and enhancing English language instruction through CEFR-based principles. The research is both exploratory and evaluative, designed to analyse the need for systematic integration of CEFR in tertiary-level language instruction. It investigates learner perceptions, proficiency levels, and the comparative usefulness of current instructional practices.

Quantitative Component

- Survey: A descriptive-style questionnaire was administered to 110 first-year undergraduate students across disciplines, of which 70 complete responses were used for analysis.

- Likert Scale: Used to assess students' preferences, awareness, and perceived benefits of CEFR integration, as well as their perceptions of current evaluation practices.

- Statistical Data: Responses were quantified and presented in percentages to capture patterns and levels of agreement. Select cross-tabulations were also examined to identify patterns relevant to the research questions. All quantitative analyses were carried out using spreadsheet software (MS Excel/Google Sheets), and results were then interpreted in relation to CEFR-based concepts of levels and transparency in assessment.

Qualitative Component

- Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with students and English language faculty to collect experiential insights and challenges. Each interview lasted approximately 20–40 minutes
- Focus Group Discussions: Facilitated among student groups to explore in-depth experiences, needs, and suggestions for curriculum design.

Data Analysis (Qualitative): Field notes from interviews and focus groups were read repeatedly and manually coded. Initial codes were clustered into broader categories (for example, usefulness of activities, exam alignment, assessment clarity, CEFR awareness, and role of literature), which were then refined into overarching themes. Triangulation was achieved by comparing these themes with the questionnaire findings and by examining points of convergence and divergence between student and teacher perspectives.

Tools and Instruments

- Survey Questionnaire: Included both open- and closed-ended questions.
- Interview Guide: Semi-structured, focusing on learner needs, curriculum gaps, and CEFR alignment.
- Focus Group Protocols: Used to encourage open dialogue about teaching practices and assessment issues.

Context and Setting

- Conducted in Lady Doak College, Madurai and SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur.
- Focused on first-year students who are mandated to take English language courses across all disciplines.
- Context revealed a syllabus heavily reliant on literature, lacking clear language proficiency benchmarks or CEFR integration.

Purpose of the Design

- To explore the current awareness and application of CEFR in tertiary-level English language courses.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of existing instructional and assessment practices.
- To provide insights for aligning curriculum design with global proficiency standards.

## 3. Results

The researcher has conducted a study to analyse the current assessment pattern and students' awareness of CEFR at the tertiary level of education by circulating an online questionnaire. There were 70 responses collected from a heterogenous mixture of students belonging to both science and humanities fields. These students were selected as samples because they have an English language course in the first year of their education irrespective of their core major. The syllabus is designed to provide language skills that help them in their future career. But the authenticity and validity of the instructional design, teaching pedagogies, and evaluation are still a question.

Out of 70 responses, 39% of the students revealed that they wish to study abroad. 37% of the students revealed that their lack of English language skills stops them from pursuing their courses in European countries. Taken together, these figures show that more than one-third of the sample both aspires to international mobility and views English proficiency as a major barrier, indicating a clear gap between curricular provision and students' long-term goals. 87% of the students have not heard about CEFR, which suggests extremely low awareness of global proficiency standards despite these aspirations. Though 99% of students said that they are aware of their level of English language skills, 44.3% of students expressed that they are unable to improve their language skills no matter how much they try. This shows that the students do not have a concrete idea of where they stand, based on the parameters and comments told by the teacher they assume their level of skills. Descriptively, this produces a paradox: almost all students believe they know their "level", yet nearly half report stagnation, implying that self-perceptions are impressionistic rather than anchored to objective criteria.

13% of the students recorded that the teacher did not help them to identify their problem. 27% of the students expressed that the teacher was not aware of their strengths and weakness. Viewed together, 40% of respondents experienced some form of diagnostic gap in teacher support, reinforcing the perception that feedback is neither systematic nor individualised. 84% of students revealed that the curriculum needs to have more language-based activities rather than literature. At the same time, 72.9% indicated that literature had helped them improve their language skills, pointing to a preference for a blended curriculum in which literary texts are retained but complemented with explicit, skill-focused tasks.

Table 1. Demographics of the students

| Demographic Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Field of Study | Humanities | 35 | 50% |
| | Sciences | 25 | 36% |
| | Professional Courses | 10 | 14% |
| Year of Study | First Year | 70 | 100% |
| Gender | Female | 30 | 43% |
| | Male | 40 | 57% |

Table 2. Study Abroad Aspirations & English Proficiency Barriers

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Wish to study abroad | 27 | 38.6% |
| English skills as barrier to study abroad | 26 | 37.1% |

Insight: A substantial cohort (37–39%) of the sample aspires to international mobility and perceives English proficiency as a critical enabler; this underscores the mismatch between their aspirations and current linguistic preparedness.

Table 3. Self-Reported Language Proficiency Awareness vs. Actual Improvement

| Item | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Aware of own language level | 69 | 98.6% |
| Unable to improve despite effort | 31 | 44.3% |

Insight: Although almost all students (98.6%) indicate that they are aware of their own English proficiency level, 44.3% also report difficulty in making further progress, suggesting that their self-judgements may not yet be grounded in clear diagnostic benchmarks. This pattern points to the potential value of adopting more objective, criterion-referenced assessment frameworks such as CEFR.

Table 4. Teacher Support in Diagnostic and Formative Feedback

| Item | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher did not help identify problems | 9 | 12.9% |
| Teacher unaware of student strengths/weaknesses | 19 | 27.1% |
| Combined diagnostic gap | 28 | 40.0% |

Insight: Two in five students experience some form of diagnostic gap in teacher support, indicating that current feedback practices are neither systematic nor individualised. This reinforces the need for CEFR-aligned assessment rubrics that provide transparent, criterion-based evaluation.
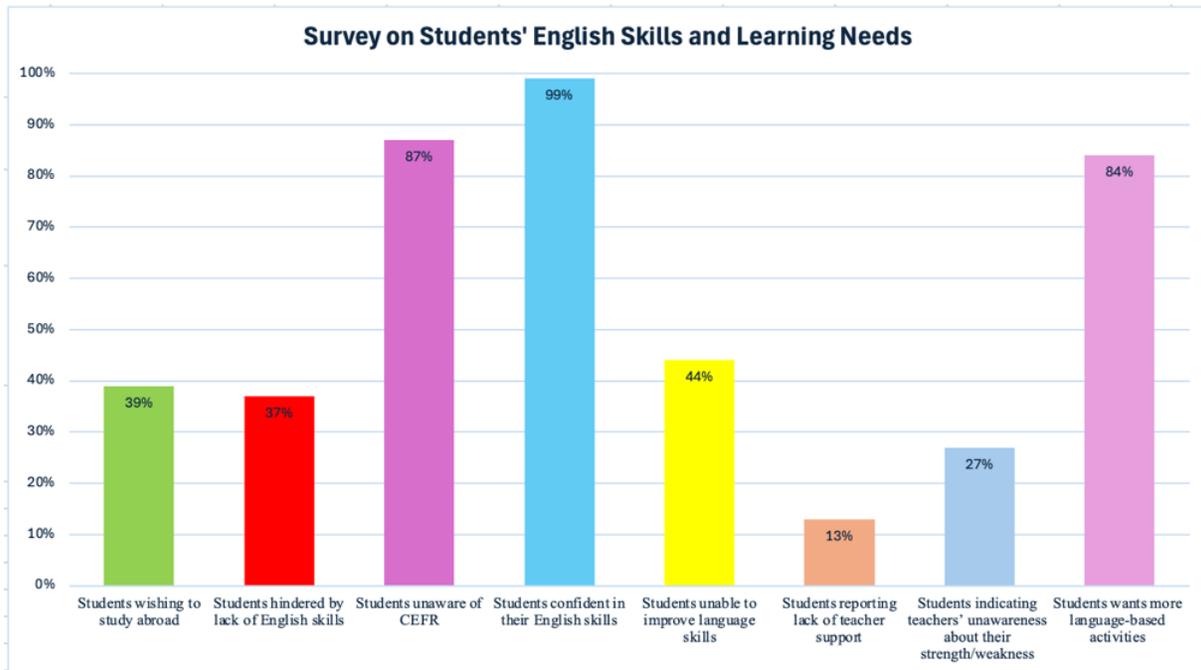


Figure 3. Survey on Students' English Skills and Learning Needs

A qualitative study was done by having a focus group discussion among select students. The researcher conducted both structured and semi-structured interview methods. The sample of this study was a mix of students belonging to Arts and Science colleges and Professional colleges.

**Effectiveness of Language Activities:** One of the students pointed out that the language activities that they had were very helpful. The teachers were remembered for the activities they conducted. She felt that the syllabus helped her to improve her writing skills in general. Having experience in taking IELTS mock tests, she pointed out that slight alterations in the syllabus would be helpful for competitive exams. The students in general said that they do not pay much importance to English language marks. When they were explained about the proficiency levels of CEFR they felt that having a standard framework of reference would help them to work and develop specific

skills.

**Perceived Limitations of the Current Course:** The students who had prior experience of preparing for IELTS courses had a totally different experience. One of the students pointed out that the language course offered in the college was a 'cakewalk' for him. He stated straightforwardly that the course was not helpful to be globally competent. It only helped to use the existing language skills and seldom helped to improve any. The syllabus is farmed enough to prepare for an interview and not take a competitive exam. He even said that it could be an optional course rather than a mandated one but he also said that students could be offered a course in alignment with the pattern of competitive exams in their third or final year because that is the time when students decide on their career.

**Lack of Clear Assessment Parameters:** When it came to assessments, it was understood that the students were not aware of the parameter. They felt that the assessment was done fairly but, it did not test the appropriate skill. The idea of having a relevant grading scale got their interest and they felt it would be a yardstick for further improvement. In the words of the student, the assessment only assessed the 'minimal level of proficiency'.

**Streaming and Skill-Specific Assessment Practices:** In the Arts and Science college that was taken for study, the students were divided into two streams: Level A and Level B. The students were asked to write an impromptu essay on the first day of their college and the papers were graded by the English language teachers. With Level A being the highest level of proficiency, the students were split into two groups. The teachers themselves have questions about this division system because they do not have a defined parameter and as the semester progressed there were fluctuations and sometimes even degradation in performance.

**Perceived Benefits and Gaps in Skill Testing:** Students who did not have prior knowledge or experience with English proficiency tests were satisfied with the existing syllabus, teaching methodology, and assessment. The majority of the students pointed out that they were able to improve their writing skills. This is a common response from both colleges. They said that speaking skills were usually tested by asking the student to speak on a topic that was given on the spot. For reading, the students were asked to read a random paragraph and they were given marks.

Table 5. Student Feedback on English Language Classes

| Student Feedback | Key Insights | Student response (Example) |
|---|---|---|
| **Effectiveness of language activities** | Positive impact on learning; activities enhanced engagement and retention. | "The activities helped me engage and remember better." |
| **Syllabus impact** | Mixed feelings about syllabus; improved writing skills but insufficient for competitive exams. | "It helped my writing but not much for IELTS." |
| **Awareness of CEFR** | Low awareness; students recognised the need for a standard framework for skill development. | "Having a standard would guide us in improving specific skills." |
| **Assessment clarity** | Lack of clarity in assessment criteria despite belief that assessments were fair. | "I don't know what exactly I'm being graded on." |

When the teachers were asked if they have awareness about CEFR, 1 out of 30 teachers knew. When an idea to integrate the CEFR framework with a common 'General English' paper was proposed by the institution, the majority of the language teachers showed opposition. They preferred to stick to their old pattern. In order to know the current assessment system, a group of 30 teachers was divided into six teams, and 5 videos of students speaking in English were played for them. The teachers were asked to rank the videos based on proficiency. Surprisingly, none of the teams had the same grading. This shows that grading, no matter how much the teachers are aware of the parameters will be subjective when it comes to language testing. This calls for the need of an objective framework.

Table 6. Teachers' awareness of CEFR

| Teacher Awareness Level | Number of Teachers (n=30) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Aware of CEFR | 1 | 3% |
| Support for CEFR- aligned General English Course | 5 | 16% |
| Opposition to change in existing curriculum | 20 | 67% |
| Open to discussing new language teaching methods | 10 | 33% |

## 4. Discussion

The quantitative data collected through the survey shows that the present syllabus that is followed is not completely unyielding. It does prepare the students to be competent. The problem is that the same treatment is given to all levels of students, which suggests that learners with different proficiency levels are not receiving level-appropriate input or support. The students are not completely devoid of understanding about their assessment parameters. They do discern based on what the teachers say, which is subjective, indicating that their self-awareness is based more on perceived teacher opinion than on clear, criterion-referenced standards. It is appreciated that a positive number of students are aware of their skills but if they do not know specifically, they will not be able to improve from their present level. That is why 44% of students have expressed their difficulty in improving their skills despite trying their best, which justifies the need for a more transparent, levelled framework like CEFR to guide progress. From a learner-agency perspective, this tension between students' willingness to improve and the absence of explicit proficiency benchmarks shows that their capacity to take charge of their own learning is structurally limited rather than motivationally lacking.

73% of the students recorded that literature helped them to improve their language skills. Literature holds a good place in language learning, but language activities have their own impact. That is why the same set of students also expects more language-based activities in the classroom, showing that students value a blended approach where literature is retained but supplemented with skill-focused tasks. The unawareness about CEFR is not a surprise because the teachers themselves are not, and this lack of awareness at both teacher and student levels further justifies the present study's focus on CEFR orientation and sensitisation. This pattern echoes prior CEFR implementation studies, which report that policy-level interest in the framework often outpaces teacher training and classroom-level understanding, leading to uneven or superficial adoption.

The results of focus group discussions show that speaking and reading are usually tested in a traditional way without a well-defined parameter, which explains why students find it hard to locate their precise level or next steps for improvement. The limitations are that content plays a vital in organizing and arranging ideas coherently. When a student is asked to talk on a random topic, they might not be well aware of the particular topic. Even if the student has good language skills, they will struggle to put forth their points with their limited content. Similarly, when a student reads out a random paragraph, the comprehension and understanding of the content in the paragraph cannot be tested. There is a possibility to read pages without really understanding them. Apart from that confidence level of the student to perform a linguistic activity in front of the classroom is also a major determinant in influencing grades. These observations collectively justify the need for tasks and assessment criteria that are clearly benchmarked, so that performance is judged on language ability rather than topic familiarity or personal confidence alone. Interpreted through the Action-Oriented Approach (AOA), the current practices offer few opportunities for learners to engage in purposeful, real-world tasks; instead, assessment remains product-oriented and decontextualised, whereas CEFR- and AOA-informed assessment emphasises observable actions in meaningful scenarios aligned with calibrated descriptors.

One of the surprising results is that students find literature as an effective tool to learn the language. Contrary to the views of many language teachers in the same college, literature still holds a decent place when it comes to language acquisition One of the students even pointed out that her receptive skills were honed mainly through literature. It also exposes students to various cultures and widens their perspectives. In fact, learning literature as a part of language courses makes them 'social agents", and this directly supports the rationale for retaining literary texts while reframing tasks and outcomes in line with the action-oriented, CEFR-inspired view of learners as active participants in society. This aligns with CEFR's conceptualisation of the learner as a social agent who mobilises linguistic and pluricultural resources to act in diverse contexts, suggesting that literature-based courses, if redesigned around CEFR-aligned, task-based activities, can simultaneously foster language proficiency, intercultural competence, and learner agency. By foregrounding these links, the present study adds to existing CEFR literature that advocates contextualised, locally meaningful adaptations of the framework in higher education settings.
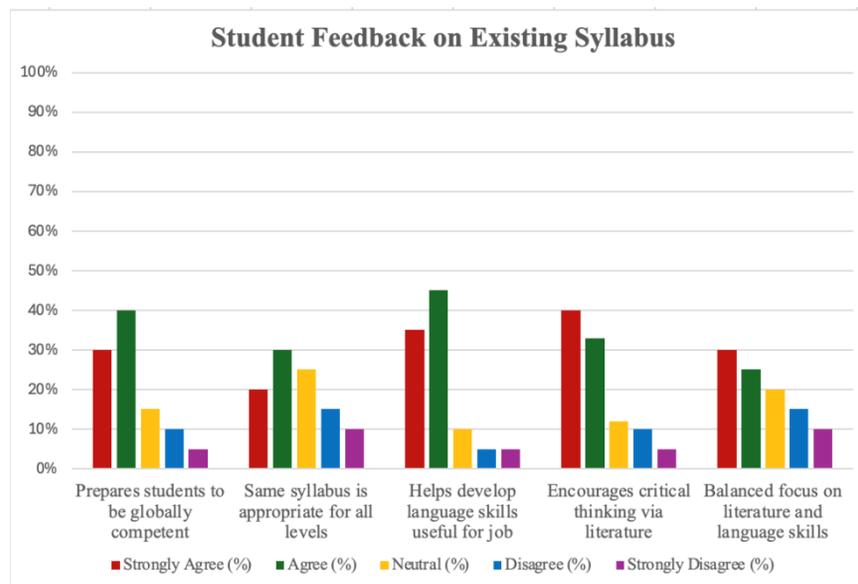


Figure 4. Students' Feedback on Existing Syllabus

## 5. Conclusion

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is an effective framework to assess the students based on their level of proficiency. It is based on the constructivist theory and action-oriented approach. In today's world, learners are expected not just to be knowledgeable and educated but to be creative and innovative with their skills. The constructivist theory lays emphasis on that. It is mainly based on the idea that learners are not just passive consumers of knowledge but rather active participants in the construction of knowledge. To be active participants, the students need to get exposed to language learning in a real-life context. This idea is backed up

by the founders of CEFR through the action-oriented approach. By adopting this approach in language teaching and learning, the learners become agents of their own learning process in the social and cultural context. Thus, they become social 'agents'. This must be induced in the students through the curriculum itself. The curriculum must enable the kind of assessment that would allow the students to know their level and further improve.

The findings of this study, which aimed to examine awareness levels, applicability, and the benefits of CEFR integration into tertiary-level education in Tamil Nadu, offer clear insights into the research questions posed. As recorded from the focus group discussion, students sometimes feel that the marks earned in English language courses do not play a significant role because they only test what they already know. This directly relates to the first research question on awareness and understanding, as many students remain unfamiliar with frameworks like CEFR that can provide more meaningful assessment. In that way, adopting a framework like CEFR would not only be relevant to the students but also improve their global standards.

It also prepares the students for global English language proficiency exams like IELTS, TOEFL, GRE, GMAT, etc. Students usually go to coaching centres to get trained, or they buy instructional materials which may not be affordable for everyone. Apart from all that, language testing must be objective without any ambiguity. The limitation in integrating CEFR into the tertiary level curriculum is that not everyone will be preparing to go abroad and when induced they might even find it strenuous. But at the same time, it helps in streaming the students in an effective and appropriate way.

Students who studied the same syllabus have differing views. That is mainly because the level of students is different but the instruction they receive and the assessment they undergo is just the same. This observation addresses the third research question, highlighting how CEFR can help individualise instruction and systematically develop LSRW skills within the Part-II English curriculum. This issue could be addressed effectively if CEFR is integrated into the curriculum. As mentioned earlier, this implementation cannot be effective if the content is not contextualised.

Therefore, the study highlights that effective application of the CEFR, as explored in the second research question, requires thoughtful contextualisation, strategic planning, and the involvement of adequately trained educators. Detailed research should go into the implementation of the framework because the existing literature reveals that there have been setbacks in implementing them. Hence, with proper guidance, preferably with a trained team, the framework can be integrated.

### Authors' contributions

Ms. Sharon Jeevarajathy E. conducted the data collection, organised the dataset, and contributed to the research design and overall structuring of the study. Dr. Hema N. contributed to shaping the research framework, offered theoretical guidance, and provided revisions to strengthen the academic clarity of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript, with no special agreements concerning authorship.

### Competing interests

The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, or institutional competing interests that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

### Informed consent

Obtained.

### Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

### Provenance and peer review

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### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

**Open access**

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**Appendix A**

    **A.**   **Questionnaire**

**Assessment of English Language Skills**

This survey aims to understand how students perceive the assessment of English language skills in college.

Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will remain anonymous. The information collected will be used only for academic research to improve teaching and assessment practices.

**Name of the Institution:**

**Department:**

**Gender:**

**Year of Study:**

1. Do you know on what basis your language skills (Listening/ Speaking / Reading / Writing) are assessed in college?

   a.    Yes     b. No

2. Has your English teachers told you on what basis you will be given marks in your   Listening/ Speaking / Reading / Writing tests?

   Yes        b. No

3. Do you think your language skills are tested appropriately in language classes?

   Yes        b. No

4. Do you know your level of knowledge in English?

   Yes        b. No

5. Do you know what you have to improve?

   Yes        b. No

6. Do you feel like you have tried your best but still you are unable to improve your English language skills?

   Yes        b. No

7. Has your teacher helped you to identify your problem?

   Yes        b. No

8. Do you think that your teacher is aware of your skills and weakness in language?

   Yes        b. No

9. Do you think the traditional way   of giving a topic and asking the student to speak is an appropriate way to test speaking skill?

   Yes        b. No

10. Do you think the traditional way   of asking a student to read a paragraph   is an appropriate way to test reading   skill?

    Yes        b. No

11. Does your teacher give you feedback after language tests?

    Yes        b. No

12. The evaluation methods used in my English course are essential for improving my language skills.

    a.    Strongly agree

    b.    Agree

    c.    Neither agree not disagree

    d.    Disagree

    e.    Strongly disagree

13. The current evaluation methods in my English course help me to improve my language skills.

    a.    Strongly agree

    b.    Agree

    c.    Neither agree not disagree

    d. Disagree

    e. Strongly disagree

14. The English language course in my college will be useful for my future academic and professional career.

    a. Strongly agree

    b. Agree

    c. Neither agree not disagree

    d. Disagree

    e. Strongly disagree

15. Is your English language course in college based on your needs?

    Yes      b. No

16. How do you view literary pieces (short story, poem, prose) in English language course?

    a. Entertainment / Leisure Reading

    b. Improves Language skills

    c. Helpful for profession in future

    d. Easy to score marks

17. Do you think there needs to be more language skill-based activities than literature?

    Yes      b. No

18. Are you planning to study abroad (foreign country)?

    Yes      b. No

19. Does your fear of English language stop you from pursuing your study abroad?

    Yes      b. No

20. Have you heard about CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference)?

    Yes      b. No

21. What is one specific change you would suggest to improve the English language course in your college?

22. Please describe an activity, lesson, or teaching method that helped you learn English most effectively this year.

**B. Focus group questions – students**

8 students per group, 45–60 minutes.

1. To begin, can you describe what happens in a typical English class for you (activities, materials, assessment)?

2. Which classroom activities have helped you most to improve your English? Can you give a concrete example?

3. How useful do you find the current English syllabus for improving your writing, speaking, listening, and reading skills?

4. For those who know about exams like IELTS, TOEFL, or other competitive tests: in what ways does the present course help or not help you prepare for such exams?

5. How much attention do you personally give to your English marks compared with marks in other subjects? Why?

6. How do you usually find out how well you are doing in English? What kind of comments or feedback do you receive from teachers?

7. Do you clearly understand the criteria on which your speaking, writing, reading, and listening are assessed? Please explain.

8. Have you ever felt that your assessment did not capture your real level of English? What made you feel that way?

9. Some colleges divide students into Level A and Level B (or similar groups). How do you feel about this kind of division based on an initial task such as an impromptu essay?

10. What kinds of changes would you like to see in the English syllabus so that it supports your future plans (for example, higher studies, jobs, or study abroad)?

11. Before this study, had you heard of CEFR or of levels such as A1, B1, C1? If yes, from where? If no, what is your reaction after it was explained to you?

12. In what ways do you think having clearly described levels and "can do" statements might help you track and improve your English?

13. How do you experience the use of literature (stories, poems, essays) in your English course? What kinds of benefits or limitations do you notice?

14. If you could redesign the English course from the first year onward, what would you keep, what would you remove, and what would you add?

**C. Semi-structured interview questions – students**

Individuals; 20–30 minutes.

1. Please describe your background in learning English before joining this college.

2. How would you describe your present level of confidence in each skill: listening, speaking, reading, and writing?

3. Can you recall a moment in this course when you felt that an activity or task significantly improved your English? What happened?

4. Can you recall a moment when you felt that a task or assessment was too easy or not useful for your goals? What made you think so?

5. How do you usually prepare for English assessments in this course?

6. When you receive grades or comments, how clearly do you understand what they mean for your actual proficiency?

7. In your view, what is missing in the current course if you think about becoming "globally competent" in English?

8. After being introduced to the idea of CEFR levels, how relevant do you think such levels are for students like you?

9. What kinds of support or changes in assessment would help you take more control over your own English learning?

**D. Semi-structured interview questions – teachers**

For English faculty involved in first-year and second-year courses; 30–40 minutes.

1. Could you briefly describe the English courses you currently teach (objectives, content, assessment methods)?

2. How do you usually determine students' initial proficiency levels at the beginning of a semester?

3. What are your views on dividing students into groups such as Level A and Level B based on an initial writing task?

4. How do you currently assess speaking, listening, reading, and writing in your classes? What tools or criteria do you use?

5. To what extent do you feel there is agreement among teachers when judging students' spoken or written performance?

6. What kinds of challenges do you face when grading student performance in English?

7. What is your level of familiarity with CEFR and its descriptors? Have you ever used CEFR scales or rubrics in your teaching or assessment?

8. In your opinion, how suitable would CEFR-aligned descriptors or rubrics be for first-year students in your institution?

9. How do you see the role of literature within General English courses at tertiary level? What advantages and limitations do you perceive?

10. What kinds of curriculum or assessment changes would you consider necessary if your institution decided to align General English more closely with CEFR?

11. How, if at all, do you think CEFR-informed assessment could help students understand their strengths and areas for improvement more clearly?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add about the possibilities or constraints of implementing CEFR in your context?

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