Responding to the CEFR Alignment Handbook: Sharing experience of alignment activities and reflecting on lessons learned

The *Handbook* Steering Group:

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In February 2020, a conference entitled "The CEFR: Towards a Road Map for Future Research and Development", co-sponsored by EALTA, UKALTA and the British Council, was hosted by the British Council in London (O'Dwyer et al. 2020, Little and Figueras 2022). The organizing institutions recognized the need to explore ways of developing research methodologies and projects of various kinds that could help to extend and further develop the CEFR and its implementation. It was hoped that the conference would inform the development of a road map for future engagement with the CEFR, taking account of what had been learnt so far and of new developments in applied linguistics and related disciplines.

Participants in the February 2020 conference agreed on the need for a new *Handbook* to support the alignment of language education with the CEFR and its Companion Volume. Accordingly, the three organizations behind the conference, together with ALTE, developed *Aligning Language Education with the CEFR: A Handbook*, publishing it online in April 2022 (Figueras et al. 2022). In undertaking to produce the *Handbook*, the steering group (which emerged from the February 2020 event) recognized that alignment applies not only to language tests but to policy, curriculum guidelines, curricula, syllabuses, textbooks and other teaching/learning resources. The group also decided that the *Handbook* should serve to inform policy makers, teacher educators, teachers and other language education stakeholders, as well as supporting the more or less technical processes on which alignment depends. The *Handbook* also seeks to help users to navigate the wide range of CEFR-related reference documents.

In the expectation that the *Handbook* would generate new interest in CEFR alignment practices, the

editors stated in their foreword that they planned to organize a conference in 2024 to give language education professionals an opportunity to share their alignment projects and reflect on the usefulness of the *Handbook*. The conference was held on 18 and 19 October 2024 at Blanquerna – Universitat Ramon Llull, Barcelona. It was hosted by Cristina Corcoll and her colleagues in the GREDA research group at Blanquerna, and organized by the *Handbook* steering group (Neus Figueras, David Little, Barry O'Sullivan, Nick Saville, Lynda Taylor). Notwithstanding the travel restrictions imposed by many academic institutions and the political situation in Europe and beyond, the conference attracted more than 120 participants from 24 countries and four continents. The programme comprised five plenary sessions, 35 presentations and eight posters. The presentations included case studies from China, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ireland, Japan, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom and Italy. Presenters' PowerPoint slides are available at https://ealta.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CEFR_Handbook_programme_overview_final.pdf.

Sarah Breslin, Executive Director of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) and Head of Language Policy at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, thanked the organizers for inviting her to attend the conference and learn more about critical engagement with the CEFR in general and CEFR alignment projects in particular; such events are a welcome response to the Council of Europe's efforts to support innovation in language education.

In the opening plenary, *Perspectives on CEFR alignment*, David Little (Trinity College Dublin) and Constant Leung (King's College London) set the scene in a conversation that addressed the CEFR's foundations and the challenges that the CEFR and CEFR CV present. David Little drew attention to the CEFR's double inheritance – the language user/learner as autonomous social agent and the scaled description of L2 proficiency designed to facilitate cooperation among Council of Europe member states. He argued that this double inheritance implies two possible approaches to alignment, one that starts from the learner as plurilingual social agent and one that starts from communicative language activities and competences, levels of proficiency and scales. Constant Leung focused on relevant research in related fields – community interpreting, medical and professional communication, interactional competence, scenario-based assessment – which suggests that there is a good educational and intellectual case for the cohabitation of the two orientations identified by David Little.

In the second plenary, *Views on CEFR alignment from the publishing perspective*, Ben Knight from Oxford University Press and David Bradshaw from Cambridge University Press and Assessment responded to questions raised by the session chair, Lynda Taylor, on the relevance of the CEFR for them as publishers and on how they address alignment in their context. For publishers, the most important sources of information when developing materials for a specific country are ministry guidelines or a national curriculum, which may not be aligned with the CEFR. The 'takeaway message' from both speakers was that ELT publishers take the alignment of their language learning materials with the CEFR very seriously, although CEFR alignment happens behind the scenes, using curriculum frameworks and editorial guidelines. Most customers prefer to use their own judgement on the appropriacy of those materials for their students rather than to read documentation about the alignment process.

The plenary at the end of the first day, *Ideas shared and lessons learnt on Day 1*, presented participants with the following list of topics covered and issues raised in the different sessions:
- The history of the CEFR, its legacy and its evolution
- The emerging/evolving nature of the construct/s of language & communication
- The value of cross-disciplinary engagement
- The need for adaptation, customisation, tailoring of the CEFR
- The critical importance of 'context'
- The importance of shared understanding, language and discourse
- The CEFR - & CEFR alignment - as an instrument for social justice

The second day of the conference started with the fourth plenary, *The future of CEFR alignment supported by emerging technologies*, where Barry O'Sullivan from the British Council and Nick Saville from ALTE asked conference participants to consider what technologies are most used in alignment projects and in what ways technology and artificial intelligence can enhance alignment of language education. Discussion followed on the affordances, risks and challenges associated with using technology and AI and on whether and how the *Handbook* could take those on board.

The fifth plenary session, *Aligning tests and testing systems in context*, comprised four presentations: 'A flexible, inclusive approach to a statutory CEFR alignment requirement for EL centres in Ireland' (Elaine Boyd, Thom Kiddle and Mary Grennan, Quality and Qualifications Ireland), 'Mapping the SMEEA Gaokao tests to the CEFR: multilingual alignment using the new *Handbook*' (Graham Seed, Cambridge University Press and Assessment), 'Implementation, use and future of CEFR in some countries in Latin America' (Walter Araya, Unversidad de Costa Rica and LAALTA), and 'Reflections on the *Handbook*: three stories from Japan' (Masashi Negishi, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).

The sixth plenary session, 'The CEFR across educational contexts and systems', comprised three presentations: 'A report from Japan' (Masashi Negishi, and Yukio Tono, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies), 'Translating the CEFR CV and the CEFR Alignment *Handbook*' (Javier Fruns, Instituto Cervantes), and 'CEFR Journal: Creating dialogue between research and practice' (Morten Hunke, Brandenburg University of Applied Sciences and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

The closing session, *Reflecting on the conference and considering next steps,* highlighted the following three issues, which stimulated lively discussion:

- The role that technology might play in the near future
- How context shapes alignment processes and CEFR uses in Europe and beyond
- Dissemination initiatives reinforcing collaboration

At the end of the conference participants were asked to use Slido to say in one or two words how they were feeling. The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: How participants said they were feeling at the end of the conference

In the course of the conference, it became clear that the *Handbook* provides useful guidance but also that it needs to be more widely disseminated. The notes made by the session chairs, the reactions from participants to the presentations, and the contributions from the audience in the plenary sessions indicated that further work on the *Handbook* should include reflection on changing linguistic

and cultural topographies, additional navigational advice on how to get from A to B, and alternative alignment methods, modes and tools (online, digital, corpora, AI, …). There was general agreement on the importance of maintaining terminological coherence across languages. The *Handbook* has been translated into <u>Spanish</u> by the Cervantes Institute and <u>German</u> by the Goethe Institute; Greek and Arabic translations are in progress.

Drawing on the rich body of research shared at the conference, the steering group plans further work on the *Handbook*, setting up short, medium and long-term objectives. The short-term objectives are to develop a supplement to the 2022 Handbook, which will address issues raised at the Barcelona conference, and to guest-edit a special issue of the CEFR Journal devoted to the alignment of language education with the CEFR. These short-term initiatives will be accompanied by efforts to reach out via international networks to language teacher educators and language teachers.

References

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Biographies

Neus Figueras coordinated the development of foreign language curricula and certificate examinations for adult language learners in the Catalan ministry of education in Spain for over 20 years. She has been involved in a number of international research and development projects related to assessment at different education levels. She collaborates regularly with the Council of Europe in the uses and the dissemination of the CEFR. She is a founding member of EALTA (European Association for Language Testing and Assessment) and was the first president of the association. She is currently the coordinator of the EALTA CEFR SIG.

David Little is a Fellow Emeritus of Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. His principal research interests are the theory and practice of learner autonomy in second language education and the management of linguistic diversity in schools and classrooms. He has been a regular contributor to the Council of Europe's language education projects since the 1980s, especially in relation to the European Language Portfolio. In 2010, the National University of Ireland awarded him an honorary doctorate in recognition of his contribution to language education in Ireland and further afield.

Barry O'Sullivan is the Head of Assessment Research & Development at the British Council. He has undertaken research across many areas on language testing and assessment and its history and has worked on the development and refinement of the socio-cognitive model of test development and validation since 2000. He advises ministries and institutions on assessment policy and practice and is particularly interested in the communication of test validation and in test localisation. He is the founding president of the UK Association of Language Testing and Assessment (UKALTA) and holds honorary and visiting chairs at a number of universities globally.

Nick Saville is Director of Thought Leadership at Cambridge University Press & Assessment (English) and Secretary-General of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE). He graduated in Linguistics in 1980 and holds an MA TEFL and an MA (Cantab). He wrote his thesis on the impact of language assessment in educational contexts supervised by Prof. Cyril Weir at the University of Bedfordshire.

Nick taught English at the University of Cagliari (Italy) for 6 years from 1980 and began working for the University of Cambridge in 1987, where he had several roles related to test development before being appointed Director of Research and Validation in 2001. He has taken part in many projects with the European institutions - the Council of Europe, the European Parliament & the EU Commission and his areas of expertise include: English language learning and plurilingualism; Learning Oriented Assessment (LOA) and the integration of learning with assessment (ILA); Ed*Tech* combined with AI for the automation of language assessment; language assessment literacy; impact research and ethical frameworks in language education. He currently co-edits the *Studies in Language Testing* series (CUP) and in 2023, he became a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (FAcSS) in UK.

Lynda Taylor is Visiting Professor at the Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA) at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. She has worked for nearly 40 years in the field of language teaching, learning and assessment, first as an ELT teacher and teacher educator, later as a materials developer and assessment researcher, particularly with IELTS and the full range of Cambridge English qualifications. Her research interests include speaking and writing assessment, testing accommodations for language learners with special needs and the development of language assessment literacy. She was formerly Assistant Research Director with Cambridge Assessment English and has advised on test development and validation projects around the world, including Europe, North America and Asia. She has presented invited plenaries, research papers and workshops internationally, and has published extensively in academic journals. She authored or edited many of the volumes in CUP's *Studies in Language Testing* series. In 2022 she was awarded Fellowship of the UK Academy of Social Sciences and has been President of the UK Association for Language Testing and Assessment (UKALTA) since 2020. Her most recent publications include a pair of co-edited volumes on the topic of *Language Assessment Literacy and Competence* (CUP).