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Adapting CEFR in the Nepalese Context: The Need for Contextualization and Practice

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the feasibility of implementing the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages to reform English language assessment in Nepalese secondary schools, aligning teaching and testing with global standards. Through a qualitative approach, the study draws on a literature review of CEFR implementation in Asian contexts (Japan, Malaysia, and Vietnam), as well as semi-structured interviews with three stakeholders: two secondary school teachers and one policymaker. Findings reveal that Nepal's current English assessment practices, which are heavily reliant on rote memorization and written tests, do not align with curriculum goals that emphasize communicative competence. Key challenges to CEFR adoption include inadequate teacher preparedness, resource constraints, misalignment between curriculum and assessment, and limited stakeholder engagement. Despite these barriers, CEFR offers opportunities to standardize assessments, promote balanced evaluation of all language skills, and enhance global comparability. Drawing on successful Asian models, the study recommends integrating the CEFR in a contextualized manner through sustained teacher professional development, curriculum revision, and inclusive stakeholder collaboration. Phased implementation and pilot testing are proposed to ensure equitable and sustainable reform, enabling Nepalese students to meet the linguistic demands of higher education and globalized contexts.

Keywords: CEFR, curriculum-assessment misalignment, transformative reform, educational equity, academic initiatives

Introduction

English assessment at the secondary level in Nepal, primarily conducted through national-level board examinations the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) and School Leaving Certificate conducted by the National Examination Board (NEB), are of high importance because the results of these examinations significantly impact students' academic progression, university admission, and employment opportunities (Department of Education, 2016). Despite their prominent roles, the design and implementation of these examinations are inadequate in assessing all language skills equally. Many studies have documented that these examinations primarily test rote memorization, focusing on discrete grammatical structures and vocabulary, rather than the true communicative use of English (Chapagain, 2020; Dawadi, 2021; Khan & Ashraf, 2023; Luitel, 2017). In particular, the existing testing system heavily favours written aspects of language assessment, focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, while productive oral communication skills such as speaking and listening get less preference (Chapagain, 2020).

Thus, there is a significant disparity between the intended goal of the curriculum (communication competence) and the actual skills tested. Such a mismatch creates a detrimental effect on the real-world language readiness of students they pass the examination without being able to use language in their real-world (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Cheng & Watanabe, 2004). This situation is further exacerbated by the persistence of traditional language teaching methodologies most notably the grammar-translation and structural approaches that continue to shape assessment practices in Nepal. These approaches prioritize linguistic accuracy and form over fluency and meaningful communication (Rana & Rana, 2019). English tests typically focus on discrete grammar rules, multiple-choice questions, and written tasks emphasizing correctness and formality rather than authentic language use in context. Furthermore, the assessments are conducted mainly by the teachers who have limited assessment literacy and rely on past examination papers as templates rather than preparing new tests in alignment with competency-based assessment concepts. Such illiteracy also does not provide the opportunity for formative assessments in students' language development.

In recent years, several policy reforms have prioritized competency-based education (CBE) and learner-centered pedagogies (Henri et al., 2017; Shah, 2020). The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC, 2019) has updated English language

curricula to incorporate not only knowledge but also skills, attitudes, and soft skills, placing equal importance on listening and speaking as on reading and writing. With these reforms providing a very positive direction for holistic language education, the real practices of assessment have found it challenging to translate curriculum objectives into outcomes. In Nepal, inconsistencies in the application of CBE principles are apparent, as policies promoting communicative competence coexist with traditional examination formats that emphasize rote learning and grammar accuracy (Brown, 2014; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). On its own, this gap highlights an urgent need for a standard and internationally recognized framework that promotes a holistic, balanced, and communicative approach to language assessment (Council of Europe, 2001).

To address the need for a standardized conceptual framework that aligns assessment with communicative goals, the CEFR offers a formidable solution and is widely acclaimed as the most comprehensive system for describing and assessing language proficiency. The CEFR, established by the Council of Europe (2001), comprises a series of "can-do" statements that describe six levels of language proficiency. These descriptors provide in-depth descriptions of what learners can do to engage in real-life communication across all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Hence, the action-oriented approach, incorporating elements of social agency and mediation, aligns with Nepal's goal of promoting inclusive, communicative language education (CEFR Expert Group, 2023).

The successful adoption of the CEFR in countries like Malaysia, Japan, Vietnam, and China has demonstrated its effectiveness in standardizing language assessment, aligning curricula, and promoting formative assessment (Chong & Yamat, 2021; Figueras et al., 2022; Jamain & Jamaludin, 2023). Although integrating the CEFR into secondary-level English language testing in Nepal has not yet been considered, global experiences indicate several benefits: CEFR-based systems promote transparency and comparability, build stakeholder trust, and motivate learners with clear proficiency benchmarks (CEFR Expert Group, 2023). Overall, CEFR integration in Nepal is not just an academic endeavor but a transformative reform that might address current misalignments and support comprehensive language proficiency aligned with global standards.

Specification Grid of Grade 10 and Grade 12 English Examinations in Nepal

A specification grid, often referred to as a test blueprint, serves as a systematic framework in educational assessment design, aimed at ensuring that examination content aligns coherently with curriculum objectives and intended

learning outcomes (Brown, 2014; Ing et al., 2015; Messick, 1994). It helps teachers frame the decision-making process of test construction and improve the validity of teachers' evaluations based on tests constructed for classroom use, explicitly outlining how test items are distributed across different language skills and systems (Fives & DiDonato-Barnes, 2013; Luitel, 2017). It also describes the cognitive levels being tested, ranging from knowledge and recall to those requiring high-order skills. However, research has identified several limitations in the existing specification grids' ability to capture holistic communicative competence (CDC, 2019).

The English specification grids for Grades 10 and 12 in Nepal present frameworks aiming to balance all language skills and aspects. However, they disproportionately emphasize reading and writing over listening and speaking in practice (CDC, 2019; Rana & Rana, 2019). The Grade 10 grid prioritizes reading and writing along with form-based grammar tasks (Shrestha & Gautam, 2022). Similarly, the Grade 12 grid introduces more cognitively demanding tasks, particularly in reading and writing, yet still underestimates the importance of communicative interaction and real-life language use). Despite curricular emphasis on communicative competence and higher-order thinking (Brown, 2014; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Paneru, 2024), current practices largely reflect exam-oriented traditions rooted in recall-based teaching (Shah, 2020), creating a mismatch between educational goals and assessment reality. Integrating the CEFR might offer a viable reform strategy by aligning assessment with international benchmarks, promoting authentic task design, and enhancing assessment literacy among teachers (Figueras et al., 2022; CEFR Expert Group, 2023; Bohara, 2025).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the feasibility of implementing the CEFR in Nepalese schools to enhance English language assessment. It also attempts to determine the stakeholders' perceptions, contextual influences, and institutional readiness for implementing the CEFR and drawing on an extensive review of global and South Asian literature, such as policy documents from the Council of Europe (2020) and Malaysia's Ministry of Education (2013), as well as empirical research from Malaysia (Jamain & Jamaludin, 2023; Kaur & Jian, 2022), Vietnam (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020), and Japan (Butler, 2011). The study integrates these insights with primary data collected through in-depth interviews with two secondary-level English teachers from Kailali and Lalitpur, as well as one official from the CDC. These interviews were recorded

with consent, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model to identify themes around CEFR awareness, challenges, opportunities, adaptation, and perceptions. The triangulation of literature and interview data enhanced the trustworthiness and richness of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) while ethical protocols, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity, were rigorously maintained throughout the study.

Findings and Discussion

This study's findings are organized around five interrelated themes derived from the combined analysis of the literature review and qualitative interviews with English language teachers and policymakers in Nepal: (1) current English assessment practices in Nepalese schools, (2) challenges in implementing the CEFR framework, (3) opportunities for enhancing assessment practices through CEFR integration, (4) contextual adaptation and policy-practice gaps, and (5) stakeholders' perceptions of CEFR-based assessment reform.

Current Assessment Practices in Nepalese Schools

In Nepalese schools, the current English language assessment procedure is product-centered, with a notable emphasis on written tests that involve discrete linguistic items, such as grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (Rana & Rana, 2019). The curriculum reflects an under-representation of listening and speaking activities in classroom instruction, which marginalizes the development of oral skills and creates a pedagogical imbalance (Peterson, 2012). In this context, the pedagogical atmosphere often stands in opposition to the efforts of teachers who aim to engage learners in meaningful communicative use of language (Shrestha & Gautam, 2022).

The over-emphasized national examinations, viz. SLC and SEE primarily value reading and writing, with little or no room for oral and interactive competencies (Dawadi, 2018). Listening and speaking skills are either informally assessed or completely neglected because they lack appropriate and strategic assessment tools and practices (Rana & Rana, 2019; Dawadi, 2018). Infrastructural constraints and teacher-centered ideologies especially in publicly run schools further obstruct communicative assessment, thereby producing candidates who excel in examinations but lack real-life English communicative competence (Bhandari & Bhandari, 2024; Usman & Mahmud, 2024; Yangambi, 2023).

However, the implementation of CEFR within the Nepalese school system is indeed a crucial and transformative attempt to reform English language education, ensuring that assessment procedures within Nepal align with internationally recognized standards. The change, thus, is not a matter of procedure but represents a genuine reframing of teaching philosophies, assessment paradigms, and educational policies. For such a change to come into being, a strategic approach must be designed that invites a refined theoretical background along with an appreciation of Nepal's particular sociolinguistic, cultural, and infrastructural realities.

Challenges in CEFR Implementation

Despite the potential advantages, there are several significant barriers that hinder the introduction of the CEFR system in Nepal. That is to say, one of the principal barriers is that teachers are inadequately prepared (Bohara, 2025). CEFR adoption requires teachers to be familiar with proficiency descriptors, outcome-based assessments, and the principles of communicative language teaching; yet, a significant number of English teachers in Nepal, particularly secondary English teachers, have received no formal training on CEFR or related concepts (Chong & Yamat, 2021).

Such a lack of teachers' preparedness led them to resist the CEFR as boredom rather than as a constructive change in pedagogy and assessment. Resource constraints present another critical hurdle. Language laboratories, digital listening materials, and facilities for interactive speaking assessment are frequently absent in rural and government schools, hence impeding the successful implementation of CEFR formative and summative evaluation procedures (Kadel, 2024). Another significant barrier to the implementation of CEFR is the technical divide, which marginalizes teachers struggling with digital inclusion due to limited or no ICT-supported teaching and learning activities (Shah et al., 2025). Thus, aligning the Nepalese national syllabus with the CEFR proficiency levels proves an academic and administrative challenge.

The CEFR was developed for the well-resourced environment of European multilingual regions; however, to adapt it to the diverse and resource-constrained educational environment, such as that of Nepal, it required some careful customization (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). Therefore, without having a supportive national policy and ensuring cooperation among concerned stakeholders, CEFR stands as a mere superficial reform with a microscopic perspective for change. Deep-rooted exam-centric cultures in Nepal tend towards summative assessment; however, with insufficient consideration of teachers, students, and parents regarding

continuous communicative performance assessment, the cultural setting provides some resistance to the CEFR's progressive assessment ideology (Carless, 2007).

Nepal can learn from Malaysian experiences that illustrate the consequences of insufficient teacher preparedness, where teachers initially resisted the adoption of CEFR due to a lack of clarity about the framework and inadequate support mechanisms for teachers (Kaur et al., 2019; Kaur & Jian, 2022). Teacher engagement and their proactive involvement in the implementation of this framework can be assured by realigning training programmes to suit the framework, providing ample support to teachers, and encouraging them to share their challenges, prospects, and innovative ideas.

Similarly, the CEFR framework, developed in, for, and within the European multilingual milieu, which is endowed with highly advanced educational infrastructures and vast resources for language teaching classes, might face significant obstacles when adopted directly and wholly into resource-constrained and linguistically diverse contexts like that of Nepal. Thus, instead of a wholesale transplantation, the framework needs to be thoughtfully customized to suit the unique contexts of countries like Nepal. Contextualizing the CEFR, directing policymakers and curriculum developers to reinterpret CEFR descriptors in light of their local linguistic realities, cultural norms, and educational constraints (North, 2014). This involves more than just aligning assessment rubrics; it also entails translating CEFR into curricular content, textbooks, classroom activities, and pedagogical objectives.

Similarly, insights from Japan (Bučar et al., 2014) and Vietnam (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020) also support the gradual and phased implementation of CEFR to address the ground reality in Nepal, where more than 70% of schools are in rural and resource-scarce environments (MOEST, 2020). It demands adapting CEFR descriptors in a manner that is flexible enough for both teachers and learners within these contexts to prevent any further educational inequity.

Logistic requirements for CEFR implementation, such as language laboratories and digital audio-visual tools or interactive speaking assessments, pose a significant challenge in Nepal's education system, particularly in rural, government-run schools. In this line, Myende (2018) points towards resource constraints being a hindrance to pedagogical reforms in low-income countries, thus causing a gap between theory and practice in policy. Nepal's Ministry of Education would do well to prioritize budget allocations to address infrastructural gaps, foster

ICT integration, and ensure fair access to CEFR-aligned materials across the regions.

As observed by Little (2007), the core concepts of CEFR, such as can-do descriptors, communicative competence, and formative, performance-based assessment, demand a shift in pedagogical thinking away from traditional product- and teacher-centred methods towards learner-centred and communicative approaches. Therefore, teachers must understand and be aware of these principles. Such understanding and initiatives become even more significant to provide continuous, full-time training for teachers in the context where widespread conventional teaching methods are primarily based on rote memorization. Short-term or one-off workshops are insufficient; instead, systematic, ongoing professional development programmes that incorporate practical pedagogy, contextualised examples, and reflective practice are essential to equip teachers with the confidence and skills to implement CEFR-aligned instruction effectively.

Opportunities for Enhancement through CEFR

Despite these challenges, the integration of CEFR may offer significant opportunities to transform English assessment practices in Nepal. The framework provides a standardized and internationally recognized nomenclature of language proficiencies, enabling assessment practices across diverse schools and regions (Council of Europe, 2001). At a time when Nepal is opening itself to the global education and labor market, CEFR-based assessments have the potential to enhance the academic mobility and employability of students by aligning their skills with international standards. The CEFR lets all language skills be evaluated equally, away from the former focus on just grammar, into pure communicative and performance-based assessment with an emphasis on genuine communicative use. Malaysian experiences, for instance, show that wise adoption of CEFR has altered systematic teaching and testing to fit global standards (Kaur & Jian, 2022). Moreover, CEFR-aligned certifications are widely accepted by universities, employers, and immigration authorities around the world, thereby offering better international education and employment opportunities to Nepalese students (Little, 2007). Pedagogically, CEFR fosters learner autonomy by promoting self-assessment and goal-setting through “can-do” descriptors, which can motivate learners and shift the classroom culture from exam-centered to learning-centered (Little, 2005).

Contextual Adaptation and Policy-Practice Gaps

There is an urgent need to set up a CEFR system for Nepal, keeping its unique socio-cultural and linguistic context in mind, as the geographical, linguistic, and socio-economic dynamism of Nepal impedes the uniform application of educational frameworks developed in foreign lands and cultures (Poudel et al., 2022). In Nepal, more than 70% of schools are dispersed in rural locations with scant resources (MoEST, 2020), and hence the CEFR descriptors have to be localized and customized so as to suit local teachers who have received limited training and can barely avail reference materials or technological support.

The multilingual situation in Nepal, where many indigenous languages coexist along with Nepali the lingua franca, calls for an assessment framework that accommodates linguistic diversity to ensure equitable access for all learners (Yadava, 2013). There is also a clear lack of cohesion between national education policies and their implementation in schools. The reform programmes initiated and run by the Ministry of Education seldom witness a meaningful participation of these frontline actors. Hence, they view the CEFR reforms with some suspicion and question the sustainability of these unless an ongoing investment programme in teacher capacity-building, curriculum revision, and infrastructure development is laid out. This gap between policy and practice will have to be addressed by participatory processes where educators, linguists, policymakers, and local authorities will work hand in hand.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), successful educational reforms require the interconnected actions of multiple actors and layers of influence, from classroom teachers and learners to parents, community leaders, policymakers, and curriculum developers. Lacking transparent communication about the CEFR-based reforms' intended aims and benefits. In the absence of a wide-range inclusive dialogue that involves these stakeholders in the very reforms, CEFR stands to be forcibly implemented as a top-down decree hardly accepted downwards. Engaging parents and communities to recalibrate educational expectations away from rote learning and toward communicative competence is essential. Similarly, continuous feedback loops between policymakers, educators, and local authorities will foster ownership and adaptability, increasing the likelihood of sustainable reform.

Finally, the phased implementation of the CEFR-based assessment reforms through pilot studies is important to ascertain actual viability and fairness. It allows reforms to be piloted in assessments so that factors such as reliability, washback,

and cultural appropriateness can be duly considered before any large-scale adoption. In Nepal, it would be helpful if some pilot districts or schools for new assessment tools could be selected to conduct research or experiments on their applicability. Data and findings from these pilot studies will serve as the foundation upon which instructional curricula, teacher development, and resource development strategies can be altered to meet CEFR requirements. Thus, this can greatly reduce one danger that weighs upon failure in big-scale implementation and is a practice that calls for reflection and, at the same time, for evidence-based policy making.

Stakeholders' Perceptions of CEFR-Based Reform

Interviews revealed a whole spectrum of attitudes among teachers and policymakers toward CEFR adoption. Most teachers, while appreciating the framework for its comprehensive and communicative approach, had some pragmatic concerns about its actual implementation in the current classroom situation. For instance, a teacher in the Kailali district commented on CEFR, "It sounds good in theory, but our classrooms are not ready. We don't have good speakers for listening tests, and most of our students have never spoken in English." Another participant from Lalitpur emphasized the need for professional development: "I've heard of CEFR but never received any formal training on it. We need workshops, sample tests, and classroom materials." Policymakers, on the other hand, were generally optimistic about the CEFR's potential to bring Nepal's education on par with international standards but viewed phased implementation, contextual adaptation, and pilot testing as critical steps before any nationwide rollout. One Curriculum Development Centre official noted, "We are working on aligning new textbooks with CEFR levels. But we need pilot studies, feedback from teachers, and flexibility in assessment before scaling nationwide." Although parents and students were not directly interviewed, teachers reported that parental pressure for exam results often discourages innovative, formative assessment approaches, reflecting a broader cultural constraint documented in Asian educational reform literature (Carless, 2007).

The integration of CEFR in Nepalese ELT presents significant opportunities for modernizing assessment and pedagogy, enhancing learner communicative competence, and aligning Nepal's ELT with international standards. However, this potential can only be realized if these processes are purposefully contextualized, emphasizing teacher development, curriculum adaptation, infrastructure investment, comprehensive stakeholder engagement, and phased piloting. A thorough consideration of these various factors will enable the country to cultivate an English

language assessment landscape in Nepal that is student-centered, equity-focused, and relevant to the global context at least on paper.

In summary, this study's findings reveal that Nepal's current English assessment system inadequately evaluates holistic communicative competence. The CEFR may serve as a possible solution in this regard as it offers a promising framework to standardize and enhance assessment quality. However, to improve assessment and reach that promise, colossal problems of teacher training, infrastructure, curriculum alignment, and sociolinguistic diversity need to be addressed. Perceptions of the various stakeholders reveal cautious optimism as well as apprehension about the feasibility of the implementation framework, further emphasizing the urgency and necessity of an inclusive, context-driven, and continuous reform policy in Nepal.

Conclusion

The adoption of the CEFR in the Nepalese context can be utilized as a means to improve English language learning and teaching, fostering communicative competence, learner autonomy, and transparent outcome-based learning objectives, all of which constitute the foundation of any contemporary language education system. Amidst the traditional methods at the backdrop, implementation of CEFR-informed pedagogy is likely to face significant challenges such as teacher unpreparedness (pedagogical and content knowledge), insufficient teacher training, traditional teaching approaches, mismatch between curricular goals and assessment practices, and disparity between urban and rural pedagogical settings. The CEFR in English language education offers an internationally recognized framework for language proficiency and enhances academic mobility and employability by aligning students' skills with global standards. Furthermore, the CEFR shifts the assessment from grammar-based to real-life, communicative and performance-based evaluation, reforms the teaching and assessment in line with international standards, gets global recognition for further study and the job market, and promotes learner autonomy. Realizing such benefits, the CEFR should be contextually adapted in Nepal's diverse socio-cultural and linguistic contexts. Regarding the stakeholders, they show their cautious and positive concern but highlight the need for inclusive, context-sensitive, gradual, synergetic, and strategic reform to ensure sustainable and effective integration of CEFR in Nepal's English language education.

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