# A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of practices

## 1 OVERVIEW

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**Country:** Bulgaria                    **Institution**: AVO Language and Examination Centre
Eaquals

**Type of context:** Programme/school level

**Educational sector:** Adult (Extensive language school)

**Main focus:** Teaching Practices; Learning/Self-Assessment; Classroom Teacher Assessment

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## SUMMARY

**Name:** A 'can do'-based curriculum with 18 sublevels

**Abstract:**
Flexible, coherent and pragmatic implementation of a CEFR curriculum, based on CEFR descriptors, and triangulating detailed objectives between CEFR descriptors, coursebooks, and the Eaquals Core Inventory.

**Stage:** Planning, Implementation, Assessment

**Theme:** Curriculum, Assessment

**CEFR aspects used:** Levels, descriptors, assessment with defined criteria

**Main features of this example:**
- CEFR descriptors for curriculum, daily teaching, assessment
- Detailed objectives developed from descriptors, EAQUALS Core Inventory and coursebooks
- Systematic teacher training, including standardisation training
- Teacher assessment backed up by progress tests

**Quality principles particularly demonstrated:** Relevance, Validity, Transparency, Coherence, Inclusiveness, Sustainability

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European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe
www.ecml.at/CEFRqualitymatrix

# 2 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

**Background:** The school is a successful language school in Sofia, teaching English as a foreign language, and is a member of Eaquals.  The CEFR was introduced and implemented in the school in the early 2000s.

**Stated aims:** Systematic alignment of course aims, level descriptions, assessment/test content, and grading criteria to CEFR level descriptors.

**Steps/stages:**

1. *Mapping school levels against the CEFR levels.*

The school has 18 sublevels which have been mapped against the CEFR levels, e.g. A1 and A1+ for the CEFR level A1, B1.1 and B1.2 for the CEFR level B1, etc. We choose course books which are well-calibrated to the CEFR, on the one hand, and which are adequately building upon each other in order to prepare the students towards the successful performance in the Cambridge Exams main suite. The initial approach we took was cross-referencing the course book materials we use, and the Can-do descriptors for each of the levels, as in CEFR. On the basis of these, we have developed Can-do-statements for all courses at all levels in the school: Young Learner  (YL) courses, General English adult courses, Business English courses, English for Communication courses, and Exam Preparation courses.

The rationale behind doing it was to relate the descriptors from the CEFR for the particular level, to the course syllabus and the materials used in each course.

We developed checklists of Can-dos for the following areas: Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking. These have now dual (or even triple) function in the school curriculum: we use them for
- needs analysis and self-assessment at the beginning,
- mid-course assessment, and
- at the end of course.

We have also integrated the Can-do descriptors in the course syllabuses. Also, in the process of teaching, teachers use the Can-do derived lesson objectives to familiarise students with the lesson main aims, and thus give them a practice-oriented focus at the beginning of the lesson, and a sense of achievement at the end of it.

The latest stage of our curriculum development is a project about identifying the core language for all levels / sub-levels we have, YLs included. We have triangulated the contents of the Core Inventory for General English, our experienced teachers' "inner understanding" for the essential language for each level, and the Can-dos to come up with checklists of language items which are essential for mastering the language at each sub-level, as well as for moving a level up.

The next stage is transforming the existing progress and final tests into step tests, containing two parts: core and mastery level language. Students cannot do the mastery part without having achieved 90% or above in the core language test. The next stage will be labelling teaching resources / supplementary materials according to the items in the core language list for each level.

The final way we use CEFR descriptors is in developing assessment criteria for the productive skills (i.e. speaking and writing) on the basis of a global descriptor for the level, plus other aspects of assessment we have found relevant.


## 2. Teacher training, especially for new staff.

Teacher training sessions are devoted to the application of the Can-do-statements in the classroom use:
- Introduction of teachers to the levels as specified by CEFR, and how descriptors are graded according to the competences described by CEFR;
- Classroom activities which can be used by teachers for the purposes of introducing the Can-do-statements to students in a more interactive, learning-oriented, practical manner;
- The benefits of using the can-do-statements from both teachers' and students' points of view, which was later passed on to the students.

Standardisation training includes various approaches and techniques that are intended to include the whole teaching staff, esp. at the beginning of term, or prior to assessment periods, e.g. final tests / mock exams conduct, or during induction periods.

Inexperienced teachers are given initial training in the CEFR levels:
- how to discriminate between the different CEFR levels by activities in which descriptors are gapped, jumbled up in different order, etc.;
- how to work with the YL Portfolio and the school Can-do-statements;
- how to integrate the Can-do work in the language work done in class by using a bank of classroom activities the school has developed, etc.

More experienced staff, e.g. teachers who administer the placement tests, are subject to standardisation training, too: they are asked to provide their own descriptors for the CEFR levels, and then compare their ideas against the CEFR descriptors. They also are trained with official samples to define the students' level.

Official DVDs (see Council of Europe and Eaquals websites) are used for the purposes of standardisation of speaking assessment of the whole team. Local samples are normally used for the purposes of writing standardisation for the lower levels, and Cambridge ESOL samples for B2, C1 and C2 levels.


## 3. System of Assessment
### a) Teacher continuous assessment, in relation to CEFR descriptors


### b) Assessment of performance in specific spoken/written tasks, assessed with CEFR-related criteria

The schemes of work for each course contain special writing and speaking sessions, incorporated for the purposes of introducing students to the assessment criteria for spoken and written production (hence the descriptors for the level), as well as to the format of the testing tasks. The criteria used have been designed especially for our purposes, and contain a general reference to the CEFR descriptor plus features specific for the particular mode of delivery, e.g. discourse management, range of structures or

vocabulary, etc. The students are given a mark out of 5 in each criterion, and the final score is added up and converted into percentage. The mark sheets used per each pair of students are a very convenient way of making record of the student's performance plus the mistakes made, which serves as a further reference and feedback. Self-assessment is embedded in course work, too, and is based on the school CEFR-based Can-do-statements. Students use these checklists at the beginning of course to outline their priorities, then work with them mid-course to reflect on the progress they have made, and at the end of the course when they have done the final test and are capable of estimating what they have achieved. Again, the school is moving to digitised versions of the self-assessment process with can-dos via the AVO Online Zone, which is a bespoke platform developed for our own purposes.

### c) Information from tests: how tests are used to support and influence teacher judgements.

For all courses there are progress tests for the span of the course: a) Skills tests which include testing of Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and b) Language systems tests, which focus on Grammar, Vocabulary and Functions. At the end of the course, there is a final test which includes all these components. The format of these tests is similar to the course book types of tasks in order to reduce students' anxiety and not to impede their performance. Each of the above components carries equal weight, and scores are calculated in percentage for each skill. The most recent developments are: a) digitising the tests and giving students and teachers automatized feedback and error analysis; b) aligning the tests contents with the core language for the level.

Progress test results are used by the teachers as an indication of areas that need further attention and remedial work to be done during the course. They support teachers' judgement about the students' performance at the end of the course, when final test results are issued. On the basis of both, the teacher recommends next level and course for each individual student. The teacher compares progress and final test results in case there are instances of inconsistent scoring by students in certain papers, or results below the pass mark. Basically, test results plus teacher impression of continuous work of the student complement each other, and are crucial about recommending the next course and level they need to take. Course co-ordinators and teachers monitor students' performance in progress tests and if results in the first test are a way under the pass mark, or the general performance for the group, action is taken to either change the student's group / level, or offer remedial measures, e.g. tuition, extra remedial work via the Online zone, etc. On other occasions, students are given to complete an alternative paper for the same level and course to check if there will be a deviation from the previous test results.

### 4. Moderation techniques

Individual teachers' assessment is monitored by academic directors and course co-ordinators who are experienced members of staff with appropriate qualifications. The latter monitor students' results in progress and final tests. If there are large discrepancies noticed, written work is double–marked and discussed with the teacher.

Co-marking of students' performance in the speaking component of the final test for General English, Business English and English for Communication courses is done almost every year, one third of the teaching staff being involved. These are done by some of the teacher trainers and the oral examiners at the school. (AVO is a Cambridge approved examination centre, too.) Overall, results prove to be encouraging as there are not huge differences in the grades awarded. Also, it becomes clear that all teachers observed stick to the standard task format: individual turn and interaction phase. The materials used are matched to the students' age and interests, too, and are well mapped against the descriptors for the level.

In addition, each course has a course co-ordinator. They have access to the group's test results and monitor closely students' performance after the administration of the progress and final tests. If the results are lower than the pass mark (60%), adequate remedial action is taken to improve individual student's performance: change of course or level, recommendation for doing an alternative course at the same level, supplementing the course with extra individual work, personalising the feedback via the AVO Online zone. Inexperienced teachers are monitored when conducting tests in terms of: assessment of speaking / writing and sticking to the assessment criteria, co-marking of students' written work if deemed necessary, doing double-marking with an experienced member of staff.

**People/roles:**
- Experienced teachers help further develop assessment criteria
- Teacher trainers and the oral examiners double mark
- Course coordinators monitor the relationship between test results and teacher grades

**Quality Assurance procedures employed:**
See above

# 3 RESULTS

**What was achieved:** The school has a transparent, coherent curriculum and assessment system linked to the CEFR. Recent developments have facilitated the flexibility with which the school can meet the needs of learners who progress at different speeds. There is an ongoing development of it by an engaged teaching staff.

**Impact:**

- Do students like it?
- Do teachers find it difficult?
- Do end users notice it?

**Benefits for the students:**
- They can make a criterion-based judgement about their own progress. Can-do statements serve as a solid basis for conducting meaningful self-assessment at regular intervals throughout the course.
- They have clearer learning goals both on a daily basis and longer term
- They learn how to relate classwork, i.e. activities, tasks, tests, etc. to concrete learning outcomes and communicative competences

**Challenges for the teachers:**
- To translate (and chunk) their daily work into concrete learning goals and outcomes,
- To see the bigger picture with the whole learning pathway instead of getting bogged down into covering the book / syllabus or aiming at high test scores
- To work out the more abstract meaning of the can-dos and to relate it to concrete, tangible results

- To develop a more solid understanding for each of the levels and sub-levels of the CEFR

**How it has made a difference to teaching:**
- Teaching has become more action and result orientated
- It has gained greater focus and thus its results have become more easy to measure / assess
- Teaching has moved away from the book into the outer world., as teachers have started thinking about the real language competences their students have acquired as a result of their teaching

**Impact in terms of end users (sponsors, employers, parents)**

- They have become better aware of the actual results of the learning process
- Their children's / employees' language competences have become externally validated
- They receive a clearer idea of the learning goals by translating these into concrete everyday skills and abilities

# 4 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

- Don't start from scratch – use all previously developed syllabus and curriculum documents
- Make sure teachers are well familiar with the concept behind the CEFR, as well as the institution's way of interpreting its rationale and contents
- Try to adopt an approach to syllabus / test design which allows for greater flexibility and independence from the course books you use
- Try to experiment in terms of making the CEFR more tangible by binding its contents to the actual learning outcomes and results
- Think of the language that has to be internalised by your learners in order to be capable of operating at a certain CEFR level, as well as of the actual learning that has to take place
- Devise your own ways of measuring achievement and learning outcomes. Doing only progress / final tests is not enough.
- Train your learners to measure their progress against the specified learning goals