# AM I AWARE OF MY LEVEL IN ENGLISH? — COMPARING STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF CEFR LEVELS AND DIAGNOSTIC TEST RESULTS

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## Abstract

*University students in Portugal are often required to certify their level of English before, after or during their course of studies, either as a degree or international studies program requirement. Consequently, at the Catholic University in Lisbon, students are often asked to take writing and speaking diagnostic tests in order to asses their proficiency in the foreign language and place them into the right Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level. Although students in Portugal are generally aware of the different levels, they seldom lack specific knowledge concerning the objectives or descriptors that the reference involves and hesitate when asked what is their level of English as a Foreign Language. This lack of knowledge constrains one of the advantages of the CEFR for learners which would be "to encourage practitioners in the language field to reflect on their current practice, particularly in relation to learners' practical language learning needs, the setting of suitable objectives and the tracking of learner progress" (North, 2006). It would be desirable that such framework, which seems to offer such clear guidance for teachers, would also be beneficial for the students, particularly at tertiary level, given that most graduate and post-graduate course requirements around the world are now aligned with the CEFR standards. This study compares students' diagnostic test results to their perception of their own CEFR levels. The data include a speaking interview to assess oral skills, a written diagnostic test to assess grammar, vocabulary and writing and a questionnaire based on the CEFR self-assessment grid. Two undergraduate classes enrolled in the Media Studies course participated in the study which main goal was to achieve a better understanding of students' perception of the CEFR levels and, ultimately, to help increase student's awareness of the language learning process.*

*Keywords: Applied Linguistics, Action Research, EFL, CEFR levels, Language Learning Awareness*

## 1. Introduction

Back in 2006, when I was overseeing the implementation of the English as a Foreign Language Curriculum in a private school in Lisbon, which had recently inaugurated its middle school and secondary school branches, the headmistress and I had a meeting with Desmond Rome, the Cambridge University Press manager in Portugal at the time. Speaking enthusiastically, as he always did, about the art of English language teaching and the importance of the CEFR levels to measure learners' progress, Desmond pointed a finger at each one of us and said: "You're a C2 and you're a C1, did you know that?"

Although the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment" had been published in 2001, the changes were still gradually being introduced in foreign language education policies and practices in Portugal and, other than the language teachers themselves, not all educators were aware of the impact that the CEFR woud have on the foreign language teaching and learning field.

By the end of the meeting, the headmistress asked: "I'd like all our students to be C2 at the end of the 12th grade, is that possible?". My answer must have been something politically correct such as "we can try..."

As a matter of fact, in spite of the advantages that the international standardization had brought to the educational community, particularly in terms of syllabi and assessment, it also presented several challenges, including the fact that educational policies in Portugal do not contemplate streaming based on proficiency levels. Multi-level classes deal with different levels of learners expertise and that is a challenge to overcome when trying to apply the CEFR

framework to the curriculum. On the other hand, mixed ability classes also inhibit learners perception of the CEFR levels overall, as well as the perception of their own personal level and progress.

As a complement to the EFL school curriculum, many students in Portugal are exposed to English as a foreign language learning and testing outside school, particularly in private language centres or tutors . Cambridge exams have long been popular in Portugal and are promoted by several state and private schools around the country, particularly since the *Cambridge English: Key for Schools*, — a joint effort between *Cambridge Assessment English* and some Portuguese leading private companies and foundations, — was implemented in 2014.

Although *Key for Schools Portugal* only covers levels A1 to B1 of the CEFR, according to Nigel Pike (2022), Director of Assessment for Cambridge Assessment English, the aim would be to give students "an internationally recognised qualification and an excellent first step towards more advanced certificates such as the famous *Cambridge English: First* and *Cambridge English: Proficiency" (ibidem)*.

*Cambridge English* works closely with the teachers, naturally within the CEFR guidelines, the national syllabi and materials are also designed with reference to the framework levels, so by the time students enter tertiary education,  they would be expected to have a notion of their level of English within the CEFR  framework

Specific university courses require different levels of English, particularly the ones that include international programmes, and so university students are often asked about their level of English language proficiency. However, some students knowledge about the CEFR levels, as well as the perception of their personal level of English proficiency, is often vague and imprecise.

This fact seems to contradict one of the CEFR 2001 main aims which is "to encourage practitioners in the language field to reflect on their current practice, particularly in relation to learners' practical language learning needs, the setting of suitable objectives and the tracking of learner progress" (North, 2006: 1). However, the general perception of EFL teachers at university is that students often lack this kind of knowledge and reflection. This observation led to the questions on this study.

Overall, the research hopes to obtain a better understanding of the CEFR levels from the learner's perspective as well  to gauge the use of the framework as needs analysis tool.

Ultimately, it aims at analysing whether an increased awareness of such levels can help to determine the gap between learners existing knowledge and the desired knowledge, by creating learning objectives around the students specific needs in English as foreign language.

The following research questions were addressed:

1. What is university students understanding of CEFR levels and what is the perception of their own level of English language proficiency compared with the results obtained by the teacher assessment?

2. Can improved knowledge of the CEFR levels and descriptors help students reflect on the process of language learning and enhance motivation to improve performance in the foreign language?


## 2. Methodology

The methodology used for the purpose of this study is based on Nunan's approach to the action research/ case study method (1992: 77), which, according to the author "typically observes the characteristics of an individual unit," in this case two English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at the Catholic University in Portugal, in the hope that the "insights yielded by the case study can be put to immediate use" in its particular context *(ibidem:* 78).

Although the observations in this paper draw basically from the initial phase of the study, the aim was that both the teaching and learning processes could benefit from the information collected by the teacher at the beginning of the academic year and that the exchange of information between teacher and students would be reflected in the students' performance and achievements throughout the semester.

The data was collected from the diagnostic test results that students are usually given during the first week of classes, which was completed with a brief questionnaire aimed at guiding students reflection on their level of EFL proficiency based on the CEFR.

The same test and questionnaire were given to 41 Media Studies students, twenty enrolled in a first year class and twenty-one in a second year class.

A brief explanation about the CEFR levels, as well as copies of the global scale descriptors was also provided for students' reference. The test and the questionnaire were answered on the same day and students took between 60 to 90 minutes to finish both tasks.

Speaking proficiency was assessed during individual interviews with the students, which also included further clarification on how the framework could help to check progress and be used as needs analysis tool.

## 3. Results

Out of the 41 participants in the study, 31,7% had taken one of the Cambridge exams and were divided as follows:
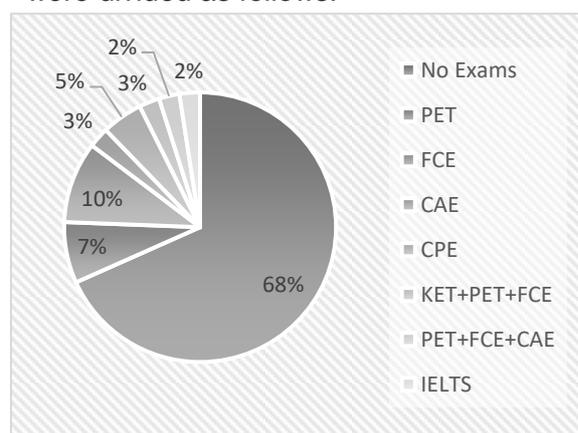


study answered that they "didn't know" what was their level of English as a Foreign Language overall, but provided a level for all the other skills; while in the English III class, three participants answered "I don't know" for all skills, including the overall level.

Only one of the students who answered "I don't know" for the overall level provided a level to individual skills. Overall, 19,5% of the total number of participants replied that didn't know what was their level of English proficiency.

Generally speaking, three out of the twenty English I students who participated in the

When questioned about these answers, most students said that they had never been officially assessed, so they weren't sure about their levels, others said they couldn't clearly understand the descriptors.

The results obtained by the two classes were analysed separately in an attempt to check whether there would be any discrepancies between first year and second year students perceptions of CEFR levels.

8.C2
7.C1+
6.C1
5.B2+
4.B2
3.B1+
2.B1
1.A2+
0.A2

**English I — CEFR Levels**
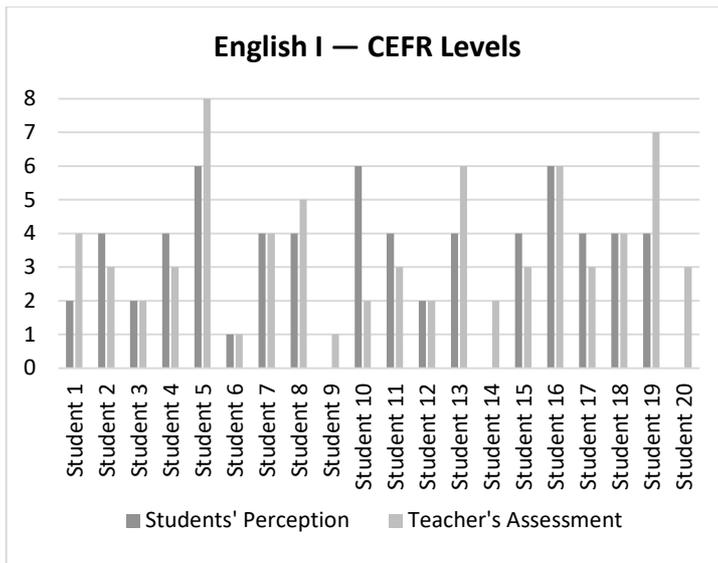
The graph clearly shows that most students' perception of their CEFR levels differs from the results obtained in the diagnostic and speaking tests evaluated by the teacher. Only in five cases do the levels coincide. Overall, 55% of the students answers differ from the teacher's assessment results.

However, some discrepancies are greater than others, the most significant being the three students who replied that they "didn't know" what their level of English was and who were evaluated as A2+, B1 and B1+, generally lower than the general average, as well as student 10, who selected the C1 level, but was evaluated by the teacher as B1. He/she admitted he/ she had misunderstood the information provided.

On the other hand, student 19, who selected the B2 level but was evaluated C1+ by the teacher is a very confident and outspoken learner, but said that he/ she had never taken an official exam and, therefore, was unsure of the level.

The remaining cases, where students' perceptions differed one level from the teacher's evaluation, do not seem as relevant, although it should be noted that the majority of students perceptions of their level tend to be higher than the teacher's assessment.

Nevertheless, generally speaking, in the English I class, this difference is not significant, as the number of students who evaluated their CEFR level higher than the teacher is very close to the number of students who evaluated their CEFR level lower than the teacher.

| |
|---|
| 8.C2 |
| 7.C1+ |
| 6.C1 |
| 5.B2+ |
| 4.B2 |
| 3.B1+ |
| 2.B1 |
| 1.A2+ |
| 0.A2 |

**ENGLISH III—CEFR LEVELS**
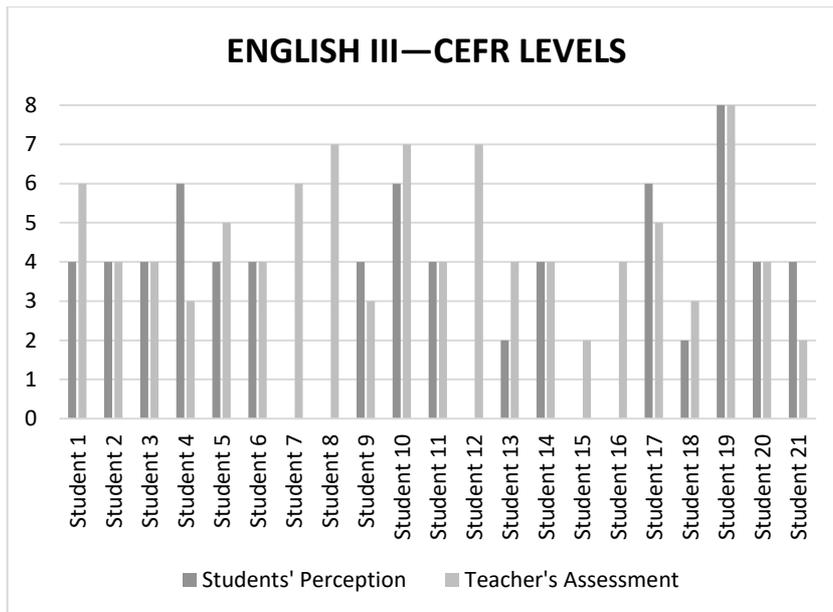


Although the observations drawn from the English III class do not differ substantially from the English I class, some aspects are interesting to note. The percentage of students whose answers differ from the teacher's assessment results is lower, around 43%, however, the number of students who replied "I don't know" was higher than in the English I class.

Two of these students who were evaluated C1+ said they had achieved a high level of English proficiency in non-academic environments and, therefore, had no knowledge about the CEFR levels. The other three students simply said that they were unsure of their level of English.

Just as in the English I class, five students perceptions of CEFR levels differed only one level from the teacher evaluation, which is probably not very significant, although the discrepancy is greater in four other cases. Again, the difference between the number of students who evaluate their CEFR level higher or lower than the teacher is not significant.

Overall, taking both classes observations into consideration, 48,8% of students' perceptions of CEFR levels differed from the teacher's assessment results, 31,7% of students' perception of English proficiency matched the teachers evaluation results and 19,5% of the number of students who participated in the study had no perception of their CEFR at all.

## 4. Conclusions and further research

The research questions that guided this study aimed at helping university students and teachers understand whether the students' perception of their level of English proficiency matched the results obtained by the teacher assessment.

Furthermore, it intended to observe if students' analysis and reflection about their CEFR levels would help the process of language learning and enhance motivation to improve performance in the foreign language.

Although the results reveal that the majority of students had no precise knowledge of their CEFR level, and some even avoided suggesting a point on the scale, during the interviews, most students showed interest in getting more input about the framework and knowing their exact level of English proficiency.

Further research is needed to understand if the reflection and analysis of CEFR levels and descriptors actually supported students' confidence to establish

personal short and long term learning objectives and monitor progress in the foreign language learning ladder.

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