

CEFR: Common European Framework

What is it?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a tool for defining, tracking, and recognizing progress in learning a language. It describes what language learners have to be able to do in order to communicate through understanding (listening and reading), speaking (production and interaction) and writing.

Where did it come from and why?

When the European Union (EU) was formed, citizens were given the right to work in all countries that were part of the EU. Language proficiency and how to describe it in a universally accepted way was a challenge that was given to the European Council of Languages. Over many years, with wide consultation and research throughout Europe, the Common European Framework was developed. It allows employers and schools to use shared understanding of language levels to determine suitability for work and learning. Many European countries have language proficiency exams and they use the Framework to describe the results.

Who decided to use it in Canada and why?

In 2008 the Roadmap to Bilingualism was created by the Canadian government, in cooperation with the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC), with the goal being to have more bilingual Canadians. The first challenge was how to determine if someone is bilingual. Is it that you can write a letter or a report in English and French? Is it how fluently you can speak or how well you understand? CMEC asked Dr. Lawrence Vandergrift to conduct research in this area and determine how to create a Canadian standard for bilingualism. He concluded that the Common European Framework was the most comprehensive and comprehensible way to describe language proficiency and that it was flexible enough to be used in Canada where education is a provincial responsibility. In January 2010 the CMEC published “Working with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the Canadian Context: Guide for policy-makers and curriculum designers”. The need for a common framework has been voiced by the Commissioner of Official Languages and the House of Commons Committee on Official Languages and is supported by the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) and Canadian Parents for French (CPF).

What can we do with the Framework?

- Language learners, young and life-long, will be able to describe their level of language proficiency with ‘I can’ statements for our official languages, French and English, and other languages being learned at home and in the community.
- Language learners will be able to set proficiency goals.
- Language teachers will be able to assess the proficiency of students and provide parents with meaningful reporting that answers the question ‘can my child understand, speak, and

write’ the language being studied.

- School boards and Ministries of Education will be able to set proficiency goals by program and grade.
- School boards will have a tool to determine appropriate placements of transfer students between programs, boards, and provinces.
- Ministries of Education will be able to link language curriculum to internationally recognized proficiency levels.
- Secondary and post-secondary institutions will be able to recognize measurable achievement in language proficiency.
- Professional organizations will be able to set standards of language proficiency for language teachers.
- Employers will be able to identify the level of language proficiency needed for a job and assess the suitability of candidates’ language proficiency.

What are the levels?

- Basic User: A1, A2
- Independent User: B1, B2
- Proficient User: C1, C2

Each level has 5 categories of effective communication: understanding when listening, understanding when reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing.

What is the European Language Portfolio?

1.25 million Europeans are keeping portfolios in more than 75 different formats designed for local needs. The portfolio belongs to the language learner and is for goal setting, self-assessment, and documenting progress. It has 3 main components:

- Language Passport: where the levels are recorded for as many languages as the learner is learning;
- Language Biography: where the learner records goals and learning activities in and outside the classroom;
- Dossier: contains samples of work that document the learner’s progress. It could include samples of written work and recordings.

How is the CEFR being implemented in Ontario and across Canada?

The Ontario Ministry of Education is supporting pilot programs on the CEFR at some boards and is exploring its use for the new French curriculum. Alberta high-school students are offered testing to determine their level of proficiency. British Columbia has set B2 as the goal for French Immersion graduates and is using the CEFR in new curricula for French, German, Japanese, Mandarin, Punjabi, and Spanish. The Atlantic provinces are reviewing French Second-Language and English Language Learner (ELL) curricula and are considering the Framework. The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) is developing the CEFR assessment tasks and resources for second-language teachers to use with Grades 4-12.

Prepared by CPF Ontario, in consultation with the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT)