

Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

What is it?

The CEFR provides a common basis to define language proficiency. It offers tools for teachers and students to track and recognize progress in learning a language. It describes the skills and knowledge that language learners need to communicate effectively through understanding (listening and reading), speaking (production and interaction) and writing. The approach is action-oriented with a focus on what skills the learner needs to do real-life tasks with specific goals.

Where did it come from and why?

When the European Union (EU) was formed, citizens were given the right to work in all EU countries. A common way to describe language proficiency was needed to match workplace needs with worker skills and the education system. In response, the Council of Europe developed, researched and validated the CEFR over the last 40 years. Many European countries have standardized language proficiency exams that link to the CEFR. For French, that is the DELF (Diplôme d'études en langue française). The CEFR is used in countries around the world including Brazil, Australia and Japan.

Who decided to use it in Canada and why?

In 2003, the Government of Canada created an Action Plan for Official Languages that included the goal of increasing the percent of bilingual 15 to 19 year olds from 24% to 50%. The first challenge was to define what being bilingual means. Is it that you can write a report in English and French? Speak fluently? Follow films in both languages without effort? The Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) asked Dr. Larry Vandergrift to research this and to determine how to create a “transparent and coherent system for describing language proficiency” in Canada, particularly in education. He concluded that the CEFR was the most comprehensive and understandable way to describe language proficiency and that it is 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 House and Senate Committees on Official Languages and the Commissioner of Official Languages have voiced the need for a common way to describe language proficiency. The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) and Canadian Parents for French (CPF) support the use of the CEFR.

What are the CEFR levels?

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

Each level has ‘I can’ statements that describe what language learners can understand (listening and reading), can say (spoken production and interaction) and write in the language they are learning.

What is a Language Portfolio?

A tool that learners use to set language learning goals and document progress. It belongs to the language learner and can be entirely electronic. It has 3 components:

- **Language Passport:** the learner records ‘I can’ statements by level for languages being learned.
- **Language Biography:** the learner records goals and learning activities in and outside the classroom.
- **Dossier:** contains samples of written and oral work that document the learner’s progress.

What can we do with the CEFR?

- Both young and life-long language learners can describe their language proficiency with ‘I can’ statements and set goals for learning our official languages, French and English, and other languages being learned at home and in the community.
- Language teachers can identify their students’ language profile and provide parents with meaningful reporting that answers the question ‘can my child understand, speak and write?’ the language being learned.
- School boards and Ministries of Education can communicate French as a Second Language program outcome goals using common, plain language and link language teaching and learning to the CEFR.
- School boards can use it to appropriately place transfer students from other programs, boards and provinces.
- Post-secondary institutions can recognize language proficiency qualifications that are CEFR based.
- Professional organizations and universities can set standards for language proficiency for teachers.
- Job seekers can describe their language proficiency using recognized levels rather than grapple with “am I or am I not really bilingual”.
- Employers can describe the language proficiency needed for a job and match it with employees’ skills.

How is the CEFR being implemented across Canada?

The Ontario Ministry of Education used the CEFR in developing the K-12 curriculum for French Second Language (FSL) programs and professional learning resources and facilitates DELF testing for some Grade 12 students. In New Brunswick, language learning programs are aligned with the CEFR and parent presentations about FSL programs include CEFR-based outcome goals. In 2016, the Atlantic provinces launched a CEFR-based language e-portfolio. Alberta FSL students write the DELF exam in increasing numbers. British Columbia grants high school credits based on DELF results. The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) has a CEFR Information Kit for educators and administrators with teaching and assessment tasks and resources.

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