

The CFER in English and Communication Competence: A Decolonial Perspective

Fabian W. Marbaniang
Assam Don Bosco University
fabian.marbaniang@dbuniversity.ac.in
<https://orcid.org/0009000049597279X>

Abstract

The process of migrating from a non-English-speaking and developing country outside Europe to an English-speaking developed country is a prerequisite to having communicative competence in English to work and reside in an English-speaking country, particularly the United Kingdom (UK). The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) assesses and describes the communicative competence level of a foreign language speaker in a European language. The development of English language competence as a foreign or second language learner is gradually phased out in favour of English or other European languages. Preliminary findings suggest a growing demand for communicative competence in English in higher education, a need that has paved the way for the CEFR to be adopted in non-English speaking countries outside Europe. The communicative approach aligned with the CEFR descriptors dominates English Language Education. This paper argues that communicative competence has dominated linguistic competence, and UK-based organisations and publishing houses have contributed to this dominance, utilising the CEFR descriptors as a tool.

Keywords: *CEFR, communicative competence, language competence, decolonisation*

*Corresponding Author © The Author 2025

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Introduction

The English language dominates former British colonies, such as India, fostering connectivity across linguistic, economic, and cultural boundaries. During the British *Raj*, English functioned as a unifying medium in India, enhancing connectivity, building human relationships for trade and commerce, and providing a platform for deliberations and negotiations in favour of the *Raj*. From where we stand, English seems to be the only language connecting us with the rest of the world, even after Independence. For reasons embedded in colonial rule, or for other varied reasons, along with countries that are not English-speaking, the English-speaking countries seem to fit in the category of the first world (Kachru, 1985). Citizens of India, Nepal, and many other countries flock to English-speaking countries for higher education and better job opportunities. People in developing countries often believe that English-speaking countries offer status, reputation, and a comfortable

lifestyle. To achieve a comfortable lifestyle, a B2 to C1 level (as per the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors) in English is a catalyst for such a lifestyle, and Communicative English leads one to the corresponding CEFR level of proficiency. The CEFR has accelerated communicative competence over linguistic competence. Prior to the dawn of communicative competence, language competence served a higher purpose in learning and acquiring English as a foreign or second language. What bearings does the CEFR, aligned with the Communicative Approach, have on developing language and communicative competence?

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (North, 2006) established a standardized assessment of learners' proficiency levels in learning a foreign European language in Europe. The outcome of extensive and deep research in finding and creating familiar grounds, assessing competence in all European languages, and using similar yardsticks has resulted in the CEFR descriptors. The CEFR descriptors have become the point of reference for assessing the proficiency levels of learners learning a foreign European language. Kassim and Hashim (2023) argue that numerous countries outside Europe have accepted the descriptors as original, while others have customized the descriptors to align with learners' standards and local needs. The Thai localised version is the FRELE-TH; the Japanese version is the CEFR-J. Project 2020 in Vietnam and Malaysia was synchronised to meet local requirements. Due to the strong presence of the British Council and Cambridge University Press, the CEFR is recognized in India, but it has yet to be formally accepted, if at all, as a means to assess English proficiency levels. The core purpose of the CEFR, according to Mislevy (1993), is to assess proficiency in communication and "identify the learner's state of competence at a given point of time" (Mislevy, 1993 as cited in North, 2006).

The language descriptors in the CEFR have influenced several aspects of English language education, including curriculum design, syllabus design, teaching methodologies, and assessment. Having determined this, I believe that the course of English Language education globally endorses language and communicative competence on a large scale. The CEFR, as presently projected, does not have to be the end or the only standardised method of assessing communicative competence. If language competence development is emphasised in our school and higher education system, the CEFR may be customised to cater to local needs and promote language competency development. It promotes language competence from the perspective of the communicative approach, a skill-based approach to using English, and the functional use of English. With a concrete support system ranging from a trained teacher-facilitator to learning materials from authentic situations, the development of language competence will aid in the development of communicative competence. The CEFR stresses and assesses communicative competence over language competence; the role could be reversed.

The British Council, Cambridge Language Assessment and Accreditation, Pearson, and Macmillan, all UK-based organisations, have stressed the importance of the CEFR in their support of English Language Education and Assessment in India and worldwide. The CEFR aligns with their programmes in Communicative English, such as the Interchange and Empower programmes, as well as related English language proficiency tests, including Linguaskills, IELTS, Aptis, and Pearson PTE. The English language curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment now revolve around the CEFR, as it prioritizes communicative competence over language competence.

Language Competence and the CEFR

A Google search on comparative studies and other research works conducted to analyse if there is a difference between the levels of language competencies of learners from the convent schools and that of government schools show that works by the *National Council of Educational Research and Training* (NCERT, 2012) and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2020) indicate that students from private schools and convent schools have shown to have acquired competence in use of English as a second language. In contrast, those from the government and vernacular schools struggle with fluency in English. The research findings indicate that learners in private and convent schools have acquired language and communicative competencies. On the other hand, learners from vernacular and government schools struggle with language and communicative competence. These findings suggest that little importance has been given to language and communicative competencies, for unknown reasons.

The term 'competence' refers to "the ideal internalised knowledge" (Chomsky, 1965), which includes syntax, vocabulary, and grammatical rules. The internalised knowledge "consists of speech (phonetic), lexical, phraseological and grammatical (morphological and syntactic) competencies" (Jumanazarov, 2021, p. 42). Thornbury stresses that linguistic competence is the ability of language speakers to compose "newly formed sentences" (Thornbury, 2006, as cited in Jumanazarov, 2021, p. 43). Competence activates the "language faculty" (Marbaniang, 2016, p.91, para. 2) of the learner. The activation occurs through continuous exposure to the target language, providing learners with the language competence required to communicate effectively as a foreign or second language.

Often, competent speakers of English as a second language find it difficult to recall how they learned English. They may recall the methods they used to learn English in school. It is possible that an effective methodology or a skilled English teacher had a significant impact on the learner's education, particularly in the English language. The lifelong impact is the learners' ability to communicate competently in English. While the English language classes offered instruction in composition, comprehension, writing, and grammar, the English literature classes focused on prose, poetry, and drama. There were few opportunities for formal communicative classes in English education. Yet, exposure to literary works provides learners with an opportunity to become competent users of the English language. Based on the research findings stated earlier, one would assume that these learners are either conventionally educated or have been educated in private schools.

One can draw two arguments from this: the term 'language competence' is the control one has over language, as most of us have with our mother tongue. The ability to play with foreign words pragmatically, using proper syntactical arrangement, stress, and tone, and driving home an intended meaning, depending on the context, may be considered a sign of having language competence over a foreign or second language. The learner who has acquired 'language competence' or has adequate and suitable exposure to English as a foreign or second language may choose to opt out of the CEFR radar, as they would have met the parameters that describe the CEFR proficiency levels (A1 to C2).

Communicative Competence and the CEFR

A survey (unpublished) was conducted between February 2025 and April 2025 among the students of Assam Don Bosco (ADBU) to identify their English language needs. The survey was titled "*Where Am I? Where do I want to proceed?*" I sent a structured questionnaire to 361 students from the School of Social Sciences and the School of Bio-Sciences. 28% of the students indicated a need for Spoken English, 13% indicated a need for

written English, 33% wanted to enroll in the Communicative English programme, and 26% showed no interest in further support for learning English. In this scenario, one can assume that the language pedagogy in schools has given little importance to language and communicative competence. One would assume that the learners have been educated in the vernacular or public schools. This is an encounter with learners from one little corner of the world. How has the English language education world addressed this gap, where learners desire to be competent in using English as a foreign language or a second language?

From the 1940s to the present day, regulatory bodies have introduced various programs and testing systems to promote English language communication. The Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Linguaskills, Aptis, Pearson PTE, are some of the standardised tests that are presently available for those who can avail them which have sought to address the gap in communicative competence in English. Thus, there has been a surge in the promotion of Communicative English as an alternative and more effective method of acquiring English speaking skills. Emphasis is therefore being given to communicative competence over language competence. Chomsky (1965) termed performance as the "actual use of language in concrete situations" (Chomsky, 1965, p 4). We assess a learner's performance as a measure of competence, which is impossible because it is an abstract notion that is not realized in reality. The utterances, the conversations, are the application (conscious or otherwise) of the knowledge (prior and procedural knowledge) of a foreign or second language to which the learners have been exposed.

The CEFR has its foundation in Hymes' Communicative Competence and the Communicative Language Teaching method, assessing and describing learners' functional language ability, which includes interaction, discourse, and pragmatic use of the language. The CEFR describes the proficiency of the learner as "he or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and what to talk about, with whom, where, when, in what manner" (Hymes, 1972, p 277). Within this function, it is clear that CEFR conditions the performance (the communicative ability) of the learners, by drawing parameters on how much is too little when communicating in English (A1) as a foreign or a second language, and yet puts a cap on how far one can go (C2) in communicating in English in a given context. Socio-cultural factors for countries such as India have not been considered when assessing communicative ability using the CEFR guidelines.

Modes of Assessment

To possess the skill of playing with the English language, juxtaposing between the lower variety and the higher variety, is a feat that, once upon a time, could be achieved by those who had adequate exposure to the English language within and outside the educational institutions. The exposure was to the medium of English instruction, supplemented by an environment that augmented the use of English in casual conversations. This process of acquiring the English language and using it in the academic and social realms was not limited to any specific form of assessment parameters (such as the CEFR) for how the English language was used (activities) or whether it was used accurately. The focus was on the conscious and unconscious processes by which learners acquired the language in a natural setting and applied it in both academic and social contexts.

While the medium of instruction was English, the pedagogy and assessment were teacher-centred. The pedagogy and assessment focused on developing receptive skills, including listening and reading comprehension, as well as building vocabulary and improving

accuracy in grammar and pronunciation, when using the productive skills. The teacher-centered strategy was appropriate for an environment that supported the acquisition of English as a second language. Competency in the English language was the result among many learners who come from this environment. With sufficient subject knowledge and critical thinking skills, such learners become proficient in what we call Communicative English. Thus, the responsibility for teaching and assessing learners' language competency or language proficiency in school education and higher education rested with the teacher, whose knowledge, experience, and skills contributed to developing language competency among students.

The CEFR is a relatively recent development and is currently in its initial implementation stage. The implementation of the CEFR descriptors started in 2001. As a descriptive and standardised document, the CEFR describes learners' language proficiency levels. The aligned courses and tests, however, are more prescriptive in nature. The English language courses prescribe materials and methods that would 'enable' learners to reach a higher level of proficiency as per the CEFR descriptors to meet the following objectives: to 'enable', or to make the learners' more proficient' in communicative English, or to 'improve' English Communication skills, or to 'develop English Communicative English'. Indeed, it has brought with it a wave of quick learning of a foreign language, focusing on how English could be used in specific situations. The focus is on proficiency in language use to reach a goal of communicative competence. The learner takes the centre stage in this approach. What they think and how they feel is essential as they work on their communication skills. It is important for the learners to 'feel good', boost their confidence, and gain communicative competence within a given socio-cultural setup.

Dominance of the Common European Framework

Within 24 years, the CEFR has become a point of reference and a standardised global benchmark. With non-English speaking countries outside Europe adopting the CEFR descriptors and proficiency levels to assess proficiency levels among English learners, English language proficiency testing, as prescribed by the CEFR, has become globalised and 'standardised', making English language proficiency testing mandatory. This has led to the rise in dominance of the CEFR globally.

Globalisation and standardisation of the CEFR have given impetus to organisations and publishing houses such as the British Council, Cambridge University Press, Burlington English, Macmillan, Pearson to have courses and testing systems lined up, preparing learners for Communicative English with communicative competence, the aim of English language learning over language competence in English. Courses and testing systems include Interchange, Empower, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), offered by Cambridge Language Assessment, as well as the Certificate of English Teaching to Adults (CELTA), Linguaskills, and Aptis, both offered by the British Council, and Pearson PTE, a testing system provided by Pearson. The mentioned courses and testing systems have been aligned as per the proficiency descriptors of the CEFR. The courses and testing systems serve as a prerequisite for applications for scholarships, jobs, and citizenship in first-world English-speaking countries and other non-English-speaking countries. This has become a norm due to the recognition and acceptance of the CEFR as a standardized set of descriptors and proficiency levels at the global level.

Decolonisation of English and the Western Forms of Assessment

The emphasis on the CEFR descriptors has found its way through the Communicative Approach in teaching and learning English. The emphasis on communicative competence,

aligning with the CEFR descriptors, has crept into higher education, a misconception that communicative competence in English is a pathway to better performance in English. There are two conclusions that can be drawn from this.

The colonial rule of the British Empire has enabled the global spread of the English language, leaving behind a wide variety of English being used across all continents. English has developed regional varieties to accommodate local socio-economic and cultural influences from indigenous communities. The CEFR, a European framework, is now adopted in non-European countries, paving the way for the rise of another form of colonization. Countries have been decolonized, but colonization once again hovers in non-English-speaking countries, through the emphasis on the Communicative Approach, which is aligned with the CEFR descriptors. The standardization of the CEFR, although adopted by non-European countries, was designed primarily for European nations.

One of the drawbacks of learning English using the Communicative Approach is learning to communicate in English only within a specified context, making it difficult to use English beyond a given situation. Communicative English has narrowed the focus of English learning to specific purposes, where learners acquire specialized vocabulary and learn to respond to queries related to their particular jobs. Performance in this context does not refer to the academic realm, or the use of a high variety of English, where there is a play and manipulation of words during intellectual discourse, with appropriateness and accuracy being used at all levels. Performance, as one would interpret it, is a regular conversation, an interaction that aims at the functionality of a job assigned or the functionality of day-to-day life. Preparing learners along the CEFR may be particularly relevant for learners who aspire to migrate and move abroad, especially those from the working class. Communicative English conditions the learning of English, confining communication only to specified situations, limiting the cultural influence on how the English language is used, and adhering to the CEFR descriptors.

Within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, the use of English as a foreign or second language, as well as its purpose, is determined by the socio-economic and cultural factors particular to each country. Based on this argument, it would be interesting and beneficial for the SAARC nations to explore whether a standardized form of assessment is likely for nations under this umbrella, one that aligns with the sociolinguistic norms and reflects the socio-cultural context of each SAARC country. The first step towards this is the decolonisation of English and its Western assessment forms.

Conclusion

Regarding language competence and communicative competence, it is clear that establishing supportive pedagogical systems develops language competency, as was the case in the pre-CEFR era. Supporting learners in developing language competence enables communicative competence, which the UK-based organisations have so enthusiastically emphasised, by promoting communicative competence through courses and materials aligned to the CERR.

English is considered the *lingua franca*, especially in international relations; yet, English also has a range of distinct varieties, which are outcomes of socio-cultural and economic influences. The CEFR limits the way English is perceived worldwide. Over a period of 24 years, using the CEFR descriptors as a standardised form of assessment of English language proficiency has become a norm in non-European countries. However, a few have adopted and customized the CEFR according to their requirements. Keeping this in mind, the article calls for decolonisation of the forms of assessment of the English language

for reasons that non-English nations, especially those under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), are free from being conditioned even along linguistic lines, by aligning the English language assessment methods in the SAARC countries along socio-linguistics and socio-cultural lines.

On this note, therefore, one concludes that standardization of assessment can be based on the socio-cultural and linguistic norms of nations, and thus, pedagogy and materials can be aligned accordingly. If this is proven to be successful, the CEFR will no longer dominate non-European nations, but will coexist as a pioneer alongside other forms of standardized methods of English language assessment in the English Language Education arena.

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The Author

Dr. Fabian Wanbok Marbaniang, a faculty member of the English department at Assam Don Bosco University (ADBU), specialises in the area of English Language Education and teaches Communicative English across all disciplines at ADBU.