The CEFR in Cuba: Alignment endeavours for English certification in Cuban higher education

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We report CEFR alignment endeavours for the certification of English in Cuban higher education. In 2015, the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) introduced a new language policy, employing the CEFR as a proficiency framework, and setting CEFR level B1 as the exit standard. The MES wanted to introduce a CEFR-aligned certification system to teach and assess students' English proficiency in order to achieve international recognition.

We present achievements and outcomes from the project's first phase, which encompassed a) familiarization and training for 42 representatives of all HE language centres in Cuba, b) developing test specifications and tasks by the trained representatives, c) piloting the tasks on a small scale, followed by d) standardization and benchmarking of local examples. All available information has been reported in a local handbook, and all data have been compiled in a database to support the piloting and the formal standard setting, which will be conducted in the second project phase, recently confirmed by the MES.

1 The educational context in Cuba

Since 2015, the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) in Cuba has been promoting a paradigmatic change in the teaching and learning of the English language. The CEFR was introduced as a globally accepted proficiency framework, with CEFR-level B1 being set by the MES as the exit standard for all non-major BA university programs. The CEFR was adopted as a proficiency framework in order to achieve international recognition of the planned certification, and level B1 was chosen from a pragmatic perspective, as an achievable level within a BA study program.

This reform required changes to the curriculum, teaching and assessment practices. In 2017, a project was launched to develop a certification system for teaching and assessing students' English proficiency. Partners in this international endeavour are MES, Universidad de las Ciencias Informáticas (UCI) and the University of Bremen, Germany with support from the British Council, the International Language Testing Association (ILTA), and the Belgian VLIROUS network.[1]

Seeking international recognition of the new certification system via alignment to the CEFR, training needs in the following areas were identified: familiarization with the CEFR, curricula development in line with the CEFR, and high-stakes assessment aligned to the CEFR. The new *Teaching and certification system in EAP in Cuban HE for BA students* is composed of three main stages, which integrate teaching, formative and summative assessment, and final certification. Taking a placement test in the first year of their major, students are assigned to suitable courses. If they obtain level B1 in the placement test,

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1. The Belgian capacity building network VLIROUS is "the leading funding body for scholarships for and partnerships between academics from Flanders and partner institutions in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, focused on global sustainable development" (www.vliruos.be/en).

students can directly take the certification exam. A mentoring process is opened for those students who request it or who fail the final certification.
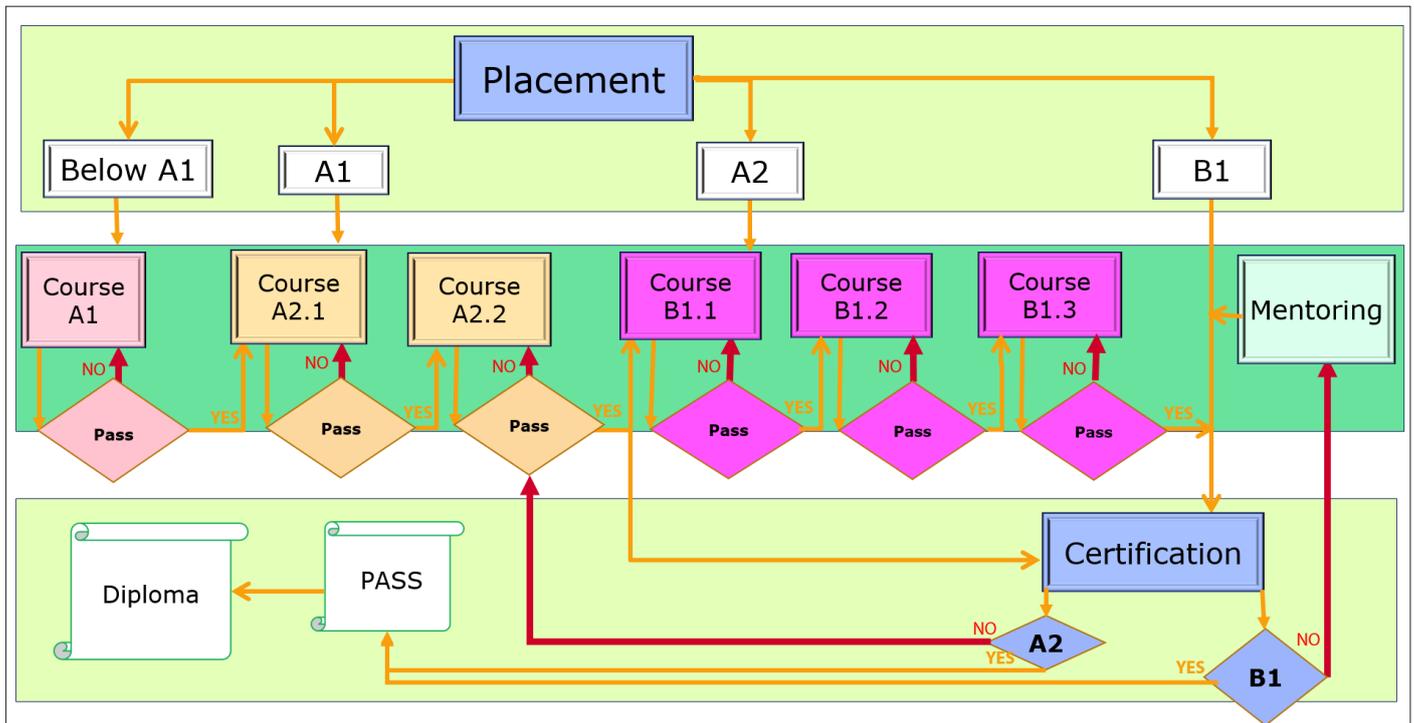

Figure 1. Design of the Teaching and Certification System in EAP in Cuban HE for BA students

The teaching process was designed to operationalize the targeted CEFR-levels from A1 to B1, and was intended to offer maximum flexibility to students, to match their individual progress. At this point in time, the certification system is kept open for an additional certification of the A2 level for those students who may not reach level B1. The final decision on whether to certify both levels or only the B1 level is yet to be taken. In the Cuban context, the teaching system is organized into 90-hour courses over one semester. CEFR level A1 can be achieved in one course, CEFR level A2 can be achieved in two courses, and CEFR level B1 in three courses. The learning outcomes for each course are based on selected and adapted CEFR/CV descriptors that were considered relevant for the project context, and the learning and teaching approaches follow the learner-centred, action-oriented approach of the CEFR. Through mentoring, at any time of the learning process, teachers can assess whether students would benefit from attending another course level or whether they are ready to take the final certification exam. This flexibility is one of the features of the new MES policy that teachers and students value the most.

2 Development of the new proficiency exam

In this article, we focus on developing the new proficiency exam, which is placed at the end of the learning and teaching process. We report on the first phase of the exam development project, which took place between 2017 and 2022, and which encompassed 1) familiarization and training for teachers representing all HE language centres in Cuba, 2) developing test specifications and tasks, 3) piloting the tasks on a small scale, followed by 4) standardization and benchmarking of local examples.

All available information is reported in a local handbook (Collada et al. 2023), and all data collected so far are compiled in a database to support the piloting and the formal standard setting, which will be conducted in the second project phase, recently confirmed by the MES. Table 1 provides the overall plan of the project.

Table 1. *The overall plan of the project in Cuban higher education*

Steps	Timeline
Planning	2016–2017
Training	2017–ongoing
Developing test specifications, tasks, rating scales	2017–2019
Feedback in the team, external feedback	2018–2020
Pre-testing and benchmarking	2020–2023 => task revision
Compiling an item bank	2020–ongoing
Piloting, IRT scaling	[2026]
Alignment to CEFR	[2027]
Implement proficiency exam	[tbd]
Monitor the impact on teaching and learning	[tbd]

2.1 Project design: the CEFR in Cuban HE

The project to develop a CEFR-aligned exam was designed cooperatively between the former project lead in Cuba (current project lead: co-author) and the external advisor (author) to encompass three synergetic strands, combining teacher training, exam development, and research. The training and exam development process was a collaborative and responsive project that was evaluated on an ongoing basis and adjusted according to the feedback and needs of the local participants (Harsch et al. 2021, on the design and its evaluation). One of the aims was to train teachers from all language centres across Cuba, to enable them to become local trainers, mediating the outcomes and skills to their peers in the local language centres.

The following local training needs were identified before the first workshop. Participants needed to be familiarized with the CEFR, its approaches and conceptualizations, as well as its scale system; as assessment literacy was not part of formal teacher education, the training should also encompass an introduction to different assessment purposes and suitable instruments for different purposes, such as placement testing, diagnostic assessment, assessment for achievement purposes and proficiency exams. Furthermore, an introduction to the theory and practice of language assessment, constructs of relevant communicative skills, the role of linguistic competences, communicative task formats, and basics of constructive alignment was considered a necessary part of the introductory training. Building on this foundation, the training then aimed at developing practical skills in designing test specifications, selecting suitable test formats and developing communicative test tasks.

The training was designed in such a way that one-week-long workshops were delivered with participants attending face-to-face meetings in Habana (during the pandemic, we had to switch to online delivery). The workshops were followed by working in groups, where teachers in their local regions collaborated on practical task development, giving each other feedback. The tasks were then cooperatively evaluated at the beginning of the next workshop. We collected feedback after each workshop to design the following one based on participants' needs.

In the first workshop, the teachers were familiarized with the CEFR, its approaches, the philosophy behind it and its scale system, while the external advisor (author) was familiarized with the Cuban context, the teaching and learning system, the local constructs and teaching/assessment task formats, the students' characteristics, and the general HE system. In this phase, it became transparent that in Cuba, the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing are traditionally taught in the language classroom, and the new certification system should focus on targeting these four skills.

Overall, nine workshops and ensuing working group phases were conducted, covering the following aspects:

- theories and practice of assessing the four skills
- developing test specifications for the four skills and targeted levels A2 and B1 (the test development process should cover these two levels, to be able to create exams for both levels, and to also certify students who may not reach B1)
- developing suitable task formats targeting the different levels and skills
- developing rating scales for (interactive and productive) speaking and writing, based on selected CEFR/CV scales (Harsch et al. 2020)
- trialling and benchmarking local performances
- basics of item analysis and reporting
- planning, conducting, and analysing a pilot study
- task and item revisions based on statistical analyses.

We aimed to constructively align curriculum, classroom practice and assessment. To reach this alignment, teacher participants brought their practical classroom perspective and experience into the development of test specifications, the selection of suitable task formats, as well as the decisions on suitable topics and inputs for the assessment. Not only did we take classroom expertise into account when selecting and adapting CEFR/CV descriptors, we also took into account the newly revised curriculum for higher education, which was also adopting the CEFR and its descriptors, while building on existent traditions. While the curriculum development took place in a different project, we had regular contact between the two projects, with some participants being active members of both project teams. The curriculum was finalized in September 2019 (Casar Espino et al. 2019), but even during the development phase of the curriculum, we used drafts of this revised curriculum as a complementary source next to the CEFR/CV descriptors for the test design and development.

We will now outline the achievements of the first project phase with regard to test development, piloting and benchmarking.

2.2 Project outcomes of phase 1

The project team developed test specifications for the Cuban standardized national exam in all four skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing). The skills targeted in this exam are based on selected CEFR/CV scales and descriptors, on the recently revised Cuban University Curriculum (that also takes the CEFR into account), and the Pearson Global Scale of English that explicitly targets the academic context (Pearson Education 2022), and the rating scales of the IELTS academic exam, as it reflects relevant academic speaking and writing aspects, and its bands are aligned to the CEFR (IELTS 2013, IELTS 2016, IELTS 2018). Table 2 lists the general exam specifications.

Table 2. *Test specifications, general exam purpose*

Purpose	To serve as a certification of English language proficiency, a prerequisite for university graduation in the Cuban context.
Age groups	Mostly 18-24
Expected L1s	Mainly Spanish and Portuguese
Possible targeted situations	Four language skills in general and academic contexts
	Interaction English for international communication

Test structure	Four equally weighted sections (reading, listening, speaking, writing)
Targeted CEFR levels	A2 and B1
Topic areas	Mostly general, professional, or academic, accessible to a general audience; from concrete to mostly concrete; distressing topics avoided

The following excerpt from the reading test specifications for level B1 shows how the CEFR descriptors were adapted, and how the other sources such as the curriculum and the GSE were integrated to formulate the specific purpose of the exam:

The students can

1. *understand the gist of straightforward factual texts related to topics students are familiar with* [CEFR scale OVERALL READING COMPREHENSION, level B1; Cuban curriculum]

2. *scan longer general as well as professional/academic texts accessible to a general audience to locate information to solve specific tasks* [CEFR scale READING FOR ORIENTATION, level B1; Cuban curriculum]

3. *understand main ideas and supporting details in general, professional, or academic texts accessible to a general audience* [GSE, Cuban curriculum]

4. *...*

Furthermore, the project team developed item writer guidelines for the four skills, interlocutor guides for conducting the speaking exam, a set of standardized instructions for reading and listening tasks, as well as 150 test tasks in total (reading 52, listening 21, writing 47, speaking 30). All tasks were specified with a task specifier that includes the targeted competences (from the specific purpose in the test specifications), characteristics of input, expected output, task formats, and expected duration, along with the answer key.

For speaking and writing, rating scales were developed that were also based on the CEFR and its Companion Volume. The development and the accompanying challenges are reported in Harsch et al. (2020). The scales were revised in several rounds and finalized after standardization and rater training within the project group. For this endeavour, the group collected performances in small-scale trials, which also served as a basis for selecting benchmarks to illustrate all criteria and levels.

Table 3 illustrates the criteria for the rating scale for assessing writing, showing the defining descriptors for level B1; note that the colours indicate the sources underlying the descriptor wording; red indicates wording from the CEFR/CV descriptors, blue indicates the revisions after the first trial, green indicates the IELTS writing scale (IELTS, 2013, 2016).

The rating scales, along with the task types used in the exam, have been introduced to regular classroom teaching and have been applied for more than two years in teaching and assessment practice all over the country, in order to familiarize teachers and students with the approaches well before the actual exam is introduced.

In May 2022, a pre-pilot study with a selection of tasks for all four skills took place to gauge the possibility of a representative pilot study with participants from across Cuba. This also served to pilot feasible procedures for data collection, data coding, rating, and quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Moreover, we introduced basic statistics to the teachers and trained the group in interpreting item and task analyses, with a view to revising tasks and items in preparation for the representative pilot study that is to take place in Phase 2 of the project.

Table 3. *Rating scale for writing, level B1 (taken from Harsch et al. 2020: 96)*

	Task Fulfilment	Coherence / cohesion	Vocabulary (range & appropriateness)	Grammar (range & accuracy)	Orthography (spelling & mechanics)
B1	The message is generally clearly conveyed. (CLAN) The ideas/content are generally relevant to the topic of the task. (CLAN) Performs most of the language functions required by the task (e.g., comparing, describing, explaining, etc.) (Test specifications: 8 and adapted from CEFR/CV: 138). Mostly follows the conventions of the text type/format required by the task (CLAN), *but the format may be inappropriate in places* (IELTS band 5). Shows awareness of the required register, *but may still be inconsistent in tone* (IELTS band 6). Generally follows salient politeness conventions, but not always appropriately (adapted from CEFR/CV: 138)	Mostly organizes ideas into a meaningful sequence, with adequate topic progression (TS, GE). Makes simple, logical paragraph breaks if required by task. (adapted from CEFR/CV: 142) Links a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points by using a limited number of cohesive devices (adapted from CEFR/CV: 142)	Uses sufficient topic-specific vocabulary to express themselves on familiar topics. (adapted CEFR/CV: 132) Shows appropriate use of a wide range of basic, frequent vocabulary. (adapted from CEFR/CV: 134) *Major errors may still occur when expressing more complex thoughts.* (adapted from CEFR/CV: 134) *May use circumlocution and occasionally unclear expressions.* (adapted from CEFR/CV: 131, 174)	Uses a range of simple grammatical features and sentence structures with reasonable accuracy. (adapted from CEFR/CV: 133) Attempts a limited range of complex sentence structures or complex grammatical features, *though they may usually be incorrect*. (adapted from IELTS band 5) *In general, the reader can interpret the errors correctly based on the context*. (adapted from CEFR/CV: 174)	Produces generally intelligible spelling for most common words, *mother tongue influence is likely with less common words*. Punctuation is enough to be followed most of the time, but *mother tongue is likely to influence punctuation*. (adapted from CEFR/CV: 137)

3 Constructive alignment and next steps

Over the whole process, we aimed at constructively aligning curriculum, classroom practice and assessment, following Little and Erickson (2015). The learning and teaching objectives and the competencies to be assessed were CEFR-informed, and we took both the CEFR and the learning objectives depicted in the curriculum into account when developing the test specifications. Concerning implementing the new curriculum and assessment approaches in classroom activities, the trained teachers are acting as mediators and are delivering training on assessment literacy, assessment procedures, new task formats and the use of the new rating scales on an ongoing basis, so that all Cuban teachers are gradually familiarized with new approaches and task formats, and can explore the tasks and rating scales with their students in an informal way, well before the certification exam is in place.

With regard to the formal alignment process stated in the CEFR alignment handbook (British Council et al. 2022: 14), we have covered the stages of familiarization, specification and standardization. Familiarization was ensured through the aforementioned workshops, specification was achieved via the test and task specifications, while standardization was targeted via several standardization and benchmarking workshops that also served as rater training, to ensure a common understanding of the CEFR levels and to benchmark local performance samples to relevant CEFR levels. All available data have been entered in a database, statisticians are currently trained, and all tasks are currently pre-trialled in classrooms to finalize them for the pilot study.

In Phase 2 of the project, we aim to conduct a formal standard setting, to align the exam, its tasks, performances and results to the CEFR. This will involve both local stakeholders, such as policy decision-makers, language centre directors and teachers, and international CEFR experts. Furthermore, we will investigate the validity of the exam and the standard-setting procedure from internal and external perspectives. Several PhD projects in this realm are currently in planning within the Cuban project team.

4 Conclusion

We would like to conclude this contribution with insights that we gained from the project experiences. We will outline challenges when adapting CEFR/CV descriptors and how we dealt with them, wider implications for adapting the CEFR, and general recommendations when planning such an endeavour.

We exemplify the challenges when adapting CEFR/CV descriptors for our rating scale development, where we chose a descriptor-based approach, as reported in Harsch et al. (2020). We selected relevant descriptors from the CEFR/CV and other CEFR-related scales suitable for the HE context. In an initial intuitive approach, the teachers re-sorted the selected descriptors, and in ensuing empirical approaches, we undertook benchmarking exercises in several rounds. We encountered the following challenges, as outlined in depth in Harsch et al. (2020): there was an overwhelming abundance of scales at different places (e.g., the writing assessment grid is presented separately from the writing scales) in the CEFR/CV, which was challenging at a time when the searchable Excel-file containing all CEFR/CV descriptors was not yet available. We also found different categorisations in the CEFR/CV and our context; for instance, the writing assessment grid in the CEFR/CV contains the criteria of range, coherence, accuracy, description and argument, while the local assessment criteria combined range and accuracy for vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, descriptors for the "plus" levels were not always provided. Finally, we encountered inconsistent wording across scales and/or across levels; for example, the nature and impact of errors is described in different ways in different scales, even when looking at the same level (for a detailed analysis, Harsch et al. 2020). These aspects are a challenge when the aim is to systematise selected CEFR/CV descriptors into a distinct locally shaped assessment criteria grid.

Our solution consisted of the following four main approaches, which are also described in detail in Harsch et al. (2020):

1. Reorganizing CEFR/CV descriptors into the local assessment criteria, to adapt CEFR/CV categorisations to the local context.

2. Adapting CEFR/CV descriptors (i.e., changing wording), to overcome the aforementioned inconsistencies in wording and make levels more coherent.

3. Adding descriptors from other sources, particularly for the plus levels, as the CEFR/CV has some gaps for the plus levels which we needed to fill for the rating scales.

4. Adding and adapting descriptors to account for the local context, both for criterion levels and plus levels.

With regard to implications when aiming to adapt the CEFR, we would recommend allowing all participants to get familiar with the CEFR and other relevant materials in their own ways and at their own pace; here, a collaborative approach with hands-on activities for familiarization seems most feasible. We also found that pre-selecting relevant scales for certain activities helps simplify complex endeavours such as rating scale development. We would also recommend making use of other sources relevant to the context in a complementary way and documenting all steps transparently.

To ensure constructive alignment, it was helpful to co-develop learning goals, curricula, and assessment goals across the different project teams; to simultaneously consider learning activities, teaching tasks, and assessment tasks; and to make use of the alignment handbook (British Council et al., 2022), its helpful explanations, activities, tools, guidelines for reporting, and practical suggestions.

With regard to overall project management, when aligning an exam to the CEFR, we would recommend (based on Harsch et al. 2021) familiarizing all participants with the context, with institutional conditions and constraints, and with already existing professional development initiatives. It is important to include all relevant stakeholder groups in all phases, from design to implementation, thus enabling them to bring their expertise to the table and to form communities of practice. We can only underscore the importance of scheduling sufficient time for changes to take place in teaching, learning, and assessment practices, so that all participants can get on board. It was helpful in our context to facilitate collaboration by providing sufficient resources and shared spaces online as well as face to face, and to combine hands-on experiential workshops (with a focus on practical outcomes and applicability) with seminars and lectures where theoretical underpinning can be provided as needed.

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6 Biographies

Claudia Harsch is a professor at the University of Bremen, specializing in language learning, teaching, and assessment. She has worked in Germany and in the UK, and is active in teacher training worldwide. Her research interests focus on areas such as language assessment, language and migration, the development of language assessment literacy, and the implementation of the CEFR. Claudia is currently the immediate past president of the International Language Testing Association (president from 2023-2024), and was president of the European Association of Language Testing and Assessment from 2016 to 2019.

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