

Making it work: On the alignment of work-oriented writing tasks with the CEFR

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This article explores the challenges and solutions involved in aligning workplace-oriented writing tasks with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) within the context of the German Tests for Work (Deutsch-Tests für den Beruf, DTB) at levels A2, B1, B2, and C1. Developed by telc GmbH for the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, these standardized exams serve as final assessments in vocational language courses. The article details the process of defining learning objectives based on authentic workplace communication needs and the adaptation of CEFR descriptors to fit vocational contexts. It discusses the design of writing tasks that reflect real-world professional communication—emphasizing brevity, appropriateness, and mediation—and the establishment of rating criteria tailored to workplace requirements. The article also examines the standard-setting process, including expert workshops and calibration, and presents findings from a 2024 re-rating study that demonstrate improved alignment and fairness in assessment outcomes. The case study concludes with reflections on CEFR alignment in vocational language assessment, highlighting the need for ongoing standard validation, authentic task formats, and continuous rater training to ensure valid and reliable certification of workplace language competence.

1 Context

This article examines the challenges of aligning workplace-focused writing tasks with CEFR levels in standardized German examinations, the four German Tests for Work (Deutsch-Tests für den Beruf—DTB) A2, B1, B2 and C1. The German Tests for Work are an exam suite that serves as a final assessment of proficiency in vocational language courses with language level goals of A2 to C1. The exams were developed by telc GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and under the technical guidance of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). The four exams represent an integral component of the German federal programme of vocational language courses (*Berufssprachkurse*) providing learners with the opportunity to develop and refine their job-oriented language skills in German.

The programme of vocational language courses is based on course concepts (BAMF 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d), a catalogue of learning objectives (Bärenfänger et al. 2019), dedicated qualifications for teachers in these courses (telc 2020e), a choice of fit-for-purpose course materials, and the exams presented here (telc 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). These are specially developed components designed to ensure both appropriate target group orientation and the high quality of the programme. Constructive alignment of all these components was one of the major aims in the development phase.

The test development process is fully documented in the Examination Handbook (Plassmann et al. 2021). The focus of this article will not be on the very complex project to develop the exam suite as a whole, but on the writing tasks in the German Tests for Work. The development of the writing tasks exemplifies general challenges and solutions found in test development and administration of CEFR-related tests for a vocational purpose. Figure 1 shows the project's general timeline.

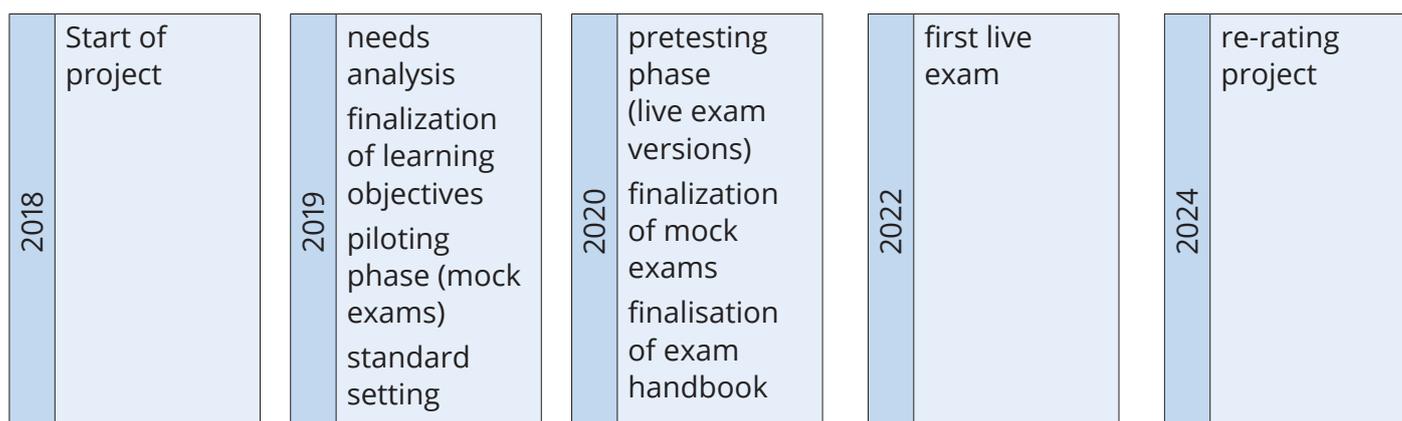


Figure 1. Timeline of test development and re-rating project

2 Learning objectives

The CEFR served as a comprehensive reference system for the project, with particular emphasis on the most relevant levels—A2, B1, B2 and C1. In particular, the CEFR was used as the overall framework for the German Tests for Work.¹ It was important to align them to the four levels (A2 to C1) as these levels were defined as goals for the respective language courses. From the start of the project, however, it was clear that CEFR descriptors would be helpful but not sufficient, as they do not reflect language use in the workplace in the necessary depth. Therefore, the first steps of test development were a needs analysis and the development of a Catalogue of Learning Objectives A2-C1. This catalogue provides a model of language competence in the workplace, based on an empirical analysis of language use and aiming at the description of real-world language use. Authentic communicative situations in the workplace are described and grouped along the employee life cycle (Bärenfänger et al. 2019: 20). The 344 detailed learning objectives are structured into eleven domains and 60 broad learning objectives. From the perspective of CEFR alignment the microstructure is most interesting: each of the 344 learning objectives has language functions from A2 to C1 (if applicable). These language functions provide descriptors which break down the multiple learning objectives into different competence levels, according to the CEFR.

For example, learning objective 30.¹² reads: “Can handle complaints and respond to them appropriately.” (Bärenfänger et al. 2019: 120) This descriptor shows what is expected at the workplace. It is clear, however, that learners at lower CEFR levels cannot fully achieve this objective. In order to provide guidance as to the degree of communicative competence with regard to this situation at the relevant levels, language functions are defined as follows:

C1: [...] Can respond to complaints fluently, correctly, and convincingly; if mistakes occur, they are hardly noticeable; the degree of formality is appropriate to the circumstances.

B2: [...] Can adequately respond to complaints relatively spontaneously and fluently, practically without giving the impression of being constrained in what he/she wants to say; the degree of formality is appropriate to the circumstances.

B1: [...] Can respond to complaints in simple, coherent statements; even if there may be problems with the wording, they can usually be understood without difficulty.

1. The CEFR itself in its German version (Council of Europe [CoE] 2001) was used together with the Companion Volume (CEFR/CV; CoE 2020) in the English version as the latter had not yet been translated into German. Note that the Companion Volume was not yet available for the 2019 Standard Setting described in this article.
2. This is one of the detailed learning objectives under the broader objective 30: *Respond appropriately to error or fault messages from others and offer assistance* (Bärenfänger et al. 2019: 120).

A2: [...] Can respond to complaints in short sentences and simple phrases, even if they may falter and have to restart.

3 Writing tasks and rating criteria

The German Tests for Work have four writing tasks: Reading and Writing, Listening and Writing (both mixed-skill tasks, including mediation), an argumentative Writing task, and a gap-fill task. This range of tasks was developed because it corresponds to the needs analysis. In professional settings, individuals tend to produce written communication that is generally shorter in length when compared to that produced in an educational environment or other contexts. Texts are generally concise, avoiding extensive descriptions or arguments, and often exhibit less variation in linguistic devices. There was much discussion about how this analysis of written language use could be reconciled with the CEFR descriptors which demand a certain complexity, in-depth argumentation and a range of linguistic means and strategies, particularly with regard to the higher competence levels from B2 upwards. This was solved by creating three writing tasks instead of only one. Writing three very different texts gives test takers the opportunity to more fully demonstrate the range of their linguistic resources, while adhering to the writing conventions of many workplaces with respect to conciseness and brevity. The three open-ended tasks are designed to elicit different registers, a variety of work-related conventions and thus a range of linguistic means.

Four rating criteria are used: Task Management, Communicative Design, Accuracy, and Linguistic Range. These rating criteria were developed using CEFR descriptors with some modifications. The original CEFR descriptors were shortened and combined for better handling in the day-to-day rating process. An example of this is the criterion *Linguistic Range* at level B2:

Setzt ein hinreichend breites Spektrum sprachlicher Mittel ein, um sich auch zu komplexeren Sachverhalten zu äußern. Variierte Formulierungen; Lücken im Wortschatz können dennoch zu Umschreibungen führen. Verwendet einige komplexe Satzstrukturen. (telc 2020c: 40-41)

[Has a sufficient range of language to be able to communicate topics of some complexity. Can vary formulation, but lexical gaps can still cause circumlocution. Is using some complex sentence forms.]

This criterion is derived from the following original CEFR descriptors:

General linguistic range, B2: *Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints and develop arguments without much conspicuous searching for words/signs, using some complex sentence forms to do so.*

Vocabulary range, B2: *Can vary formulation to avoid frequent repetition, but lexical gaps can still cause hesitation and circumlocution.*

When rating the test takers' output, it should be noted that the three texts demonstrate different facets of writing competence. None of the tasks elicits educational language. Consequently, the expectations of some raters, which may have been influenced by their educational background, whether at school, university or in their current teaching context, were not fully met. Rating should reward texts that are succinct, readily comprehensible and written in a way that is appropriate for the specific target audience in the workplace, i.e., colleagues, superiors and clients. The traditional discussion paper, reminiscent of those encountered in academic settings, is ill-suited to this context.

The B2 Reading and Writing task can serve as an example for this discussion point. The task uses two emails as input: the first is a customer complaint, and the second is guidance from your superior on how to respond to the complaint. The test taker must write a short email to the customer apologizing and outlining the next steps. In this situation, neither very original answers nor elaborate ones are expected (indeed, the space on the answer sheet is limited accordingly). This means that parts of the answer may

consist of typical phrases that any customer service staff member would use. While the test taker must respond to the specific situation, generic phrases such as “I sincerely apologize for the inconvenience.” and “We’re committed to finding a solution.” are appropriate and acceptable. The rating focuses on appropriateness in customer relations situations and the mediation required to take the superior’s email into account, rather than any personal originality on the part of the employee.

4 Setting standards

During the test development phase, alignment to the CEFR played an integral part. It was explicitly stipulated that the four German Tests for Work would be utilized as end-of-course assessments within a course system that is structured according to CEFR levels. The expectation was that each learning phase would enable learners to progress to the subsequent level. Consequently, alternative approaches, such as defining uneven profiles or varying goals according to different professional aims, were not viable. All in all, the utilization of the CEFR and its four relevant levels (A2 to C1) as a widely understood anchor has facilitated acceptance and rendered the interpretation of results more straightforward than it would have been with a concept requiring more explanation.

The use and usefulness of the CEFR levels for test development was questioned, however, and the CEFR as the default reference framework challenged. The CEFR had to be applied in a way that provides fair learning and assessment opportunities for test takers as well as transparent certification of the competence level reached for all stakeholders. To facilitate the range of perspectives and ensure sufficient scope for discussion, a large number of experts and stakeholders were invited to contribute to the conception of the German Tests for Work, including the definition of learning objectives, via surveys, discussion rounds and interviews. (Plassmann et al. 2021: 13-14). Specifications and exam models were developed and pretested with more than 1,000 learners.

The next step was a standard setting event which took place from 10 to 12 October 2019 with 80 experts. On 10 October, an introduction to the mission, needs analysis, learning objectives and exam formats was given in plenary session. On 11 and 12 October, the experts worked in four groups, each dealing with one skill as the exams provide for a separate partial result for each skill (i.e., Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing). The event aimed to document and prove that the four exams were aligned to their respective CEFR levels. This involved discussing and judging the provisional cut scores and rating criteria, considering their ability to produce exam results firmly rooted at a specific CEFR level. The general suitability of the tasks was also discussed providing the test development team with extra qualitative feedback. Methods were taken mainly from the *Manual* (CoE 2009) for relating languages exams to the CEFR.

The workshop group focusing on writing skills consisted of 19 independent experts plus two experts who had taken part in the previous phases of the test development project and conducted the workshop. They were mainly professional raters with many years of experience in rating written exam tasks as well as rater and examiner trainers. One expert came from a test provider, one from an academic context, and one represented the Federal Office who had commissioned the tests. It was particularly helpful that the experts offered such different perspectives. The fact that not all of them were very experienced raters led to relevant questions that might otherwise not have been raised.

In the familiarization phase, the group first dealt with the CEFR level system. All participating experts brought in-depth knowledge of the CEFR so that this phase could be kept relatively short at 90 minutes. Sorting exercises and a discussion of salient features of each relevant CEFR level were especially helpful to focus the experts’ discussion (CoE 2009: 20-21, 123).

For calibration, writing samples from existing exams were rated. These samples had been rated through intensive calibration work in previous expert workshops and thus provided a benchmark to

which the group could orientate itself.³ In each case, a global judgement was first given at one of the six CEFR levels. The results were recorded and projected onto the wall as a graph. A strong majority opinion emerged in all cases; deviations were discussed intensively. This was followed by a second global rating in conjunction with an analytical rating process using the relevant CEFR scales for Writing. This second round of rating was discussed in detail as well, which led to further agreement. Finally, 40 writing samples taken from the new exams' pilot version were rated without further discussion.

Before starting the actual benchmarking, familiarization with the learning objectives and writing tasks of the German Tests for Work was necessary. At this point, it was especially important to understand the examinations' concept of offering several relatively short tasks which have to be rated as a whole. Assessing the output to one task only would in many cases—at least for the higher levels B2 and C1—lead to lower marks. A short writing sample provides only a limited opportunity to show the expected range of linguistic means. Also, errors in grammar and spelling tend to gain more weight if there are fewer correct passages to outweigh slips in correctness. It was therefore crucial that raters take *all* the writing tasks into consideration and not judge on first impressions.

In the German Tests for Work the rating process is managed by asking the raters to provide their marks for task management for each written text, but to reserve their judgement on linguistic criteria till the end. During the benchmarking session, however, experts tended to consider each text sample separately. In some cases, rating a rather short text at a time led to lower marks than expected, as short texts might not demonstrate the full range of linguistic abilities of the writer. It was only when all written productions were judged together that the full writing competence emerged. This was discussed in depth and a common understanding about the all-encompassing view necessary for these exams was reached. However, it became clear that this concept would take time to be grasped, as traditional writing tasks tend to consist of one long text, which in turn leads to a slightly different rating process. Some experts were not able to implement this rating across text boundaries fully during the workshop.

Following this discussion, the rating criteria were revised in terms of wording to strengthen the connection to the CEFR and in terms of layout to provide guidance on the rating process. Some of the tasks were modified, as a few were considered too difficult for their respective CEFR level. Extensive training and calibration were planned for the actual implementation of the examinations.

5 Dealing with short texts and mediation

The discussion about short written texts and their rateability can be illustrated by the B2 Reading and Writing task. As described already, a short answer to a customer complaint is required. This is an example⁴ discussed at the benchmarking event:

Sehr geehrter Herr Stemmler,

da Sie schon lange Zeiz unsere Kunde sind, möchte ich uns entschuldigen, dass die Qualität unseres Arbeits nicht mehr gut ist. Im Moment haben wir die Mangel von Mitarbeitern, weil viele krankgeschrieben sind. Ich möchte Ihnen versprechen dass wir schon ab nächstes Mal die Reinigung Ihres Büros ordentlich machen werden.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen, Xxx Xxx

In English translation, the text reads as follows (linguistic errors not included):

3. Form C2 of the *Manual* was used to record these activities (CoE 2009: 182) and the Written Assessment Criteria Grid in Table C4 was used for rating (CoE 2009: 187).
4. Source: internal documentation; the text was not published.

Dear Mr. Stemmler,

As you have been a customer of ours for a long time, I would like to apologize for the fact that the quality of our work is no longer satisfactory. We are currently short-staffed because many of our employees are on sick leave. I would like to promise you that we will clean your office properly from next time onwards.

Kind regards, Xxx Xxx

Discussion of this text revealed that raters found it difficult to weigh up the linguistic strengths and weaknesses in view of the short length of this writing sample, and to deal with the fact that only the third sentence touches on the actual problem at hand, with the other two sentences being generic. The first solution to these rating issues was to consider the test taker's other written work, in order to gain an overall picture of their writing competence. However, the issue of stock phrases and the lack of direct reference to the situation at hand was not fully resolved. Two main arguments were raised in the discussion:

1. Test construct: We want to assess whether the test taker can write at B2 level, i.e. perhaps with some confidence, in a clear and detailed way, demonstrating a certain degree of fluency and spontaneity. For the type of text expected in this task, however, it is possible to rely on prepared phrases and text conventions, which some of the experts at the benchmarking did not find sufficient to prove B2 proficiency.
2. Authenticity: Long, complex texts are rare in a work environment. It would also be inappropriate to deviate from the conventional scope of linguistic means in this highly formal occupational situation.

In addition, this is a mediation task. Mediation gained more attention only when the CEFR/CV was published in 2020 and therefore raters were not as confident about this skill as about the more traditional approaches of testing written production and interaction. What can be expected when mediation is asked for? Certainly not just a repetition of everything the input text contains. Some of the raters raised the question of whether ignoring some parts of a superior's email should not lead to lower marks. This rather strict view leads to counting content points rather than evaluating if the text as such fulfils the communicative aim. Actually, some of the best output texts add a personal perspective to the superior's view. This is exactly what mediation as defined by the CEFR/CV should be, and from a very broad perspective it reflects our work environment, where employees are allowed and expected to have their own opinion and perspective.

An intensive discussion about these questions arose during the benchmarking and continued later in regular calibration sessions. The exam provider held the view that deviation from the input email was not to be seen as avoidance of difficult aspects of the task and therefore as an indicator of lower competence, but as an individual approach to task management in line with the learning objectives and the CEFR.

6 Re-rating 2024

The original standard setting was not the end of discussion. Rating criteria were modified and illustrated by examples, their translation into points and cut scores finalized, and a general consensus on the rating process was reached. As rating written (or spoken) output is a highly qualified task, constant training and calibration was provided. So, raters became more confident over time.

Two years after the German Tests for Work were first introduced in 2022, the test provider decided to conduct a small-scale study on rating to check whether the inter-rater reliability observed in calibration sessions meant that the controversial issues from the benchmarking in 2019 had been resolved. To achieve this, the twelve most controversial writing samples from the original benchmarking were chosen and re-rated by ten of the experts who were present in 2019 and were still active raters for the live examinations.

In 2019, a consensus had been reached, but not everybody had been fully convinced. The more skeptical views on the test construct asking for short texts and mediation had a certain influence on the group which may have led to a more severe outcome than intended. Such severe judgments were later overcome through calibration and training. At least, this was the claim of the exam provider, which was to be proved by the re-rating. The study therefore aimed to establish whether the overly severe initial application of the rating criteria, in view of the work-related test construct, had diminished, particularly for B2/C1 texts, which were often compared to tasks in academic language assessment contexts.

The results of the re-rating demonstrate exactly this. As the rating criteria had been modified in their wording in order to provide the best possible CEFR alignment and the underlying points had been altered in order to achieve the best possible balance in the final scoring, the focus of the comparison between 2019 and 2024 is on whether each sample (consisting of three texts for each test taker) was judged as a pass or fail with respect to the intended CEFR level of the task. The following table clearly shows that the pass rate for B2 and C1 writing samples has risen significantly.

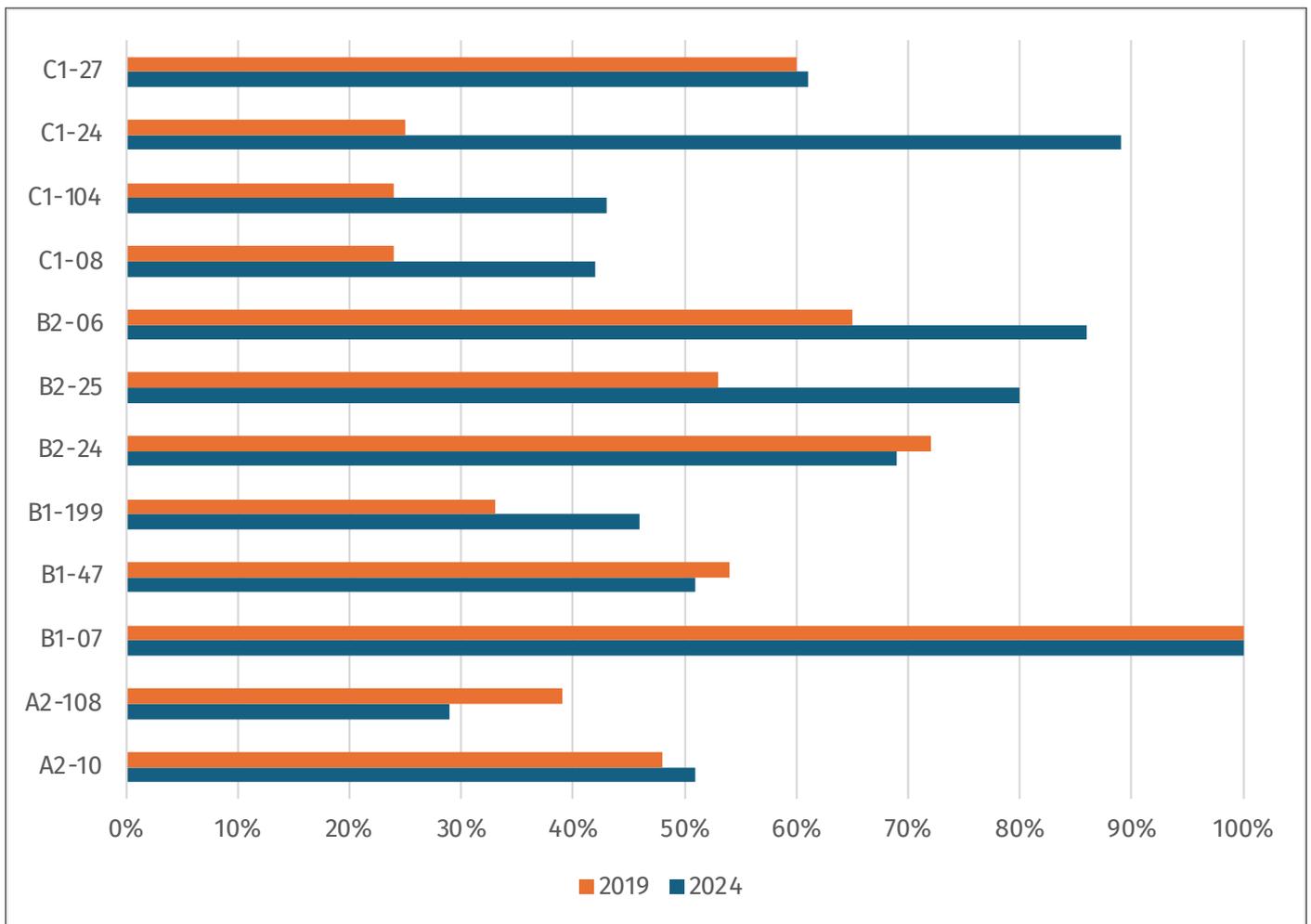


Figure 2. Rating of writing samples in 2019 and 2024 (percentage of raters who placed the text at the respective target level)

The C1 samples 24, 104, and 08 show a far better pass rate in 2024. Sample 24 is regarded as adequate to the target level by almost 90 percent of raters in 2024, compared to only 25 percent in 2019. Samples 104 and 08 are almost 20 percentage points above their initial ratings. B2 samples 06 and 25 as well as B1 sample 199 also show rating outcomes significantly closer to the target level than initially awarded. The other samples show little deviation or in one case a stricter rating. In these cases, other factors than the original discussion about text length and content were dominant in rating.

Thus, questions about the B1/B2/C1 worthiness of these tasks are resolved, as reflected in the higher pass rate, which corresponds to the levels achieved in other skills. Today's rating practice reflects the original intention of the test developers and provides a fair outcome for test takers.

7 Implications for CEFR alignment in vocational language assessment

This case study offers several key insights into linking examinations with the CEFR.

Firstly, it is advisable to establish a strong foundation by clearly defining learning objectives and aligning them with CEFR descriptors. When it comes to work-related exams or teaching and learning materials, using CEFR scales in their original form is not entirely appropriate. Raters, teachers and other stakeholders must apply CEFR descriptors from the personal, public or educational domain to the occupational context, as there are not enough work-related illustrative scales. This demands a high degree of abstraction and is therefore less intuitive than desired.

Secondly, a single standardization workshop is not enough. Defined standards must be validated in practice and reinforced continuously, even after the initial development phase, when tasks, rating criteria and scoring are well defined. The need for continuous refinement and the consistent application of established standards is particularly pertinent in the assessment of free text production, where human judgement is required. Ongoing calibration, discussion and shared understanding are indispensable in this context.

Thirdly, the project demonstrates that task formats which deviate from traditional expectations, such as short or highly formalized texts, can be successfully implemented. Although developing such tasks and ensuring valid assessment requires additional effort, the increase in the authenticity of language use is significant.

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9 Biography

Dr. Sibylle Plassmann is Head of Tests and Training at telc GmbH, specializing in language testing for academic purposes, integration and in vocational contexts. With extensive experience in language teaching, teacher training and assessment, she has contributed to national and international projects on language proficiency and integration. She also works on advancing quality standards in language testing, ensuring validity of tests as well as robust procedures in test administration.