CEFR IMPLEMENTATION AT THE POST-SECONDARY LEVEL: TEACHERS' RECEPTIVITY

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Abstract: The influence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in teaching, learning and assessment has grown increasingly since 2001. Convinced of the potential benefits that the CEFR can bring to English language education in local contexts, Malaysia has enforced the CEFR in all levels of education from preschool to university, mainly to improve students' English proficiency and align local educational practices with international standards. Although the CEFR was officially introduced in 2017, starting with Standard 1 primary and Form 1 secondary school students, its implementation at the post-secondary level started late in 2020 and, since then, has remained largely unexplored. Against this background, the present study, based on a social constructivist case study methodology, conducted an in-depth interview with four post-secondary English teachers to explore their receptivity to the CEFR. The findings of the thematic analysis revealed four major dimensions, namely teachers' knowledge, perceptions and practices, and the challenges of implementing the CEFR. The study ends with pedagogical and policy implications resonating with other similar contexts.

Keywords: CEFR Implementation in Malaysia, Post-Secondary English Teachers, Teachers' Receptivity to the CEFR, CEFR at Form Sixth Institutions, English Language Policy and Reform

INTRODUCTION

Undeniably, the CEFR provides guidance for three important aspects of the curriculum: teaching, learning and assessment. Historically, it was first brought into focus due to the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project in the 1970s, focusing on adult language learning. It emphasised that European citizens should not only learn languages in a formal context but also develop language competencies to meet their communicative needs throughout life (Read, 2019). Currently, the CEFR has been translated into more than 40 languages as its visibility has extended beyond the target group, including non-English speaking regions such as Vietnam (Van & Hamid, 2015) and Taiwan (Huei-Lein, 2020). The borrowing of this European language framework is largely fuelled but not limited by its association with international recognition, access to standardised levels of competence and the alignment of teaching and learning against global standards (Byram & Parmenter, 2012). Of all these, to date, the uptake of the CEFR has been significant in the assessment domain, with a strong emphasis on its levels and can-do descriptors at the cost of teaching and learning (Negishi, 2022).

In Malaysia, the adoption of CEFR stems from the country's aspiration to produce students proficient in English, per the second shift of student aspiration outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025). To this end, the Ministry of Education (MOE) set up a Commission of Inquiry in 2013, led by Cambridge Assessment English, to examine the strengths and weaknesses of Malaysian English language education against international standards. The results showed that students' and teachers' English proficiency levels were mostly low, at A2 and B2 (Cambridge English, 2013). Furthermore, the study found that teachers' instructional practice was riddled with teacher-centred teaching, hence, the impetus for introducing the CEFR from preschool to university was to improve students' English proficiency.

Following the decision to enforce CEFR, several concerns are worth reflecting on. This is because much literature is unanimous in the view that the mere introduction of educational innovations often does not lead to their immediate adoption at the grassroots level but is often countered with aggression, cynicism and resistance (Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Carless, 2013; Uri, 2021). Indeed, such sentiments are not surprising, given that educational change interferes with the professional lives of teachers who have comfortably held on to their decades-old

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conventional but workable practices, as opposed to a novel educational change that may not necessarily be to their advantage (Carless, 2013). In the case of the CEFR, its application undeniably represents a paradigm shift in how teachers design and implement their lessons, which are built on real-world, task-based communicative language teaching (Nagai et al., 2020; Supunya, 2022). Simply put, CEFR-informed practice is ideally communicative, with the target language acting primarily as a means of communication rather than as the sole subject of examination (Huei-Lin, 2020; Kanchai, 2019). As with any new change in education, research has pointed to various factors that are fundamental to its success and sustainability, from system-related to school-related factors (Carless, 2013), but in unison, the teacher factor has been recognised as being at the heart of the matter (Cajas, 2017). This is also consistent with Foley's (2021) observation on the implementation of the CEFR in Southeast and East Asia that six of the eight factors identified are related to the teacher factor, including teacher proficiency, knowledge of and experience with the CEFR, and capacity building, which are best summarised as teacher receptivity to the CEFR. Although studies on the CEFR in the local context have gained momentum since 2017, the scope of understanding is limited to what is happening at the primary (Kee & Iksan, 2019; Khair & Shah, 2021) and secondary (Alih et al., 2020; Uri, 2021; Yueh, 2018; Yusoff et al., 2022) at the detriment of post-secondary education. In other words, the extent to which English teachers at the post-secondary level are receptive to the mandatory CEFR has remained unexplored, which would have been crucial to providing the public with a complete picture of comprehensive and systematic monitoring of the implementation of the CEFR-aligned curriculum as envisaged in the English Education Reform Roadmap 2015-2025. It is against this backdrop that the study was embarked upon, specifically to answer the pressing question: How receptive are English teachers to the implementation of the CEFR in post-secondary education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge, Perceptions, Practices & Challenges of The CEFR Implementation

Before examining the study's central question concerning the receptivity to the CEFR at the grassroots level, it is worthwhile to shed light on the nature of language policies and decisions practised globally. Considering that the CEFR is predominantly introduced through power strategies or institutional arrangements, it is more than evident that the role of teachers in educational reform is not given much importance, as is the case in most contexts characterised by traditionally domineering, top-down educational administration (Franz & Teo, 2018; Huei-Lin, 2020; Van & Hamid, 2015). In the studied context, Naidu (2013) lamented the non-participation of English teachers in the first CEFR symposium in 2013, which would have been a perfect way to raise their awareness and familiarise them with the CEFR earlier. In reality, this one-sided, partial approach significantly contrasts the spirit of the CEFR, which considers prospective practitioners' concerns or beliefs about language teaching and learning before committing to the CEFR (Trim, 2011). This key aspect deserves much attention, especially when teachers are confronted with a policy document with unique values and intentions, which are theoretically and practically demanding and complex (Piccardo et al., 2019; Van & Hamid, 2020).

Recognising that the success of educational innovations ultimately depends on the teachers, previous studies have attempted to determine the extent to which teachers have been receptive to the CEFR. Their receptivity to the CEFR can be divided into four core aspects consisting of knowledge (Abidin & Hashim, 2021; Gursoy et al., 2017; Ngu & Aziz, 2019), perception (Khair & Shah, 2021; Uri & Aziz, 2018; Yassin & Yamat, 2021: Yusoff et al., 2022), practice and challenges encountered (Aziz, 2022; Uri, 2023). Concerning teachers' perceptions of the CEFR in Malaysia, previous research has consistently shown two common reactions: either they are completely open-minded or very cautious and sceptical about the impact of the CEFR on teaching and learning. On the one hand, the studies by Yassin and Yamat (2021), Khair and Shah (2021), Yusoff et al. (2022), and Uri and Aziz (2018) showed that the idea of introducing the CEFR was positively received as they felt they were familiar with the framework and had a high level of preparedness and sufficient skills to deliver the CEFR-aligned curriculum. Interestingly, most teachers involved in these studies responded positively to the CEFR because of its benefits to language teaching, such as the greater emphasis on communicative skills and the fairer opportunities for all students to succeed at their own pace and level. On the other hand, some largely ignored and were reluctant to adopt the CEFR (Kee & Iksan, 2019; Yueh, 2018).

Although exploring teachers' perceptions of the CEFR is central to understanding their receptivity, it is incomplete without examining how they put the CEFR into action in the micro-context of their classroom practice. Moreover, people do not necessarily practise what they preach (Johnson & Christensen,

2008; Johnson, 2009). In educational innovation, despite the willingness to change, it is often masked by superficiality and partiality, making the implementation process ineffective, problematic and undesirable (Jenkins, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020). Concerning teachers' classroom practice, Aziz (2022), based on 980 observed English lessons between 2018 and 2021, exposed that the implementation of the CEFR at both primary and secondary levels was superficial at best, which explained the moderate quality of the CEFR, ranging from 65% to 69%. Although some strengths were highlighted, teachers still conveniently resorted to a teacher-centred approach and therefore, interactions were predominantly directional. This revelation has presumably correlated with the latest statistics that until 2021, only 31.46% (18,876) of English teachers nationwide have been certified at C1 (Education Performance Delivery Unit, 2022). This is also attributable to teachers' questionable knowledge of the CEFR (Ng & Ahmad, 2021; Ngu & Aziz, 2019; Uri, 2023). For instance, Alih et al. (2020) argued that teachers' awareness does not necessarily equate to their knowledge of the CEFR. Similarly, teachers' knowledge of the plurlilingualism advocated in the CEFR in the English classroom was poor, as they emphasised the use of the target language in all respects without considering the learners' first language (Abidin & Hashim, 2021; Gursoy et al., 2017; Yusoff et al. 2022).

As for teachers' insufficient understanding of CEFR knowledge in general, at least two factors are responsible for this deficiency: lack of specificity of the CEFR and the ineffectiveness of training. As for the first factor, the risk of failure is high when the specificity of the intended pedagogical change is compromised (Carless, 2013; Franz & Teo, 2017; Karavas-Doukas, 1998). Moreover, the CEFR itself is, from the outset, "NOT intended to tell practitioners what to do or how to do it" (Council of Europe, 2018, p.26). Thus, without providing concrete examples, it is almost impossible to understand the abstract principles of the CEFR, let alone bring them to life. The quality of training is another plausible reason for the ineffectiveness of CEFR implementation. Various studies have confirmed that Malaysian English teachers have not been adequately trained. For instance, Aziz et al. (2018) concluded that the ineffectiveness of the training was due to the cascade model deeply rooted in the delivery of training, where there was no uniformity of information besides the absence of hands-on application, shortened training duration and incompetent trainers. Along the lines, Uri (2021) also noted that there was no system of follow-up or intervention after the completion of training, which directly threatened the application of CEFR in its organic setting, as teachers were more inclined to discard it and revert to their conventional practices when they returned to work. Conversely, Rehner et al. (2021) discovered that the greatest impact of CEFR-related professional training derived from corrector-examiner training, where teachers were afforded first-hand experience of integrating assessment with planning and teaching.

However, compared to primary and secondary English teachers who had attended in-service training sessions, it can be presumed that their colleagues at post-secondary institutions were at a distinct disadvantage in several respects as their training was limited to familiarisation with the new MUET-CEFR test specifications and sample questions (Don et al., 2021). They had been deprived of the support and resources crucial to CEFR implementation (MOE, 2020). Even though they are faced with such constraints, Chua (2020) denoted that they may still be able to make sense of the CEFR as it is not completely different from the former curriculum except for its stronger emphasis on developing students' communicative competence, hence the increased weighting to 25% for speaking and listening (Malaysian Examinations Council (MEC), 2019). Given the gravity of this matter, it is worthwhile to broaden the scope of CEFR implementation by investigating the receptivity of post-secondary English teachers to the CEFR.

METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a social constructivist case study to explore the receptivity of post-secondary English teachers to the CEFR and, in particular, to shed light on their perceptions, knowledge, practice and challenges in engaging with the CEFR. The reason for choosing such an approach lies in the opportunities it offers the researchers to best understand how teachers perceive and experience the phenomenon of interest in the context in which they find themselves (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, this approach not only considers social and cultural factors that shape participants' experiences and perspectives but also advocates the construction of knowledge between the researcher and the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2008), which reinforces the idea of social constructivism. Accordingly, semi-structured in-depth interviews were strategically employed as a two-pronged heuristic to contribute to a deeper understanding of the context and subtleties of the participants, as well as to more comprehensive and nuanced conclusions (Dornyei, 2007).

Context and Participants

Before addressing the biographic information of the participants in the study, it is vital to first understand the contexts within which they are situated. All the participants are to comply with the newly released post-secondary English language curriculum framework, more commonly referred to as PSELCF, which aims to "further support English language teaching and learning progression between secondary and tertiary education" (MOE, 2022, p.1). Before that, post-secondary English language education had been teaching students the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) since 1999 so that students could accomplish the required band score and gain admission into their desired university courses (Cambridge English, 2013). With the CEFR incorporation into the PSELCF, an unprecedented departure from the 24-year-long customary test-oriented practices, the post-secondary English teachers are now tasked with helping students reach the CEFR level of B2 by the end of their 18-month post-secondary English education so that they will be able to utilise the language and operate effectively in tertiary environments. In this regard, teachers of English at this stage are accountable for assisting students in achieving four main objectives articulated in the PSELFC, which include "understand[ing] spoken language on concrete and abstract topics and follow complex lines of arguments" and "interact[ing] with a degree of fluency and spontaneity which makes regular interaction quite possible without strain" (MOE, 2022, p.3).

In general, four post-secondary English teachers participated in this study. They were selected based on purposive sampling to find well-informed people regarding the educational change under study (Creswell, 2014; Plano-Clark, 2011). Additionally, there were some predetermined criteria that the participants in the study had to meet. Firstly, they received at least one training session on familiarisation with the CEFR and the new test specifications and sample questions from MUET-CEFR. Second, they had taught English at the post-secondary level since 2020, as the CEFR was officially introduced into post-secondary English education that year. Finally, those who had already achieved at least CEFR level C1 in their English test, indicating that they were linguistically competent in their field, were sought for the study. Table 1 below presents details on the study participants.

Table 1.
Participants' Profile

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Highest academic qualification	Years of Teaching Experience	English proficiency level against the CEFR	Number of CEFR-based training received	Locality
Sudirman	Male	38	Master	15	C1	2	Urban
Affwa	Male	45	Bachelor	20	C1	2	Urban
Suria	Female	58	Bachelor	30	C1	2	Rural
Camelia	Female	30	Bachelor	5	C1	2	Rural

Two male and two female post-secondary English teachers participated in this study. In addition, all participants were assigned pseudonyms such as Sudirman (Participant A), Affwa (Participant B), Suria (Participant C) and Melor (Participant D) to ensure confidentiality and protection of their identities. In addition, most had a Bachelor's degree in TESL, and one had a Master's degree in the same field of study. As for the level of English proficiency, all of them were certified at C1. In addition, they had attended the trainings mentioned above. Concerning school locality, two worked at urban schools, and the other two at rural schools. This geographical composition of the participants' workplace contributes to the representativeness of the population. Concerning teaching experience, it is equally diverse and representative, ranging from 5 to 25 years, enabling prospective and experienced teachers' voices to be heard.

Instrument

As mentioned earlier, the study used a semi-structured interview to comprehensively understand teachers' receptivity to CEFR implementation at the post-secondary level. As this is a semi-structured interview, some of the questions were formulated by the researchers in collaboration with a qualitative expert who works in one of Malaysia's public universities and has personally been involved in implementing CEFR in Malaysia. This was important to ensure that the pre-determined questions reflected the issue under study. Initially, there were 15 questions, but on closer inspection, only 10 were retained as the rest were overlapping, ambiguous and contradictory. At the request of the participants, three interviews were conducted online and one face-to-face interview. Generally, the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, depending on what the participants were told during the interview. As the English proficiency of all participants was at C1, the interviews were conducted entirely in English. All interviews were manually and digitally recorded to facilitate data analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews to identify themes or patterns in the data. The researchers closely followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis entailing: a) becoming familiar with the data obtained, b) generating initial codes, c) configuring themes, d) revising themes, e) fine-tuning and naming themes, and f) assigning meanings to themes. In addition to all the steps, the accuracy of the data was ensured through member checking by sending an interview transcription to each participant so that they could check and confirm their information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Subsequently, the data were coded manually by the researchers and two CEFR practitioners attached to the MOE to ensure the reliability of the coding and optimise its trustworthiness. In this process, the data obtained were analysed individually in the first phase. Next, the individual analyses of the data were compared to clarify ambiguities and reach a consensus on the assigned themes. Finally, all emerging themes were categorised into four aspects, namely perceptions, knowledge, practices and challenges.

FINDINGS

It could be ascertained that teachers' receptivity to the CEFR was best viewed through teachers' perceptions, knowledge, practice and challenges encountered over the course of its implementation. Table 2 below outlines key summaries of the aforementioned domains related to teachers' CEFR receptivity.

Table 2.
Highlights of Teachers' Receptivity to the CEFR

Domain	Description
Perception	• Students' communicative skills
	• International currency
	• Empowering all learners
Knowledge	• Roles as Speaking examiners
	• Good knowledge of the CEFR descriptors and levels
	• Good understanding of plurilingualism
Classroom Practice	• Lesson design based on can-do descriptors
	• Topic selection
	• Task differentiation
Challenges	• Teachers' questionable English proficiency
	• Ambitious target of B2 for students
	• Ineffective training

Perceptions of the CEFR

The results showed that all the participants were positive about the MOE's decision to enforce the CEFR at the post-secondary level. This is because they unanimously felt that students' communicative skills have become central to their pedagogical practice and have thus been further strengthened with the introduction of the CEFR. Also contributing to their positive perception of the CEFR were the significant changes in aligning students' English language skills with the CEFR. Specifically, this means that the weighting of all tested language skills equals 25%. Before alignment with the CEFR, Participant A mentioned that "*speaking and listening skills were*

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considered secondary and accounted for only 30% of students' total English proficiency score". Consequently, according to Participant C, "*much attention and emphasis were given to reading and writing, with a weighting of 45% and 30% respectively*". It is also noteworthy to underscore Participants A and D's concerns that the currently adjusted weighting in Speaking "*may only bring minimal impacts*" unless it is "*increased to 50% or 60%*".

The positive receptivity to the CEFR is also brought about by the international currency associated with it. In this sense, the fact that the MUET is aligned with the CEFR helps to ensure that it is internationally recognised and that "*students do not have to take such a language test twice, especially those who wish to study abroad*" (Participant B). In other words, as claimed by Participant C, "*the quality of B2 in MUET is the same as in other international tests aligned to CEFR, such as IELTS or TOEFL*". In this light, the CEFR's affiliation with such a global currency and its associated benefits have, to some extent, created a sense of conviction and confidence among teachers, thus establishing their favourable receptivity to the CEFR.

The final known factor in the positive impression left by the CEFR is that it espouses the philosophy that everyone can succeed in their language learning endeavours. Participant D opined that "*any shortcoming that learners have is seen as an opportunity to improve their knowledge, depending on their learning pace and other factors*". Before the introduction of the CEFR, English language teaching at the post-secondary level, as all participants noted, tended to be "*unfriendly*" (Participant C), "*cold*" (Participant A) and "*unfair to learners with low English proficiency*" (Participant D) and therefore "*favoured the advanced learners*" (Participant B). However, the CEFR makes English language learning much more bearable and, more importantly, achievable.

Knowledge of the CEFR
Per participants' knowledge of the CEFR, it can be assumed that they have acquired a relatively satisfactory understanding of it. Their current knowledge and understanding of the CEFR mainly focused on their involvement as examiners in the Speaking (Participants A, B, C and D) and Writing section of CEFR-MUET (Participant B). As Participant B shared, this opportunity has helped him "*to understand how language teaching and assessment works in concrete terms*". In this sense, Participant D foregrounded that she was "*able to conduct and assess language teaching in accordance with the CEFR*", as she received first-hand information after "*watching the numerous speaking videos they had to evaluate, discuss and critique during their speaking assessment workshop*". In addition, all participants agreed that although they had all attended training on the CEFR at the district and school levels, they admitted that they had not received as much input as when they attended the speaking assessment workshop, as the former "*did not address practical applications*" (Participant B) nor demonstrate "*how the CEFR was put into practice*" (Participant A). Nevertheless, Participant C felt that she was fortunate that the theoretical understanding of the CEFR she had gained during the training was complemented by the concrete, experiential learning experiences she could have in the MUET-CEFR speaking workshop.

This can be seen, firstly, in the fact that all participants understood the descriptors and levels of the CEFR. Each expressed how important the CEFR descriptors and levels are for the teaching and learning process. Participant A, for example, noted that the can-do descriptors can be compared to "*the learning outcomes or learning objectives that teachers want to achieve*". Participant D complemented the differentiation of the can-do descriptors according to the six levels of the CEFR as they "*help teachers set realistic, practical and achievable learning expectations for students with different abilities*" in a single classroom. However, Participant B suggested that the fact that "*the descriptors are so extensive can make teachers feel overwhelmed*". Therefore, he reminded that teachers should proceed cautiously and "*select only the descriptors that are most relevant and significant to their context, needs and priorities*".

It is also worth noting that CEFR implementation educates its practitioners to appreciate the diversity of languages and not to limit themselves to the target language alone. For example, Participant A expressed that "using students' first language is inevitable when most students of mine do not have a good command of English and that it is one of the most effective ways to support their learning". In the case of Participant C, the flexibility of the CEFR to use students' first language made her students perceive English differently. For example, a student of hers "*was no longer afraid or demotivated to use English*". Notwithstanding, some participants claimed that "*it is essential to use students' first language selectively*" (Participant B) and not to go so far as "*to conduct the entire teaching*

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and learning process in students' first language, especially at the post-secondary level" (Participant D). The bottom line is that students' first language should not be abused but used purposefully and strategically.

Teachers' Classroom Practices

The findings on teachers' self-reported teaching practices revealed some significant parallels and commonalities, regardless of the school locality to which they were assigned. Therefore, the discussion at this point revolves around three themes, namely, instructional design, topic selection and task differentiation.

Firstly, all indicated that their sole reference for lesson design was the can-do descriptors included in the MUET-CEFR test specifications and question booklet. Therefore, all agreed that the descriptors are central to the lesson design, informing teachers and students of the learning objectives to be achieved at the end of the lesson. Moreover, Participant A stressed the importance of designing lessons based on can-do descriptors as this purposeful action helped "*track students' learning progress*". Per Participant B, this practice was "*not very different from what I did*" before the CEFR was introduced. The only notable difference is "*the standardised can-do descriptions for each competence scale*". However, Participants C and D said that sometimes they did not know or were unsure how to adapt the can-do descriptions to their teaching. Meanwhile, it is worth mentioning that all still designed their lessons around what mattered to the test and further consolidated through repetition and drill. On account of that, Participant C noted that she was "*still trapped withing the teaching to the test mentality*" and subscribing to Participant C's statement, the other three participants acknowledged that they did not adequately equip students with skills for university learning given that students' performance on the test took precedence over other matters.

The discussion about the can-do statements centred on almost all participants choosing topics and tasks that were appropriate for their context and the needs of the students. Participant A, for example, felt that *"the topic chosen should arouse the students' interest and gradually raise their communicative competence to the desired level*". To this end, he often started her lessons with questions related to current issues, e.g., "*What do you think about mental health?*" or "*What would you do to curb the rising cost of living?*" Furthermore, Participant B mentioned that while the CEFR advocates learner-centred teaching, "*the level of difficulty of tasks should also be given due consideration*". Participant C shared the same opinion as Participant B. For instance, she classified the conversation topics according to the level of familiarity, from "*discussing matters related to personal life, family, hobbies, etc.*" to "*talking about environmental issues, finances or science and technology*".

Closely related to this progressive approach to topic selection, two of them said that it was equally important to differentiate tasks to meet the needs of learners with different abilities. For example, Participant A reported that he varied the tasks in one group. While "*some have the task of presenting information, the others are responsible for retrieving and analysing information and writing reports*". Another example was found in the teaching context of participant B, who allowed his students to "*participate in an open discussion at the beginning of the lesson*", which later developed into "*a series of debates*". Although they were aware of differentiation and choice in tasks and learning, the other two participants did not consider this a viable option in their context as they had quite "*a large number of students*" (Participant C), and it was therefore "*difficult to monitor*" (Participant D) whether or not their students were doing what they were asked to do.

Challenges

Undoubtedly, the implementation of the CEFR, like any change in education, is also fraught with challenges and friction. This was confirmed and attested to by the participants in the study. Overall, the obstacles in the implementation of the CEFR can be divided into three areas, namely teachers, policy and training factors.

As far as the teacher factor is concerned, all considered the level of English proficiency of teachers to be a strong predictor of the effectiveness of the implementation of the CEFR. Indeed, the MOE's efforts to set C1 as the minimum English proficiency requirement for teachers speaks volumes about the importance of good English proficiency and must not be compromised in any way. However, Participant C remarked that "*there are still teachers whose language level stagnates at B2*" despite having completed a one-year Pro-ELT Programme and taking three mandatory language tests (CPT, APTIS-Advanced and CEFR-Readiness Test). As for Participant A, who was also the Head of English in her school, most of her colleagues, especially the senior teachers aged 40 and above, had problems using English as a medium of instruction. This is because "*they were used to delivering*

English lessons in Malay as how the students were taught in primary and secondary schools". Echoing Participant A's observation, Participant B revealed that he lacked confidence in his own English. He also noted that his modest English skills affected the delivery of the speaking lessons, especially as he frequently used repetition and drill activities instead of impromptu activities. In his defence, he said he would rather perform something familiar so that his students could "*respond well and at least perform satisfactorily*".

The next obstacle to CEFR implementation is the ambitious target of students' English proficiency at B2, which is addressed under the policy factor. As expressed by all participants, most students were still developing their B1 conversational skills upon their secondary schooling. Nevertheless, they believed that there were only a few students who could reach beyond the targeted level, particularly those who achieved B2 after completing secondary studies. Apart from the students' low language proficiency, setting B2 level in post-secondary education is considered unrealistic as Participant C pointed out that "*students generally spend 18 months in post-secondary studies or 240 hours of classes in three semesters*". Moreover, Participant A emphasized that "*the transition from B1 to B2 requires more or less 620 hours to produce learners at B2 who are equipped with a fairly good command of English*" which Participant D believed as those who "*demonstrate an active use of English as well as able to understand and be understood in most situations*".

Lastly, ineffective delivery of training was cited by all study participants as the biggest barrier to implementing the CEFR at the post-secondary level. In particular, they were discouraged that there had been no follow-up after completing the one-off training. For example, Participant C stressed that training without a follow-up mechanism was tantamount to "*not attending the training at all, as we may not know or be sure if we are on the right track*". Apart from this, Participant D was dissatisfied with the "*one-way dissemination of information on the CEFR*". Participant B shared the same experience, stating that "*the training he attended was conducted passively*", although attempts were made to get teachers to design questions aligning with the CEFR levels. However, he stressed that practical demonstrations of the CEFR were not even addressed in the form of video clips or experiential learning. The same frustration was felt by Participant A, for whom training or workshops on the CEFR at the post-secondary level "*mostly focused on tests*".

DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the present study was to find out how post-secondary English teachers' receptivity to the CEFR implementation. With this in mind, their perceptions, knowledge and practice, as well as the challenges in implementing the CEFR were explored in depth. Based on the findings presented in the previous section, it can be stated that there are some indications of utmost importance that are worth discussing and reflecting on.

First, coherent with Byram and Parmenter (2012), all participants responded positively to the implementation of the CEFR, considering the benefits and privileges it offers to language teaching, such as global recognition, access to standardised levels of competence and the alignment of teaching and learning with international standards. Interestingly, this positive receptivity was largely fostered by immediate changes in the post-secondary English curriculum, reflected in the equal weighting of all language skills tested in the MUET after alignment with the CEFR (MEC, 2019). Unlike their counterparts at the primary and secondary levels, English teachers at the post-secondary level were familiar with the greater emphasis on listening and speaking skills required by the CEFR. They were, therefore, more open to it, similar to the earlier curriculum for English at the post-secondary level (Chua, 2020). In this context, the fact that the weighting for each skill tested was set at 25% was seen as beneficial and thus contributed to the positive impressions associated with CEFR implementation at the post-secondary level. Nevertheless, such a move can be seen as a double-edged sword at best. On the one hand, such fair weighting can potentially help realign deeply entrenched teaching practices by treating and considering all language skills equally. On the other hand, the study offers a fresh insight that there is a fear that the equal distribution of weighting across all skills at 25% does not do justice to speaking in particular, which deserves a higher percentage and thus greater recognition if one is truly serious about improving students' communicative skills in English.

Another notable finding was that the teachers demonstrated a fairly passable knowledge of the CEFR, largely due to their work as examiners of speaking and writing, through which they had clarity about how CEFR-based

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teaching should proceed (Rehner et al., 2021). This is reflected in their shared understanding of the importance of the can-do descriptors, the basis of the CEFR. In addition to their voluntary participation in the assessment of speaking and the marking of writing, their CEFR knowledge is shaped by their experiences, which they have formed, reinforced and reconstructed over the years (Chua, 2020). This is evident when each of them speaks passionately about humanising education by, among other things, addressing students' needs and creating a positive and conducive learning environment. Even though there are differing opinions on the use of the students' first language, this shows how keen they were to ensure that the students get the maximum benefit from what they believe works best in contrast to the studies of Abidin and Hashim (2021), Gursoy et al. (2017), and Yusoff et al. (2022). At the same time, nevertheless, it can be argued that the knowledge they had developed through previous experiences, curricula and professional exposure to the CEFR may not be sustainable and, therefore, lead to less effective outcomes for at least two reasons. First, the fact that they have limited their teaching to what is relevant to the test in some ways negates the full possibilities that the CEFR offers students beyond tests and exams (Don et al., 2021). Second, amidst teachers' preoccupations with CEFR levels and its can-do descriptors, other important aspects of the CEFR, such as task management and communicative language methodology that could be integrated into classroom practice (Byram & Parmenter, 2012), have remained under the radar.

As far as their teaching practice is concerned, the study showed that they tried to implement the CEFR well, possibly because they are strong advocates of the CEFR, unlike the usual reactions and practices that follow educational innovation imposed from above in a highly controlled, authoritarian educational setting (Aziz, 2022). As reported earlier, they reiterated and elaborated on the importance of can-do statements, careful topic selection and progression, meeting students' interests and creating a conducive learning atmosphere. In this regard, it is undeniable that they have shown a strong commitment to making the CEFR work in their unique contexts. They even claimed that what they have practised so far is not very different from what they did in the past (Chua, 2020). The usefulness of the can-do descriptors was also not seen as an innovation, as their mechanism, to some extent, reflects the learning outcomes in the previous curriculum. Accordingly, how they configured the CEFR within their teaching practices was very much influenced by their existing teaching practice. Nevertheless, their teaching practice is undeniably still very much centred around preparing students for the test (Don et al., 2021), given how often teachers support students' learning through repetition and drill, even when there have been modest efforts to provide them with skills for university learning. Therefore, achieving a fully student-centred approach is difficult, as teachers were primarily concerned with enabling students to pass the test and achieve the targeted level of performance.

Finally, the findings reflect the problems faced in CEFR implementation at the post-secondary level. These challenges can be narrowed down to two critical aspects, namely the basic needs and the feasibility of the intended goals (Foley, 2021). Regarding the first aspect, it is undeniable that the basic needs that support and strengthen the implementation of the CEFR have not yet been met, which increases the vulnerability and susceptibility of the CEFR in both the short and long term. For example, the common practice of one-off, disjointed in-service training without follow-up should be reconsidered as it has had little benefit if not detrimental effects, on teachers' professional development in general and their pedagogical practice in particular (Uri, 2021). The other pertains to teachers' compromising English proficiency levels, which can debilitate the CEFR's impact on teaching and learning (Foley, 2021). As for the latter challenge, the findings imply that the target proficiency level for post-secondary students should be adjusted accordingly, indirectly indicating the adverse effects of teachers' non-involvement in policy reform (Franz & Teo, 2018; Huei-Lin, 2020; Naidu, 2013). It was felt that the constraints and limitations of post-secondary English language teaching, including allocated teaching hours over 18 months and the profile of students' English language skills acquired during primary and secondary education, must be weighed against the feasibility of the expected level.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As mentioned, the study aimed to shed light on the English teachers' receptivity to the CEFR at the post-secondary level, as manifested in their perceptions, knowledge, practice and difficulties in implementing the framework. The findings showcased a few implications that can help improve the current CEFR implementation at the post-secondary level. Firstly, concerning the CEFR-aligned MUET, it is fairly obvious that the CEFR has somehow penetrated teachers' classroom practice, speaking skills are seen as important as reading and writing. Nevertheless,

the ability of learners to develop solid communicative skills by the end of post-secondary English education so that they "can "interact with some degree of fluency and spontaneity" (Council of Europe, 2001, p.5) is indeed an astonishingly ambitious plan unless some striking changes are made to achieve the desired goal. One of these is to increase the current weighting of 25% to 50%, as this substantial increase would potentially bring about a significant change in language teaching and learning. Secondly, providing effective in-service training cannot be overemphasised, as in many ways, it is undeniably the foundation of any successful educational innovation. In this sense, they should receive as much intensive training as their primary and secondary colleagues.

Most importantly, the quality of training should be optimised by increasing the frequency of training and supplementing it with follow-up activities, providing teachers with experiential learning or practical demonstrations, and giving them direct access to CEFR trainers whom they can turn to for help and support. Lastly, it is timely to ensure teachers' English competencies are at the most optimal level through recertification within a stipulated period. However, this measure must be communicated well so will not be misinterpreted as diminishing trust in teachers' capacity.

Although the results offer invaluable insights into CEFR implementation at the post-secondary level, some caution must be exercised in interpreting the findings due to several limitations inherent in any qualitative research. For example, since only a small number of participants were recruited in this study, the generalisability of the findings to other contexts is limited. In addition, only one area was examined, making the transferability of the findings difficult. Similarly, the participants selected were representative of those who had received training on the CEFR and were professionally involved in CEFR-related assessments, which renders a rather one-sided view of a very proactive segment of CEFR supporters. Deliberately and purposefully focusing on the views of English teachers may not be sufficient and may not do justice to other stakeholders who are affected in one way or another by the implementation of the CEFR. Moreover, the findings of the study, which are ultimately based on semi-structured interviews, are not incontestable, as teachers' statements may differ from the actual implementation of educational innovation. Given the above limitations, it is suggested that future research could increase the generalisability of the findings by surveying in addition to qualitative techniques such as interviews and classroom observations, which could involve a larger number of respondents with and without CEFR education from different parts of Malaysia. It is also worth considering the participation of students and principals in future studies, as their voices are equally pivotal to the successful CEFR implementation.

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