Practicum Teacher English Readiness Based on Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) in ESL Teaching

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Abstract
Before gaining its independence, several English Language policy reforms have been introduced to Malaysia's education system. The main reason for the changes would be the need to master the English Language skill, as they greatly influence how Malaysia education system policies are being implemented. There is a growth of the need to improve in mastering the language, coming from the public and private education sector. Hence, it is necessary to prepare the English teachers to be aligned with the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013 – 2025, which introduced the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages as guidance in teaching and learning the English language in schools. It was also reported that during the first Cambridge Placement Test, which was aligned with the CEFR in 2012, 70% of the English teachers failed to reach C1 or C2 level (high mastery). There was a total of 61,000 who sat for the test. Henceforth, this study is conducted to investigate the level of proficiency of the practicum teacher candidates according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Thirty respondents were chosen to sit for Aptis Remote, administered by the British Council. The results from the Aptis test revealed that 30% of the candidates passed the test with grade C1, the minimum level of proficiency set by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE). Future research directions are proposed in consideration of developing an incentive programme for teachers and introducing a reliable testing tool linked to CEFR level to assess and monitor the level of proficiency of practicum teachers.

Introduction

English language teaching and learning has a long history in the Malaysian education system. Numerous policies and changes were introduced that shaped the current model used in the system. Starting with Barnes Report, Razak Report, The Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (Malay acronym: PPSMI), and the newest; MBMMBI (Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia dan Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris), and its English translation as 'To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and to Strengthen the English Language' have contributed on the different strategies used to produce graduates who are able to use English as the L2 with minimal difficulties. These policies are efforts to improve the mastery of L2 among Malaysian students, as stated in the National Education Blueprint (NEB).

According to the NEB, a roadmap was developed to reform the English language system in Malaysia by introducing the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) was formed and assigned to assist the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) in aligning the current syllabus with the framework, including the textbook, curricula, and teaching practices.

Improving English language education in Malaysia means that the teachers' English language ability must also be assessed and kept at par with the quality of English education delivered. Hence, the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT) was conducted in 2012, and 61000 English teachers were expected to sit for it by the end of the year. In 2014, the results revealed that 70% of the teachers who sat for the test failed to achieve the required proficiency level set by the MOE according to the CEFR scale (Rajendram, 2015).

In order to adapt to changes in the English education system, institutions that offer English teacher training programmes should take action as well. The test results in 2012 consisted of English teachers who were in the service for several years. The result has raised whether teacher training institutions could produce English teacher graduates who meet the standards required by the Ministry of Education. English teachers should at least acquire the C1 or C2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to fulfil the roadmap.

Objective of the Study and Research Question

This study is done to explore the level of proficiency of the teaching practicum candidates according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Specifically, this study is done to answer the following question:

1. What is the level of proficiency of the teaching practicum candidates according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)?

Literature Review
The Common European Framework Reference (CEFR)
The Common European Framework Reference CEFR) for languages is an international standard for illustrating language ability which describes the language ability on a six-point scale for everyone involved in language teaching and testing to see the level of different qualifications (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2021). According to the Council of Europe (2021), CEFR is developed to provide a translucent, reasonable, and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessments of foreign language skills. Numerous studies have been carried out for the adoption of CEFR in second speakers of English language countries, and the findings were skewed to positive outcomes rather than indicating difficulties in adopting CEFR as stated by Nawai and Said (2020). According to the Council of Europe (2001), the CEFR framework divides language proficiency into six levels from A1 to C2, which can be regrouped into three levels: basic users (A1 and A2), independent users (B1 and B2), and proficient users (C1 and C2). The proficiency levels are measured in relation to the five skills using 'can do' descriptors.

Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (2012) explained that the CEFR as the linguistics fluency required to participate fully in professional and academic life as neighbouring Asian education systems in China, South Korea, and Singapore are increasingly focused on developing students who are not only proficient in their national language but also English language to maximise the employability in the worldwide workforce. The adoption of the CEFR in the development of the Malaysian English education system is to meet international standards.

The CEFR was publicly introduced in Malaysia in 2013 when the CEFR Symposium was held in Sepang, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur; attended by key teachers, lecturers, and testing experts (Nurul Farehah & Mohd Sallehhudin Aziz, 2017). According to the English Roadmap document published by the Ministry of Education (2012), CEFR in Malaysia would be fully developed in three phases; the first phase should have been implemented between 2013 and 2015. The second phase; 2016 until 2020, while the third phase; begins from 2021 and ends in 2025. This English Roadmap has also highlighted the Malaysian CEFR targets set by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE) according to education level in Malaysia. The mapping of the targets starts from the pre-school level until the university level. The university students are expected to achieve B2 or C1 according to the CEFR scale, and for students pursuing teacher education, they are required to achieve the minimum level of proficiency; C1.

CEFR is a description of the level of language proficiency, but it is not a teaching method. However, understanding the different levels in the CEFR and how to refer to the descriptors to determine the speaker's language proficiency level will affect the way the school teaches English (Nurul Farehah & Mohd Sallehhudin Aziz, 2017). Since the descriptors are described in detail based on listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, it will be an excellent reference to determine students' proficiency based on their classroom skills. Although CEFR is not a teaching method, it is a reference for teachers to apply various teaching strategies to achieve the goals.

Therefore, an internationally recognised descriptor such as CEFR would help students and teachers set the goal of improving students' English proficiency to match what is described in the framework. This is supported by the study conducted by Tatiana and Gopal (2017) that found CEFR is expected to play an essential role in the reorganisation of the Malaysian English education system in the next ten years. CEFR has always been a frame of reference designed to improve the proficiency of Malaysian students. An analysis of the responses of the participants in this study shows that the English language is still challenging to master due to factors such as the oral environment and the proficiency of teachers. However, the government has taken many measures to improve this situation. Like any other new system, it takes much time to start CEFR to provide positive opportunities for English learners.

Language Policies in Malaysia
Malaysia (known as Tanah Melayu before 1963) was colonised by the British, which contributed to English language usage as the official language in the early 1900s. Malay, Chinese, and Tamil languages were identified as vernacular languages mentioned by languageeducationpolicy.org (2017). Malay language (then known as Bahasa Malaysia) obtained its status as the national language by its recognition in the National Language Act 1963/67 under the Country Constitute 152, in which the Malay language was utilised in government sectors of Malaysia.

Based on Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025: Wave 3, Innovating to the next level, for language, "the ministry aims to develop students who are proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English Language, and who are encouraged to learn an additional language." The measures taken for English language proficiency are strengthening the delivery of English language lessons, reinforcing testing and upskilling all English language subject teachers based on the Cambridge Placement Test and the Aptis Test, and making it compulsory for students to pass the English language subject paper at SPM from 2016. Malaysia is known to have multicultural backgrounds with different races and their mother tongue. The English language is used in many parts of Malaysian professional and social life, which is well-positioned to develop a nation that is at least "operationally proficient" in more than one language (Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2012, p.113)

This recent move was introduced with the primary objective to bring English language education on par with the international level, compared with the standard used in many countries worldwide; CEFR. As mentioned in the blueprint, the CEFR will also be used as a guide in improving the textbooks, curricula, and teaching practices.
2.3 English Teacher's proficiency in Malaysia

In order to improve English education in Malaysia, it is essential to note the progress of Malaysia compared to other countries. Hence, a baseline study was conducted by the Ministry of Education with assistance from Cambridge English. The results were reported in the Cambridge Baseline 2013, and it was found that Malaysia is not progressing as a nation that uses English as means to communicate internationally (Ministry of Education, 2015). The study is not just based on the English proficiency level of students in primary and secondary school but also on the teachers' level of proficiency. This finding justifies CEFR being introduced to the English education system.

According to Nurul Farehah and Mohd Sallehhudin (2017), many Malaysian English teachers have been found to be unskilled in teaching English. About 15,000 of Malaysia's 60,000 English teachers are not well equipped to teach this subject (Star, 2014). This is because, according to a Cambridge English baseline survey, about two-thirds of the total number of English teachers in the country failed to reach the minimum level of English proficiency. The relatively poor performance of teachers in the test, like any other program, is very embarrassing as they are the leading players for successful program implementation. Teachers are a significant determinant of successful learning outcomes.

In the 2014 baseline project led by Cambridge English, an attempt was made to understand English teachers' proficiency fully. The primary purposes of this research are to map the proficiency of English teachers in Malaysia based on the internationally recognised measurement standards for describing language ability. Also, it aimed to develop a framework for continuous professional development based on the needs and proficiency of teachers, where the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT), questionnaires, and even face-to-face interviews are used to measure the English language ability of teachers. The minimum standard set for teachers to achieve is C1.

Theory Linked to Proficiency Level of English Teacher Affecting Students
According to Chomsky (1980), problems regarding language acquisition could be caused by two sources. Firstly, the quality of the language input. If the language input is deemed to be grammatically incorrect and full of errors, it will heavily affect the acquisition of the second language. Secondly, the problem could be caused by the absence of negative evidence. The learners could not determine which form of language or structure is acceptable to use.

Hence, it results in difficulty acquiring the language. Based on the first source, the poor language input comes from the surroundings, in which the people around the learner use the speech and language forms. In this context, the learner spends most of their time learning the language from the parents and the teacher. The teacher is seen as a role model for learning the language because it is expected of a good English teacher to be proficient in using the English language. Hence, when the teacher has limited English proficiency, it will affect the students' progress as their speech is primarily based on the teacher's speech.

Aptis Test
Aptis Test is a proficiency test developed by the British Council that works directly with organisations to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) test services for a variety of evaluation purposes (Mohammad Rizwan & Omid Wali, 2020). It is an innovative global tool designed to assess the English proficiency of adults and young adults.

For each skill tested, a scaled number of points (0-50) is given, which can be used to compare individual candidates. It also helps to measure progress if candidates are retaking the test. Candidates can view test results individually or in a group format to analyse performance for individuals and departments as a whole. The scores are scaled to CEFR level for each skill taken; A1-C. If the candidates take the test for all skills, they will receive a report based on the overall CEFR level.

According to Aptis Candidate Guide (2018), there are five different components in Aptis, namely core grammar, vocabulary, and language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Each candidate takes a grammar and vocabulary test and then determines the level of English of their choice. The tests start with general questions and then move on to more complex questions. Each section of the test assesses an English level from A1 to C1. Grammar and vocabulary are mandatory for the candidates. However, they can choose one of the four language skills or all the components of language skills.

There are four different variants of the Aptis test; Aptis General, Aptis Advanced, Aptis for Teachers, and Aptis for Teachers. Aptis General is a basic evaluation test that can be adapted to the business or organisation's needs, depending on the skills you are testing. Aptis Advanced is an innovative assessment tool that helps candidates accurately test their English skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. Aptis for Teachers is specifically designed for those involved in education to help improve the quality of their teaching, while Aptis for Teens is a general English test for ages 13-15. It is designed to meet the needs of young language learners in developing their English skills.

Aptis Test Structure
The Core: Grammar and Vocabulary
Each candidate is given 25 minutes for grammar and vocabulary parts. As for the grammar part, it is a multiple-choice question format that focuses on sentence completion. As for the vocabulary part, the questions are word matching questions.

Reading
The time allocated for this skill is 35 minutes. It consists of four parts namely sentence comprehension, text cohesion, short text comprehension, and long text comprehension. For sentence comprehension, the candidates need to select a word to complete the sentence. There are five sentences to complete. Each sentence in the text is free-standing. It is unnecessary to understand all of the sentences to complete individual sentences. Part 2 is a collection of text that puts the sentences in the proper order for the candidates to create a story. In this regard, the seven sentences are messed up. Part 3 focuses on understanding short texts where candidates select the best word to create a sentence from the list. There are ten options and seven free spaces. Part 4 requires the candidates to match the headings to the paragraphs. There are always extra headings that do not fit with any paragraph.

Listening
The listening part of Aptis takes up to 55 minutes and is divided into three parts. The first part is word and number recognition. Here, the examinee listens to the phone message to identify specific information. The second part specifies the identification of specific information. The third part is the inference part. Candidates determine attitudes, opinions or intentions by listening to monologues or dialogues. There are multiple-choice questions in all the three parts mentioned with four options.

Writing
Each candidate is given 50 minutes to complete four parts for this skill. The first part is word-level spelling, in which the candidate responds to messages with separate words. There are 1-5 words for each question. The second part is writing a short text in which the candidates

write personal data. It should be written in 20-30 words. Part 3 is three written answers to questions in which the test taker answers written questions on a social networking website. The maximum number of words for writing an answer to each question is 30-40 words. The fourth part focuses on formal and informal writing, in which the subject writes an informal email to a friend and an official email to an unknown person. The word limit for an informal letter is 30-40 words, and for an official email, it is between 120 and 150 words.

Speaking

The speaking test is divided into four parts, where each candidate is given 12 minutes to complete all parts. The first part is the personal information part. Each candidate is required to answer three personal information questions and talk for 30 seconds for each question. The second part requires the candidates to describe and express opinions and provide reasons and explanations.45 seconds is given to each candidate to describe a photograph and then answer two questions related to the subject depicted in the photograph. Three questions increase in complexity from description to opinion. The next part is to describe, compare and provide reasons and explanations. Each candidate must compare two pictures and then answer two questions related to the topic. The complexity of these three issues increases from description to speculation. It is estimated that your speaking time is 45 seconds for each question. Part 4 focuses on discussing personal experience and opinion on an abstract topic. Each candidate is given a picture and must answer three questions on an abstract topic within two minutes.

Methodology

This study aims to investigate the level of proficiency of the teacher practicum candidates according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Thirty final year students from the Diploma in TESL program in Kolej Universiti Poly-Tech MARA Kuala Lumpur (KUPTMKL) were chosen to sit for Aptis Remote (Aptis Advanced package) for this purpose. The test was carried out on 22nd December 2020 and remotely administered by the British Council using the Janison Insights platform. It was conducted with video monitoring to ensure a secure experience and reliable results. All the 30 candidates took the test from the comfort of their homes using their own devices. They were monitored using test-tracking software, ProctorTrack and required to download onto their devices three days before the scheduled test.

Aptis Remote has the same format, structure, and timing as a standard Aptis test. It is structured into five main components; grammar and vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As the candidates sat for Aptis Advanced, the tasks were more complex as compared to the Aptis General test. The maximum time allowed for each component is also different; Grammar and Vocabulary (25 minutes); Reading (60 minutes); Writing (45 minutes); Listening (30 minutes) and Speaking (10 minutes). Once completed, it took 48 hours to receive their results.

4.0 RESULTS

The results from the Aptis Remote test revealed that 30% of the candidates passed the test with grade C1; advanced. English. The majority of the candidates were certified at band B2, upper-intermediate English, and only 6.7% of them scored B1; intermediate.

According to the CEFR descriptor, nine (9) candidates with grade C1 can understand a wide range of demanding, longer clauses and recognise implicit meaning. They can express ideas fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions, can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes. They also can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors, and cohesive devices.

Nineteen candidates that were certified at band B2 show that they can understand the main ideas of complex text on concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of specialisation. They can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party and can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

On the other hand, two (2) candidates who scored B1 are considered candidates who can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, and leisure. They can deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken, can produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest and can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

From the result, it can be concluded that 30% of the candidates are proficient English users, and 70% of them are English dependent users.

Table 1
Distribution of Aptis Remote results

CEFR Score	No of candidates	Percentage (%)`
C1	9	30
B2	19	63.33
B1	2	6.67
Total	**30**	**100**

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that only 30% of practicum students achieved the minimum level of proficiency set by the MoE, similar results to the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT) taken by the English teachers in 2012. This could be due to the fact that these students were not a product of the CEFR-aligned syllabus that was introduced in school. The CEFR-aligned English syllabus was introduced in 2018, which involves students from Year One and Year Two for primary school and Form One and Form Two for secondary school. As of 2021, Year 1 - 5 of primary school students and Form 1 - 5 of secondary students have experienced the CEFR-aligned syllabus. The English practicum teachers mentioned in this study were products of the previous syllabus, which incorporates locally produced textbooks, different teaching methods, and different grading systems to assess their English proficiency level.

However, it is best to note that these students are part of a Diploma teacher training programme, which has yet to meet the minimum criteria set by the ministry to become an English teacher in public schools. The minimum criteria of becoming an English teacher are to graduate with a Bachelor of Education in Teaching English as a Second Language and a CEFR grade of C1 or C2 for their English proficiency. Therefore, completing a Diploma is only halfway through becoming an English teacher. This means that these students still have several years during their Bachelor to improve their mastery of the English language.

Nevertheless, the results served as necessary feedback for the teacher training programme to upskill the students' mastery of the English language. Despite the fact that their graduates have yet to meet the minimum requirements of becoming full-fledged English teachers, all teacher training institutions should be preparing their graduates to be in accordance with the National Education Blueprint (NEB). The Malaysian Examinations Council (Majlis Peperiksaan Negara - MPM) has also made preparations to align the Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET) to receive the first batch of students who went through the CEFR-aligned syllabus. Other academic institutions should also follow suit by preparing their English syllabus at the tertiary level based on the CEFR. More attention should be given to teacher training programmes as the students must have a better CEFR grade for English as they are the pioneers.

Recommendation and Conclusion
Proficiency of an English language training teacher matters. Training teachers need to have a level of proficiency significantly above that of the target level of their learners to provide

positive models, recognise learner errors and be able to deal with them, explain issues in language and assist language development appropriately (Allan & Mackenzie, 2019). One of the most effective ways is that the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Malaysia should review and reassess the current teacher training model to ensure the practicum teachers can achieve the minimum criteria of becoming English teachers. The involvement of knowledgeable or well-versed external advisers on CEFR to assist higher education providers would be beneficial and help make the qualification for English training teachers more relevant to the actual classroom setting. The appointment of external advisers from the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) would be relevant as the members of the council consisted of experts appointed by the MoE, including the director of the ELTC or the Center for English Language Education. One of the purposes of the organisation is to advise the government on the adequacy of language policy. ELSQC was established primarily to raise the level of English in Malaysia.

As discussed in the previous section, the respondents of this study are part of the Diploma teacher training programme, which has yet to meet the minimum criteria set by the MoE to become an English teacher in public schools. The minimum criteria of becoming an English teacher is to graduate with a Bachelor of Education in Teaching English as a Second language and a CEFR grade of C1 for their English proficiency. Since completing a Diploma is only halfway through becoming an English teacher, it is relevant for the MoE to consider setting a minimum linguistic standard for the Diploma teacher training program with a required proficiency at least level of CEFR B2 or C1. It is suggested that all students who enrol for the Diploma teacher training program such as Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) in any higher education institutions sit for the Aptis test before undergoing their teaching practicum. Those who fail to meet the minimum standards, at least a grade of CEFR B2, are required to re-sit for the Aptis Test before completing their Diploma. This is in line with the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) and Roadmap 2015-2025; all university students are expected to achieve the minimum linguistic proficiency, B2 or C1. Furthermore, these students still have several years during their Bachelor's to improve their mastery of the English language in order to achieve the minimum linguistic proficiency; C1.

Setting minimum linguistic proficiency for students who wish to become an English teacher indicates the seriousness of the language proficiency for a professional qualification (Allan & Mackenzie, 2019). Developing an incentive programme for training teachers by including language development courses with a minimum linguistic proficiency by graduation. Students who fail to achieve the minimum proficiency requirement on recognised standard test delays their graduation until the minimum linguistic proficiency is achieved. All the language development courses should be linked to CEFR to help improve their linguistic proficiency. Those who attend the courses should be provided with vouchers and book or self-study resources budgets. Financial incentives can also be given to those who can achieve the minimum target. However, it is recommended that they are only paid once as this will cause a financial burden to the MoE.

In order to assess and monitor training teacher language proficiency, a reliable testing tool linked to CEFR should be introduced. They should be tested on a regular basis to help them set their development goals and keep them motivated. This also gives a significant period over which to improve to those working on achieving their linguistic proficiency targets. The results

from the regular tests will become key performance indicators for the institutional providers and MoE to monitor the progress of the linguistic development of training teachers across Malaysia.

Training teachers need to have a level of proficiency significantly above that of the target level of their learners. Hence, this study is conducted to identify the English proficiency level of the teaching practicum candidates according to the CEFR. As one of the valid and reliable testing tools, Aptis Test was used, and the result revealed that the majority of the practicum achieved CEFR B2 score. The results served as necessary feedback for the teacher training programme to upskill the students' mastery of the English language. Even though their graduates have yet to meet the minimum requirements of becoming full-fledged English teachers, all teacher training institutions should be preparing their graduates to be in accordance with the National Education Blueprint (NEB).

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