

# The Importance of Innovative Teaching and Learning Approaches in the Implementation of CEFR: A Literature Review

Segar Sadhasivam, Moses Veda P Michael, Maslawati  
Mohamad, Melor Md Yunus

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia  
Corresponding Author Email: maslawati@ukm.edu.my

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## Abstract

The presence of several Innovative Pedagogy principles in Common European of References (CEFR) particularly through the inclusion of Differentiation Strategies and Formative Assessment has encouraged a creative and innovative teaching and learning environment among Malaysian English teachers and pupils. There is a lack of priority towards an effective practice of Differentiation Strategies and Formative Assessment in a CEFR lesson due to the focus on merely achieving the learning standards. CEFR has received a mixed review from educators and test developers due to a lack of understanding of the framework. This situation has directly affected the pedagogy process, especially in the insertion of differentiation strategies and formative assessment. In relation to this, this paper aims to present the perspective of implementing innovative teaching and learning approaches in CEFR while highlighting the embodiment of the principles of innovative pedagogy through Differentiation Strategies and Formative Assessment recommended in the Schemes of Work. By understanding this, educators could make attempts in implementing these new approaches in their own classroom context, especially to the current generation of pupils in order to promote more active learners. It is hoped that these new approaches could yield better achievements among the pupils.

**Keywords:** Innovative Pedagogy, Perception towards CEFR, Formative Assessment, Differentiation Strategies

## Introduction

It is essential for educators to constantly upgrade their knowledge, master relevant skills and commit to a continuous learning process in order to maintain the same rate of progress with the current needs of education. The inclusion of innovative pedagogy would allow an inclusive and equitable quality education for all (Li-Zhao et al., 2021). A study claims a more flexible educational environment while enabling the involvement of students' engagement with an enhanced structure to ensure students' autonomy for their own continued learning (Collis, 1998). In addition to this view, emphasizing a learner-oriented classroom in comparison to an instruction-dominated classroom is claimed to be more effective (Wright and Cordeaux,

1996). This enables an educator to develop his/her own identities within the context of students can be established through innovative pedagogy (Li-Zhao et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the integration of the CEFR into the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 infuses inspiration into the Malaysian ESL education system, transforming it ahead from an exam-oriented approach towards a more initiative one (Abdul Hakim et al., 2018). It brings with it a focus on merging innovative pedagogy through CEFR-aligned ESL teaching and learning to focus on student-centered teaching and learning while aiming to develop autonomous language learners (Sidhu et al., 2018). Due to the introduction of the CEFR in Malaysia, English education has shifted from an exam-oriented approach to a more action-oriented approach, resulting in a more structured approach by creating a new environment for teaching and learning English in school (Aziz et al., 2018).

It has also been claimed that the inclusion of technology in classrooms has the tendency to indulge pupils in an active learning environment while increasing their level of interest in learning the language. Many researchers have mentioned that the advancement of technological tools has brought a bright future for our learners today as it caters to the needs of increasing the proficiency level of students while making them achieve an international standard.

Nevertheless, the deficiency in technological tools at some schools becomes a constant excuse for teachers not to execute a lesson that involves creative pedagogies as if technological tools are the only means to conduct a creative, effective, and engaging lesson. Although the chosen textbooks to complement the CEFR implementation and the Scheme of Work for Year 1 until Form 5 pupils include various suggestions on creative pedagogical techniques for teachers to use when conducting the lesson, effective usage of this valuable resource is still questionable. Since this implementation is rather new, and many educators are still working on adapting to the needs of CEFR, their main focus emphasizes ensuring the learners achieve the learning standards which includes achieving the aims of a particular lesson. However, the inclusion of creative pedagogy suggested in these documents has been given less priority in comparison to wanting them to merely achieve the standards set in the Schemes of Work.

The connection between the lack of teachers' attention towards including creative pedagogical methods suggested in the teaching of CEFR and the actual need of including creative pedagogical methods in classrooms to enhance the teaching and learning process while creating an effective environment in achieving the set learning standards has led to the aim of this research; to present the perspective of implementing innovative pedagogy in CEFR while highlighting the embodiment of the principles of innovative pedagogy through Differentiation Strategies and Formative Assessment recommended in the Schemes of Work.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Innovative Pedagogy and CEFR In Malaysia***

A myriad of ways of innovative pedagogy has been portrayed in the recent education system. Here, it is worth noting that the role of information and communication technology (ICT) which currently plays an extremely significant role in education and assists in ensuring sustainable development (Carrion-Martinez et al., 2020) had enhanced the possibilities of executing innovative pedagogical classroom while providing an opportunity for learners to

take responsibility over their own learning through effective communication, which then executes the socio-affective and meta-cognitive factors (Farren, 2016), Inquiry-based learning (Schwab, 1962) and problem-based learning (Servant-Miklo, 2019) are among the pioneers in innovative pedagogies. Not forgetting to acknowledge play based-learning (Cheng & Stimpson, 2004) and design based-learning (Nelson, 1984). Flipped classrooms are also a prominent pedagogy introduced (Baker, 2020) and have been proven to accommodate an innovative pedagogy. Once again, the support of mobile technology such as mobile phones and tablets has an intense impact on influencing a learning process and its outcomes (Bernacki et al., 2020). This approach is also known as mobile learning. Another creative and fun way of implementing pedagogy is termed “playful learning” which enables the learners to engage in a playful and explorative environment (Kangas et al., 2017). This method also encourages individuals’ physical engagement in a learning environment. A different dimension of innovative pedagogy also highlights the importance of collaborative learning to enhance learners’ performance (McDonough & Foote, 2015).

In this globalized era of the new millennium, Malaysia has constantly made improvements in the education sector to refine the curriculum quality and criteria to evaluate and assess students. Due to the need to improve ESL competency among Malaysian students, there is an expanding development of various standards for English language learning and assessment in terms of global standards in Malaysia (Farehah & Sallehudin, 2019). The Common European Framework of References has been adopted in the development of the English Education system in Malaysia to achieve the international standards the Malaysian Blueprint intends to achieve (Malaysian Education Malaysia Blueprint, 2015). It consists of four important skills: Reading, Speaking, Listening and Writing. This has given much exposure to the teachers to innovate their teaching and learning process in the ESL classroom.

Language portfolios, peer or self-assessment, and other CEFR-aligned evaluation methods are recommended to be used in schools to complement traditional teaching methods (Le, 2018; Read, 2019). The implementation of CEFR was a paradigm shift for many teachers with the introduction of a new band tier for assessing the level of proficiency in the English language. The Common European Framework (CEFR) provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe (Council of Europe, 2001). Teachers are encouraged to experiment with innovative ways of assessing and enhancing students' passion and competency in the language both inside and outside of the classroom. This change has brought concern regarding the teachers’ readiness to implement CEFR in their pedagogy (Uri et al., 2018) Conducted a study to investigate the views of English teachers and Ministry of Education officials on the implementation of the CEFR in Malaysia and the challenges faced by stakeholders in adopting the CEFR in the English syllabus and assessment. In line with this, (Sidhu et al., 2018) found in their study that almost all of the respondents (ESL teachers) agreed to always rely on textbook exercises as their main tool to assess their students. Furthermore, education and learning in an ongoing process where pedagogy and theory which have been implemented in the past cannot be assumed to be able to produce the same result. Researchers have to continually research and try out newer and innovative pedagogy in tandem with the coming age and the new millennium learning style. This can be seen in (Laura et al., 2021) study, where a Western learning model has been experimented with within a Malaysian context which was not tested by previous research at the time of the study being conducted. The result institute that the Western learning model has a positive implication for students’ learning. Therefore, innovative pedagogy is a need in improving the whole teaching and learning process.

Differentiation strategies and Formative Assessment, are familiar terms that are recently highlighted through the execution of CEFR in Malaysia. These methods are claimed to be engaging pupils in an active learning environment. The key elements embedded in both differentiation strategies and formative assessment compliments the features of innovative pedagogies that are claimed to enhance a CEFR lesson. The summary of techniques and approaches of teaching and assessments highlighted in this subsection are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

*The summary of techniques and approaches of teaching and assessments*

Inquiry-based learning (Schwab, 1962)
problem-based learning (Servant-Miklo, 2019)
play based-learning (Cheng & Stimpson, 2004)
design based-learning (Nelson, 1984)
flipped classrooms (Baker, 2020)
mobile learning (Bernacki et al., 2020)
playful learning (Kangas et al. 2017)
collaborative learning (McDonough & Foote, 2015)
language portfolios, peer or self-assessment, and other CEFR-aligned evaluation methods (Le, 2018; Read, 2019)
differentiation strategies and formative Assessment (Burkett, 2013; Erickson, 2010; Karadag & Yasar, 2010; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Tomlinson, 2001)

### ***Perspective and Views on Implementing CEFR In ESL Class***

With the enforcement of CEFR in the education sector as a new scale to assess language proficiency, educators, learners and language policy maker have given their viewpoints on it. According to Nurhaliza (2021), who conducted a study at Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Indonesia, stated that English instructors have a good view of CEFR and it is applicable in Language Department Centre. They also claim to apply CEFR in their pedagogy process and it allows them to practice differentiated instruction. Apart from this, findings revealed that a large number of teachers had limited knowledge and minimal exposure to the CEFR (Kok & Aziz, 2019). However, they were optimistic about the idea and believed that the CEFR-aligned curriculum was vital in improving the level of English proficiency among Malaysians. Education, lack of training, non-local textbooks, and inadequate ICT support and resources for teaching and learning were some of the main issues and challenges identified in this study. The teachers were also positive about the implementation despite the perceived challenges and obstacles.

On the contrary, in a study conducted by Green (2018) titled "Linking Tests of English for Academic Purposes to the CEFR", the results suggest that more work is needed to help users understand the implications and limitations of the CEFR as a tool for interpreting the scoring result as there are lack relationships between the tests and the framework. Furthermore, Aziz and his researchers (2018) found in their study, despite the long and careful planning in terms of teacher training for the implementation of CEFR, there are various aspects that need to be improved namely synchronization between the textbook with the curriculum and scheme of work. Failure in this has resulted in a hindrance to the pedagogy process. Moreover, during the course given to English language teachers on CEFR, they were perpetually reminded to be flexible and should be able to adapt to the needs and circumstances of their classroom, including how they plan their teaching and learning (Aziz et al., 2018). Another similar study

(Uri & Abd Aziz, 2018) has been conducted to obtain the view of subject matter experts pertaining to the suitability of the writing syllabus specifications against the CEFR writing scale to find out if the CEFR levels of writing syllabus specifications recommended by the teachers match the CEFR level set by the Ministry. Results indicated that some aspects of the syllabus are aligned with the CEFR level established by the Ministry of Education and that some aspects of the syllabus did not match the CEFR level for secondary education. Nhung and Hai (2019) found from their data that English teachers were dissatisfied with the implementation process. Their dissatisfaction is afflicted by three main issues, namely time constraints, incompatible teaching materials, and huge gaps between students' entry English proficiency levels and achievement of learning outcomes. Another study with a sample size of 44 participants (Díez et al., 2019) shows only 86.4% (38 teachers) affirmed they had seen a copy of the CEFR and only 70.5% of the total sample (31 teachers) had read one or more parts of it. Most of the other teachers had just browsed the document searching to look for information on the levels, competencies, descriptors, or assessments. Therefore, the analysis shows that teachers' degree of familiarity with the CEFR as a whole was superficial.

### ***Differentiation Strategies and Their Connection to Innovative Pedagogy***

Differentiation strategy, a keyword emphasized in the execution of CEFR ever since it was introduced in our Malaysian English Language teaching system, allows the recognition of pupils with various learning needs and abilities while complementing a variety of innovative pedagogical principles that have been proven to create effective learners. Acknowledging learners' diversity in order to enhance an ESL teaching and learning process would be the key element in the reformation of educational learning in Malaysia (Ikhwan & Azlina, 2019). The differentiated approach has been used globally as an efficacious educating method to emphasize learners' differences (Burkett 2013; Erickson 2010; Karadag & Yasar, 2010; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Tomlinson 2001). Every student is different and has their own capability and grasping style. Similar to one of the principles of an innovative learning environment which is to consider an individual's different needs while learning, differentiation strategies would speculate various learning experiences and forethought that each learner brings to their class (Istance & Paniagua, 2019). Consequently, it encourages delightful and adequate learner-centred education and teaching (Ikhwan & Azlina, 2019). Differentiated instructions would promote the adaptations to various content in CEFR and increase the innovative style of learning because each student is catered with a different learning approach and style and this has been clearly stated in the Schemes of Work as well as the Roadmap (Malaysia Education Roadmap, 2015). This is being implemented through experiential learning through experiences, exploration and thinking in the classroom. Thus, this would give an enjoyable teaching and learning experience in the CEFR. Moreover, through innovative teaching pedagogy, teachers have constantly included interactive technological tools and digital applications in their teaching in order for the mixed proficiency students to excel in their English subject which also leads to the inclusion of differentiation strategies. For example, the usage of applications such as Kahoot, Quizzes & Live Worksheets. It is undeniable that online tools have been accommodating the 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning style and have proven to improve students' performance while increasing their achievement in English subjects (Hasrul et al., 2017)

### **Formative Assessments**

The implementation of the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) in the curriculum creates a pathway for innovative ways of assessing students' levels in the form of formative assessment in the Teaching and Learning process. Shepard (2017) highlighted in his study that formative assessment is compelling as it enhances students' learning by supporting students understanding of the characteristics of a good job, specifically showing them how to improve, by developing habits of thinking and a feeling of competency. Similar to Shepard, Ong (2010) as cited in Uri and Abd Aziz (2019) state formative evaluation has greater benefits in comparison to summative evaluation because it permits teachers to monitor the students' performance and achievement.

As the year 2020 was tremendously affected by Covid 19 outbreak, the education sector has experienced a paradigm shift from a traditional classroom setting to online learning as a response to the situation. Questions have been raised regarding students' engagement in the learning process considering the unexpected change in the medium of instruction. However, data that were collected on students' learning records have indicated that the students were actively engaged in online learning activities. Furthermore, the students' achievement was high on the formative assessment conducted such as tasks, quizzes and tests (Chen et al., 2021). Relating to this, Elmahdi et. al (2018) conducted a study on integrating technology and formative assessment as a means of improving students' learning and correlating with 21<sup>st</sup> century learning style. The extent of this research indicates that the usage of technology-based tools reinforces formative assessment in tandem with improving students' learning due to the implementation of innovative pedagogy via technology captures the student's engagement which promotes the learning process.

Ozan and Kincal (2018) carried out experimental research to seek the effects of formative assessment on students' academic achievement. After 28 weeks, the outcome indicated that the experimental group in which the formative assessment practices were performed had a significantly higher level of academic achievement and better attitudes toward the lesson than the students in the control group. Another similar study was conducted using a quasi-experiment method by Nurhijah et al (2020) to investigate the effect of formative assessment in developing critical thinking which is one of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills students need. The result determines that the experimental group had higher critical thinking skill improvement than the control group.

Another group of Malaysian researchers conducted a study on school-based formative assessment which was introduced by the Malaysian Education Ministry with the CEFR-aligned curriculum found that ESL teachers find it difficult to adopt the formative assessment method (Sidhu et al., 2018). Findings revealed that the teachers were not providing feedback on assessment which highlighted the failure of formative assessment due to the limited understanding of revised CEFR-aligned school-based assessment. Another study shows that teachers were more concerned with students achieving the required learning outcomes than students improving their language proficiency (Le, 2018). The can-do descriptors of CEFR A1 B1 to improve students' language proficiency were not given adequate attention. Therefore, the whole idea of fully achieving students' autonomy and proficiency improvement in learning cannot be accomplished. Answering this downfall of formative assessment, Abd Samad and Haron (2021) insisted extra aid need to be supplied through the Malaysia Ministry of Education to teachers to make a formative assessment is practiced extensively through English teachers in the country considering the fact that years after the introduction, little utility of the assessment may be visible in schools.

## Discussion

Innovative pedagogy appears to be in the form of Differentiation Strategies and Formative Assessment in CEFR lessons. Apart from being aware that learners are different, innovative pedagogy also includes the ability to enable the learners to master skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, communication, negotiation skills and competencies related to literacy, multilingualism, digital, personal and social (Council of the European Union, 2018). In the current CEFR English syllabus, these skills happen to appear in the learning standards that need to be achieved by the learners. The Schemes of Work provided by the Malaysian Ministry of Education provides more than sufficient information on how these skills could be taught through a variety of differentiation strategies in order to enable learners from different background, interest and need to acquire the necessary skills to achieve a certain level in the CEFR scale.

At this point, it is worth highlighting that differentiation strategies such as the differentiation strategy by the task pupils are given which involves brainstorming, thinking of examples, and playing games requiring personalized answers (Scheme of Work F5, 2019), accommodates the idea of putting the learners as a center of the classroom and reassuring them that learning is a social process involving discussing and accepting and rejecting ideas to expand the horizon of one's knowledge is a way of innovative pedagogy (Herodotou et al., 2019). In addition to that, another differentiation strategy that compliments the principle of innovative pedagogy would be the strategy of the amount of support provided and by the time pupils are given to complete a task. As an example, teachers can actively play their role to encourage more proficient pupils to provide more by scaffolding them into doing their personal research to enhance their work quality (Scheme of Work F5, 2019) while providing more prompts for the less proficient ones through additional support materials.

Another prominent differentiation strategy that connects deeply with innovative pedagogy would be by supporting individuals learning preferences and needs (Herodotou et al., 2019). Obviously, this strategy emphasizes learners' autonomy while embracing the fact that learners are different while maximizing their learning capacity (Piccardo et al., 2019) Though the guidance is thorough in the SOW and clearly accommodates the teachers to utilize these strategies in their teaching, there are tendencies for some teachers to overlook these values as the concern is more in achieving the learning objectives. In addition, an easy strategy will always be the choice, as it saves rather a lot of time planning the lesson. Undoubtedly, planning a lesson with suitable differentiation strategies implied might consume more time in comparison to lessons that are standardized for all types of learners (Piccardo et al., 2019). Teachers may need more guidance applying differentiation strategies in their teaching apart from giving priority to achieving the learning standards. This will ensure the development of a holistic learner who will be able to manage challenges that may arise outside school life.

This new framework for assessing language proficiency has received a mixed review. Past studies (Nurhaliza, 2021; Kok & Aziz, 2019) have shown that educators do have a good view of CEFR and claim it allows differentiate instruction in the pedagogy process. Even if they have limited knowledge and minimal exposure to it, the teachers were optimistic about the idea and believed that implementation of CEFR was a vital step towards enhancing English proficiency level. However, non-local textbooks create incompatible teaching materials as it serves as a hindrance for the teachers to convey the content. This situation turns out to be a time constraint as teachers need to adapt the content for an easy learning process. Moreover,

the lack of relationships between tests and the framework (Green, 2018) indicate a struggle in preparing exam question to cater to the CEFR level as there is a huge gap in achieving the learning outcome. Lack of synchronization between the textbook with the curriculum and the scheme of work emerges as an area to focus and make amendments in order to provide a successful learning experience for the students. Therefore, the government and education ministry should look forward to providing more training, support and resources for teachers so they would be having a greater understanding pertaining to the implementation of CEFR aligned curriculum.

Formative assessment works collectively with innovative pedagogy as it allows space for creativity and differentiated instruction which is a key component in the implementation of CEFR. Scholars have highlighted the significance of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process as it permits the teacher to be a facilitator and provide feedback throughout the learning. Therefore, assessment for learning is the core principle rather than an assessment of learning. Previous studies have shown that students play an active role throughout the lesson since they are more engaged and motivated to learn with the formative assessments (Chen et al., 2021). The amalgamation of formative assessment with technology emerges a new idea for teachers to explore various platforms available online to assess the student adequately. Furthermore, experimental research (Ozan & Kincal, 2018; Nurhijah et al., 2020) has correspondingly shown that formative assessments do have a positive impact on students' academic achievement and including 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. However, the downside of this assessment can be seen when teachers are more concerned with achieving learning outcomes and completing the syllabus rather than improving the student's competency. This happens due to a lack of knowledge pertaining to formative assessments which results in a failure or worst demotivates the students' interest in learning. On that account, more training and guidance should be given to teachers for them to carry out formative assessments successfully (Sidhu et al., 2018; Le, 2018; Abd Samad, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The inauguration of CEFR in the Malaysian Education context should be given more concentration as it assures a brighter perspective into the Malaysian Education sector. From this study, we can see the previous researchers have highlighted the potential of correlating innovative pedagogy with implementing CEFR in the curriculum demonstrating the excellent potential to enhance the student's learning experience as it allows a holistic approach. By this means, formative assessment plays a significant role in determining the success of this framework grafting with the curriculum however lack of differentiation strategy in the pedagogy process has resulted in a deterrent for the embedment. Therefore, innovative pedagogy should be emphasized widely by the teachers so that the teaching and learning process fulfills the purpose of learning rather than concentrating on completing the syllabus. Moreover, past studies have indicated the lack of knowledge in CEFR has served as the major issue in the reformation. As a sum up, extensive training should be given to teachers to aid their understanding of CEFR so they would be able to integrate innovative pedagogy in the teaching and learning process.

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