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ESL Teachers' Views on the Implementation of CEFR in Reading Skill

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ABSTRACT

One of the most essential elements of learning English is the ability to read fluently. Mastering reading skills among ESL (English as a Second Language) learners is important in this global environment as it helps to widen their vocabulary acquisition and gradually helps them to enhance their other language skills. Although there is a large volume of published studies describing the implementation of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) in the English education system, these studies have not dealt with the implementation of CEFR specifically in reading skill. Thus, this study aims to find out more about ESL teachers' views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill. Besides that, the findings of the study will be able to identify the current arising issues or challenges in the teaching of reading skill. Data for this study was gathered through an online survey which was participated by 42 primary ESL teachers from Negeri Sembilan. The findings revealed that primary ESL teachers have mixed views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill in terms of applicability. Although, the findings suggest that CEFR improves ESL learners' reading skills, the results revealed that there is a need to adapt and modify CEFR related reading texts to fit in the Malaysian context with a local touch. Thus, the findings of this study provide useful information for other researchers who are interested in analysing the need of adapting the CEFR textbooks and reading texts to be in line with the Malaysian context.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies that have investigated the perception of ESL teachers in the implementation of CEFR, focusing on reading skill. It provides insight into the teachers' understanding on the implementation of CEFR and the applicability of CEFR onto reading skill.

1. Introduction

Upholding the status of a second language in almost all countries, English plays an important role to produce marketable and skillful professionals in various fields. A primary concern of English is to master all four main skills which are listening, speaking,

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reading and writing. According to Ahmad (2016), language is a skill that requires adequate practice in all four skills. Thus, the need for young learners to master all four skills has been the main concern among the stakeholders.

Among the four skills, reading is a fundamental skill that needs to be acquired by young learners during their primary schooling years. According to Jeffes (2016), most of the research on reading interventions focuses on children in primary schools but quite a large number of children start secondary school with very poor reading skills. Therefore, English as a second language (ESL) teachers need to play their role effectively to develop students' intelligence and to help to develop their memory and imagination. Thus, ESL teachers need to shoulder the responsibility to incorporate reading skill into their teaching practices.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was developed in Malaysia in 2001 with the goal of establishing global benchmarks for foreign language instruction that would serve the needs of both academics and other language learning professionals as well as language learners themselves (Uri & Abd Aziz, 2018). There have been a considerable number of discussions and research done on CEFR in the past years. However, there is an increasing concern over CEFR implementation in reading skill as not many studies were done specifically on this skill.

Reading is a fundamental skill that needs to be given importance to reduce illiteracy. Over the years, there is an increasing concern among the teachers on the implementation of CEFR in ESL classrooms (Uri & Abd Aziz, 2018). However, there were not many studies done on CEFR implementation in reading skill. Hence, this study aims to find out more about ESL teachers' views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill.

2.Literature Review

2.1. Defining CEFR

According to Uri and Abd Aziz (2019), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which was developed in 2001, aims to meet the needs of language learners as well as academics and other professionals involved in language assessment, teaching and learning. CEFR also sets international standards for foreign language education. Uri and Abd Aziz (2019) indicated that CEFR is a global framework that serves more as a guide than a test. Accordingly, a scale for each person's reading, listening, speaking, and writing abilities exists (Uri & Abd Aziz, 2019).

2.2. CEFR in the International Context

In their study, Uri and Abd Aziz (2019) revealed that the effect of the CEFR has spread to countries in South East Asia, with Vietnam becoming the region's first nation to adopt the standard for its educational system. Uri and Abd Aziz (2019) claims that a large number of Vietnamese workers were unable to compete internationally due to their low English proficiency, which prompted the Vietnamese government to act swiftly to change the education plan in order to incorporate international language standards into language teaching and learning in Vietnam.

In another study by Ishak and Mohamad (2018), the researchers pointed out that CEFR was created by the Council of Europe in 2001 and offers a general framework that details

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the crucial components that each language learner must master in order to use a foreign language effectively in practise. The study conducted by Ishak and Mohamad (2018) provides some significant insights into the CEFR, which serves as the foundation for language syllabuses, curriculum standards, exams, and textbooks not just in Europe but also internationally.

2.3. CEFR in the Malaysian Context

In their study, Marzaini and Yusoff (2022) indicated that the creation of the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) in 2013 marked the beginning of the CEFR implementation in Malaysia. Marzaini and Yusoff (2022) reported that the Council supported English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) to assist the Ministry of Education in raising Malaysian students' English language competency. Accordingly, the council was in charge of integrating the CEFR framework into the educational system and creating a plan for comprehensive reforms of English language instruction (Marzaini & Yusoff, 2022). Their study explained the Malaysian Education Blueprint's alignment of the educational system with the CEFR is a key component in raising educational standards to those of the global community.

2.4. Reading skills

The ability to read, understand, interpret, and decode written language and texts is referred to as reading skills. The act of examining written symbols and letters and deciphering their meaning is referred to as reading. It's one of the four primary language abilities, along with speaking, listening, and writing. Grabe (2009) as cited by Maleng and Hartati (2021) stated reading skills enable learners to utilise their knowledge to build, produce, and construct meaning between them and the text. This skill can be placed into four main categories which are decoding, fluency, vocabulary and understanding sentences. Reading skill is an essential skill for every child throughout their primary education as it helps young learners to understand the meaning of what they read.

2.5. Implementation of CEFR in reading skill

The Common Reference Levels of the Global Scale were proposed by the Council of Europe as the foundation of the CEFR. At six levels of proficiency, from "basic user" (A1, A2) through "independent user" (B1, B2) to "proficient user" (C1, C2), it is extensively described what a language user can "do." The self-assessment grid, which describes a user's linguistic abilities or performances at a certain level within three domains, serves as the foundation for this broad concept of performance. These three are reception (listening and reading), interaction (speaking and writing) and production (speaking and writing). The framework is primarily intended to serve as a point of reference for the identification of various language learning objectives and the definition of various credentials.

2.6. Objective of the study

This study aims to answer the following question.

RQ: What are the ESL teachers' views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill?

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3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design & Instrument

This quantitative research was conducted using an online survey method. This method was used to obtain data and generalise results from the chosen samples. A questionnaire was adapted and adopted from Uri and Abd Aziz (2018) as the research instrument. Uri was a doctorate student from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and she allows researchers to use the questionnaire. The questionnaire was set in monolingual which is in the English language and it was checked by an ESL teacher who is currently teaching English in a primary in Seremban. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A was on Demographic Background with 11 items. Section B was on Teachers' Understanding on the implementation of CEFR under 3 subtitles. The first subtitle was on Teachers' Familiarity with 5 items, the second subtitle was on the Awareness of the Main Objective of CEFR with 3 items and the third subtitle was on the Adoption of CEFR into Primary School English syllabus and Assessment with 5 items. Section C was on the Applicability of CEFR onto reading skill with 6 items. Each item in Sections B and C was accompanied by 5 point Likert Scale between a range of 5 to 1. The score of 5 represented strongly agree. A score of 4 meant to agree. A score of 3 indicated that the respondent was unable to decide whether he or she agreed or disagreed with the item. A score of 2 meant disagree and a score of 1 represented strongly disagree with the item.

3.2. Population and Sampling

This survey was carried out in Seremban and Bahau in Negeri Sembilan, primarily focused on primary ESL teachers. The link of the questionnaire was shared with a few English optionists and the researcher requested the teachers to send the link to their colleagues who are teaching English in primary schools. Thus, the respondents were chosen using simple random sampling. Altogether 42 ESL teachers responded to the questionnaire.

3.3. Data collection and Data Analysis

The survey was conducted online to ensure the respondents answered all items in the questionnaires and complete them with ease. The items in Section C were designed to answer the research question. The main goal of this research was to answer the research question by using descriptive statistics which involved the calculation of percentages to analyse the data obtained from the questionnaires. The data was analysed using a simple percentage method as there were only 42 respondents.

4. Findings

This study set out with the aim of identifying ESL teachers' views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill. To achieve this aim, a quantitative research design was applied. The results of the quantitative data collected were related to the research question, "What are the ESL teachers' views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill?" A total of 42 primary ESL teachers from Seremban and Bahau, Negeri Sembilan answered the Likert scale online questionnaire. The data were tabulated into percentages to better illustrate the findings.

Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of the respondents. Out of 42 ESL teachers who responded to the questionnaire, 90.5% (38) were English optionist and 14.3% (6)

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were non-English optionist. In terms of academic qualification, 83.3% (35) of the respondents possessed degree holders. Moreover, 40.5% (17) of the respondents had between 11 to 15 years of teaching experience while 33.3% (14) of the respondents had working experience between 5 to 10 years. Out of 42 teachers, 50% (21) were teaching lower and upper primary classes. It can be seen from the data in Table 1 that 88.1% (37) of respondents have sat for CPT or APTIS test. In terms of CPT or APTIS language ability, only 42.9% (18) had scored C1 while 38.1(16) of the respondents had obtained B2 level. From the data in Table 1, 50% (21) of the respondents had attended only one CEFR-related workshops, trainings or seminars.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents - status, academic qualification, teaching experience, teaching classes, Aptis test result, and number of CEFR-related courses attended

		Total	Percentage
Status	English optionist	38	90.5
Status	Non-English optionist	6	14.3
Academic Qualification	PhD	1	2.38
	Masters	2	4.76
	Degree	35	83.3
	Diploma	4	9.52
Teaching Experience	<1-5 years	3	7.14
	5-10 years	14	33.3
	11-15 years	17	40.5
	>16 years	8	19.0
Currently teaching	Lower primary classes only (Year 1-	4	9.52
	Year 3)	17	40.5
	Upper primary classes only (Year 4-6)	21	50
	Lower and upper primary classes		
Did you take CPT/ APTIS test for teachers?	Yes	37	88.1
	No	5	11.9
Your English language ability based on your CPT/APTIS result:	C2	0	-
	C1	18	42.9
	B2	16	38.1
	B1	8	19.0
	A2	0	-
	A1	0	-
How many CEFR related workshops, trainings or seminars have you attended as of today?	1	21	50
	2	18	42.9
	>3	3	7.1

Table 2 provides the results obtained from the preliminary analysis of teachers' understanding on the implementation of CEFR, focusing on their familiarity. As can be seen from Table 2, it is apparent that all the respondents are very familiar with CEFR with 73.8% (31) and 26.1% (11) respectively answered strongly agree and agree. Out of 42 respondents who responded to the questionnaire, 54.8% (23) strongly agreed that they are familiar with the main ideas and concepts of CEFR. From Table 2, it can be seen clearly all the respondents did not have a brief idea about CEFR with 78.6% (33) and 21.4% (9) respectively answered disagree and strongly disagree. In response to statement 4, "I only know the name, not the content of CEFR", 83.3% (35) of the respondents answered strongly disagree. The overall response to statement 5, "I am well informed about the CEFR roadmap as well as aligning process and its effect on my teaching and learning" was

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very positive as 69.0% (29) answered agree. The results obtained from Table 2 summarised the respondents' familiarity with the implementation of CEFR.

Table 2: Teachers' understanding on the implementation of CEFR –Teachers' Familiarity

No	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I am very familiar with CEFR				26.1 % (11)	73.8% (31)
2	I know the main ideas and concepts of CEFR.			9.5% (4)	35.7 % (15)	54.8% (23)
3	I only have a brief idea about CEFR.	21.4 % (9)	78.6 % (33)			
4	I only know the name, not the content of CEFR	83.3 % (35)	16.7 % (7)			
5	I am well informed about the CEFR roadmap as well as aligning process and its effect on my teaching and learning.			14.3 % (6)	69.0 % (29)	16.7% (7)

Table 3 shows the data obtained on the teachers' views of the applicability of CEFR onto reading skill. Out of 42 ESL teachers who responded to the questionnaire, 31.0% (13) of them indicated their disagreement on the suitability of the CEFR levels to be used in reading skill for primary students while 21.4% (9) respondents answered neutrally.

Table 3: Applicability of CEFR onto reading skill

No	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I believe the proposed CEFR levels for primary students are suitable to be used in reading skill.		31.0 % (13)	21.4 % (9)	26.2 % (11)	21.4 % (9)
2	It is highly recommended to adapt and modify CEFR related reading texts to fit in the Malaysian context with a local touch			16.7 % (7)	33.3% (14)	50.0 % (21)
3	The "can do "descriptors provided for reading skills are achievable			9.5% (4)	54.8% (23)	35.7 % (15)
4	CEFR improves pupils' reading skills		4.8% (2)	21.4 % (9)	64.3% (27)	9.5% (4)
5	It is difficult to adapt the CEFR descriptors when preparing lesson plans	7.1% (3)	73.9 % (31)	7.1% (3)	12.0% (5)	
6	Materials provided for reading skill adequate and related to CEFR and helps to improve pupils' reading skill		31.0 % (13)	26.2 % (11)	42.9% (18)	

The most surprising aspect of the data is the responses given for statement 2, "It is highly recommended to adapt and modify CEFR related reading texts to fit in the Malaysian context with a local touch." The total number of responses for this was 50% (21) and 33.3% (14) respondents who respectively answered strongly agree and agree. Just over

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half of those who responded to statement 3 reported that the "can do "descriptors provided for reading skills are achievable. Of the 42 participants who responded to this question, 35.7% (15) respondents answered strongly agree and 54.8% (23) respondents answered agree. As can be seen from Table 3, only a small number of respondents which is 4.8% (2) indicated their disagreement with statement 4, "CEFR improves pupils' reading skills." The majority of those who responded to statement 4 felt that CEFR improves pupils' reading skills with 64.3% (27) and 9.5% (4) respondents respectively answered agree and strongly agree. Surprisingly, in response to statement 5, most of those surveyed indicated the difficulty to adapt the CEFR descriptors when preparing lesson plans as can be seen in Table 3 with 73.9% (31) respondents answered disagree. As for statement 6, 31.0% (13) respondents answered disagree while 42.9% (18) respondents answered agree. Overall, these findings answered the research question, "What are the ESL teachers' views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill?". Taken together, it is apparent from this table that respondents have mixed views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill.

5. Discussion

This study set out with the aim of finding the ESL teachers' views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill. Apparently, the results of the study show that most ESL teachers are familiar with the main ideas and concepts of CEFR. Among the factors that contributed to this are their status of being English optionist, having working experience between 11 to 15 years and have attended CEFR related workshops and seminars. Apart from that, a large number of respondents agreed that they were well informed about the CEFR roadmap as well as aligning process and its effect on their teaching and learning as reported by Phoolaikao and Sukying (2021). This contradicts with Yin and Ahmad (2021)'s findings of teachers having a moderate level of knowledge and moderate level of practice in CEFR-aligned English curriculum. In the same account, Lo (2018) stated that interventions or professional development programmes should be carried out to encourage and to scaffold the English teachers to increase their involvement in CEFR. Thus, these proved that ESL teachers support the implementation of CEFR aligned curriculum.

Another important finding was more than half of the teachers strongly agreed with the recommendation to adapt and modify CEFR related reading texts to fit in the Malaysian context with a local touch although (Khair & Shah, 2021). stated that teachers have lack understanding of CEFR as most of them were not really an expert in this new reform of curriculum. However, this finding contradicted the results obtained from the previous study by Hadi and Shah (2020). Hadi and Shah (2020) reported that teachers have positive perceptions of the CEFR-aligned textbooks regardless of the limitations of the textbooks. Furthermore, their study revealed that textbooks can provide an ample amount of activities and practices that can maximise language learning in the classroom. A possible explanation for these results may be the current study focused primarily on reading skill compared to the previous study which focused on the textbooks as a whole.

Apart from that, it is interesting to note that the majority of the teachers agreed that CEFR improves pupils' reading skills. However, this result disagrees with the findings of another study by Chandran and Shah (2019) which found that pupils face reading difficulties due to ineffective word recognition and decoding methods in their reading process. Although the findings of the current study do not support the previous research, one possible explanation is that the ability of pupils is the key aspect of mastering reading skills. The

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current study also found that ESL teachers indicated their disagreement on the suitability of the CEFR levels to be used in reading skill as less than half of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed. These results are inconsistent with findings from another study by Kamarrudin and Mohamad (2019) as they found that scheme of work documents guides the teachers to plan lessons related to CEFR aligned curriculum in developing pupils 'language skills. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between English teachers' attitude toward CEFR implementation and their motivation level in implementing CEFR (Shukor & Sulaiman, 2022). Apart from that, the current study also indicated teachers' disagreement on the difficulties to adapt the CEFR descriptors when preparing lesson plans. This finding is in agreement with Hadi and Shah's (2020) findings which indicated the teacher' acknowledgment that the textbooks do help them in planning the lesson by making the process more manageable with the suggested activities and explicit instruction in the textbooks.

In this study, less than half of the respondents were agreed that materials provided for reading skill adequate, related to CEFR and helped to improve pupils' reading skill. These results agree with the findings of other studies by Kamarrudin and Mohamad (2019) and Hadi and Shah (2020). These similarities showed that teachers agreed on the suitability of the current CEFR related materials although there is a proposed concern to modify the material to fit in the Malaysians context.

As mentioned earlier, this study set out with the aim to answer the research question," What are the ESL teachers' views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill?". Based on the results and findings of the current study, the respondents showed variations in views in answering the research question. Although a few findings were less significant, they may help us to understand more about the importance of CEFR implementation in reading skill. One of the issues that emerge from these findings is the need to adapt and modify CEFR related reading texts to fit in the Malaysian context with a local touch. Hence, future studies on the current topic are therefore recommended.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to find answers to the question, "What are ESL teachers' views on the implementation of CEFR in reading skill?". These findings enhance our understanding of teachers' views on understanding the implementation of CEFR and the applicability of CEFR onto reading skill. Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings have given insight into adapting and modifying the CEFR related material to fit in the Malaysian context. Therefore, this research can be significant for policy makers and teachers to revise again the CEFR based material upon the completion of the roadmap in 2025.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (RECUKM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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