



## EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE USE OF CEFR-V

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### Abstract:

This study explores the perceptions towards the use of the Vietnamese Common European Framework of Reference for Language Proficiency (CEFR-V) as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency held by EFL teachers. The participants were 41 EFL teachers from one university in Mekong Delta. The instruments of data collection were questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire was administered to identify the students' beliefs about effective vocabulary learning strategies. Six participants were selected for the follow-up interviews. The interview questions were developed on the basis of the initial results of the analysis of the questionnaire responses. The purpose of the interview was to elicit more information that the questionnaire responses failed to provide. The obtained results revealed that the participants in general had positive perceptions towards the CEFR-V use. They also addressed possible benefits, possible problems and suggestions for optimizing the CEFR-V.

**Keywords:** CEFR, CEFR-V, perception, EFL, project

### 1. Introduction

In order to satisfy the requirement of qualified human resource and to integrate into world markets, the Vietnamese Government approved the implementation of Vietnam's National Foreign Language 2020 (NFL 2020) project in 2008 with the aim of enhancing foreign language teaching and learning. The English language is a compulsory course at all academic level among undergraduate students in tertiary education. Especially, there is an admission requirement for all graduate programs to take an entrance exam in English or submit an equivalent international or local English certificate. This illustrates how English is seriously concerned by Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) as well as Vietnamese people as one important driver of change

and regional integration. By the year 2020, EFL Vietnamese-speaking students are expected to be able to communicate in speaking and in writing and to comprehend spoken and written language in order that they can get involved in multicultural working environments for their own career development and for serving the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country which is the objective of the National 2008-2020 Project of the Teaching and Learning of English in the National Educational System (Vietnam, Government Offices, 2008). Hence, the localized version of a framework, namely Vietnamese Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR-V), was constructed and issued as a detailed and unified language proficiency framework consists of 6 levels. Subsequently, evaluation criteria have been established to serve different learning and teaching levels, describing clearly certain requirements for competency, capacity in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The findings from the present study would pile up the literature and provide potential insights into how graduate students at Can Tho University (CTU) could be supported to achieve English language proficiency as describe as B1 level under NFL 2020 project. Thus, the results of the study will be beneficial for many reasons. Firstly, it provides evidence on how CTU's English teachers perceive the use of the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency. Secondly, it could indicate possible influences the CEFR-V may have on the foreign language education and evaluation in the Vietnamese context. In addition, the obtained findings can raise teachers' awareness of the use of CEFR-V. Therefore, better applications of the CEFR-V would be proposed.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Language proficiency

The concept of language proficiency has been a subject of debate among researchers for years. It is described as a process, in which students alternate in their use of linguistic form according to the linguistic and situational context (Ellis, 1994). Hulstijn (2011) stated: *"language proficiency is the extent to which an individual possesses the linguistic cognition necessary to function in a given communicative situation, in a given modality (listening, speaking, reading, or writing)"*.

Different conceptions and definitions of proficiency are brought together and it is assumed that the definition most relevant to this study is that of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) which describes second language proficiency as the ability to use the language across five activities (listening, reading, writing, spoken interaction, and spoken production) at six levels: A1 and A2 (basic

user), B1 and B2 (independent user), and C1 and C2 (proficient user) (Council of Europe, 2001).

## **2.2 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**

The Council of Europe created the CEFR in order to provide *“a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe”* (Council of Europe, 2001). After three decades of research on language teaching, learning, and assessment, CEFR was officially published in 2001. The Framework was developed and polished thanks to the collaborative effort of researchers, linguists, specialists, and educators delegated to do this task by the Council of Europe. It consists of a descriptive scheme of language use and competence together with scales of proficiency for the different parameters of this scheme. It encompasses chapters on curriculum design, methodological options for language learning and teaching, and principles of language testing and assessment. The learner-focused descriptive scheme offers the reader a tool for reflecting on what is involved not only in language use but also in language learning, teaching, and assessment. CEFR describes six levels of proficiency for foreign language learning. Each level includes a list of the expected competence and skills that language learners should have and be able to perform.

## **2.3 The Vietnamese Common European Framework of Reference for Language Proficiency (CEFR-V)**

### **2.3.1 The National Foreign Language 2020 Project**

The Vietnamese Government has always been concerned to improve foreign language teaching and learning. Foreign languages have always appeared in the language policy of Vietnam as a compulsory subject from general education level up to graduate level through the history of foreign language teaching in Vietnam since the 1960s. Due to the Government's ceaseless concerns, foreign language teaching in Vietnam has positive improvements. Being conscious of the significant of foreign languages, the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed Decision N0 1400/QĐ-TTg on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September in 2008 (Vietnam, Government Offices). The National Project entitled Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008- 2020 (namely 2020 Project) was promulgated then. The goal of the 2020 Project is

*“...to renovate thoroughly the tasks of teaching and learning foreign language within national education system, to implement a new program in teaching and learning foreign language at every school levels and training degrees, which aims to achieve by the year*

*2015 a vivid progress on professional skills, language competency for human resources, especially at some prioritized sectors; by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth whoever graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently. This will enable them to be more confident in communication, further their chance to study and work in an integrated and multi-cultural environment with a variety of languages. This goal also makes languages as an advantage for Vietnamese people, serving the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country."*

The 2020 Project undergoes three phases. The first phase is from 2008 to 2010; the second phase, from 2011 to 2015; and the third phase, from 2016 to 2020. In the first phase, the precedence is to perfect conditions that guarantee the constructing and piloting of new language program and to prepare for the majority implementation of the program at general school levels. In the second phase, the main focus is on the mass implementation of ten-year language program for general education level and intensive language training program for different training degrees. And in the third phase, top attention is to the implementation of the ten-year language program to nationwide scale and the implementation of intensive language program to all training centers, professional vocation training schools, colleges, and universities.

Policies introduced involve adopting the CEFR and establishing the CEFR-V. The CEFR was chosen by MOET because there is a need for a guideline for measuring and assessing language proficiency. The CEFR supplies a guide in designing and developing curriculum, teaching and learning practices, and evaluation. It is believed to promote democracy and accountability in education. It is thought to be teacher-friendly, with there being a profusion of supporting teaching and research material, and it also provides students with more independence in learning. Since the CEFR is widely employed in Europe and beyond, it is considered an ideal standard to adopt in Vietnam. (Nguyen, 2015)

### **2.3.2 Overview of CEFR-V**

To supply coherent proficiency requirements for the foreign languages educated in the national education system, a unified set of criteria for foreign language test design, textbook evaluation, and teaching methodology development, and a legal basis for conceding academic degrees and transferring credits in the countries that recognize or use CEFR's 6 level framework of foreign language proficiency, on the 24th of January in 2014, MOET signed Circular N0 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT to promulgate the CEFR-V, based primarily on CEFR. This new framework also consists of three primary proficiency levels which are referred to respectively Elementary Level = CEFR Basic User,

Intermediate Level = CEFR Independent User, and Advanced Level = CEFR Proficient User. Each level is divided into two sublevels, making it a 6-level proficiency framework as follows:

**Table 1:** The 6 levels of the CEFR-V

Level group	Level	Level name
A – Basic user	1 (A1)	Breakthrough or beginner
	2 (A2)	Waystage or elementary
B – Independent user	3 (B1)	Threshold or intermediate
	4 (B2)	Vantage or upper intermediate
C – Proficient user	5 (C1)	Effective operational proficiency or advanced
	6 (C2)	Mastery or highly proficient

### 2.3.3 The use of the CEFR –V

The NFL 2020 Project has extended its influence and training programs to the plurality of teachers of English at all levels since 2008, used it to set standards of English for general education, higher education, and other foreign language teachers, as well as for government officials. As described in the MOET documents of the CEFR-V, teachers of English should have the minimum required bachelor degrees in the English language, teaching English, or English linguistics at the high school level, and hold at least a master's degree in TESOL or equivalent for teaching at the tertiary education. High school teachers are required to reach Level C1 while both secondary and primary teachers are required to reach the B2. Up to now, the CEFR-V has been primarily applied in the educational area. Nevertheless, it is believed that it will be nationally applied. In fact, the requirements of foreign language skills of candidates for all postgraduate education programs of all majors (B1 for master's degrees and B2 for doctorate degrees) can influence human resource development in other industries and areas, particularly their key and noble staff and professionals who frequently pursue further study for their professional development. Hence, the application of the CEFR-V in education is a judicious selection to prepare new generations for regional and international integration.

To get level 3 (B1), students should be able to understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. The students should be able to deal with most situations likely to arise whilst they are traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Besides, the students should be able to produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Finally, the student can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

## 2.4 Related studies on CEFR-V

Duong and Trinh (2014) conducted a study on lecturers' and students perception of EFL policy and practice at Can Tho University. The quantitative and qualitative data from questionnaires, and in-depth interviews revealed that most policies then, especially the two policies of engaging students and enhancing the interrelation of student supporting units, were evaluated to be effective in fostering teaching quality of Basic English courses at the university. In addition, the CEFR-V was not frequently integrated in English teaching at the university; neither did lecturers nor students master it adequately. Hence, it was recommended implementing the CEFR-V in learning, teaching and assessing students' proficiency, maintaining the strength of its policies then and investing more to promote the policies supporting lecturers in their professional development and teaching innovation. The focus of their suggestion to make the implementation possible and effective was how to publicize CEFR-V and what to prepare for the implementation such as: lecturer training, material selection, facilities and test formats. Moreover, findings stressed on the pedagogical practices to suite the syllabus of the CEFR-V. It was suggested a combination of traditional practices and a communicative approach to instruction, emphasized on the effectiveness and attractiveness of the classroom instruction and extensively discussed the concept of professional learning communities (Duong & Trinh, 2014).

In Nguyen (2015)'s study to investigate the educational policy borrowing in a globalized world, a case study of CEFR in a Vietnamese University, qualitative results from the policy document analysis, classroom observation, and in-depth interviews. The research argues that the adoption of the CEFR can be considered as a "quick-fix" solution to the complex and time-consuming problem of enhancing the quality of English language education, which fails to address some critical issues in the practice of foreign language teaching and learning in Vietnam.

Similarly, Nguyen (2016) conducted a study on the challenges of implementing the national proficiency standards with ethnic minority students, an exploratory study at Tay Bac University. The quantitative and qualitative data from the placement test, questionnaires and interviews revealed that the minority students' difficulties included their tri-language barrier, low English background level, negative attitudes, lack of learning motivations, poor-and-inflexible learning strategies, inactiveness and over-anxiety in English learning; difficult curriculum and strange textbook; teacher behavior; and inadequate time.

To summarize, many studies have found the benefits of the use of CEFR to learners. However, there is still little research which specifies in the EFL teachers' perceptions toward the use of the CEFR-V particularly to evaluate graduate students'

language proficiency. In order to bridge the gaps in the literature, the present study was conducted.

### 3. Methodology

A total of 41 Vietnamese teachers of EFL from a Mekong Delta university, Vietnam partook in the current study. Their ages ranged 26 from to 50 years old and their years of experience of teaching were between 4 to 25 years.

A survey questionnaire (see Appendix) was used to collect data. It was adapted from Council of Europe (2006) and Nagai and O'Dwyer (2011). To encourage response, the questionnaire was kept short. It consisted of two parts, with a total of 11 questions: 3 questions in the first part (background information), and 8 questions in the second part, focusing on teachers' perceptions towards the use of the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency as well as possible influences the CEFR-V may have on the foreign language education and evaluation in the Vietnamese context. The questionnaire consisted mainly of closed questions on 5-point Likert rating scales. Collected data were subjected to SPSS for analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers who had answered the questionnaire. To secure confidentiality, the participants' names were not mentioned. Data from the interviews were transcribed. The responses from the interviews were analyzed in terms of three categories as (a) strengths of the use of the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency, (b) challenges of implementing the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency, (c) suggestions for optimizing the use of the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency.

### 4. Findings and discussion

The Descriptive Statistic Test was used to analyze the mean scores of participants' perceptions towards the use of the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency. The results are presented in Table 2.

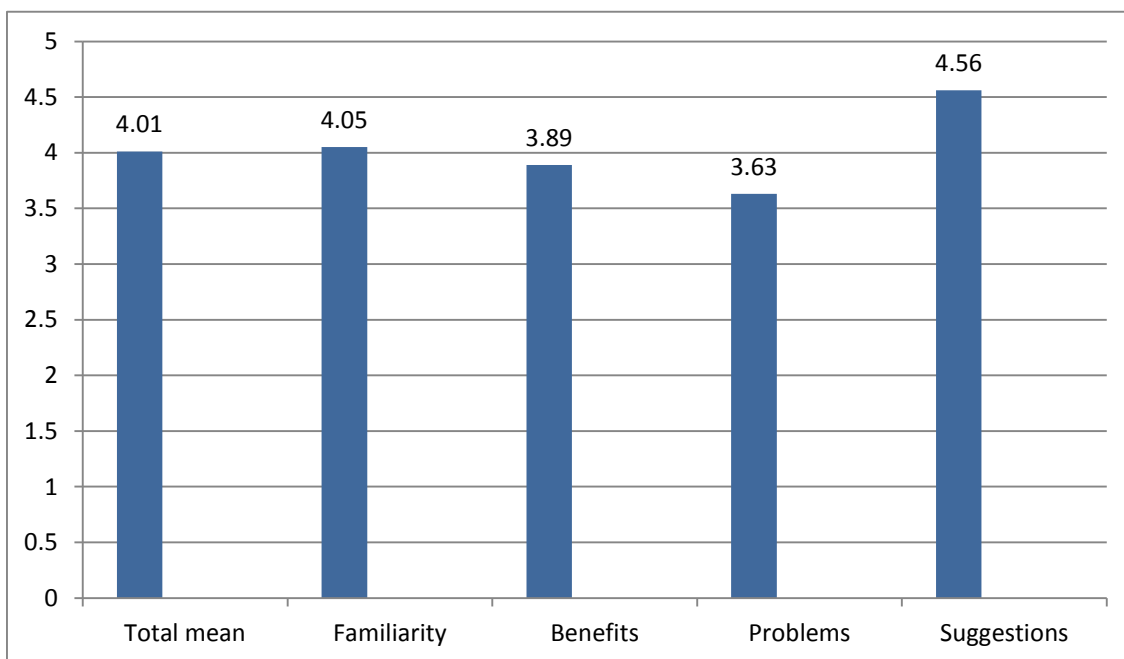
**Table 2:** Mean scores of the questionnaire

	<b>N</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Mean	41	3.39	4.61	4.01	.31

From Table 2, the result showed that the mean scores of the participants' perceptions towards the use of the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English

proficiency was slightly higher than the scale 4 in the five-point scale ( $M=4.01$ ,  $SD=.31$ ). Thus, they had positive perceptions towards the use of the CEFR-V as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency.

The summary results of all questionnaire clusters are demonstrated in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1:** Participants' perceptions towards the use of the CEFR-V

As far as the four clusters were concerned, the perceptions of participants towards the CEFR-V use stood in the relatively high level. The mean scores of suggestions for optimizing the CEFR-V use was the highest ( $M=4.56$ ) while the mean scores of familiarity, possible benefits and problems were respectively: ( $M=4.01$ ), ( $M=3.89$ ), ( $M=3.63$ ).

The results of the questionnaire revealed that participants had positive perception towards the CEFR-V. This result was consistent with that in some studies (Council of Europe, 2006 and Nagai & O' Dwyer, 2011). In other words, EFL teachers held positive perceptions towards the CEFR-V use. From the results, it could be seen that the mean scores of the possible benefits ( $M=4.89$ ) was higher than that of discovery strategies ( $M=3.63$ ). It meant that participants perceived that the CEFR-V use had more possible benefits than possible problems. The results were similar to that of Council of Europe (2006) and Nagai & O' Dwyer (2011). Specifically, the mean scores of suggestions was the highest ( $M=4.56$ ).

Additionally, the results from the interviews showed that all interviewed participants held the positive perceptions towards CEFR-V. They provided many



benefits of the use of CEFR-V including the advantages of being in mother tongue, potential for student self-assessment, and user-friendly. They gave compliments on its clear and detailed description of proficiency levels useful for assessment, its usefulness in assessment, and its being systematic and useful for course design. Nevertheless, they also indicated the challenge which might be the distinction between the proficiency levels and proposed the idea of having "mid-levels". The use of can-do statements as checklists to facilitate learners' self-regulated learning was perceived to be possibly quite successfully implemented. They also mentioned the framework's usefulness in assessment and its being systematic and useful for course design. Then, they provided many suggestions for optimizing the CEFR-V use. They perceived that there was a need for more training on designing tests and testing specifications and practices to the CEFR-V, considering levels of students to upgrade learners' English competence step by step before giving out examinations and criteria. They also needed further information about the framework, more training workshops, detailed version of the framework, and a simplified edition for quick consultation.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of the current study suggest a number of implications, especially in EFL settings. The implementation of the CEFR-V in English teaching and assessment at the researched university is essential because the framework was developed on the basis of the global framework. It is asserted that the participants at the researched university held the positive perceptions towards the use of the framework. From the findings, it can be seen that participants perceived more possible benefits than possible problems in CEFR-V use. For improvements, they provide several relevant suggestions.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

#### Part 1: Background information

Please provide your personal information by writing your responses or putting a check mark (✓) in the appropriate box where necessary.

Gender:  Male  Female

Year of birth:

Years of English teaching:

**Part 2: To what extent do you agree with each following statement? Please put a check mark (✓) in the appropriate box that represents your answer.**

1. How widely **known** is *the CEFR-V* as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency?

not at all  hardly at all  not very widely  rather widely  very widely

2. To what extent is the description of *the CEFR-V* understandable?

not at all  hardly at all  not very easy to understand  rather easy to understand  very easy to understand

3. How widely **used** is *the CEFR-V* as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency in your institution?

not at all  hardly at all  not very widely  rather widely  very widely

4. Please estimate how **useful** has *the CEFR-V* been as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency?

cannot be estimated  not useful  of some use  rather useful  extremely useful

5. These are the **possible benefits** of the use of *the CEFR-V* as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency:

a. It provides a means of aligning assessment with proficiency level

strongly disagree  disagree  no option  agree  strongly agree

b. It promotes better curriculum design

strongly disagree  disagree  no option  agree  strongly agree

c. It leads to the perceived shift from teacher-centered knowledge driven classes to learner-centered communication oriented instruction

strongly disagree  disagree  no option  agree  strongly agree

d. It provides a means for self-regulated learning.

strongly disagree  disagree  no option  agree  strongly agree

e. There is no benefit of the use of *the CEFR-V* as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency

strongly disagree  disagree  no option  agree  strongly agree

6. These are *possible problems* of using *the CEFR-V* as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency that you expected to have:

a. There is confusion about how to use the new scale (*the CEFR-V*) due to the familiarity with using level-based scale.

strongly disagree    disagree    no option    agree    strongly agree

b. The language used in *the CEFR-V* is ambiguous.

strongly disagree    disagree    no option    agree    strongly agree

c. Designing tests based on *the CEFR-V* is challenging.

strongly disagree    disagree    no option    agree    strongly agree

d. Test administration is costly.

strongly disagree    disagree    no option    agree    strongly agree

e. There is lack of funding and limited time and expertise.

strongly disagree    disagree    no option    agree    strongly agree

7. These are the *suggestions* for optimizing the use of *the CEFR-V* as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency:

a. Workshops should be organized on the use of *the CEFR-V* as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency, analyze the existing exams by mixed teams of teachers and experts and to provide teachers with more training in implementing *the CEFR-V*

strongly disagree    disagree    no option    agree    strongly agree

b. There should be more training on the use of *the CEFR-V*.

strongly disagree    disagree    no option    agree    strongly agree

c. There should be more examples of good practice in universities that use *the CEFR-V* as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency.

strongly disagree    disagree    no option    agree    strongly agree

d. There should be projects to attain potential fund for the test administration.

strongly disagree    disagree    no option    agree    strongly agree

8. If you have other remarks to make about the use of *the CEFR-V* as criteria to evaluate graduate students' English proficiency, please use the following space:

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