

Visualizing CEFR Implementation in English Language Teaching: A Bibliometric Trend Analysis (2015–2025)

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Article information

Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has become a foundational benchmark for language proficiency assessment and curriculum design in English language teaching (ELT). However, despite its expanding influence, evidence on how CEFR is implemented across diverse ELT contexts remains fragmented. This study presents a comprehensive bibliometric analysis and science mapping of CEFR implementation in ELT from 2015 to 2025. Using a descriptive quantitative approach and a dataset of Scopus-indexed journal articles and conference papers, the study combines performance analysis with network-based visualizations generated through VOSviewer and Biblioshiny. The analysis covers annual scientific production, leading authors, journals, institutions, and countries, as well as co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence, conceptual structures, and thematic evolution. The findings indicate a marked growth in CEFR-related ELT publications, with strong contributions from Europe and Asia, particularly Malaysia,

	Spain, and the United Kingdom. Dominant themes cluster around language assessment and testing, proficiency modeling, and writing-focused pedagogy, while emerging topics include multilingualism, academic writing, digital and e-learning environments, and early work on AI-supported assessment. Thematic evolution maps show a shift from policy and test-oriented research toward learner-centered, classroom-based, and technology-mediated implementations. At the same time, areas such as mediation, classroom language functions, and CEFR-AI integration remain underexplored. These results provide a macro-level overview of how CEFR has been taken up in ELT and point to concrete directions for future research, curriculum development, and assessment innovation.
Keywords	Bibliometric analysis, Biblioshiny, CEFR, English language teaching, VOSviewer
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1. Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has become one of the most influential frameworks in language education, especially within English language teaching (ELT). Since it was first introduced by the Council of Europe (2001), the CEFR has provided teachers and institutions with a common language to describe what learners can do at different stages of language development. Rather than focusing on grammar rules or vocabulary lists, it emphasizes what learners can accomplish through language in real communication (Foley, 2019). Over time, this learner-centered approach has helped teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers rethink how they define and measure language proficiency.

The CEFR framework is built around six reference levels, from A1 to C2 (Hulstijn et al., 2012). It captures a learner's journey from beginner to advanced. These levels have proven remarkably useful in connecting classroom teaching with assessment, curriculum planning, and even international job requirements (Little, 2007). Additionally, the CEFR is powerful and flexible, as it can be adapted to different languages, teaching philosophies, and educational contexts while maintaining a clear structure.

In recent years, the CEFR has moved far beyond its European roots. Across Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, education systems have begun adopting or adapting CEFR standards to improve English education (Hai & Nhung, 2019). Some countries, such as Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and China, have incorporated CEFR levels into national curricula, teacher training programs, and proficiency assessments. For example, Malaysia's CEFR-aligned English Language Education Reform aims to ensure that students graduate with comparable English skills (Foley, 2019). [Click or tap here to enter text.](#) Moreover, Indonesia and Japan have followed similar paths, adapting the framework to suit their own national goals and classroom realities. This growing trend reflects the need for more transparent and internationally recognized benchmarks for language learning.

However, global adoption does not necessarily mean global uniformity. In practice, the CEFR has been interpreted and applied in very different ways across local contexts. Some education systems use it mainly for testing and certification, while others use it to guide curriculum design or classroom instruction (Khan et al., 2023). In many cases, teachers and institutions still struggle to fully integrate CEFR principles into everyday practice (Amiruddin et al., 2025; Green, 2018; Lim et al., 2023; Schmidt et al., 2019). This variation raises an important question: what does CEFR implementation really look like around the world, and how has it been studied over the past decade?

Researchers have explored this question from many angles. Some studies have examined how well language tests align with CEFR levels, while others have investigated teachers' understanding of the framework or its influence on classroom practices (Moonen et al., 2013; Rehner et al., 2021). Several studies also discuss challenges in localization (Khan et al., 2023) and how to make CEFR meaningful in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language rather than as a second language (Bérešová, 2017). Teachers often report uncertainty about how to interpret descriptors or frustration about the lack of supporting materials and training.

Many bibliometric studies treat CEFR as a conceptual or policy object, mapping its global presence, citations, and conceptual clusters without drilling down into concrete classroom practices. As a result, the literature focuses more on the framework's visibility than on how teachers translate CEFR principles into lesson design, assessment for learning, or classroom routines. More recent research, however, has turned toward classroom implementation, learner autonomy, digital language learning, and self-assessment practices (Piccardo et al., 2019).

Although bibliometric studies on the CEFR have begun to emerge, existing investigations remain methodologically fragmented, temporally limited, and analytically partial. Runnels and Runnels (2019) primarily mapped early CEFR-related assessment discourse without tracing thematic evolution. Sahib and Stapa (2022) and Hui and Yunus (2023) focused narrowly on CEFR-based pedagogy and instructional strategies, offering limited insight into collaboration structures, intellectual clustering, or longitudinal topic shifts. More recent studies by Tuilan et al. (2025) and Nadtayay and Wongsaphan (2025) expanded coverage to digital learning contexts. However, they still relied mainly on single-tool or descriptive bibliometric techniques. They did not fully integrate performance metrics, social networks, conceptual structures, and thematic evolution within a unified analytical system.

Positioned at the intersection of CEFR, English language teaching, and advanced bibliometric science, this study offers the most comprehensive visualization to date of CEFR-related ELT research (2015–2025) using an integrated VOSviewer-Biblioshiny analytical framework. Unlike earlier bibliometric inquiries that emphasized either descriptive productivity patterns or isolated network mappings, the present study delivers a multilayered analytical framework encompassing performance indicators, global collaboration networks, conceptual topic formations, and thematic evolution. By revealing dominant knowledge hubs, emerging research frontiers, and underdeveloped domains, this research repositions CEFR bibliometric analysis from retrospective mapping to forward-looking strategic forecasting. As such, the study provides theoretical advancement, methodological innovation, and practical intelligence for researchers, policymakers, and curriculum developers seeking to align CEFR implementation with the evolving digital and global ELT ecosystem.

1.1 Overview of Previous Bibliometric Studies on the CEFR

Bibliometric investigations into CEFR-related research remain limited and largely fragmented by context, skill focus, and database coverage. One of the earliest structured efforts was conducted by Runnels and Runnels (2019). They examined publication trends and thematic orientations in CEFR studies across applied linguistics and language testing. Their findings showed that CEFR research has steadily expanded since the mid-2000s, with a strong dominance in assessment-related studies, particularly in validation and large-scale proficiency testing. However, their analysis was limited by the use of non-Scopus data sources and descriptive indicators, and by not applying science mapping techniques such as co-word, co-authorship, or thematic evolution, leaving the large-scale intellectual structure unexplored.

Building on this framework, Sahib and Stapa (2022) conducted a Scopus-based bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer and bibliometric indicators, covering CEFR publications (2002–2021). Their research showed that evaluation, curricular

alignment, and digital language learning are significant areas of focus for CEFR scholarship. Additionally, they found that Europe was the world's leading producer of knowledge, with Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom producing the most. However, Asian contributions, especially from China and Malaysia, were growing substantially. Significantly, their scientific mapping revealed disjointed conceptual clusters, indicating that CEFR research is still methodologically varied but thematically isolated.

Another line of CEFR-related synthesis research concentrates on systematic reviews rather than bibliometric mapping, such as the CLT-CEFR alignment study by Hui and Yunus (2023), which used PRISMA to review classroom-level CEFR-oriented speaking instruction. While this study provided strong pedagogical insights, it did not examine citation structures, patterns of country collaboration, or global research visibility, which are core strengths of bibliometric studies.

Subsequently, Tuilan et al. (2025) examined CEFR-based speaking instruction at the university level using Dimensions AI/Google BigQuery and a PRISMA workflow. That study retrieved an initial set of items, screened to a final corpus of ~43 studies, and employed VOSviewer for keyword co-occurrence and co-citation mapping. Its strength was its tight pedagogical focus (speaking instruction) and in the use of a large-scale indexing source (Dimensions), but its limitations were (a) narrow topical scope (speaking only), (b) limited generalizability to the whole ELT/CEFR literature, and (c) lack of combined MCA/thematic-evolution analyses that trace long conceptual shifts. Most recently, Nadtayay and Wongsaphan (2025) conducted a bibliometric analysis of CEFR-based communication teaching models at the primary level using Google Scholar data and VOSviewer. Their results identified short-term publication output and highlighted methodological trends in CEFR-based speaking instruction. They also showed strong growth in classroom-based implementation studies, teacher readiness, and curriculum reform.

These five bibliometric studies confirm that CEFR research has transitioned from an assessment-driven framework toward broader pedagogical and digital applications. However, three critical limitations persist across the literature: (1) the absence of an integrated longitudinal science mapping covering performance, thematic evolution, and conceptual structures simultaneously; (2) overreliance on Google Scholar, Dimensions, EBSCO instead of Scopus, reducing data reliability and citation precision; and (3) a tendency to rely on either descriptive bibliometric statistics or partial network visualizations without triangulation. Moreover, no previous study has systematically combined performance analysis, co-authorship networks, thematic evolution, and MCA-based conceptual structuring within a single dataset indexed in Scopus.

1.2 The present study

Addressing the identified gaps, this study employed a dual-platform bibliometric approach using Biblioshiny and VOSviewer to generate multilayered science mapping of CEFR-related research in English language teaching from 2015 to 2025. Integrating productivity, impact, collaboration, and conceptual evolution into a unified analytical framework, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the publication trends and main contributors in CEFR-related ELT research from 2015 to 2025?
2. What journals and articles have had the most significant impact on CEFR-related ELT research, and how has this affected scholarly discourse?
3. What are the dominant and emerging research themes in CEFR-related ELT scholarship based on keywords and thematic analyses?
4. How has the global CEFR research community collaborated and conceptualized domains from 2015 to 2025?
5. What are the knowledge gaps and potential future directions in CEFR-related ELT research as revealed through bibliometric and conceptual mapping?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study used a bibliometric research design with a descriptive quantitative orientation. Bibliometrics was selected because it provides systematic tools for mapping scholarly output, identifying intellectual structures, and revealing thematic shifts in a research field. Moreover, it also enables researchers to handle large datasets on broad topics through both quantitative and qualitative interpretations (Donthu et al., 2021; Gozali et al., 2023).

2.2 Data Collection

The data were collected exclusively from the Scopus database, which offers extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals. It provides a rigorously curated, comprehensive database of abstracts and citations, making it well-suited for bibliometric studies (Baas et al., 2020). The researchers used the initial search query: TITLE-ABS-KEY (CEFR OR "Common European Framework of Reference") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("English language teaching" OR "English language" OR "English teaching" OR "English as a foreign language" OR "English as a second language" OR "English learning" OR "English language instruction" OR "English instruction" OR "English for Specific Purposes" OR "English for Academic Purposes" [R1.1] OR Speaking OR Writing OR Reading OR Listening) AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "cp")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ARTS") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOC")). This phase produced 500 documents. Subsequently, the researchers downloaded the metadata for all 500 records in CSV format. Table 1 shows the general information obtained from the database.

Table 1*Description of the Collected Data*

	Description	Results
Main information about the data	Timespan	2015–2025
	Sources (journals, books, etc.)	221
	Documents	500
	Annual growth rate (%)	14.55
	Document average age	4.67
	Average citations per document	6.622
	References	38.1
Document contents	Keywords Plus (ID)	302
	Authors' keywords (DE)	1568
Authors	Number of authors	1012
	Authors of single-authored documents	128
Authorship and collaboration	Single-authored documents	145
	Co-authors per document	2.4
	International co-authorships (%)	16.4
Document types	Article	467
	Conference paper	33

2.3 Data Analysis

The analytical procedures were based on the bibliometric framework proposed by Donthu et al. (2021), combining performance analysis and science mapping. Performance analysis examines the contributions of key research constituents and assesses the performance of authors, institutions, countries, and journals. Science mapping is used to examine the conceptual structure (keyword co-occurrence and thematic evolution), the intellectual structure (co-citation networks of highly cited documents), and the social structure (co-authorship networks among authors, institutions, and countries).

The software tools used in this stage were OpenRefine, the Bibliometrix package in R (Biblioshiny) (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017b), and VOSviewer (Donthu et

al., 2021). The exported Scopus dataset was preprocessed using OpenRefine. The cleaning process involved removing duplicate records and normalizing keywords. This preprocessing step ensured the consistency and reliability of the bibliometric dataset before analysis. After that, the cleaned data were imported into two bibliometric software tools: Biblioshiny and VOSviewer. The researchers used bibliometric analysis and network visualization software in combination to take a complementary approach that leveraged software strengths and addressed shortcomings (Donthu et al., 2021). By integrating Biblioshiny's descriptive capabilities with VOSviewer's visualization power, this analysis provided both statistical and structural insights into the evolution of CEFR implementation in English language teaching between 2015 and 2025 (Muslimin & Basthomi, 2024).

3. Results

The results are presented in two key areas, reflecting the dual focus of bibliometric analysis: performance analysis and science mapping. The performance analysis addresses RQ1 and RQ2, and the science mapping addresses RQ3–RQ5.

3.1 Performance Analysis

This study's performance analysis examined annual scientific production, the most productive authors, leading journals and citation impact, leading institutions, country-level productivity, and the top ten most-cited articles on CEFR implementation in ELT.

3.1.1 Annual Scientific Production, Most Productive Authors, Leading Institutions, and Country Productivity

This section addresses the first research question. Representing the initial part of the performance analysis, Figure 1 shows the yearly scientific production on CEFR implementation in ELT from 2015 to 2025, revealing a strong rising trend with several notable fluctuations. The timeframe began with relatively modest output in 2015 and 2016, followed by a significant increase in 2017 and continuing growth through 2019. A substantial boom occurred in 2020, with publications rising

to 54 articles, reflecting increased interest in CEFR-aligned digital and remote learning practices during the early pandemic. The field reached its highest output in 2024 with 83 articles followed by a lower count in 2025 (70 articles), which is likely attributable to incomplete indexing at the time of data retrieval in November, rather than a substantive decline in research activity.

Figure 1

Yearly Publication Output for CEFR-Related ELT Articles

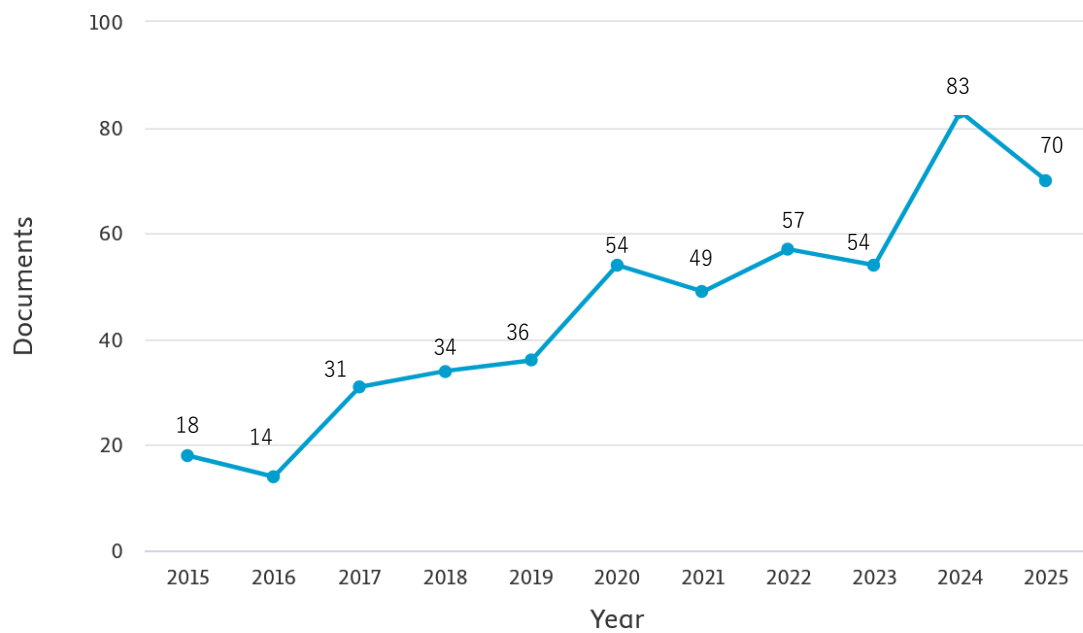


Figure 2 displays the top ten most productive authors contributing to CEFR-related ELT research from 2015 to 2025. As shown, Cabrera-Solano, P. and Castillo-Cuesta, L. led the field with seven publications each. They are followed by Khushik, G. A. and Yunus, M. M., both of whom had five publications. Several significant authors, including Coniam, D., Fleckenstein, J., François, T., Gaillat, T., Huhta, A., and Köller, O., published four papers.

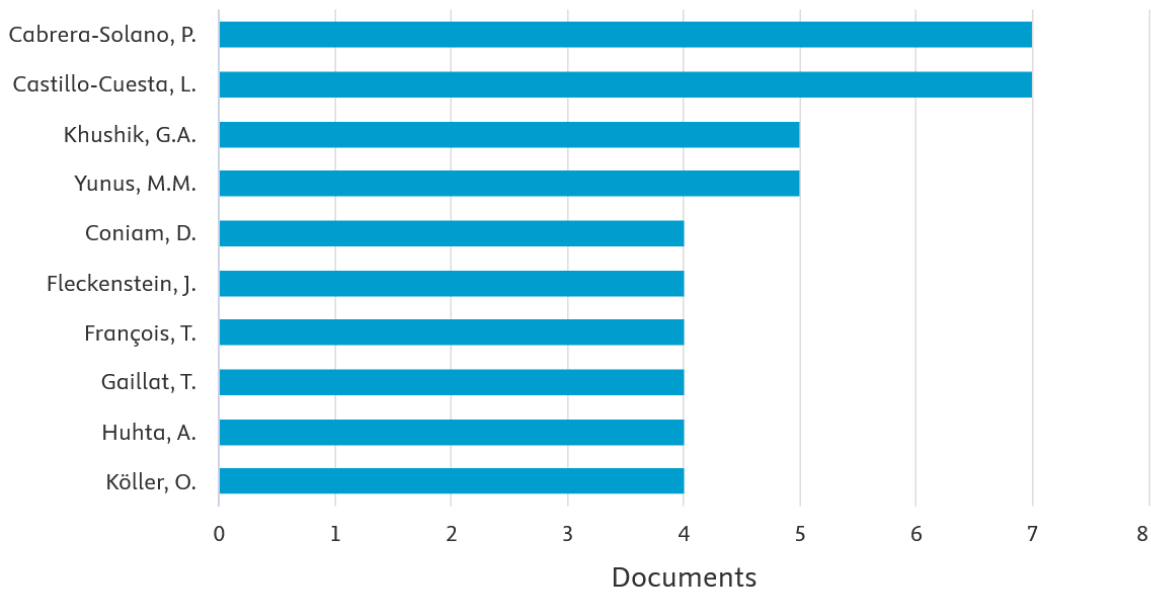
Figure 2*Top Ten Most Productive Authors*

Table 2 shows the top ten most productive affiliations. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was the most productive institution in CEFR-related ELT research, with 16 publications between 2015 and 2025. It was followed by Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium and Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja in Ecuador, with 11 publications each, and the University of Bedfordshire in the United Kingdom, with ten. Other institutions with significant research output included Educational Testing Service in the United States and the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, with nine publications each; Universiti Sains Malaysia, International Islamic University Malaysia, and Walailak University in Thailand, with seven each; and Universiti Teknologi MARA in Malaysia, with six.

Table 2*Top Ten Most Productive Institutions*

No	Affiliation	NP
1	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	16
2	Université Catholique de Louvain	11
3	Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja	11
4	University of Bedfordshire	10
5	Educational Testing Service	9
6	University of Jyväskylä	9
7	Universiti Sains Malaysia	7
8	International Islamic University Malaysia	7
9	Walailak University	7
10	Universiti Teknologi MARA	6

Note: NP: Number of publications

Moving on to productivity by country, Figure 3 shows the global distribution of CEFR-related ELT publications on a world map tinted according to productivity levels. Countries with no publications are shown in grey, while varying intensities of blue represent increasing research output, with darker shades indicating greater productivity.

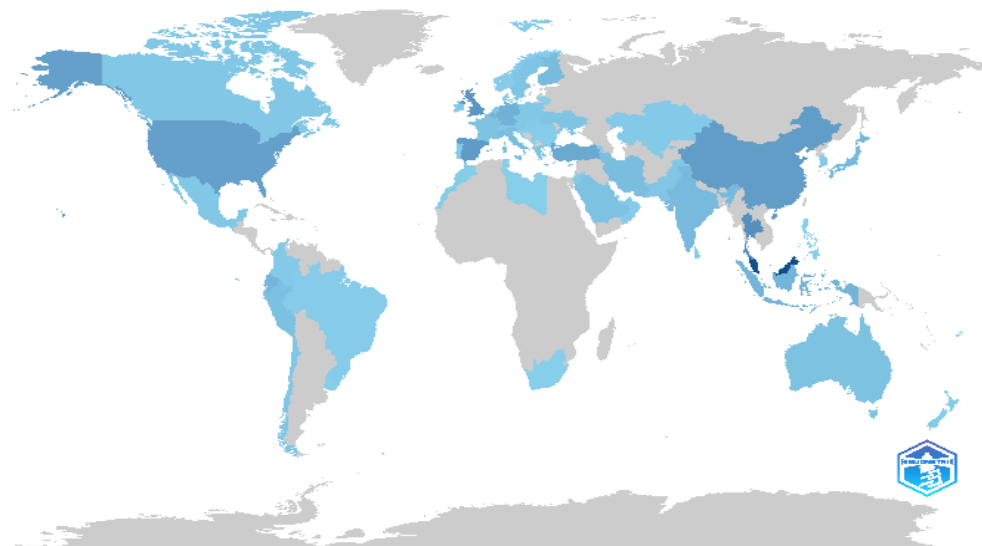
Figure 3*World Map of the Most Productive Countries in CEFR-Related ELT Research*

Figure 3 and Table 3 show Malaysia as the most productive country, with 58 publications, followed by Spain and the United Kingdom, each with 40 articles. Other extremely productive contributors included Thailand (39 articles), the United States (35), Turkey (29), China (26), and Germany (25), indicating CEFR research's global reach throughout Asia, Europe, and North America. Meanwhile, Belgium and Japan, with 18 publications each, showed strong interest in CEFR-related studies.

Table 3

The Most Productive Countries in CEFR-Related ELT Research

No	Country/Territory	NP
1	Malaysia	58
2	Spain	40
3	United Kingdom	40
4	Thailand	39
5	United States	35
6	Turkey	29
7	China	26
8	Germany	25
9	Belgium	18
10	Japan	18

Note: NP: Number of publications

3.1.2 Leading Journals, Citation Impact, and Top Ten Most-Cited Articles

To address the second research question, this study identified the journals and articles that have had the greatest impact on CEFR-related ELT research and considered how they have influenced scholarly discourse. Table 4 presents the top ten journals publishing CEFR-related ELT research between 2015 and 2025. The three most productive journals were *Assessing Writing*, *Language Testing in Asia*, and *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, with 13 publications each. They were followed by *International Journal of Learning, Teaching, and Educational Research*, and *Language Assessment Quarterly*, with 12 publications

each. Other journals with notable output were *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* (8), *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature* (7), *Arab World English Journal* (7), *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* (7), and *Journal of Second Language Writing* (7).

Table 4

Top Ten Most Productive Journals

No	Source Title	NP
1	<i>Assessing Writing</i>	13
2	<i>Language Testing in Asia</i>	13
3	<i>Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities</i>	13
4	<i>International Journal of Learning, Teaching, and Educational Research</i>	12
5	<i>Language Assessment Quarterly</i>	12
6	<i>Theory and Practice in Language Studies</i>	8
7	<i>3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature</i>	7
8	<i>Arab World English Journal</i>	7
9	<i>Journal of Language Teaching and Research</i>	7
10	<i>Journal of Second Language Writing</i>	7

Note: NP: Number of publications

Table 5 shows the top ten journals with the highest h-index. In this study, *Assessing Writing* and *Language Assessment Quarterly* were at the top, each having an h-index of 8, indicating that both journals have published at least eight CEFR-related publications that have been cited eight or more times. *Language Testing in Asia* followed with an h-index of 6, indicating its growing influence on CEFR-informed assessment practices. The table also provides useful metrics such as the g-index and m-index. The g-index measures citation concentration. For example, a journal with a g-index of 12 has had its top 12 articles cited at least 144 times. The m-index, which normalizes the h-index by the number of years since the journal's first CEFR-related article, offers a fairer assessment of citation consistency across time.

Table 5*Top Ten Journals by h-Index*

Source	h-index	g-index	m-index	TC	NP	PY start
<i>Assessing Writing</i>	8	13	0.73	181	13	2015
<i>Language Assessment Quarterly</i>	8	12	0.73	196	12	2015
<i>Language Testing in Asia</i>	6	10	0.67	118	13	2017
<i>Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics</i>	5	6	0.63	71	6	2018
<i>International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning</i>	5	5	0.71	95	5	2019
<i>International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research</i>	5	8	0.71	73	12	2019
<i>RELC Journal</i>	5	6	0.56	176	6	2017
<i>System</i>	5	7	0.5	112	7	2016
<i>Journal of Second Language Writing</i>	4	7	0.5	89	7	2018
<i>Language Teaching Research</i>	4	7	0.67	107	7	2020

Note: NP: Number of publications; TC: Total citations

Representing the last part of the performance analysis, Table 6 lists the top ten most-cited articles on CEFR-related ELT research. Paquot (2019), published in *Second Language Research*, was the most cited work, with 130 citations and an average of 18.57 per year, making it the dataset's most influential piece. Yannakoudakis et al. (2018) in *Applied Measurement in Education*, garnered 81 citations, whereas Freeman (2017) received 73 citations in the *RELC Journal*.

Table 6*Top Ten Cited Articles*

Paper	DOI	Total citations	TC per year
Paquot, 2019, <i>Second. Lang. Res.</i>	10.1177/0267658317694221	130	18.57
Yannakoudakis, 2018, <i>Appl. Meas. Educ.</i>	10.1080/08957347.2018.1464447	81	10.13
Freeman, 2017, <i>RELC J.</i>	10.1177/0033688217691073	73	8.11
Paquot, 2018, <i>Lang. Assess. Q.</i>	10.1080/15434303.2017.1405421	69	8.63
Tavakoli, 2020, <i>Mod. Lang. J.</i>	10.1111/modl.12620	64	10.67
Yancey, 2023, <i>Proc. Annu. Meet. Assoc. Comput. Linguist.</i>	10.18653/v1/2023.bea-1.49	63	21
Tavakoli, 2020, <i>Lang. Learn.</i>	10.1111/lang.12384	61	10.17
De Wilde, 2017, <i>Stud. Second. Lang. Learn. Teach.</i>	10.14746/sslit.2017.7.4.6	58	6.45
Khushik, 2020, <i>Appl. Linguist.</i>	10.1093/applin/amy064	52	8.67
Chan, 2015, <i>Assess. Writ.</i>	10.1016/j.asw.2015.07.004	48	4.36

Note: TC: Total citations

3.2 Science mapping

To address RQ3–RQ5, this study used science mapping to examine the frequency of authors' keywords, trends in CEFR implementation in ELT, the social structure (co-authorship network), the conceptual structure (keyword co-occurrence network and multiple correspondence analysis), and the temporal

structure (thematic map of authors' keywords and thematic evolution) of CEFR-related ELT research.

3.2.1 Authors' Keywords Frequency, Trend Topics, and Thematic Map

To investigate the third research question, this study investigated the dominant and emerging research themes in CEFR-related ELT scholarship based on keyword and thematic analyses. It began with the most frequently used author keywords in CEFR-related ELT research as shown in Figure 4. The term *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* was by far the most common keyword, appearing 128 times, suggesting its importance in defining the research environment. Other frequently used terms included *English as a foreign language*, *assessment*, *English language proficiency*, *writing*, *higher education*, *vocabulary*, *teaching*, and *language policy*. Furthermore, emerging concepts such as *ChatGPT*, *multilingualism*, and *young learners* pointed to new study areas that linked CEFR with technological innovation and varied learner groups.

Figure 4

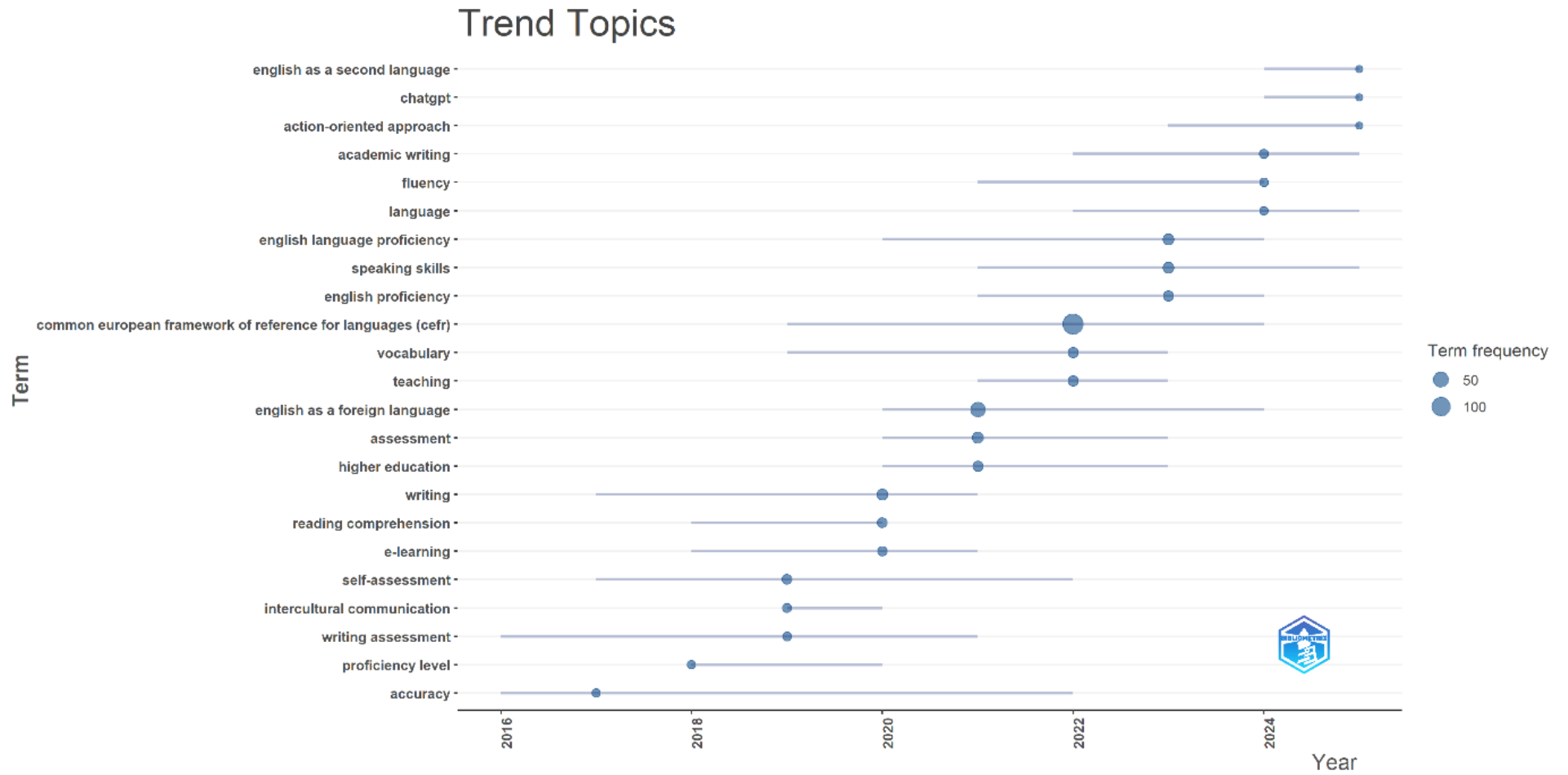
Top Keywords Used



Next, Figure 5 illustrates the trends in the topics of the terms most commonly used in CEFR-related ELT research from 2015 to 2025. The trend-topic visualization indicates a clear longitudinal shift in CEFR-related English language teaching research from foundational constructs to more technology- and pedagogy-driven themes over the analyzed period. Early studies (circa 2015–2017) emphasized foundational proficiency constructs, including accuracy, proficiency level, reading comprehension, and writing assessment. From 2018 onward, research expanded to include pedagogical and learner-centered themes, such as self-assessment, intercultural communication, e-learning, and higher education contexts. During the mid-period (2020–2022), the CEFR became a central organizing framework for vocabulary, speaking skills, and overall English proficiency. In recent years (2023–2025), the focus has shifted toward applied and technology-driven directions, with increasing attention to action-oriented approaches, academic writing, fluency, and AI-enabled tools such as ChatGPT, reflecting a move toward future-oriented, digitally mediated language education.

Figure 5

Trend Topics

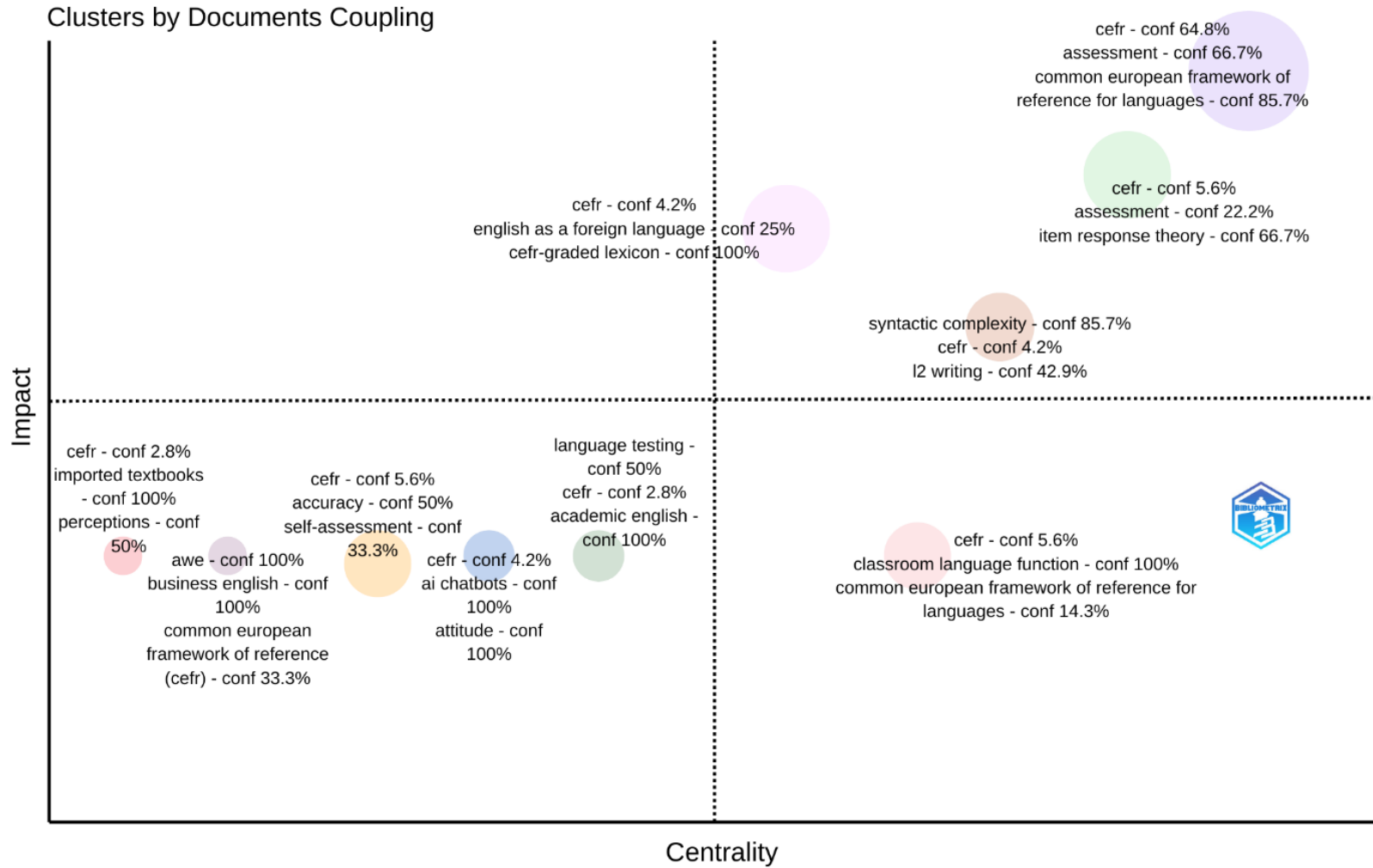


Moving on to the thematic analysis, Figure 6 shows how CEFR-related topics were interconnected by mapping clusters along two parameters: centrality, which reflects the relevance of a theme within the broader field, and density, which indicates the internal cohesiveness of the theme (Agbo et al., 2021). Based on these parameters, themes are positioned within four quadrants that represent different levels of development and importance:

- a. The top-right quadrant (Q1) represents the motor themes: topics that are both well developed and highly central to CEFR-ELT research. This quadrant includes clusters dominated by *CEFR*, *assessment*, and the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, as well as psychometric and linguistic measurement topics such as *item response theory*, *syntactic complexity*, and *L2 writing*. These themes play a driving role in the field and are strongly connected to assessment, proficiency measurement, and standard-setting research.
- b. The bottom-right quadrant (Q2) contains the basic themes, which are essential to the field but display lower internal density. In this area, themes such as *classroom language function* and the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* appear, indicating foundational but less conceptually cohesive topics that support broader CEFR implementation studies.

Figure 6

Thematic Map of Authors' Keywords



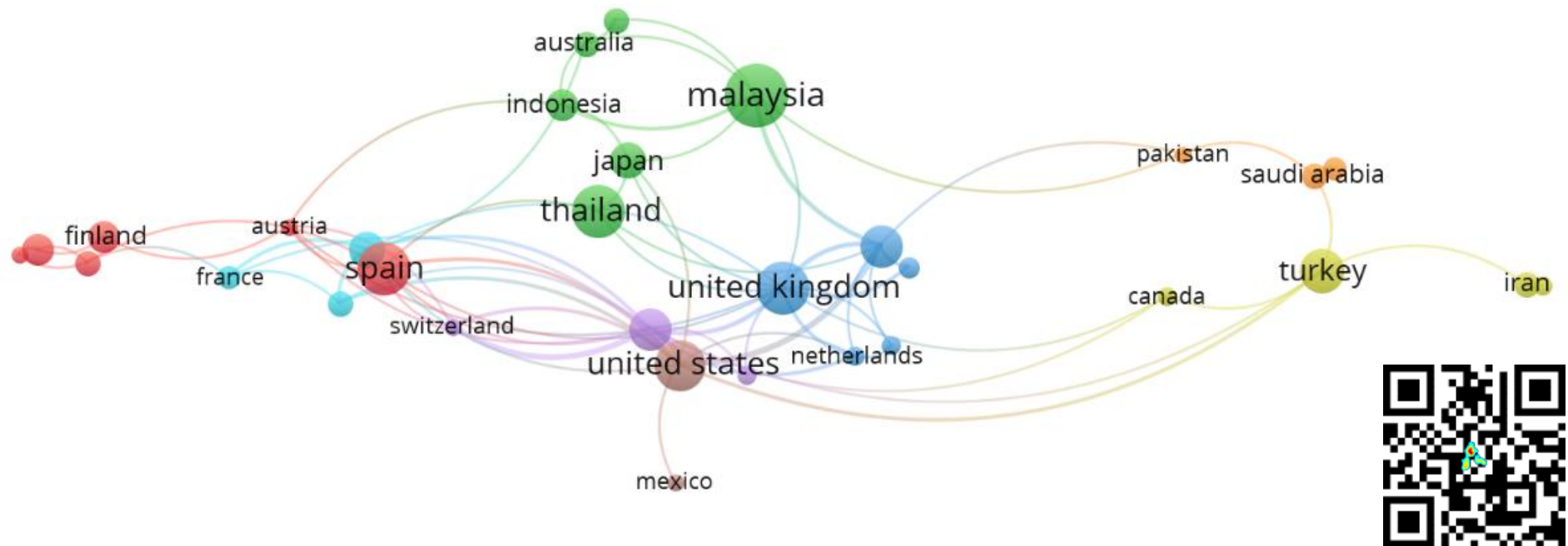
- c. The top-left quadrant (Q3) contains the niche themes, which are well developed but more specialized, showing high density but lower centrality. This quadrant includes themes related to CEFR-aligned lexicon and English as a foreign language, reflecting specialized research domains that contribute rigorously but may not directly shape the central discourse of CEFR in ELT.
- d. The bottom-left quadrant (Q4) displays the emerging or declining themes, characterized by low density and low centrality. This quadrant includes scattered topics related to *AI chatbots*, *self-assessment*, *accuracy*, *business English*, and *perceptions*, which represent either emerging lines of inquiry or areas receiving diminishing scholarly attention.

3.2.2 Social Structure and Conceptual Structure

The fourth research question was addressed through an analysis of the social and conceptual structures. The social structure, examined through co-authorship analysis, shows collaboration patterns among countries, institutions, and authors (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017a; Gozali et al., 2023). A conceptual structure drawn from co-word (co-occurrence) analysis revealed the clustering of terms extracted from keywords, titles, or abstracts in a bibliographic collection (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017a).

Figure 7

Co-Authorship Networks among Countries



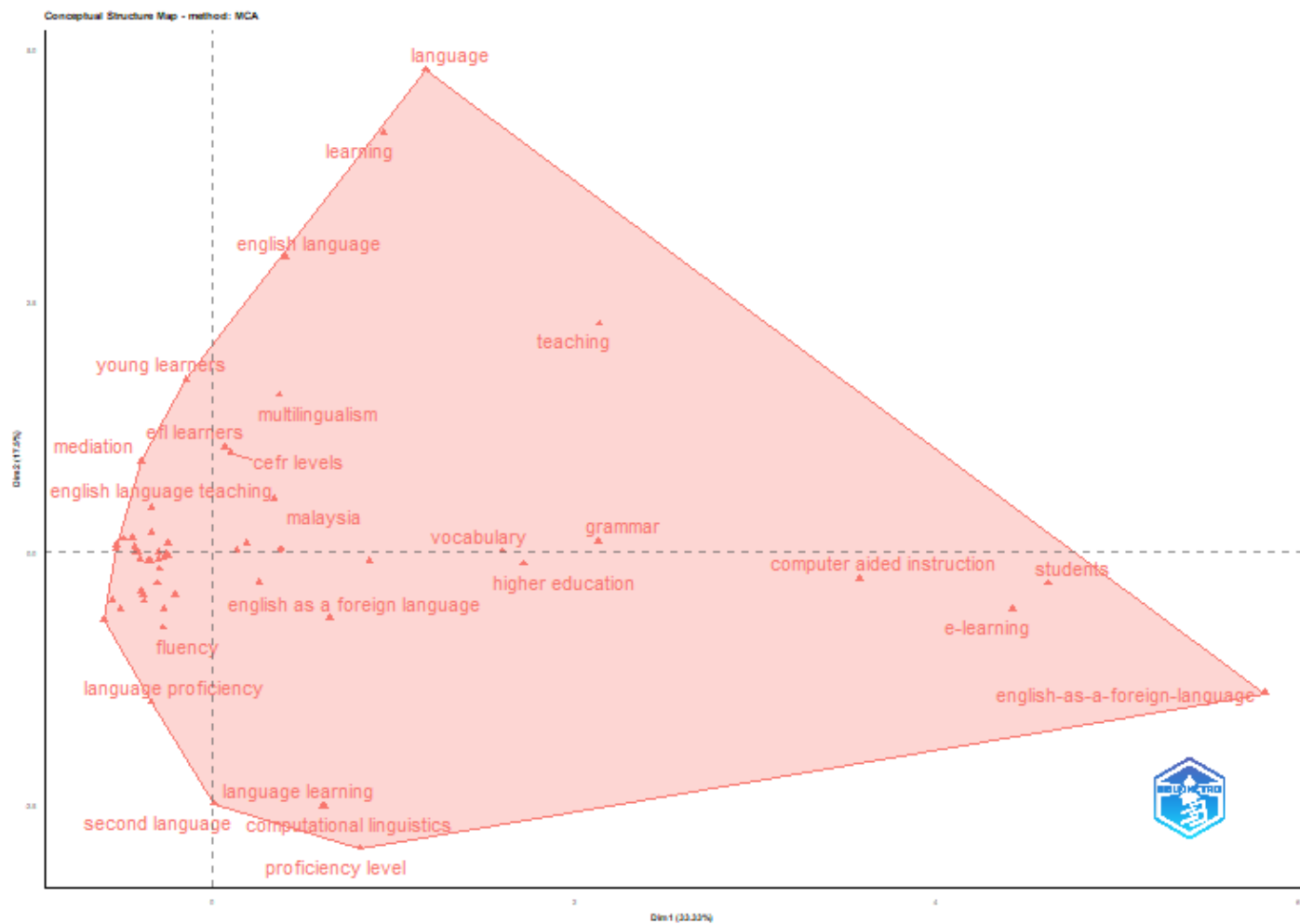
Note: Scan the QR code to enlarge the map for a comprehensive view of all keywords, occurrences, links, and total link strengths.



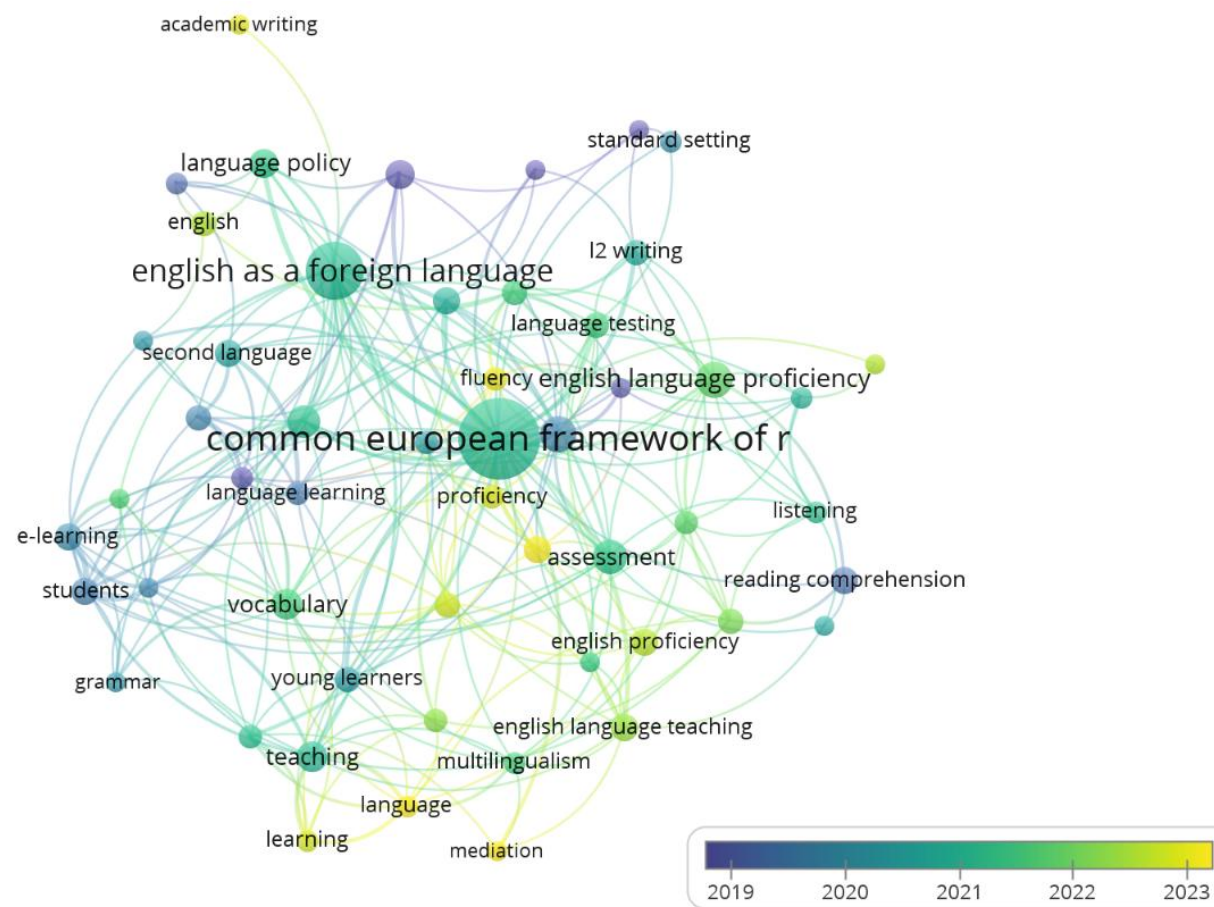
Figure 7 illustrates that CEFR-ELT research is arranged into several clear regional collaboration clusters. The largest green cluster reflects strong Asia-Pacific cooperation, including Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, and Australia. The second major blue cluster links the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada, and Mexico, indicating active transnational collaboration among Western institutions. The third red cluster connects Spain, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Finland, highlighting close links within Europe. Malaysia, the United States, and the United Kingdom stand out as major hubs with numerous linkages throughout the network, while Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan are also showing signs of increased activity in the Middle East.

Figure 8 shows the co-occurrence network of authors' keywords related to CEFR implementation in ELT. The clustering structure and color coding were generated algorithmically using VOSviewer, while the thematic labels were assigned by the authors through qualitative interpretation of the most frequent and central keywords within each cluster. The network illustrates how frequently terms co-occurred and how thematic areas were interconnected. The largest and most central node is *CEFR*, indicating its role as the core organizing concept around which most keywords cluster. Several thematic clusters are shown to have emerged around this focal node:

- a. The green cluster emphasizes keywords associated with assessment and proficiency, including *assessment*, *listening*, *reading comprehension*, and *English proficiency*.
- b. The blue cluster contains terms related to language testing and writing, such as *language testing*, *L2 writing*, *fluency*, and *standard setting*.
- c. The yellow cluster groups terms related to teaching and learning, including *teaching*, *learning*, *young learners*, and *multilingualism*.
- d. The purple cluster contains terms pertaining to digital learning contexts, including *e-learning*, *students*, *vocabulary*, and *grammar*.

Figure 9*Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA)*

To further interpret the conceptual structure underpinning authors' keywords, Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) was conducted. Figure 9 illustrates the MCA map, presenting how CEFR implementation in ELT keywords can be distributed across two main conceptual dimensions. The left side of the map groups keywords related to learner and proficiency-related themes, such as *young learners*, *EFL learners*, *fluency*, *language proficiency*, *second language*, and *mediation*. It also includes terms like *multilingualism* and *CEFR levels*, indicating a focus on learner characteristics and proficiency descriptors. On the right side of the figure, keywords related to instructional and technology themes form a separate cluster. This cluster includes terms such as *teaching*, *higher education*, *grammar*, *vocabulary*, *computer-aided instruction*, *students*, and *e-learning*, indicating an emphasis on pedagogical practices and digital learning contexts. Terms like *English language*, *English as a foreign language*, and *English language teaching* are distributed across the map's center, indicating that they serve as bridge concepts linking learner-related and instruction-related themes.

Figure 10*Thematic Evolution*

Note: Scan the QR code to enlarge the map for a comprehensive view of the thematic evolution.

3.2.3 Thematic Evolution

Figure 10 shows the thematic evolution of CEFR-ELT research from 2019 to 2023, using a color-coded overlay visualization. In the earlier years (2019–2020), the dominant topics were *language policy*, *standard setting*, *language testing*, and *L2 writing*, indicating a strong focus on policy frameworks and assessment. Around 2020–2021, the emphasis shifted toward classroom-based and digital learning themes, including *students*, *e-learning*, *vocabulary*, *teaching*, and *young learners*. In recent years (2022–2023), new themes emerged, including *academic writing*, *English language proficiency*, *reading comprehension*, *listening*, and *mediation*, reflecting growing interest in proficiency development and CEFR-informed skills instruction.

4. Discussion

4.1 Publication Trends and Main Contributors (2015–2025)

Annual production on CEFR implementation in ELT increased steadily from 2015, accelerated after 2020, and peaked in 2024. The growth was consistent with two macro drivers identified in prior research: (a) the global spread of CEFR beyond Europe into Asia and Latin America, which expanded the number of CEFR implementation studies (Runnels & Runnels, 2019; Sahib & Stapa, 2022), and (b) the shift to online instruction during the pandemic that triggered new CEFR-aligned teaching and assessment studies and accelerated publication cycles.

At the author level, Cabrera-Solano, P. and Castillo-Cuesta, L. were the most productive contributors, signaling growing engagement from Latin American contexts alongside European and Asian hubs. Institutionally, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia topped the list, consistent with Malaysia's system-level CEFR agenda. Geographically, Malaysia led output, followed by Spain, the UK, Thailand, and the United States, mirroring policy-led adoption in Southeast Asia, where national reforms explicitly embed CEFR into curricula and assessment. These patterns align with policy-led CEFR adoption and system-wide rollouts in

Southeast Asia, as well as with Europe's sustained leadership in standard-setting and assessment research (Jones et al., 2016; Runnels & Runnels, 2019). The performance indicators illustrate a field that has grown, globalized, and consolidated around assessment and proficiency reporting while progressively broadening into implementation studies across diverse systems.

At the same time, the observed concentration of publications in specific regions and Scopus-indexed journals warrants critical reflection. While bibliometric databases provide a standardized and reliable overview of research trends, they do not fully capture the diversity of knowledge production in the field. Previous studies have noted that Scopus tends to privilege English-language and internationally indexed journals, which may result in the underrepresentation of locally published, practitioner-oriented, or classroom-based research, particularly from developing contexts (Donthu et al., 2021; Faizudin Abdullah Bokhari et al., 2025). As a result, important insights into everyday CEFR implementation practices—often reported in regional journals, institutional reports, or non-indexed outlets—may remain less visible in large-scale mappings (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; Mukherjee et al., 2022). This limitation suggests that the global patterns identified in this study should be interpreted as reflecting dominant publication channels rather than the full spectrum of CEFR-related pedagogical work, underscoring the value of complementing bibliometric analyses with qualitative and locally grounded studies.

4.2 Journals and articles that have had the greatest impact and influence on scholarly discourse

The most productive journals were *Assessing Writing*, *Language Testing in Asia*, and *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*; the greatest h-indexes, however, were concentrated in *Assessing Writing* and *Language Assessment Quarterly*. These patterns suggest that assessment-oriented journals occupy a particularly influential position in CEFR-related ELT research. This configuration reflects the literature's long-standing center of gravity in CEFR

research on measurement, validation, and scale operationalization (Fulcher, 2010; Jones et al., 2016). According to reports of CEFR's growing pedagogical reach (North & Piccardo, 2016) and regional adoption in Asia (Sahib & Stapa, 2022), mid-to-high-impact venues with broader applied-linguistics remit (*System*, *RELC Journal*, and *Language Teaching Research*) indicate a diffusion from testing into pedagogy and classroom implementation.

The most-cited articles in the corpus have shaped discourse in three ways. First, these studies converted abstract scales into analyzable linguistic data by combining writing/lexical complexity and proficiency modeling around CEFR descriptors, such as Paquot (2018) and Paquot (2019). Second, they pushed methodological boundaries in CEFR-referenced evaluation by advancing assessment and automated scoring analytics aligned with the CEFR (Yannakoudakis et al., 2018). Third, they expanded the application of skill-focused, learner-centered approaches (e.g., task design and fluency in Tavakoli et al. (2020); classroom acquisition patterns in De Wilde et al. (2020); benchmarked writing in Chan and May (2022)). When considered together, the source and citation landscape shows that CEFR scholarship has been guided by high-impact studies on proficiency/complexity and assessment venues, while continuously integrating pedagogical and technological lines of study that recalibrate how CEFR is implemented in ELT.

Despite their strong influence, the citation dominance of assessment-oriented journals may also indicate a structural imbalance in CEFR knowledge production. High-impact venues often prioritize psychometric validation, scale alignment, and proficiency modeling, which may marginalize pedagogical interpretations of CEFR as a flexible, action-oriented framework for classroom learning. Earlier CEFR scholarship emphasized learner agency, mediation, and curriculum development rather than testing alone (Little, 2006; North & Piccardo, 2016). Moreover, classroom-based innovations and context-sensitive pedagogical adaptations, particularly from underrepresented regions, are often

disseminated through local or practice-oriented outlets that are not indexed by major citation databases. As a result, bibliometric visibility may underrepresent pedagogical CEFR research, reinforcing an assessment-centric narrative that does not fully capture the framework's original educational intent (North & Piccardo, 2016).

4.3 The Dominant and Emerging Themes in Research

The keyword treemap suggests an assessment-centric core: high-frequency terms (*CEFR, assessment, EFL, writing*) and trend-topic spikes around writing assessment, accuracy, and proficiency indicate the field's longstanding anchoring in measurement and scale operationalization (Fulcher, 2010; Jones et al., 2016). The thematic map positions these as motor/basic themes, while related proficiency constructs (lexical/phraseological sophistication and fluency) appear tightly connected to skill development, resonating with influential CEFR-aligned studies on lexical modeling and writing (Paquot, 2019) and fluency/task design (Tavakoli et al., 2020). These patterns show that work linking CEFR descriptors to empirical language evidence continues to shape the conceptual center of the field.

Concurrently, emerging themes expand the agenda: the trend timeline shows recent growth in multilingualism, academic writing, and English proficiency, and the newest bubbles (*ChatGPT, e-learning*) signal increasing interest in technology-mediated CEFR applications and automated/AI-assisted assessment (Yannakoudakis et al., 2018). The thematic map also flags underexplored/low-centrality areas (notably mediation and elements of language policy) despite policy-level attention to mediation in updated CEFR descriptors (North & Piccardo, 2016) and ongoing national adoption initiatives. These gaps, alongside limited longitudinal classroom implementations, suggest clear opportunities for future research that integrates CEFR pedagogy with AI-supported practice, plurilingual/mediation constructs, and sustained classroom evidence beyond one-off assessments.

The marginal positioning of mediation, classroom discourse functions, and longitudinal implementations, despite their prominence in the *CEFR Companion Volume*, can be attributed to several structural and methodological constraints. These constructs are inherently interactional, process-oriented, and context-sensitive, making them less amenable to large-scale, cross-sectional designs and to standardized measurement, which dominate high-impact CEFR research (Little, 2006; Piccardo, 2014). Bibliometric visibility further favors studies that operationalize CEFR through quantifiable proficiency indicators rather than qualitative classroom processes, which are often reported in localized or practitioner-oriented venues. In addition, longitudinal classroom research requires sustained access, time, and institutional support, factors that limit its prevalence in Scopus-indexed publications. Consequently, although mediation and discourse-oriented CEFR applications are theoretically central, they remain empirically underrepresented in the indexed literature (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; North & Piccardo, 2016).

4.4 The International Collaboration and Conceptual Domains

The country co-authorship network shows tightly knit clusters, most prominently an Asia-Pacific hub (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, and Australia) and a Transatlantic/Western hub (UK, US, Netherlands, Canada, and Mexico), alongside a continental European cluster (Spain, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Finland). Central nodes such as Malaysia, the UK, and the US exhibit the highest linkage, signaling brokerage roles that align with policy-led CEFR adoption in Southeast Asia and Europe's longstanding stewardship of standards and assessment (Runnels & Runnels, 2019; Sahib & Stapa, 2022). This pattern is consistent with science-mapping evidence that language-education collaborations tend to gravitate around regional policy initiatives and dominant outlets, then extend through cross-regional ties as implementation matures (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017b).

The conceptual maps (keyword co-occurrence and MCA) can be grouped into three interlocking knowledge domains. First, an assessment/testing nucleus (*assessment, language testing, proficiency, standard setting*) anchors the field, reflecting the CEFR's validation and scale operationalization heritage (Fulcher, 2010; Jones et al., 2016). Second, a pedagogy/skills domain (*writing, fluency, reading/listening comprehension, young learners*) indicates sustained movement into classroom implementation, aligning with calls to link descriptors to observable language performance (Little, 2006). Third, a digital/innovation strand (*e-learning, computer-aided instruction, emerging AI topics*) connects to both assessment and pedagogy, echoing post-2020 shifts toward technology-mediated CEFR practices. The MCA's two major poles (learner proficiency/CEFR descriptors versus instructional/technology practices) mirror this structure, while low-centrality items (e.g., mediation, some policy constructs) highlight underexplored intersections identified in recent reviews (North & Piccardo, 2016). The social and conceptual maps depict a community that is regionally networked yet increasingly intercontinental, and a knowledge base that remains assessment-centric while it broadens its scope to pedagogy and digital innovation.

4.5 The Knowledge Gaps and Potential Future Directions

The thematic map shows low-centrality/low-density areas (notably mediation, classroom language functions, and parts of language policy) that remain underdeveloped despite their prominence in the *CEFR Companion Volume* (e.g., mediation, plurilingual/pluricultural competence). This gap mirrors longstanding critiques that CEFR implementations often stop at assessment alignment rather than classroom enactment (Fulcher, 2010; Little, 2006). Likewise, while high-impact studies have advanced proficiency modeling (Paquot, 2018, 2019) and learning-oriented assessment (Jones et al., 2016), these maps show limited longitudinal, classroom-based evidence connecting CEFR descriptors to measurable learning gains across skills and levels, especially for young learners. Finally, the co-authorship structure suggests strong regional clusters but relatively

few cross-regional, multi-site replications, constraining generalizability across diverse ELT systems.

Going forward, the field should pivot from “describe and align” to “design and validate.” First, researchers should run design-based and longitudinal studies that operationalize mediation and plurilingual constructs in tasks, rubrics, and teacher practices, then track outcomes over time (North & Piccardo, 2016). Second, they should integrate AI-enabled analytics (e.g., automated writing/speaking scoring, feedback systems) with transparent CEFR alignment and rigorous human-in-the-loop validation (Yannakoudakis et al., 2018), including fairness checks across age groups and proficiency bands. Third, they should build cross-national consortia (UK, Malaysia, Spain) to co-develop shared protocols, open lexical/fluency benchmarks, and replicable instruments that bridge assessment-pedagogy divides and test the impact of policy in multilingual settings. This agenda directly addresses weaknesses in the science mapping outputs and positions CEFR-in-ELT research for evidence-based implementation at scale.

The continued low centrality of mediation, despite its prominence in the *CEFR Companion Volume*, reveals a persistent disconnect between CEFR policy discourse and dominant research practices. This marginalization is largely driven by methodological constraints, as mediation is interactional and process-oriented, making it difficult to operationalize within large-scale, assessment-focused designs (Little, 2006; Piccardo, 2014). Recent advances in AI and learning analytics offer a viable pathway to model mediation-related processes longitudinally and at scale, positioning AI as a methodological bridge to realign CEFR research with its pedagogical policy vision (North & Piccardo, 2016; Yannakoudakis et al., 2018).

5. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations to this study should be noted. First, CEFR-related work in other databases, languages, or regional journals might not have been included because the analysis was limited to Scopus-indexed English-language journal

articles and conference papers from 2015 to 2025. As a result, the findings largely reflect the international, English-medium CEFR-ELT literature rather than the global ELT field. Second, the study examined co-authorship at the national level only for the social structure. Co-authorship networks among individual authors or institutions, which would offer a more thorough understanding of how certain research groups collaborate, were not mapped. Third, the field's deeper citation-based roots, key schools of thought, and essential works were not explicitly represented because the study lacked an analysis of intellectual structure (e.g., co-citation or bibliographic coupling).

Future research can build on these limitations in several ways. Researchers could combine multiple databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC) and include non-English publications to obtain a more inclusive view of CEFR implementation. In particular, databases such as ERIC and regional indexes are more likely to capture classroom-based and policy-driven studies from the Global South, which are often published in local or regional journals and are underrepresented in Scopus-based analyses. Extending the social structure analysis to author- and institution-level co-authorship networks would help identify core research teams and strategic partnerships. Adding analyses of intellectual structure (co-citation, bibliographic coupling) would clarify the connections between theoretical and methodological traditions in CEFR-ELT. Finally, the thematic gaps identified in this study, such as mediation, classroom language functions, AI-assisted CEFR assessment, multilingual policy impact, and proficiency benchmarks for young learners, point to promising directions for future empirical and design-based studies that can connect bibliometric patterns with concrete classroom practice and learning outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This bibliometric study visualized CEFR-related ELT research (2015–2025) using a Scopus-based dataset and integrated analyses via Biblioshiny and VOSviewer. The performance analysis showed strong growth in publications,

dominated by assessment-oriented journals and highly cited works on proficiency modeling, writing, and testing. Malaysia, Spain, the UK, and Thailand emerged as key national contributors, with authors such as Cabrera-Solano and Castillo-Cuesta among the most productive. The science mapping results revealed a socially interconnected but regionally clustered research community, and a conceptual landscape organized around three major domains: assessment and proficiency calibration, pedagogy and skills development, and an emerging strand of technology-mediated and AI-informed practices. The observed thematic evolution indicates a shift from policy and standard setting toward classroom implementation, academic literacy, and digital learning, while also exposing underexplored areas such as mediation, classroom language functions, multilingual policy, and CEFR-AI integration. These findings not only provide a comprehensive macro-level map of CEFR implementation in ELT but also generate concrete directions for future research and innovation, positioning CEFR as a continually evolving framework at the intersection of assessment, pedagogy, and educational technology.

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8. Declaration of AI Use

The authors declare that AI tools, specifically ChatGPT and Grammarly, were used to refine academic language and language editing. Moreover, Scopus AI was used to identify and explore relevant scholarly literature. The authors emphasize that these tools were used solely to enhance the clarity and quality of the manuscript. All outputs generated by AI tools were carefully reviewed,

evaluated, and edited by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content.

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