

From Policy to Practice in Assessment: A CEFR-aligned Professional Development Model for Classroom-based Assessment in Iranian EFL Classrooms

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Article information	
Abstract	The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a cornerstone in language education policy and assessment worldwide. This research explored the design, implementation, and evaluation of a CEFR-aligned professional development program aiming to raise awareness and impact practices of in-service Iranian EFL teachers. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research involved 30 teacher participants in public high schools in Tehran, utilizing semi-structured interviews, observation, and a CEFR-awareness questionnaire. Findings revealed that the teachers initially lacked familiarity with CEFR descriptors and struggled to adopt CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment effectively. Research-informed post-intervention results demonstrated significant improvements in teachers' assessment literacy, including increased confidence in designing communicative, criterion-referenced tasks and integrating formative classroom-based assessment aligned with CEFR standards. The present

	study emphasizes the need for continual, contextually pertinent PD programs to promote research-informed assessment techniques and practices in language education within the CEFR framework. It also offers a model to implement CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment in Asian teacher education contexts and provides implications for stakeholders in language education assessment.
Keywords	assessment policy, assessment practice, CEFR-aligned professional development, quality education, Iranian EFL classrooms
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1. Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a coherent and adaptable framework was introduced in 2001 providing a common descriptive metalanguage to describe what language users must learn to do to use language for communication. In 2020, the Companion Volume was expanded with clear descriptors and inclusivity (Council of Europe, 2020). The framework offers guidance to be adapted and adopted in both formal testing and everyday classroom practice in different countries (Hunke et al. 2018).

Communicative language activities at different proficiency levels from A1 to A2 are contextualized within domains encompassing public, private, occupational, and academic, categorized under four communication modes: production, reception, interaction, and mediation. The proficiency levels are defined through descriptors that make visible what learners can actually do at each stage. The CEFR situates learners as active participants of tasks who combine language with other resources to achieve communicative goals. The recent revisions focused on

inclusive language policies and the needs of varied multicultural learning communities (Council of Europe, 2020).

In practice, however, research continues to highlight persistent challenges in implementing the CEFR in its entirety. For instance, Jones (2011) argued that effective adoption of the framework in new contexts is possible only when they are understood and addressed on their own terms. In short, the CEFR may not be applicable across diverse educational systems and has to be adapted to suit the target use situations and purposes (Mohd Don et al., 2025).

In the Iranian context, studies consistently show a gap between policy intentions and classroom implementations. Keyvanfar et al. (2019) compared the CEFR with the country's new EFL curriculum and identified some areas of misalignment. While teachers demonstrated a general awareness of the CEFR, they often lacked the necessary training and time to translate its principles into classroom activities and assessments procedures. Even when they appreciated the value of the CEFR can-do descriptors in describing what learners could do with English, institutional constraints often hindered their effective integration into everyday teaching practice.

Kamalvand and Mohammadi (2024) investigated teacher assessment literacy with regard to pragmatic competence in L2 using the CEFR as a lens. They asserted that assessment in this regard needed to be aligned with the CEFR in practice (Xu & Brown, 2016). In fact, CEFR-aligned assessment encompasses summative and formative modes, self and peer assessments, portfolio assessment, and standardized tests linked to CEFR levels. Another study has shown that sustained professional development helps teachers overcome skill and confidence gaps (Tabatabaee-Yazdi et al., 2018). However, it is worth noting that there is still little evidence on training models that fit the Asian language education settings, including the Iranian EFL context.

Few studies have worked on CEFR focused classroom-based assessment with reflective practice and peer collaboration within a professional development program. Given the case, this study aimed to design a professional development program tailored for in service Iranian EFL teachers. It focused on developing teachers' ability to create communicative assessment tasks drawing on CEFR descriptors for alignment and to equip them with the skills necessary to implement these tasks effectively in real language classes. The study further set out to demonstrate how a professional development program centered on assessment could serve as a practical means of operationalizing the CEFR in an Asian educational context. Professional development is considered not as an optional supplement, but as a vital bridge linking policy intentions to effective classroom practice through CEFR-aligned teacher education. The following research questions were formulated in line with these aims:

RQ1: To what extent does participation in a CEFR-aligned professional development program enhance CEFR awareness and CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment literacy of Iranian EFL teachers?

RQ2: How does the CEFR-aligned professional development program influence the assessment and teaching practices of Iranian EFL teachers?

RQ3: What benefits and challenges do the participating teachers perceive in implementing CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment in their Iranian EFL classes?

2. Literature Review

2.1 CEFR and Language Assessment

The CEFR's action-oriented and task-based approach (Council of Europe, 2020) has not been adequately addressed for assessment in the framework document. For example, the CEFR offers limited conceptualization of language assessment that views action and task performance as indicators of language proficiency (Fischer, 2020) and learners as "social agents" who have to complete communicative tasks of different natures across different contexts of use. It was also asserted that the CEFR did not adequately account for how differences in

cognitive processing demands and contextual parameters affected task difficulty and performance (Weir, 2005). The use of the CEFR in high-stakes exams in Austria, such as the Matura at B2 level, shows that a clear structure can support fairness and lessen stigma (Bacher et al., 2024). Still, the framework's research based in second language acquisition remains thin, and there is a call for closer work between teaching and assessment specialists. Taken together, these limitations suggest that the development of CEFR-aligned assessment tasks has to be supplemented with practical, context-sensitive principles of assessment design to ensure validity, reliability, and meaningful interpretation.

Teachers and other stakeholders have also pointed to the difficulty of using descriptors in the same way across varied languages and contexts (Mohamad Uri, 2023). Linking these context-shaped descriptors to classroom-based methods—portfolios, ongoing feedback, and other formative tools—can give teachers greater choice and more innovative means to track learning against shared international standards with scaffolding at the micro-level (Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2023b). However, it is noteworthy that its effectiveness depends on training, contextual adaptation, and ongoing professional development, given that teachers, as reported by several studies such as Keyvanfar et al. (2019), Mohamad Marzaini et al. (2023a), and Mohamad Uri (2023) have limited assessment literacy in language education.

2.2 CEFR Teaching and Assessment in Non-European Contexts

The global embrace of the CEFR requires adaptations based on different educational contexts, especially in Asia, with ongoing projects required to localize its descriptors, tailor assessment tools, and move towards integrating the CEFR into national curricula. Nevertheless, in the ASEAN region, while Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and China have already used CEFR with its local versions, they have not yet updated them based on the latest CEFR descriptors, and a negative view still looms as an assessment tool among teachers and students (Foley, 2019).

Comparative studies done in some non-European countries have reported some interesting findings. In Kazakhstan, the CEFR was used in the higher education context that led to more employability and students' language proficiency enhancement (Amrenova & Rakhymova, 2024). In Vietnam, most teachers viewed the CEFR as helpful (Ngo, 2017). As such, there needs to be attempt to enable teachers to better grasp the essence of CEFR so that they can put it into actual beneficial practices.

2.3 Assessment Literacy and Professional Development

Language assessment literacy (LAL) with a focus on teachers' understanding of assessment practices encompasses the knowledge, skills, and principles needed to design, administer, interpret, and use language assessments effectively (Fulcher, 2012). As for CEFR-aligned assessment, LAL includes being familiar with CEFR levels and the CEFR descriptive scheme, selecting and adapting descriptors appropriately, developing authentic communicative tasks, and ensuring reliable performance evaluation.

Previous studies have revealed existing gaps in how well EFL teachers understand assessment. For instance, some teachers are interested in using assessment to support learning and track progress instead of just giving final grades to learners (Derakhshan & Ghiasvand, 2022); however, they may not be able to do so due to problems derived from insufficient training on assessment, a lack of practical help, and weak componential competence (Firoozi et al., 2019; Kamalvand & Mohammadi, 2024;). In the Iranian context, where a focus can be placed on CEFR-oriented assessment, Kamalvand and Mohammadi (2024) have reported on evidence that teachers lacked both the conceptual understanding and practical skills needed for CEFR-aligned assessment practice.

To address this issue, in-service teacher training holds potential to increase teachers' assessment literacy. While short, one-off workshops can be helpful, they rarely change what teachers do. Lasting change is more likely to come from

professional development that continues over time and stays connected to classroom realities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Activities associated with professional development such as workshops, seminars, collaborative reflection, and active reading of professional literature have been linked to stronger teaching efficiency and more effective assessment practices (Tabatabaee-Yazdi et al., 2018). Simply put, assessment literacy should be included as an integral component of professional development programs for language teachers (Boyd & Donnarumma, 2018).

A large body of work on language assessment literacy exists (Khodashenas et al., 2023) with researchers urging for the inclusion of assessment literacy in teacher training. On the same note, professional development programs should be updated for in-service professional development (Chang et al., 2024) and have demonstrated efficacy in raising assessment literacy (Mertler, 2009), particularly when they include theoretical input, skills, and sociocultural values (Taylor, 2013). Such interventions, including continuing professional development, are still needed to develop understanding and skills of teachers in evaluation and testing language (Westbrook & Spiby, 2024). Thus, a CEFR-based perspective can be a proactive endeavor to update professional development programs in its assessment and teaching modules and further enhance teachers' knowledge. This study addressed the effects of an implication of CEFR-aligned professional development training on assessment literacy of Iranian language teachers, with particular attention paid to contextual factors that facilitated or hindered the implementation of the program.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study utilized quantitative data to measure changes in teachers' CEFR awareness

and CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment literacy, while qualitative data informed shifts in classroom practices and changes in the participating teachers.

3.2 Participants

Thirty in-service Iranian EFL teachers from public and private high schools in Tehran participated in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with the criteria of a minimum of three years of teaching experience at Iranian public schools. The demographic information of the teacher participants included 15 female and 15 male teachers who were taking an MA course in TEFL at an Iranian university, with teaching experience ranging from three to five years. All participants held a bachelor's degrees in English language teaching or related fields. Participation was voluntary, and the participant gave their informed consent prior to their participation in this study.

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 CEFR Knowledge and Classroom-based Assessment Scale

A 15-item questionnaire was developed based on the assessment principles outlined in Nagai et al. (2020) and Westbrook and Spiby (2024), measuring teachers' knowledge of CEFR descriptors and implementation strategies for CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment (see Appendix I). As for content validity, the queries were modified and aligned by two ELT experts based on the teacher assessment literacy level scale (Mertler, 2003) and seven assessment literacy standards in CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment (Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2023a). Feedback led to minor wording adjustments. The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). Construct validity was established through an exploratory factor analysis with a pilot group of 150 teachers whose professional profiles closely matched those of the study participants. Principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation determined three constructs that included CEFR descriptors (Factor 1), CEFR aligned assessment principles (Factor 2), and classroom implementation strategies (Factor 3). For each question, factor loadings ranged from .42 to .79 on

their respective constructs. The questionnaire demonstrated high reliability, indicating internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$ for the total scale; subscale α s = .85, .82, and .84, respectively).

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

An interview protocol was designed to explore six teachers' perceptions of CEFR-aligned assessment, implementation challenges, and professional development needs, based on Mohamad Marzaini et al. (2023a, 2023b) and Rahman (2014). The questions for CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment were themed on theoretical and practical assessment principles based on CEFR proposed by Nagai et al. (2020) and Westbrook and Spiby (2024) (See Appendix II). The questions also focused on teachers' understanding of receptive, productive, interactive, and mediative skills assessment. The interviews, which lasted between 15 and 20 minutes for each participant and were conducted in English, were carried out toward the end of the professional development program to ensure the participants had enough knowledge and ideas to share regarding CEFR assessment and were able to reflect on changes in their assessment and teaching practices.

3.3.3 Classroom Observation Checklist

A structured observation tool was developed to document teachers' CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment practices before and after their participation in the professional development program (see Appendix III). The checklist included indicators for CEFR-aligned practices that emphasized self-assessment and peer assessment to develop independent language learners and the authentic assessment system where the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing were assessed through real-life like tasks. The observation tool also included principles for the assessment that emphasized testing for teaching, communicating assessment results to students and parents, as well as spotting unethical and improper assessment methods, among others (Ghajarieh et al. 2022).

3.4 Professional Development Program

The 12-week professional development program was designed around some CEFR assessment principles noted by Nagai et al. (2020) as well as the continuing professional development proposed by Westbrook and Spiby (2024), focusing on action-oriented assessment, criterion-referenced evaluation, formative assessment integration, assessment of the four language skills, and assessment of grammar and vocabulary.

Each session of the program was run based on materials developed by the researcher, which were designed to align with CEFR classroom-based assessment and tailored based on British Council tasks for teaching assessment such as videos and articles on assessment literacy (e.g, Westbrook & Spiby, 2024). The training program included use of some videos before viewing, while viewing and after viewing tasks.

Figure 1

Sample Presentation Adopted from the British Council's Teaching in English Website

learned.

Part 1: Why do we assess learning?

In this first video, Richard and Carolyn explain why assessing learning is important for both learners and teachers.

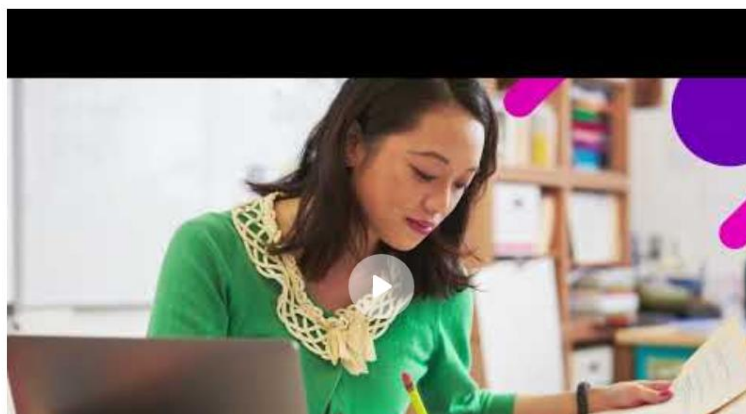
Before viewing

- Why is it important to assess our learners? Brainstorm some ideas with your colleagues or on your own.

While viewing

- What are the main differences between formative and summative assessments?
- What examples does Richard give?

Watch *Why do we assess learning?*



As follow-up measures, quizzes, discussion tasks, and practical tasks, such as scoring tests and calculating basic statistics, were incorporated into all sessions. Some online discussions were conducted and curated by the researcher as the lead educator. To place the design of the professional development within the latest research findings on L1 and L2 teacher education, the teacher participants were encouraged to cascade information to their colleagues and those they mentored (Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2023b). Peer feedback activities and individual coaching sessions were conducted to ensure better understanding of CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment practices. Reflective journaling was also used to identify changes in teaching and assessment practices of the participating teachers.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

The data gathering unfolded in three distinct stages that were built upon one another. The first stage took place before the intervention began. At this point, participants completed the CEFR Knowledge and Classroom-based Assessment Scale. The teacher participants were then invited for the intervention, and their regular classroom sessions were observed to establish baseline data of teaching and assessment practices.

During the 12 week professional development program, data were gathered from several strands. Teachers recorded their reflections in journals, adding a personalized view to the findings. Session evaluations provided an additional perspective on how the training sessions were experienced as they happened. Once the program concluded, the third stage began. Participants completed a follow-up questionnaire with the same content but different wordings and order for each query, allowing for a comparison with earlier responses. Interviews conducted toward the end of the professional development program explored in greater depth the participants' perceptions and beliefs as well as their perceived changes in their own assessment practices. Additional classroom visits after each

session of the professional development program were carried out to document changes in the teacher participants' practice as well.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Qualitative data from interviews, reflective journals, and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach.

4. Findings

4.1 Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data gained from the questionnaire were analyzed using paired-samples t-test to examine the mean difference of the participating teachers before and after the implementation of the professional development program. To assess whether the assumption of normality was met for the paired samples t test, a Shapiro–Wilk test was conducted on the difference scores (pre- and post-intervention). Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1

Shapiro–Wilk Test for Normality of Difference Scores

Comparison	W	p
A – B	0.971	.421

Note. $p > .05$ indicates no significant departure from normality.

The results indicated no significant departure from normality, $W(29) = 0.971$, $p = .421$, suggesting that the distribution of the difference scores was approximately normal. This supported the use of the paired-samples *t*-test for evaluating the effects of the intervention.

Table 2 shows the results of mean differences before and after conducting the professional development program on CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment.

Table 2

Paired Samples t-Test to Determine Differences between pre- and post-Implementation of the Professional Development Program

Comparison	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Difference	SE Difference
A – B	7.50	28	< .001	5.83	0.777

A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare scores before and after the intervention. There was a statistically significant difference between the two conditions, $t(28) = -7.50$, $p < .001$, with scores in pre-intervention (M difference = -5.83 , SE = 0.78) being significantly lower than those in post-intervention.

Table 3

Paired Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer		Point estimate	95% Confidence Interval for d
Pair 1	Before-After	Cohen's d	4.18	1.40	.94, 1.84

The resulting effect size, $d = 1.40$, 95% CI [0.94, 1.84], indicated a very large magnitude of change according to Cohen's (1988) benchmarks. This means that, following participation in the CEFR-aligned professional development program, Iranian EFL teachers' CEFR awareness and CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment literacy scores increased, thus suggesting that the professional development program was quite effective.

4.2 Change of Assessment Practices

The qualitative strand of this mixed-methods study synthesizing data from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and teachers' reflective journals, using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Codes and themes from all three sources were compared and merged to identify recurrent patterns of change in teachers' awareness, instructional practices, feedback approaches, and perceived challenges related to the implementation of CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment. The themes are presented in order of their prevalence among participants, with verbatim excerpts from both interviews and reflective journals to further clarify each theme.

Table 4

Thematic Framework Derived from the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Prevalence Rank based on frequency of themes	Quote	Source
Expanded CEFR Awareness and Integration	Recognition of CEFR as Practical Framework	1	"Before this program, CEFR felt like an abstract chart, but now I can link every classroom activity to a descriptor."	Interview (T14)
	Explicit Level Referencing in Teaching	1	"I have started telling students, 'This task will help you move from B1 to B2 in writing,' and they immediately understand the aim."	Journal (T8)
Application of CEFR-Aligned Practices	Authentic Task Design	2	"Now I can design tasks that actually test if students can do things with	Interview (T3)

Theme	Subtheme	Prevalence Rank based on frequency of themes	Quote	Source
			English, not just remember grammar rules.”	
	Peer and Self-Assessment Routines	2	“Peer assessment has become a normal routine — they know exactly which descriptors to check for each other.”	Journal (T11)
Feedback Practices Anchored to CEFR	Systematic Formative Feedback	3	“I use the CEFR descriptors to show students exactly what they need to improve and how.”	Interview (T15)
	Student-Initiated Feedback Seeking	3	“One of my students came after class showing me his writing and asking, ‘What do I need for C1?’ — that never happened before.”	Journal (T19)
Teacher Agency, Autonomy, and Apprenticeship	Curriculum Adaptation Skills	4	“I found ways to include communicative assessment while still meeting curriculum demands.”	Interview (T9)
	Comfortable Implementation in Exam-Focused Contexts	4	Observations showed more teachers confidently introducing authentic tasks even in	Observation

Theme	Subtheme	Prevalence Rank based on frequency of themes	Quote	Source
			traditionally exam driven classes.	
	Teaching to inexperienced teachers	4	"I taught the ways I learned in the workshops to pre-service teachers"	Interview
Cognitive Apprenticeship	Encouraging modeling, coaching, scaffolding, reflection, and exploration	4	All teachers show a robust enactment of cognitive apprenticeship based on Collins et al.'s (1989) model on Cognitive Apprenticeship	Observation (T3)
Logistic, Structural and Contextual Barriers	Institutional Constraints	5	"I can design great real-world tasks, but with 38 students I can't give detailed feedback to each."	Interview (T27)
	Assessment System Misalignment	5	"Even though my lessons are CEFR aligned now, the final test is still multiple choice — it sends mixed messages to students."	Journal (T16)
Emergent Student-Led Assessment Culture	Self-Organized CEFR Activities	6	"Two of my students started their own speaking club at lunch break, using B2 descriptors they copied from class."	Interview (T6)

Theme	Subtheme	Prevalence Rank based on frequency of themes	Quote	Source
	Creation of Independent Skill Checklists	6	“They surprised me by making a checklist for each skill. I didn’t tell them to do it.”	Journal (T21)

Theme 1: Expanded CEFR Awareness and Integration

Before the implementation of the professional development program, the CEFR sat apart from everyday lessons. Afterward, teachers learned how to weave descriptors into tasks and tell students exactly how activities matched levels. Lesson plans showed those links. This mattered because a tool was only operational when teachers could point to a task and say which learning step it advanced, as one teacher noted, *“Now I can say, this role-play is B1 speaking because it matches the descriptor for exchanging personal opinions.”* Another reflected, *“My lesson plans actually name the CEFR level for each activity, so students see the purpose.”* The change made clear that the CEFR went from an abstract concept to something that teachers could actually apply. Such a shift from the CEFR as an abstract concept to a practical, applicable tool, as evidenced by teachers’ journals, interviews, and observations, provided the qualitative explanation for the change observed in the quantitative data.

Theme 2: Application of CEFR-Aligned Practices

Observations showed most of the tasks had clear communicative goals. In the majority of lessons, assessment was ongoing and fed back into learning. Journals described peer review as normal, with students using descriptors in their comments. One participant described, *“During group work, students tell each other, ‘You reached B1 in fluency today.’”* Another remarked, *“Even quiet students are giving feedback using the descriptors, not just ‘good job.’”* If such practices fell

into routine, it meant CEFR principles guided how lessons were shaped and how progress was judged.

Theme 3: Feedback Practices Anchored to CEFR

Feedback was used by teachers as adopted reference points. Students also sought advice tied to specific level goals. This pattern showed feedback was no longer given unsystematically but targeted to move learners toward clear, measurable targets. One teacher explained, *“I don’t just say, ‘Your grammar needs work’; I say, ‘You’re at A2 for accuracy, and here’s what B1 looks like.’”* Students internalized this approach, with one noting, *“When I ask for feedback, I want to know which CEFR level I’m at and what the next step is.”* Such alignment was a direct sign that the CEFR had taken root in how practice was shaped in classes based on the CEFR descriptors.

Theme 4: Teacher Agency, Autonomy, and Apprenticeship

Growth in CEFR knowledge and application translated into greater professional self-assurance, teacher agency, autonomy, and apprenticeship. Participants cited enhanced skill in adapting mandated curricula to accommodate communicative assessment approaches. One participant said, *“Now I know how to add communicative tasks into the exam prep units without getting in trouble,”* And another teacher shared the same sentiment, stating *“I feel confident to justify my choices to the headteacher because I can link them to CEFR.”* Observations revealed increased willingness to introduce authentic tasks even in contexts dominated by high-stakes testing traditions as teacher agency improvement indication. In the interviews, some of the teachers shared their experiences about acting as mentors for pre-service teachers which was known as apprenticeship in teacher education.

Theme 5: Cognitive Apprenticeship

Based on Collins et al.’s (1989) model of Cognitive Apprenticeship, observation data indicated that all teachers in their observed sessions

demonstrated a high level of expertise in applying its core strategies while conducting their formative assessment. Teachers consistently modeled each task before coaching on their part for guidance and corrective feedback. Scaffolding was the next step to have over, and it encouraged the gradual release of responsibility based on learners' needs and progress, while reflection events in the observed class had students think critically about their understanding and performance. In addition, teachers fostered exploration through learners' encouragement to apply what they learned through assessment tasks in novel problem-solving contexts, avoiding rote replication. Collectively, these practices reflected a robust enactment of cognitive apprenticeship principles in the observed classrooms through these teachers' use of formative assessment.

Theme 6: Logistic, Structural, and Contextual Barriers

Despite these positive outcomes, teachers had to deal with a number of challenges stemming from institutional, professional, and learner factors. Crowded classes, fixed curricula, and old-style exams often made it hard to use the CEFR. Teachers said there was a gap between new ways of teaching in the classroom and the same final exams, which could confuse students. One of them complained, *"Thirty-two students in one class—I can't give CEFR-based feedback to all in detail."* Another reflected, *"The final exam ignores communicative skills, so students sometimes focus only on grammar drills."* Thematic saturation on this point showed that the CEFR's pedagogical ideals were mediated by infrastructural reliability, which was an area outside these teachers' control.

Theme 7: Emergent Student-Led Assessment Culture

In a smaller but noteworthy set of cases, some learners formed speaking clubs and wrote their own skill checklists using CEFR. These were not teacher-led. When students led such learning grounds, they showed control over their learning pathway. In this study, one learner proudly recounted, *"We made our own checklist to track our B2 speaking progress,"* and another added, *"Every Friday, our group meets to practice and rate ourselves on fluency and accuracy."* This small but real

pattern suggested that CEFR could shift the role of the learner as much as that of an informant.

The themes depicted a trajectory in which increased CEFR literacy among teachers catalyzed pedagogical change, improved feedback systems, and boosted professional confidence. However, there may be some structural barriers that stopped the CEFR from reaching its full potential. Student-led projects began to appear as well, showing that the CEFR could also change how learners would get involved, not just how teachers practiced in classes.

5. Discussion

This mixed-methods study investigated the impact of a 12-week professional program on assessment literacy of Iranian EFL teachers regarding CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment. The findings showed increased awareness of the CEFR and CEFR-aligned formative assessment. Qualitative findings also called attention to changes in authentic task development, peer and corrective feedback, and adaptive curriculum integration. Nevertheless, barriers in practice and policy misalignment still persisted.

Our findings substantiated that it is possible to effectively use CEFR descriptors for lesson planning and the provision of corrective feedback even in exam driven, non-European contexts (Council of Europe, 2020). This can be promising despite earlier doubts over adaptability (Foley, 2019). As regards practical classroom assessment skills, the findings provided parallel evidence to the finding reported by Jalilzadeh et al. (2024) who found that a professional development program significantly elevated Iranian EFL teachers' language assessment knowledge in terms of theoretical, design, and evaluative components. However, the findings after the implementation of our 12-week program have suggested that iterative engagement with CEFR-aligned assessment practices yielded deeper integration of CEFR into teachers' practices.

The limited adoption of CEFR aligned peer and self assessment in this study extends Jalilzadeh et al.'s (2023) observation that such strategies were underrepresented in Iranian classrooms. Their survey data showed there was a preference for assessing speaking, which came first among all four skills. Our findings also indicated that targeted CEFR aligned professional development program can encourage formative, learner centered approaches, which, as pointed out by (Jalilzadeh et al., 2023, 2024), were often neglected in actual classroom practice.

In the case of the challenges affecting CEFR integration in Iranian schools, it can be noted that there was systemic misalignment between CEFR oriented formative assessment and the summative demands of national exams. This could echo barriers mentioned by Keyvanfar et al. (2019) and Mohamad Uri (2023). In the present study, early resistance to new assessment methods could be observed, and teacher education was found to be a contributing factor to changing this trend in educational settings. The findings of this study regarding improved teacher practices also corroborated Jalilzadeh et al.'s (2023) claim that professional development with strong practical components could maximize teacher uptake. Furthermore, professional development training could also enhance teacher agency. Teacher apprenticeship, as noted by several participating teachers in the present study, underscored the role of professional development in fostering incidental cascading—the informal spread of skills and knowledge—that can support the training of peer teachers and pre-service teachers alike.

The capacity to integrate CEFR aligned communicative tasks into exam oriented curricula has suggested a viable curriculum bridging strategy not captured in shorter, workshop only models. This outcome strengthened Fulcher's (2012) argument for iterative, context bound professional learning and signaled a development beyond the training gaps documented by Jalilzadeh et al. (2023, 2024), where theoretical awareness did not consistently translate into classroom practice. Based on the analyzed interviews, most teachers complained about insufficient and fragmented professional development related to CEFR and assessment literacy for each separate language skill such as writing or speaking.

They also cited unstable digital systems that compounded stress for teachers when using the CEFR in online assessment. Studies in South Asia pointed out some of these same problems when the CEFR was introduced there (Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2023b). However, in this study, some promising results were found. Students started learning on their own when they made their own checklists and started speaking clubs with each other. This was a new development rarely reported in other Iranian studies like those by Kamalvand and Mohammadi in 2024 or Jalilzadeh et al. in 2023 and 2024. When students took control of their learning process, it showed the CEFR's potential for a change in education. In other words, the CEFR could help create a culture of independent learning. This is likely to happen even in education systems of countries that are usually teacher-focused and all about high-stakes tests such as Iran. The organic uptake underscores CEFR's potential to facilitate autonomous learning cultures even within teacher centered, high stakes contexts. Furthermore, the interview and observation data also indicated a robust enactment of cognitive apprenticeship on the part of the teachers. This clearly showed how combining assessment and teaching, which is of significance in recent learning and teaching approaches (Ghajarieh et al. 2022), could work in tandem with CEFR concepts to enhance the engagement of students and improve their cognitive skills.

Based on the findings of this study, the following diagram can be proposed to highlight teacher education and professional development as the core component to encourage policy implication and teaching and assessment practice changes.

Figure 2*CEFR-Aligned CBA Professional Development as a Capacity Builder*

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study have suggested that the CEFR could help create classrooms where students guided their own learning and learned through testing for the teaching approach. However, this may not be easily applicable on a large scale in Iran. The Iranian higher education system is built around a major university entrance exam, the Konkour. This makes school managers and parents pressure teachers to just teach for good final grades. Obviously, the CEFR cannot really take root in this kind of environment. Many countries in Europe and Asia encourage

tests that help with teaching and give regular feedback. Iran and many Asian countries still see this approach in language education curriculum as new. Teachers' receiving support from their school administrators and flexible rules is of importance in this regard.

From a practical perspective, the present study has offered several guidelines to help teachers use CEFR descriptors more effectively. Teachers should implement the concept of CEFR slowly and gradually to avoid overwhelming themselves and their students. They should create communicative tasks at specific CEFR levels and work on exam preparation activities. Students, in turn, should be equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to interpret and use CEFR so that they can take control of their own learning. Incorporating group work and peer feedback can further strengthen the collaborative learning environment that the CEFR promotes.

This study is not without limitations. It only looked at a small number of public schools in Tehran. Given the case, it is not possible to determine whether the findings could be generalized to other private and local schools located in different parts of Iran. Moreover, the study was conducted for only 12 weeks, which limited our ability to determine whether the observed changes would be sustained over longer-term periods. Future research should address these gaps by studying the implementation of the CEFR-aligned professional development over extended periods to ascertain whether improvements are maintained. More comparative studies are also needed to investigate how schools across different cities and provinces in Iran and other Asian countries have adopted and adapted the CEFR. The study was not able to obtain input from school authorities and policy makers which could have provided useful insights into institutional policies and regulations that supported or constrained CEFR-aligned assessment practices. Examining these factors will be necessary for promoting effective, system-wide CEFR implementation. In addition, the model emerging from the data positioned professional development as a key mechanism for enhancing teachers'

assessment literacy and classroom practice. This highlights the importance of continuous in-service teacher training. For future research on CEFR-aligned assessment, this model can serve as a useful conceptual guide.

In sum, the present study offers some implications for teacher training and CEFR implementation in language teaching and assessment. Continuous professional development is key to training and implementing new pedagogical and assessment approaches in language education. Professional development is a tried and tested way to adopt and localize international frameworks such as the CEFR in school systems that are mostly based on traditional instruction and summative assessment. This study also calls for a collaborative reflective approach to teacher training where both teachers and their peers share insights, knowledge, and skills gained through participation in teacher training courses. Teacher training programs must go beyond mere theoretical introductions to the CEFR. Both pre-service education and in-service training should incorporate robust, hands-on components to ensure that the CEFR is not used merely as a benchmarking tool, but as a catalyst for genuine pedagogical and assessment changes.

At the macro level, the findings of this study have highlighted that successful CEFR implementation cannot be achieved through a simple policy mandate alone. Education authorities, curriculum planners, and school administrators must be cognizant of the need to develop locally relevant support materials, set up professional learning communities, and strengthen continuous professional development structures. Such systemic support is more likely to foster sustained engagement and meaningful pedagogical change. It is hoped that the CEFR will become a core element of all language teacher training programs, empowering educators to transform their classrooms into vibrant research-informed learning spaces.

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Appendix I

Sample Queries for Questionnaire

Instruction for Participants:

Please rate your agreement with each of the following statements using the scale provided. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. I align my lesson objectives and assessments with the CEFR “Can-Do” descriptors for the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).
2. I design assessment tasks that simulate real-world communication (e.g., role-plays, projects, presentations).
3. I combine formative (ongoing) and summative (end-of-term) assessments in my teaching practice.
4. I encourage students to engage in peer- and self-assessment activities to promote learner autonomy.
5. I use CEFR “Can-Do” descriptors (A1–C2) as benchmarks when evaluating students’ performance.
6. I regularly provide students with feedback that shows their progress in relation to CEFR levels.

These 6 sample items cover CEFR descriptors, CEFR-aligned assessment principles, and classroom implementation strategies.

Appendix II

Thank you for participating. This interview will take about 15–20 minutes. We are interested in your experiences and perceptions of CEFR-aligned classroom-based assessment (CBA). There are no right or wrong answers; we want your honest views.

Interview Questions:

1. How do you interpret and use CEFR “Can-Do” descriptors in your lesson planning and assessment of students’ language skills?
2. What kinds of peer- or self-assessment activities do you use in your classes? What benefits or challenges have you observed?
3. What difficulties do you face when designing or using authentic, real-world assessment tasks for your students?
4. How do you communicate assessment results to your students and their parents? What professional development would help you improve in this area?
5. How do you introduce the CEFR levels (A1–C2) to your students? What strategies help students understand what each level means?
6. What challenges do you face when assessing students’ skills across the CEFR scale (from beginner to advanced)?

Follow-Up Prompts

- Could you give an example?
- Why do you think that challenge occurs?
- How do students respond to this practice?

Appendix III

Classroom Observation Checklist

Observation Focus: CEFR-Aligned Classroom-Based Assessment Practices

Instructions for Observer: Please mark the presence and/or quality of each item using the following scale: (0 = Not Observed, 1 = Partially Observed, 2 = Fully Observed)

Indicators	0	1	2	Notes/Examples
1. Teacher uses modeling, coaching, scaffolding and peer-assessment activities through formative assessment				
2. Teacher incorporates self-assessment activities (e.g., reflection checklists, self-rating).				
3. Teacher designs assessment tasks that are authentic and related to real-world contexts.				
4. Teacher assesses all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) through classroom tasks.				
5. Teacher provides formative feedback that helps students improve (testing-for-teaching).				
6. Teacher communicates assessment results clearly to students (and, where applicable, to parents).				
7. Teacher avoids unethical assessment practices (e.g., bias, irrelevant tasks, punitive grading).				
8. Teacher explicitly mentions CEFR levels (A1–C2) during instruction or feedback.				
9. Teacher uses tasks that reflect the CEFR “Can-Do” descriptors for the relevant level.				
10. Teacher provides feedback that situates student performance within a CEFR level.				