Help, I’m Lost!

Mapping EAP Descriptors to the CEFR

Lucy Davies & Jon Lishman, ELTS, Swansea University

Introduction: We are currently using the CEFR “can do” statements to create an autonomous feedback tool as part of our recently introduced assessment as learning system. Previously, we relied upon one summative end-of-term test. It was felt, however, we could prepare students more effectively for university with a portfolio system, accounting for 70% of their final grade, including tasks reflecting authentic academic situations. Matrices were introduced, which were intended to provide feedback and assessment and clearly outline learning outcomes for all stakeholders.

The Matrix
Each matrix is divided into four areas of assessment, for example, in writing, ‘use of source material’, ‘critical thinking and organisation’, ‘linguistic competence’ and ‘planning, evaluation, reflection’. There is a strong focus on use of the matrix for feedback. Tutors highlight the relevant descriptor on the matrix along with written feedback & corrections. Students then analyse their strengths and weaknesses, using this feedback, to inform future tasks.

The CEFR
The CEFR provides us with a measure to standardise our assessment in line with other higher education institutions. Likewise, it helps us ensure our students meet the necessary criteria linguistically for Tier 4 visas. Practically, it has been a challenging task to match our ‘linguistic competency’ learning outcomes. It has been necessary to do this through the wording of the descriptors, at each grade, for each level and at each skill. Any edits and / or tasks created must be reviewed to ensure learning outcomes and CEFR criteria are still being met.

The Project
A wiki is being created for students where they can access matrices and click on descriptors for ‘can do’ statements and advice. This also gives us an opportunity to retrofit the evolved assessment as learning system to the CEFR; with aspects of the CEFR being inappropriate for our purposes, in conjunction with the BALEAP guidelines, we are working on bringing these threads together meaningfully for all stakeholders.

Issues
The matrices are a set of dual role documents that provide feedback and assessment in an EAP context whilst simultaneously linking to the CEFR as a form of validity. They must be accessible and comprehensible to all stakeholders.

The Project
A wiki is being created for students where they can access matrices and click on descriptors for ‘can do’ statements and advice. This also gives us an opportunity to retrofit the evolved assessment as learning system to the CEFR; with aspects of the CEFR being inappropriate for our purposes, in conjunction with the BALEAP guidelines, we are working on bringing these threads together meaningfully for all stakeholders.

Strengths
- Provide formative assessment opportunities
- Create assessment for/as [independent] learning environment
- Allow constructive alignment of syllabuses in curriculum mapping passes
- Research
- Marketing
- Idea
- Software
- Exploit staff skills
- Technical
- Creative feedback formats

Challenges
- Standardisation across all matrices
- Linking descriptors to learning outcomes and the CEFR
- Balancing CEFR guidelines with EAP competencies
- Stakeholder buy-in
- Motivation
- Technical skills
- Management support
- Technical maintenance
- Constant practical and academic review

Opportunities
- Linking learning outcomes to CEFR
- Standardisation across all matrices
- Improvement of feedback

Needs
- Continual review of feedback and assessment
- Technical support
- Marketing
- Exploit staff skills

Conclusions
Our research so far suggests that employing assessment documentation for both summative and formative purposes galvanises students’ independent learning, linguistic and academic growth. By linking learning outcomes outwards to CEFR/BALEAP guides and inwards to graded bullet points, supported by syllabus documentation and all hyperlinked in a specialised interactive database, a strong bond between external guides and day to day assessment is forged. Consistency of feedback, assessment and metacognitive learning is facilitated and nourished.