# Analysis of international experience in the field of teaching and assessment of language proficiency

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**A B S T R A C T**

The article analyzes the existing international standards in the field of language teaching and proficiency assessment. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which is promoted by the Council of Europe and used in language teaching and assessment in Europe and other countries, language proficiency levels, assessment, goals, CEFR Global Scale, global English language assessment programs similar to CEFR descriptors are studied. Information is provided on the works carried out on the application of CEFR international standard in Azerbaijan. The application of information and communication technologies, including automated speech recognition systems, in language learning, teaching and assessment are analyzed. The advantages of effective use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the process of improving the knowledge and skills of language learners, checking and evaluating the development of language skills are indicated. In order to contribute to the implementation of the tasks ahead for the protection and development of our mother tongue with the application of ICT, suggestions are given for adapting the teaching and evaluation of the Azerbaijani language to the CEFR standard, taking into account different approaches to language teaching in the world experience.

## 1. Introduction

The role of language in people's life is great: it acts as a means of social interaction, preservation and development of national culture, as well as a means of national identification of a person. It is no coincidence that, along with the coat of arms, anthem and other attributes of statehood, the state language is considered one of the most important symbols of statehood.

In the modern age, each of the world's states implements its own language policy. The function of the state language policy is to develop, spread and support the state language. Language development is also supported by education policy and the media.

Protection and development of the Azerbaijani language in our country has always been one of the priorities of state policy. A number of decisions, decrees and laws were adopted in this regard: The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On the restoration of the Azerbaijani alphabet with Latin script" [1], "The State Program on the use of the Azerbaijani language in accordance with the requirements of the time and the development of linguistics in the country" were adopted in order to ensure the increase of state care for the use and study of the Azerbaijani language, the use of the Azerbaijani language in accordance with the requirements of the time in the context of globalization, the fundamental improvement of linguistic research in the country, the unification of creative efforts aimed at the development of fundamental and applied research in the leading

directions of linguistics, and the connection of linguistics with the current problems of modern society [2].

The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, signed the Decree "On a number of measures related to the provision of wider use of the Azerbaijani language in the electronic space" dated July 17, 2018, in order to facilitate the wider use of the Azerbaijani language in the electronic space, its accessibility for people interested in this language, and to facilitate learning. Instructions on the implementation of the project "Electronic platform of the Azerbaijani language for foreigners" are mentioned in the order: "Today, a favorable ground has been created for the use and fundamental study of the Azerbaijani language, for improving the situation in the field of linguistic science in the country. At the same time, the current era of globalization, in which science and technology are developing rapidly, requires raising the work implemented for the enrichment of the Azerbaijani language and the expansion of its application possibilities to a new level [3]".

"Hundreds of foreigners study in the Republic of Azerbaijan every year. In order to better introduce our country to foreign students, to facilitate their integration into the Azerbaijani society, and to further strengthen their spiritual ties with our country, it is one of the important issues to create an opportunity for foreigners, including citizens of foreign countries studying in our country, to learn the Azerbaijani language" [4].

The existence of such a high level of state support in the field of expanding the application possibilities of the Azerbaijani language and ensuring its use in the electronic space creates favorable conditions for promoting our mother tongue in a decent form and promoting the language policy with the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). This article explores the issues related to language teaching and assessment, and presents suggestions for the use of automated speech recognition in the teaching of language proficiency, the teaching of the Azerbaijani language for foreigners with the application of ICT, and the evaluation of Azerbaijani language skills based on foreign experience.

## 2. Analysis of international standards in the field of teaching and assessment of language proficiency

A number of foreign countries have standards for teaching and assessing language proficiency. For example, in the USA, "National Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st century" was adopted as early as 1986. In Europe, the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" (CEFR) was adopted in 2001, and in Japan, the Japanese Language Standard (JFS) was adopted by the Japan International Foundation in 2010 to promote and support the spread of Japanese as a foreign language.

The standard accepted in the United States was established as a collaborative effort of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), American Association of Teachers of Arabic, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, American Council of Teachers of Russian, Chinese Language Associations, and National Council of Japanese Language Teachers/Association of Teachers of Japanese. The main goal of the United States in establishing this standard was to build a future where students will develop and maintain English language skills and at least one of the other foreign languages in order to successfully communicate in the pluralistic American society and abroad [5].

The Japanese language standard is based on 2 main interrelated parameters: language activity and language skills. Language activity, in turn, is divided into three large blocks: perception (reading and listening comprehension), reproduction (writing and speech or monologue) and interaction (dialogue and correspondence). Language skill, which is represented as the root supporting language activity in the "tree", consists of three parts: fundamental language competences (vocabulary, grammar, phonetics (pronunciation) and spelling), sociolinguistic skills (use of language according to the situation and relationships with the interlocutor) and pragmatic skills (possibility of discourse – conducting a conversation and functionality – understanding the role and purposes of using appropriate language structures). Furthermore, language activities and language skills are covered by a

large number of "branches" or categories, such as: grammatical accuracy, preparing speeches and presentations, understanding the conversation of native speakers, etc. The main thing is that in any situation involving language use, language skills and language activity are closely interrelated and often interdependent [6].

The JFS standard uses a six-level assessment system for foreign language skills: A1 and A2 – beginners, B1 and B2 – independent and C1 and C2 – advanced or proficient. "Can do" ("Goals") tables are used as an assessment system. These tables show what knowledge and skills a student should have at the end of each lesson, course or unit. Depending on the level of language knowledge, what kind of presentation or report the student is able to deliver is also distinguished. Thanks to this approach, not only the teacher, but also the student can evaluate his/her language skills.

In addition, the JFS standard suggests using portfolios (folders or files where students can store everything related to the language learning process) for more detailed assessment.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was part of the "Language Learning for European Citizenship" project implemented by the Council of Europe in 1989-1996. The main goal in creating this system was to provide them with a teaching and assessment method applicable to all European languages.

In November 2001, the Council of Europe adopted a resolution recommending the use of the CEFR for the establishment of national language proficiency assessment systems. The adoption of the CEFR became the basis for the systematization of approaches to teaching foreign languages and the standardization of the assessment of language proficiency levels.

The CEFR is a reference system with three main objectives as follows:

– To provide specialists (linguists) with a base for the development of language programs, curricula, testing, textbooks, etc. in Europe;
– To help specialists in overcoming the difficulties arising when interacting with different educational systems in Europe;
– To help determine the level of language proficiency of each learner by assessing learners' and lifelong learners' progress in language learning at each level of education.

The CEFR has become a guideline used to describe the language proficiency levels of foreign language learners in Europe and other countries. This international standard facilitates the assessment of language skills of candidates for admission to educational institutions or employment, covering learning, teaching and assessment methods applicable to all languages in Europe. In the CEFR, individual learning, teaching and assessment levels are defined by six knowledge levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2. The CEFR divides language activities into information reception (listening and reading), production (speaking and writing), interaction (speaking and writing) and mediation (interpretation) [7].

Levels of language proficiency in the CEFR can again be grouped into three broad levels; i.e., language learners are classified into 3 different groups according to their language knowledge and skills: basic user (A1, A2), independent user (B1, B2) and proficient user (C1, C2) [8, 9].

At each CEFR level, there is a 'Global Scale', developed by the Council of Europe [10], which is considered useful for assessing language proficiency and skills, and is presented in Table 1.
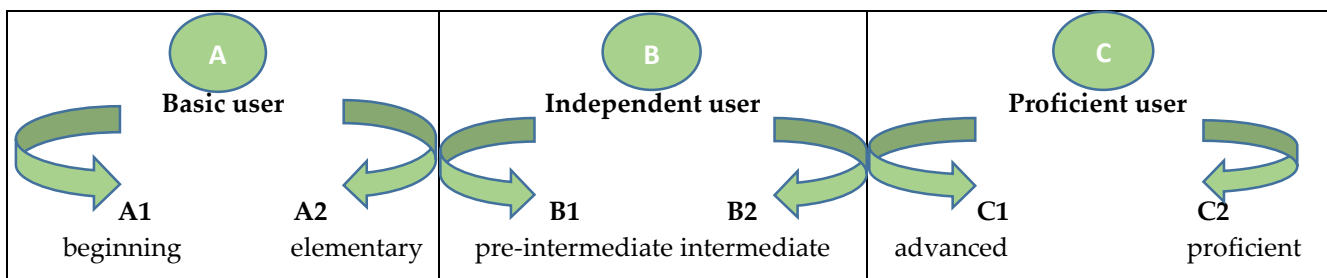


**Fig. 1.** The scheme of language levels of CEFR

**Table 1.** General description of CEFR language levels

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Proficient user | C2 proficient level | Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations. |
| | C1 advanced level | Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices. |
| Independent user | B2 intermediate level | Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. |
| | B1 pre-intermediate level | Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. |
| Basic user | A2 elementary level | Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. |
| | A1 beginning level | Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. |

## 3. Global English language assessment programs similar to CEFR descriptors

CEFR levels are currently used in all modern language books and schools, and in CVs when applying for jobs. There are global English language assessment programs that are similar to the CEFR descriptors in assessing language knowledge and skills.

Those who consider to apply to a university abroad or who want to increase their chances of being accepted into an international education program are required to take English language tests recognized by all international universities such as Cambridge Advanced Exam (CAE), The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), etc. [11].

For example, in the CAE program, a score of 160 to 210 corresponds to a C to A qualification: A is the maximum and equals 200 to 210 points. All universities accept the A grade. Most foreign universities require a CAE certificate with a minimum grade of C or B (CEFR level C1). If a CAE score of 160 to 179 is obtained, it is considered appropriate for CEFR level B2 (upper intermediate level) and a B2 certificate is presented [12]. The alignment of CAE scores to CEFR levels is given in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The alignment of CAE scores to CEFR levels

| CAE | | CEFR |
|---|---|---|
| Score | Grade | Level |
| 200-210 | Grade A | C2 |
| 193-199 | Grade B | C1 |
| 180-192 | Grade C | C1 |
| 160-179 | Level B | B2 |

IELTS certificate is required not only for studying abroad, but also for living abroad. IELTS results are required for studying and applying for jobs in many countries, including the US, Canada, the UK, New Zealand and Ireland. IELTS is a task-based test covering four language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing). Candidates receive separate

scores for the four components of the test. The average value of these points constitutes the total exam value. Each skill is rated between 1-9 points. A minimum score of 6.5 is usually required. There are two types of IELTS exams: academic and general. Candidates choose the appropriate type of examination based on the country they want to go to or the purpose they indicated in their visa application. Academic IELTS is suitable for people who want to study in English-speaking countries. General IELTS is applied to migrants who want to prove their English language skills as part of a visa or employment application [13, 14]. Table 3 shows the alignment of IELTS scores to CEFR levels [15].

**Table 3.** The alignment of IELTS scores to CEFR levels

| CEFR | | IELTS |
|---|---|---|
| **Proficient user** | C2 | 9 |
| | | 8.5 |
| | C1 | 8 |
| | | 7.5 |
| | | 7 |
| **Independent user** | B2 | 6.5 |
| | | 6 |
| | | 5.5 |
| | B1 | 5 |
| | | 4.5 |
| | | 4 |
| **Basic user** | A2 | |
| | A1 | |

TOEFL is one of the international exams that assess the level of English, and it is possible to take this exam in more than 100 countries of the world. TOEFL is one of the international exams to assess the level of English, and it is possible to take this exam in more than 100 countries of the world. TOEFL assesses language proficiency on a scale from 0 to 120. Reading, listening, speaking and writing skills are each scored from 0 to 30. One of the unique features of TOEFL is that it can be given over the Internet. Such an exam form is called Internet-based TOEFL (IBT). Giving it in written form is called Paper based TOEFL (PBT) [16]. Table 4 presents the alignment of TOEFL scores to CEFR levels.

**Table 4.** Alignment of TOEFL scores to CEFR levels

| CEFR levels | TOEFL scores |
|---|---|
| C1 and C2 | 95-120 |
| B2 | 72-94 |
| B1 | 42-71 |

In the Republic of Azerbaijan, international exams (IELTS, TOEFL) recognized in the world are organized for the assessment of foreign language proficiency. At the same time, certificates showing the level of foreign language are also required in many areas.

In some cases, difficulties arise in aligning CEFR with teaching programmers. Language schools and certificate bodies evaluate their own equivalences against the framework. Differences of estimation have been found to exist, for example, with the same level on the PTE A, TOEFL, and IELTS, and are a cause of debate between test producers.

In the developed and developing countries of the world, exam test systems are already applied for foreigners in their native languages: IELTS, TOEFL for English, "Türkçe Yeterlik Sınavı" (TYS) for Turkish, "Тест по русскому языку как иностранному" (ТРКИ ) for Russian, "Test de connaissance du français" (TCF) for French, "Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera" (DELE) for Spanish, "Test Deutsch als Fremdsprache" (TestDAF) for German, "Japanese Language Proficiency Test" (JLPT) for Japanese, etc. [17].

***Certification and teaching ecosystem enabled by the CEFR.*** Multiple organizations have been created to serve as an umbrella for language schools and certification businesses that claim compatibility with the CEFR. For example, the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA) is initiated by the European Community to promote the CEFR and best practices in delivering professional language training. The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) is a consortium of academic organizations that aims at standardizing assessment methods. Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality in Language Services (EAQUALS) is an international association of institutions and organizations involved in language education, active throughout Europe and following the CEFR [18].

## 4. Application of the CEFR international standard in Azerbaijan

The process of adapting the teaching and assessment of language skills to the CEFR standard has just begun in Azerbaijan. The State Examination Center of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SEC) is actively involved in these issues.

The 309-page official CEFR document was translated into Azerbaijani in 2021. The translation

of the CEFR document into the Azerbaijani language will make it possible to improve the teaching and assessment of both the Azerbaijani language and foreign languages taught in the country, to draw up the existing language assessment standards and adapt the teaching process to these standards. Moreover, it can be used in the development of language teaching curricula and tools for measuring language knowledge and skills.

Measures are taken to adapt the Azerbaijani language (as the state language) and foreign language blocks to the relevant levels of the CEFR in the exams conducted by SEC [19]. Thus, currently, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, in cooperation with SEC, is continuing work on the project "Support for the improvement of foreign language subject curriculum, textbooks and evaluation materials (English)" in order to implement the teaching of foreign languages in secondary schools of the country based on international standards. In addition, changes were made in the structure of the tasks in the Azerbaijani language exam of students studying in the Russian sector at the general (9-year) and full (11-year) secondary education level, based on skills such as speech and language, thinking, learning and speaking, comprehension, and application: 10 closed-type tasks on language rules, 2 texts on reading comprehension (artistic, journalistic form) and 8 tasks for each text (7 closed-type and 1 open-type task that requires a written answer) and a listening text consisting of 4 tasks (closed-type 3 and 1 open-type task that requires a written answer) were attached.

A project named "Hello Azerbaijan" is being implemented at the Institute of Linguistics named after Nasimi of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences regarding the implementation of the duties arising from "On a number of measures related to ensuring the wider use of the Azerbaijani language in the electronic space" Decree of the President of the country dated July 17, 2018. The main goal of this project, which is implemented under the motto "Let's introduce the Azerbaijani language to the world", and which scientific-theoretical base is "Theory of Linguistic-Psychological Unity", is to prepare a set of textbooks for A, B, C levels based on international standards for foreigners who want to learn the Azerbaijani language. It is considered that the textbooks prepared on the basis of the "Hello Azerbaijan!" project are the most suitable and

closest to becoming an electronic interactive tool [20]. This set of tools allows foreigners to learn the Azerbaijani language on the basis of Russian and English languages. These textbooks are believed to be useful for foreign citizens studying in our country, foreign investors, those who want to engage in the Azerbaijani studies, as well as those interested in getting to know Azerbaijan. The published works will be sent to diplomatic representatives of the Republic of Azerbaijan abroad and diaspora organizations, as well as distributed in the electronic space.

## 5. Application of ICT in teaching language proficiency

The role of ICT is indispensable in identifying convenient and effective methods for improving the knowledge and skills of language learners, checking and evaluating the development of language proficiency. The use of ICT in learning a foreign language contributes to the intensification and individualization of teaching, increases interest in the subject, allows for quick results, and allows for an objective assessment of an individual's language proficiency. In addition, ICT helps to overcome the psychological barrier that may arise when individuals use a foreign language as a means of communication. New technologies allow the individual to deepen his/her skills at each level of the language in the educational process. All this leads to great positive results; it enables each individual to develop foreign language proficiency and influences their learning motivation [21, 22].

Today, there are many Internet resources that help teachers prepare for lessons and students learn a foreign language. For example, online language courses are common. These courses have several advantages. An important advantage is that it allows to change the content according to the needs of the audience. Another advantage is the possibility of control. Thus, teachers can get a report on the time the student spends on a certain task and the results of the tests. At the same time, modern online courses have animation elements, video clips, and interactive tasks, which help learners to better master language skills.

Speech recognition systems based on artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and methods are also widely used in language teaching and assessment. The speech recognition system developed since the 1960s is the automatic

conversion and analysis of human speech into text by computer programs, and high results have recently been achieved in this field.

Automated Speech Recognition (ASR) converts speech audio streams into written text. ASR is still not perfect, but it is rapidly improving in its accuracy in speech recognition and transcription; transcribes speech and converts spoken language into written language. Automated speech recognition can be used for various language teaching and learning activities such as spelling, voice search (e.g., via Google), pronunciation practice, vocabulary and grammar exercises, translation practice [23].

ASR can also be used to support many aspects of teaching, learning and assessment in language education. For example, using Computer Assisted Pronunciation Training (CAPT) software to listen to an individual's pronunciation and give them feedback can facilitate new ways of working on phonology and stress, and help fine-tune pronunciation. When practicing independent speaking, it is difficult for an individual to hear what they are pronouncing incorrectly, so having a program that can pinpoint problems is a useful way to determine what the individual needs to work on. In addition, the use of speech recognition allows the learner to work independently, is freed from the psychological barrier of not communicating with a real person, and helps not to be embarrassed and depressed even if he/she makes a mistake. Practicing with this kind of application gives the language learner confidence in oral speech when his/her correct pronunciation is recognized by the ASR system and eliminates the stress that may arise when communicating with real native speakers. Finally, speech recognition programs provide a personalized flexible learning option. Thus, he/she can practice speaking whenever he/she wants without time scheduling with a conversation partner. IBM Reading Companion, FluentU, Mondly, Babbel, AudioNote, Rocket Languages, Duolingo are examples of ASR-enabled programs that listen to the language learner's pronunciation of a known text and correct the pronunciation they hear by comparing it with model pronunciations stored in memory, providing useful feedback [24].

## 6. Conclusion

In order to develop our mother tongue and make it more widespread, to be adopted by our citizens living beyond the country, as well as by foreigners, and to widely use the opportunities of ICT in teaching and assessing language proficiency, it is extremely important to study foreign experience in this field. The research suggested that the system of teaching the Azerbaijani language and evaluating language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) by levels should be rebuilt on the basis of international standards. So that:

1. It is necessary to ensure that foreigners learn the Azerbaijani language effectively by creating an "Azerbaijani language electronic system" which includes electronic textbooks on the Azerbaijani language, as well as audio and video materials, interactive exercises and dictionaries, compiled based on international standards.

2. By applying an automated speech recognition system to the Azerbaijani language, it can support many aspects of language teaching, learning and assessment.

3. It is important to develop the "Azerbaijani language test exam" system with the application of ICT for foreigners who live in any part of the world and are interested in the Azerbaijani language by adapting the teaching and evaluation of the Azerbaijani language to the CEFR international standard.

4. Taking advantage of world experience, it would be appropriate to conduct the exam in two fields: "Academic Azerbaijani language test exam" and "General Azerbaijani language test exam". Thus, the "Academic Azerbaijani language test" can be intended for foreigners who come to study in Azerbaijan, and the "General Azerbaijani language test" can be intended for foreigners who come to work in Azerbaijan. For both types of the test exam, it is necessary to design a teaching program based on four speech skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing) from simple to complex, according to language proficiency levels, and prepare corresponding textbooks.

5. Using CEFR assessment criteria, an exam can be organized for each level and the language proficiency acquired by an individual can be evaluated.

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