

CEFR AND LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

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The **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages**, more commonly known as the **CEFR***, was developed by the Council of Europe to describe language learners’ ability in European languages, including English. Nowadays, lots of people have heard of the CEFR but not many people actually know what it is, or how it’s been used.

The CEFR is a framework that we use to describe in broad terms a learner’s language ability. In the past we used words such as **Beginner**, **Intermediate** and **Advanced** to describe language learners’ different levels of ability. One of the problems with that is that different people interpret these terms in different ways, so one person’s *intermediate* might be seen by another person as being quite *advanced*, depending on their experience with particular learners.

Within the CEFR the levels are described in three tiers, **Basic**, **Independent** and **Proficient**. Each of these tiers has two levels, making a scale of six levels in all. The CEFR describes what a person can do in a language as they progress from the lowest level to the highest. It consists of a whole series of descriptions that are associated with each of the four skills, **Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing**. These descriptions are called **Can Do Statements** and they focus on the different things someone ‘can do’ with a language. For example, the speaking descriptions present statements about a learner’s overall speaking ability, and refer to making public announcements, speeches or spoken statements, or interacting in conversation with other speakers.

Let’s take a closer look at the levels.

If you’re a complete beginner you can’t be placed on the CEFR scale. Some people call such learners **A0** or **Pre-A1** or even **Tourist** but since these learners are likely to be quite different, with different interests and different ideas of what’s important, this stage can’t be described in any systematic or meaningful way.

At level **A1**, a person can understand and use **basic** phrases relating to everyday life. They can do simple things like introducing themselves to people and can ask and answer questions about things such as where they live or people they know. The next level is **A2**. By now a learner can talk about familiar and routine matters such as aspects of their background, immediate environment and things that are immediately important to them, describing them in simple terms.

By **B1**, a learner is becoming more **independent** and can understand the main points of things to do with work, school or leisure, if they’re stated fairly clearly. They can deal with most general situations and can describe experiences, events, dreams, hopes and ambitions. At level **B2**, learners should be able to understand the main

ideas of difficult texts on all sorts of topics, including technical discussions in their specialist field. And they can talk fluently with native speakers without any pressure on either side.

At the highest levels a learner can be considered a **proficient** user of the language. At **C1** they can use the language effectively for all social, academic and professional purposes, while at **C2** they can easily understand virtually everything they hear or read and can speak and write as well as anybody.

Since the CEFR was published in 2001, it's become incredibly influential. It's been used for lots of different things, such as:

- **evaluating learner's language needs and developing learning materials, syllabuses and courses,**
- **developing continuous and self-assessment tools and tests and exams**
- **developing teacher training programmes**
- **and describing government language policies**

All major international tests claim a link between the scores they report and the CEFR, and so do all major textbooks, language syllabuses and language programmes. Its influence has spread outside of Europe to countries right across the world so that now it is recognised internationally.

The main value of the CEFR has been that it gives us a common language to describe proficiency levels. Even if my interpretation of what a B1 speaker can do with the language is a little different to yours, the differences are generally quite small.

If you want to learn more about the CEFR you should try the Council of Europe's website, or just use your favourite search engine and search for **CEFR!**

* CEFR = *See-Eee-Eff-Are* (letters are always pronounced separately)