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CEFR, which stands for the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, is something every language learner should be familiar with, and in this post, I will explain what it is, how it categorizes language proficiency into its A, B, and C levels, and how you can prove your proficiency when needed.What is CEFR? The official definition of CEFR is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Although that may sound cool, unfortunately, it doesn't provide much insight, at least to me.To put it differently, CEFR is what helps you to determine how good your language skills are no matter what language you're learning. Depending on what you can (or cannot) do in your target language, CEFR assesses your proficiency according to its levels, from A1 to C2. And since CEFR is a common assessment framework, every time you refer to your CEFR language level people can quickly evaluate your language abilities.In simpler terms, CEFR helps determine the level of your language skills regardless of the language you're learning. It assesses your proficiency based on its levels, ranging from A1 to C2, depending on what you can or cannot do in your target language. Since CEFR is a widely recognized assessment framework, referring to your CEFR language level allows others to quickly evaluate your language abilities. It's definitely more informative than simply saying, "Oh, I speak some French."It's important to note that CEFR is not a language test itself; it serves as a framework that language tests refer to when defining results and assessing the proficiency of individual learners. It works with a wide range of languages and language tests.Which languages can be assessed by CEFR?The Common European Framework is called "common European" for a reason. When initially designed to work with numerous European languages, it has expanded beyond European borders and now includes languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and even Esperanto.Overall, CEFR supports tests in 40 languages. Here is a list of some of them:Arabic, Albanian, Armenian, Basque, Bulgarian, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Esperanto, Estonian, Finnish, French, Frutlian, Galician, Georgian, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Moldovan, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian (Iekavian version), Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish and Ukrainian.If your target language is on this list (and there's a 99.9% chance that it is), you will likely come across CEFR at some point, either now or in the near future. And that's not a bad thing at all.How does CEFR assess your language proficiency?For the longest time, I believed there were only four language skills:Listening (a passive skill)Reading (another passive skill)Speaking (an active skill)Writing (one more active skill)But, oh boy, was I mistaken!The creators of the Common European Framework managed to complicate things by introducing six language skills. Are you ready?Instead of using the usual active/passive skill system, CEFR operates on three distinct levels:Reception (oral/written)Reception refers to your ability to understand the input. It could be someone shouting in your ear with a Quebecois accent (I hope you never have to experience that), or it could be silently reading Le Monde during your morning coffee with croissants in Paris. This corresponds to the listening and reading parts of the majority of language tests.Interaction (oral/written)[This includes not only knowledge of the language at hand (know-what-to-say) but also knowledge of pragmatics (know-how-to-say). It's about being polite, appropriate, and abiding by the code of conduct, whatever it happens to be. On tests, you demonstrate this ability when writing a letter to an imaginary authority and then politely conversing with an interviewer.Production (oral/written)The interaction was all about using an appropriate type of language; Production, on the other hand, is more about expressing yourself in a clear and comprehensible manner. This is where you probably want to show off your grammar. Pronunciation, and spelling skills, my friend. Here, you're likely to write an essay and defend your opinion in a discussion with an interviewer.Your performance in each task counts. The better you do, the higher CEFR level you achieve. And there's a lot to say about these levels themselves.What are the six CEFR language levels?Language proficiency levels can be broadly categorized as basic, intermediate, and proficient. However, language abilities vary so vastly that these primary labels are not descriptive enough to be precise. For this reason, CEFR introduced its ABC system.In this system, A1 and A2 correspond to very basic language skills. Then, B1 and B2 represent more sophisticated knowledge of a target language. Finally, C1 and C2 serve as indicators of high proficiency and fluency in that language.Since language proficiency is something vague, subjective, and highly dependent on your self-esteem, CEFR offers short descriptors for each level.A1 level: The NewbieA1 is at the bottom of the CEFR language levels hierarchy.At this level, you're not too concerned with grammar and stuff. You simply focus on exchanging basic information, like introducing yourself or engaging in effective small talk about topics such as where you're from and whether you have a dog. You can also understand certain things, but your interlocutor will probably need to speak slowly and use simple words.A1 proficiency is typically required if you wish to immigrate to Germany with a spouse visa.A2 level: The Newbie Level 2I'm not sure when things start to significantly improve, but it's certainly not at the A2 level.Nevertheless, at this level, you have expanded your vocabulary to the point where you can move beyond simply pointing and naming things to engage in more direct information exchange. This may include asking for and giving directions, talking about your family, or politely indicating to a corner shop vendor that their tomatoes are too expensive. And all of this is still done using simple language.Not all CEFR language levels have a real-world point of reference, especially at the basic proficiency level. So I don't know of any institutions that would actually ask for proof of your A2 proficiency, sorry.B1 level: The Required MinimumWhen you reach B1, you start feeling the progress.You're not perfect, not even good, but at least you are independent enough to go about your business in your target language. Your vocabulary is wide enough to meet all your needs when dealing with familiar matters and points of personal interest, whether it's at work, at home, or in a local restaurant. Your speech starts to resemble that of a sane and cognitively developed person, as you can now express your desires, give reasons, and explain your ideas. Plus, you begin to understand the natives much better (if they don't have a heavy accent, of course).Another point of reference for this level is Austrian immigration. Once you have reached the B1 level in German, you'll be able to apply for citizenship in this European country.B2 level: The Sweet SpotAt the B2 level, you actually experience a feeling of freedom when speaking a foreign language.Here, you can read and understand complex things, such as your morning newspaper or the book of your favorite childhood writer translated into your target language. You become more at ease with spontaneous speech since words no longer get stuck in your brain as they did before. At the CEFR B2 level, you are able to reason and provide logical and coherent explanations. And yes, you need to know how to write to everything down.Something between B2 and C1 is usually required to be admitted to a university in a foreign country. The more proficient you are, the better, but the requirements vary from country to country. For example, Hungarian universities usually request B2 certificates, while colleges in Germany ask for C1.C1 Level: What You Really Want to Put on Your ResumeTo demonstrate your proficiency at the C level, you usually have to read and understand something that you would never read for pleasure. This could include topics like environmental problems, hunger in East Timor, or education for bilingual children.The point is, at C1, you are familiar with vocabulary that goes beyond your personal interests. Even if you don't care about some-obscure-topic you should be able to discuss it and know how to defend your opinions before the knowledgeable public. The same expectations apply to writing. At C1, you should be comfortable with every single aspect of your target language, whether you're using it for personal, academic, or professional purposes.And the fact that German universities seek the C1 level should tell you the same thing.C2 Language level: Fluency and MasteryThe CEFR C2 level represents the pinnacle of language proficiency. Perhaps only native speakers can surpass your language skills. You no longer encounter the problem of not understanding something (except for technical terms, perhaps). Your language proficiency allows you to do remarkable things: summarize ideas and construct strong arguments. But more importantly, the language has become a faithful tool that you have completely mastered.With C2, all doors are open, whether you're seeking career opportunities, higher education, or immigration. The challenge is that by the time you achieve C2 level, you usually already have all these incredible benefits.How to Get Certified with CEFR?You don't even have to take an exam to get an idea of your language level thanks to the comprehensible CEFR self-assessment tables. However, what if it's time to prove that you actually have C1 proficiency in German, for example?Why Do You Need to Prove Your Language Proficiency Level?Proof of your language skills is often required to secure a better job, receive higher-quality education, and improve your overall living situation.In the modern world, it's nearly impossible to obtain anything without providing the corresponding paper with an official stamp. This is especially true when trying to establish your status in a new environment. Thus, a language certificate can be a valuable asset.However, in many cases, your current language level may differ significantly from the level required for your ultimate goal. For instance, I needed a B2-C1 level in French to take university courses in that language, while I could only claim to have an A2 level. If this is the case, you have no choice but to continue working on your skills until they match one of the required CEFR language levels. Your citizenship application won't be approved if you have a B1 level instead of a B2. That's how the system works.Similarly, when filling out your resume, you can't simply claim to speak a language at the B2 level based on your own estimations, especially if language proficiency is not just a bonus point but a job requirement. In such cases, you'll want to prove it by demonstrating a widely recognized language certificate.So... You Have to Take a Test!Choosing and taking a language test!The CEFR is not a certification itself, it is merely a framework within which language tests function. Moreover, CEFR is not the only framework, and not all language tests are aligned with it.Therefore, the actual certification will vary depending on the test and the language you are taking. For example, you may need to take the DELF exam to prove your Spanish skills or the DEFL/DALF exam to obtain a certificate in French. As a result, you'll receive DELF or DELF diplomas that indicate your language skills at the corresponding level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In general, all TELC, ECL, and Unicorn tests work within the CEFR framework.What could go wrong?Problems may arise when you take a test, but your institution does not accept the certification you received because they require a different one.For example, I took the DELF B2 exam to prove my French language proficiency for college. However, I discovered that they didn't accept DELF and only approved the TFI (Test du Français International) administered by ETS (the major trouble-maker and the author of TOEFL and TOEIC, which are - guess what - not aligned with CEFR). Consequently, I had to take a placement test at the university itself—twice—before finally being permitted to take French courses.The moral of the story: consult your institution to determine which tests and certifications they accept.What else could go wrong?The second problem with CEFR language levels is that you have to choose which test to take: A2, B1, C1, or any other level. It's easy to overestimate your abilities and fail the test, especially when you're aiming high. Statistics show that more than half of DELF B2 test takers fail.If you fail, you won't receive a certificate. This is quite different from various international tests like IELTS, where they simply assign you a level. It may be lower or higher than your ultimate goal, but at least you receive a certificate. With CEFR, they won't even bother.The moral of the story: be realistic or better prepared.Other Small Problems with CEFR Language LevelsDespite the initials claiming it to be "common" and "European," CEFR is still far from being omnipresent and widely accepted.Some language tests do not fully correspond to CEFR standards.For instance, if you take the Polish language test, you'll find that you only have three options: B1, B2, or C2. Other three language levels do exist in the Egzaminu Certyfikacji, but they don't align with CEFR standards of A1, A2, and C1. As a result, you can certainly take these exams, but your certificate will be outside the common point of reference.You may encounter the same problem with some Swedish, Norwegian, and Japanese language tests.The Chinese ProblemThe situation with the Chinese language is even more complicated. The only standardized language test in China is HSK (Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì), which has six proficiency levels, the same as CEFR. However, CEFR has refused to accept the Chinese claim that these levels completely match the CEFR ones. The actual state of affairs is that the highest "C2" level of the HSK exam corresponds to the intermediate B2 CEFR level, which is two levels down the scale. The good news is that HSK is widely recognized and accepted in China. It is more likely that you would need to present your test results in China rather than in Europe, so the chances of getting turned down are insignificant.Is CEFR the Only Proficiency Scale?As mentioned earlier, CEFR is not the only language assessment framework, but it is the major one. In most cases, you would have to deal with CEFR and nothing else. Why? Because in most cases, you would actually be learning European languages.Just think about it. CEFR language levels cover 7 out of the 10 most widely spoken languages in the world. Only Hindi, Bengali, and Malay have no connection to the Common European Framework whatsoever, and Mandarin is hanging on the border. Otherwise, Spanish, French, German, Russian, Portuguese, Arabic... CEFR has got you covered!If your target language is not on the list, you'll have two options. Either you deal with a private test assessment scale, like CU-TFL or the Chulalongkorn University Proficiency Test of Thai as a Foreign Language, or you take a test assessed by another proficiency scale.All major test scores can be converted into CEFR language levels and vice versa. Source: Wikimedia CommonsILR, ACTFL, and CEFR Language LevelsYes, there are other broad language assessment scales apart from CEFR.Let's take one of my favorites, ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable), for example. As you can guess from the "interagency" part, it's something serious. And it is indeed serious since ILR is a professional assessment scale for those who wish to work for the US government or military agencies.ILR is regulated by the Foreign Service Institute in the US, and they deal with over a hundred world languages. If you've heard of FSI, it's probably in the context of their famous study on how many hours you need to learn a language. In this study, they refer to the "professional working proficiency" level as the ultimate goal of language training. And what this vague definition describes is actually level 3 of the ILR scale or C1 level of CEFR. There are multiple tables aiming to compare CEFR language levels with those of ILR and ACTFL scales. So it's up to you to decide which scale to use as a reference for your language skills.The main point is that it's knowing your proficiency level allows you to work on your language skills more deliberately. And yes, it also opens many doors! Kelly Langford Read the guide. Please read the guide. I can't emphasize it enough. It is essential to your success because the book tells you exactly what is expected of you.I used "Reussir le DELF. Niveau B2". In my case, it was a really old edition (2006), but it worked very well for me in 2018. Nonetheless, I still recommend using the newer 2016 edition or even both. The main reason is that these guides are the only sources of sample exams. You can't find them on the Internet—yet, you will need them more than anything else.Also, all DELF B2 guides are in French, and it's a good thing. If you can't understand the textbook, you should probably ask yourself whether B2 is actually your proficiency level.The textbook is full of exercises, which will give you a sense of what the test looks like before you actually take it. So please don't skip the next step.6. Solve All the DELF B2 Preparation ExercisesLet's be straightforward: these exercises are there for a reason.Furthermore, you will be doing exactly the same exercises from the same textbook using the same answer keys if you choose to take a DELF preparation course. It would just cost you an extra \$600, that's it. (But, of course, you will also have someone who will force you to do these exercises if you choose this option.If you can organize yourself without outside assistance, then the textbook is all you need to prepare well for DELF B2. Speaking from personal experience, I can say that it will make you 100% ready for the listening and reading parts. You will know what kind of texts to expect on the DELF B2 exam. Understand how to approach each of the tasks.Learn how to write different types of answers.Get immediate corrective feedback (if you check your answers in the "corrigés" section).Get to know your most common mistakes.Having these exercises done will help you prepare for the DELF B2 reading and listening sections. However, writing and speaking will require a different approach.7. Memorize "Les Formules de Politesse"On the DELF exam, nobody wants you to speak or write in a familiar style. Keep that by WhatsApp...What this exam really is, is an exercise in free writing and eloquent speaking. In other words, you have to be coherent, and the things you say must comply with the French understanding of what is polite.And here you hit the wall of French pragmatics because what is appropriate in formal English is not so appropriate in formal French. Voilà.The DELF B2 guide literally spells out all the expressions you may need for the writing part of the test (the letter). I wrote them all down and simply memorized them as chunks: "...Madame le Juge..." "...Je me permets de vous écrire pour..." "...Je vous prie de croire, Monsieur, à l'expression des mes meilleurs sentiments..." "Uggghgh. La France, c'est compliqué. C'est bien ça.This strategy saved me tons of time on the actual test. I wrote a good half of the letter by heart. All I had to do afterward was compose the body of the letter according to the instructions.8. Know Your ConnectorsOkay, politeness formulas can help you prepare for the DELF B2 writing part—great. But what about speaking?The good news is that you don't have to express yourself like King Louis XV of France. The bad news is that examiners will still expect you to be somewhat coherent and logical.It can be really challenging when you don't speak a language very well. It gets even worse when you have to talk about a topic you're not too familiar with (which is often the case). So, what on Earth can save you in the interview when you're locked in a room with two Frenchmen furiously writing while you're... uhm... trying to express yourself?That's right: connectors and retractors. The former are the words like "however", "nevertheless", "apart from that", "by the way", "unfortunately", "meanwhile" and so on (in French, of course). The latter are the things you should say as soon as your examiner gives you a puzzling look... "Oh, I meant to say", "I'm afraid I've expressed myself vaguely", "let me clarify that" - something along these lines. And remember that it's fine to correct yourself: we do it all the time.9. Mock the TestWhen I say "mock the test," I don't mean that you should solve one full DELF B2 sample test. I mean that you should find all available sample papers (both online and in print) and deliberately go through them, one by one, until you've completed them all.Preparing for the listening and reading sections on your own shouldn't be a problem as long as you have test samples and answer keys. However, the challenges lie in the writing and speaking sections because you may not have anyone to provide feedback. There are countless ways to write a letter or present your defense during the interview. However, the sample answer at the end of the textbook, if available, will only provide one such approach. What should you do in this case?What I did was compare my own writing with the sample. I focused mainly on fixed expressions, politeness formulas, ways to connect ideas, and constructing arguments. As long as my writing resembled the sample, I considered it correct. It may not be the most sophisticated strategy, but it works when you genuinely aim to improve your writing. One important tip: make sure to write your answers by hand. Firstly, it improves your chances of recalling your practice during the test. Secondly, it trains your hand for the exam and minimizes the impact of slow handwriting on your test performance.10. Read DELF B2-Specific Texts (and a Lot!)Finally, focus on expanding your vocabulary in the most common DELF topics: politics, economics, business, IT, ecology, and education.Poor vocabulary can be detrimental to your performance in every section of the test. In the listening part, you will be asked to spell things out. In the reading part, texts will be read with technical terms (that you need to know or (else you'll have to derive their meaning from the context). As for writing and speaking, the importance of a broad vocabulary cannot be overstated. So, if you've completed all the exercises from the textbook but still have some time to prepare for the DELF B2, be sure to read the French press.Reading the French press... 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