

Ebtesam Abdulhaleem, Claudia Harsch

Using the CEFR Scales to Assess Students' Proficiency Levels in a Saudi-Arabian Higher Education Context

Abstract

This study investigates the reliability of using selected CEFR scales in a Saudi-Arabian Higher Education context. The students attend a Preparatory Year Programme (PYP) at their enrolment to the university. The program offers among other subjects an intensive English language course at three levels (elementary, intermediate and advanced). Recently, the PYP adopted the CEFR as framework for its curriculum and assessment. In an attempt to examine CEFR usability in the Preparatory Year Programme (PYP), students and their English language tutors in one of the PYP programmes were asked to assess the students' English written proficiency using 10 pre-selected CEFR scales relevant for writing. Quantitative analysis of the collected data revealed high degree of reliability for the ten sales. Across the three PYP levels, one-way ANOVA test found reasonable alignment in both self- and tutor assessment between the assigned CEFR levels and the students' actual levels in the Preparatory Year Programme. In addition, t-test showed a satisfying degree of agreement between student and tutor assessments, particularly in the advanced level. Overall, the results indicate that the CEFR scales could be used reliably in the Saudi PYP context. Moreover, the scales enabled participants to form a sound judgement of the students' proficiency levels, confirming the students' placement in their assigned PYP course levels.

1. Introduction and background of the study

In Saudi-Arabia, Preparatory Year Programmes (PYPs) are a mandatory one-year intensive programme for all newly admitted university students. In this year, the students are expected to improve in a variety of life and academic skills, with a particular focus on English. This is because English is the main medium of instructions (EMI) in most of the university colleges, more specifically in medical and healthcare colleges. Different colleges set different entry requirements and the medical colleges, which is our focus here, set high scores in English in the high school diploma as one entrance requirement (Al-Shehri et al., 2013) prior to the English course in the PYP.

In the PYP, students are divided into three levels (elementary, intermediate and advanced) based on their results in the Oxford paper and pen placement test (Oxford University Press, 2001). This test assesses the students' proficiency levels in different English skills such as reading, listening, vocabulary and grammar. However, English writing and speaking skills are not included in this test. At the end of the PYP, all students from the three levels take the same standardised proficiency exam which contains a writing component, amongst components focussing on other skills.

Students enrolled in the medical track will join one of the medical and healthcare colleges at the university based on their GPA (Grade Point Average) at the end of the PYP. The more competitive the college is (the college of medicine being the most competitive), the higher the required GPA.

As mentioned above, the students' level in writing is not identified at the beginning of the PYP in the placement test. Additionally, the students' scores in the final standardised proficiency writing test at the end of PYP does not reflect the variation on their proficiency levels, as shown in Figure 1.

7. Conclusion

Due to the high reliabilities we found, and the fact that students and their tutors evaluated student proficiency in a way that matches students' actual PYP levels, we can tentatively conclude that the CEFR shows potential to be employed for proficiency assessment in the Saudi-Arabian context, where the CEFR was recently introduced in the PYP curriculum framework. It is, however, important to note that self-assessment results from students with lower proficiency need to be treated with caution, as these students may overestimate their abilities. Here, we would recommend combining self-assessment with tutors' assessment for triangulation.

8. References

- ALDERSON, J. C. (2005). *Diagnosing foreign language proficiency: The interface between learning and assessment*. A&C Black.
- ALDERSON, J. C., & HUHTA, A. (2005). The development of a suite of computer-based diagnostic tests based on the Common European Framework. *Language Testing*, 22(3), 301-320.
- AL-SHEHRI, M. Y., CAMPBELL, S., DAUD, M. Z., MATTAR, E. H., SAYED, M. G., & ABU-ESHY, S. A. (2013). Development of Medical Education in Saudi Arabia. In *Higher Education in Saudi Arabia* (pp. 137-149). Springer Netherlands.
- ASHTON, K. (2014). Using self-assessment to compare learners' reading proficiency in a multilingual assessment framework. *System*, 42, 105-119.
- BABAI, E., TAGHADDOMI, S., & PASHMFOROOSH, R. (2016). Speaking self-assessment: Mismatches between learners' and teachers' criteria. *Language Testing*, 33(3), 411-437.
- BACHMAN, L. F., & PALMER, A. S. (1989). The construct validation of self-ratings of communicative language ability. *Language Testing*, 6(1), 14-29.
- BLUE, G. M. (1988). Self-assessment: The limits of learner independence. *Individualization and autonomy in language learning. ELT Documents*, 131, 100-118.
- BOUD, D. (1991). *Implementing student self-assessment*. Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA).
- COUNCIL OF EUROPE. (2001). *A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DAVIDSON, F., & HENNING, G. (1985). A self-rating scale of English dif-

- ficulty: Rasch scalar analysis of items and rating categories. *Language Testing*, 2(2), 164-179.
- DIALANG ONLINE TEST: <https://dialangweb.lancaster.ac.uk>
- ELLIS, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- ENGELHARDT, M., & PFINGSTHORN, J. (2013). Self-assessment and placement tests—a worthwhile combination? *Language Learning in Higher Education*, 2(1), 75-89.
- FALCHIKOV, N. (2013). *Improving assessment through student involvement: Practical solutions for aiding learning in higher and further education*. Routledge.
- HARRIS, M. (1997). Self-assessment of language learning in formal settings. *ELT journal*, 51(1), 12-20.
- LEBLANC, R., & PAINCHAUD, G. (1985). Self-Assessment as a Second Language Placement Instrument. *Tesol Quarterly*, 19(4), 673-687.
- LITTLE, D. (2006). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Content, purpose, origin, reception and impact. *Language Teaching*, 39(3), 167-190.
- LITTLE, D. (2009). The European Language Portfolio: where pedagogy and assessment meet. *Strasbourg: Council of Europe*.
- LITTLE, D. (2011). The common European framework of reference for languages: A research agenda. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 381-393.
- LITTLE, D. (2012). European language portfolio. Perspectives from the European Language Portfolio: Learner Autonomy and Self-assessment, 7.
- LITTLE, D., & PERCLOVÁ, R. (2001). The European Language Portfolio: Guide for teachers and teacher trainers. *Strasbourg: Council of Europe*. Retrieved August 15, 2012.
- LITTLE, D. (2002). The European Language Portfolio: structure, origins, implementation and challenges. *Language Teaching*, 35(3), 182-189.
- MIKA, S. (2006). Peer and Instructor Assessment of Oral Presentations in Japanese University EFL classrooms: A Pilot Study. In *Waseda Global Forum* (Vol. 3, pp. 99-107).
- OSCARSON, M. (1989). Self-assessment of language proficiency: Rationale and applications. *Language testing*, 6(1), 1-13.
- QUICK PLACEMENT TEST, (2001) Paper and pen test. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- PARIS, S. G., & WINOGRAD, P. (2003). The Role of Self-Regulated Learning in Contextual Teaching: Principals and Practices for Teacher Preparation. from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED479905.pdf>
- ROSS, S. (1998). Self-assessment in second language testing: A meta-anal-

- ysis and analysis of experiential factors. *Language testing*, 15(1), 1-20.
- SAHRAGARD, R., & MALLAHI, O. (2014). Relationship between Iranian EFL learners' language learning styles, writing proficiency and self-assessment. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1611-1620.
- STOYNOFF, S. (2012). Looking backward and forward at classroom-based language assessment. *ELT journal*, 66(4), 523-532.
- ÜNALDI, İ. (2016). Self and teacher assessment as predictors of proficiency levels of Turkish EFL learners. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(1), 67-80.

Kontakt Daten der Autoren

Ebtesam Abdulhaleem
e.abdulhaleem@warwick.ac.uk

Claudia Harsch
harsch@uni-bremen.de