

# Foreign Language Proficiency Frameworks and Problems of Implementation of CEFR in Korea

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## Abstract

The CEFR has been rarely applied in the assessment of foreign language proficiency in Korea. This paper examines the general trends of research about the CEFR and the problems in foreign language education curricula. Also, the possibility of the implementation of the CEFR will be discussed. The paper investigates the curriculum of Korean as a foreign language and assessment system as an example of a foreign language curriculum to explore applying the CEFR to Korea. One of the important issues of this paper is whether the CEFR could be easily adapted in Korea. The answer depends on the areas of language education. From the perspective of language education and adapting a new framework, the paper indicates three challenges to implement the CEFR. First, since the basic goals of learning foreign languages in Korea is different from the perspective of the CEFR. Second, many language experts in academia and government officers who designed and promoted the language policies might not pay much attention to the CEFR until now. Lastly, there existed assessment tools and systems in the areas of foreign language education following the assessment system of English such as TOEFL and OPI (ACTFL). Therefore, it is believed that change in the perception of importance of foreign language education is demand to adapt the CEFR to Korea.

## 1 Introduction

The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) was introduced in 2007 in Korea with the Korean translation version which followed the German version of the CEFR published by the Council of Europe (2001). The CEFR has had small influence in the area of foreign language education in Korea. Since 2007, there have been a small number of studies based on the CEFR. The first reason why the CEFR was not adapted is due to the short time period. The CEFR has been in existence for less than 10 years and therefore has not had the sufficient time to be implemented. The last few years have not seen a critical change of language education policy in the area of foreign language education in Korea. Therefore, a new framework and policy of language teaching were rarely explored academically. New frameworks could be developed by undertaking new language policies, but the foreign language curricula and assessments in Korea were not seriously challenged by the educational environment. However, the question is how the CEFR relate to the case of Korea, in particular when considering an implementation of a new framework to the current

curriculum design and assessment in the field of language education. This paper is organized into three parts. In the first chapter, the general trends of research about the CEFR and the problems in foreign language education curricula will be explored briefly. The second chapter describes the case of Korean language education as a foreign language as an example. In the last chapter, the possibility of the implementation of the CEFR will be discussed.

## **2 Research Trends and the Curricula of Foreign Language Education in Korea**

There are two research trends in Korea about the CEFR post 2007. First, by introducing the CEFR, the studies compared the proficiency level of foreign language curricula in Korea to the CEFR and analyzed the common and different factors. These studies are conducted by a few scholars who are majoring in German and French education as a foreign language. The second trend is the focus on the teaching methods which is called the “action-oriented approach.” The researchers tried to apply these methods to German and French classes in foreign language curricula with through both material and assessment development. However, since these studies are very few by private interest, it is still an initial stage of this area of research.

The following are three reasons which are assumed why the CEFR may not be applied in foreign language education in Korea.

First, the needs of curriculum design are not eagerly demanded in the public foreign language educational system in Korea. The needs are related to the class schedule of foreign language teaching, in other words, the number of times classes meet per week. The importance of foreign language education has decreased in the public educational system of elementary, middle, and high school. From elementary to high school, only English is included as a mandatory subject. Foreign languages are an elective, which is also not a mandatory subject for the college entrance exam in Korea. Since 2001, only a few universities require a foreign language subject test score, and most high schools allocate the time spent on a foreign language class to other important classes. Therefore, most high school students learn a foreign language for less than 200 hours in a classroom which is not enough to even be considered as a beginner level. This means there is no need for different levels of assessment and curriculum design in the public curriculum.

In addition, most high schools teach a specific language in preparation for the college entrance exam. More than half of the high schools select Japanese as an elective subject, and the rates of other languages such as Chinese, German, French, and Spanish are gradually decreased comparing to Japanese. In addition, no school chose an Arab language. Surprisingly, more than half of the students who decide to take a foreign language as an elective subject on the entrance exam choose an Arab language. The students are willing to self-learn and take an Arab language because the tests are supposedly easier. In other words, the foreign language education system in public schools fails to do their jobs and do not fulfill their roles of language teaching and learning.

Moreover, the foreign language curriculum of college education is not so different to the problems of high schools. The foreign language courses are presented as an elective, most of which are level 1 or level 2 courses, the equivalent of A1 or A2 in the CEFR. The students who want to learn advanced levels of foreign language attend private institutes to earn certificates of language levels such as the Goethe institute (German) and Allians Francaise (French).

Second, the lack of needs to alter the curriculum design led to the indifference of language

policy by the government or stakeholders. The government assumed that it could change the foreign language educational policy until there was a high demand to change the curriculum design because it is not easy to establish a new educational policy without a critical point of development. In fact, the curriculum design of foreign language education would not be supported by the government or private fund. To apply a new framework to the foreign language education in Korea, the recognition of needs for a new foreign language curriculum as well as materials development and in-service teacher education should take precedence.

Third, it stems from the void for integrating foreign language curricula among languages. In the area of foreign language education, there is no discussion to make an integrated curriculum between academia and language institutions. While the CEFR focuses on communicating between languages, our curriculum does not consider the need to communicate in another foreign language. The curriculum proposes individual goals and objectives inside of their own languages, but not outside of the area of languages exchanges.

### **3 The Curriculum and Assessment of Korean As a Foreign Language**

#### ***3.1 The History of the Curriculum of Korean Language Education and TOPIK***

This chapter investigates the curriculum of Korean as a foreign language and assessment system as an example of a foreign language curriculum to explore applying the CEFR to Korea. The history of the Korean curriculum will be discussed first. The number of the Korean Language Institutes has been rapidly increasing after the Yonsei Language Institute was first established in 1959. In the middle of 1980, with the growing demand of learning Korean, most universities made Korean language institutes. They developed various programs for learner's including: general purpose of Korean, Korean for heritage learners, and learners for career purposes. After the middle of 1990, the demand exploded and in particular, Korean learners of academic purposes increased drastically. Nowadays, around 120 Korean language institutes belonged in universities and 150 multicultural centers undertook Korean language learners from other countries to teach Korean. Most curricula consist of 6 academic levels ranging from beginner (level 1, 2), intermediate (level 3, 4), to advanced (level 5, 6). In addition to these levels, special programs for the learners of academic purpose were mostly provided.

The TOPIK(Test of Proficiency in Korean) is related to the levels of Korean curricula at Korean language institutes. The focus primarily revolves around the prerequisite number of hours for passing one level. The TOPIK starting from 1997 is implemented by the National Institute for International Education, is a criterion-reference-test of level 1 to 6. The number of test takers was around 120,000 people in 2012. The TOPIK reformed by dividing TOPIK-I and TOPIK-II in 2014.

TOPIK-I : Listening & Reading

TOPIK-II : Listening, Reading & Writing

The criteria of TOPIK levels have influenced on the curriculum and syllabus of Korean language education. The standard curriculum of Korean language education was recommended by the National Institute of Korean Language in 2012~2013. As pointed at <table1>, the level of difficulty in TOPIK is higher than the standard Korean curriculum.

<table 1> Comparison between TOPIK and Standard Korean Curriculum

TOPIK	Standard Korean Curriculum
advanced (level 5-6)	superior (level 7)
	advanced(level 5-6)
intermediate(level 3-4)	intermediate(level 3-4)
	intermediate(level 3-4)
beginner(level 1-2)	beginner(level 1-2)
	beginner(level 1-2)

### 3.2 The Crosswalk of the CEFR and the Curriculum of Korean

The curriculum includes the process of circulation from goals and objectives, content, teaching methods, and educational assessments based on educational philosophy. The appropriate curriculum development is necessary for Korean education learners as well as teachers of Korean to succeed. Brown argued curriculum development constitutes the following criteria : ① need analysis ② objectives ③ testing ④ materials ⑤ teaching ⑥ evaluation

This study examines the goals, materials and methods, and assessments with the framework of language curriculum to compare and analyze the CEFR and the framework of Korean education as a foreign language. Korean learners are divided by the KSL(Korean as a second language) and the KFL(Korean as a foreign language). While the most foreign language teaching (except Korean) in Korea is distinguished as the FL environment, Korean language teaching is an SL situation in Korea. The comparison sets are between the CEFR from A to C and levels 1 through 6 of curriculum of Korean. The CEFR divides each of the three traditional levels of language learners; basic, intermediate, and advanced. There are six CEFR levels, the increased number of levels providing more precise information about learners' ability level. The CEFR publication includes a set of illustrative scales and descriptors of language ability. Therefore, this chapter aligns both frameworks and analyzes the similarities and differences in order to seek further implication of the CEFR to this field.

### 3.2.1 Overall evaluation criteria

<table 2> Comparison sets of overall assessment criteria between CEFR and TOPIK for beginner

	level	overall assessment criteria
beginner /basic user	Level 1	Can perform basic language skills for survival such as self-introduction, shopping, ordering food. Can understand and use expressions with private and familiar topics such as family, hobbies, and weather. Can use simple sentences based on 800 vocabulary words and basic grammatical patterns. Can understand and make a simple text related to everyday life.
	A1	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.
	Level2	Can perform language skills for everyday life- making a phone call, asking a favor, and at public places-post-office, bank, and etc. Can understand and use phrases of personal interest and familiar topics with around 1,500~2,000 vocabulary words. Can distinguish and use the form of language officially or unofficially.
	A2	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.

<table 3> Comparison sets of overall assessment criteria between CEFR and TOPIK for intermediate and advanced

	level	overall assessment criteria
intermediate/independent user	level 3	Can perform basic language skills for everyday life and maintain social relationships without difficulty. Can understand and express a unit of paragraph related to familiar and concrete topics. Can distinguish and use spoken and written forms of language appropriately.
	B1	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.

	level 4	Can perform general language skills for social life and at the work place. Can understand general news stories in the newspaper. Can understand and use language fluently and coherently on social and abstract topics. Can understand and use idioms and social-cultural content of Korea.
	B2	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.
advance d/profici ent user	level 5	Can understand and use professional language skills for a specific academic field and working places- not familiar topics about politics, economy, society, and culture. Can distinguish and use language appropriately according to official/unofficial contexts or spoken/written contexts.
	C1	C1 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.
	level 6	Can understand and use professional language skills fluently and precisely for a specific academic field and at work-even when not familiar with topics such as politics, economy, society, and culture. Can use language skills and expressions without difficulty.
	C2	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.

### **3.2.2 Educational Goals**

This study focuses not only on language curriculum but also on the teaching and learning environments to discuss the common and different points of the two systems along with learners' needs. In the early years of Korean education, over 80% of Korean learners identified themselves as general purpose learners. However, Korean learners of academic purpose and immigrant learners with instrumental motivation have rapidly increased after 2000. Therefore, the goals of the learners are very different from the goals of learners in Europe.

### 3.2.3 Materials, Teaching methods and Curriculum

The CEFR’s descriptive scheme embraces general competences (knowledge, or skills and know-how, ; existential competence, or ; and ability to learn,) as well as communicative language competences (linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural). It distinguishes four categories of language activity (reception, production, interaction, and mediation); four domains of language use (personal, public, occupational, and educational); and three types of parameters that shape language use (situational context, text type or theme, and conditions or constraints). However, the Korean curriculum focuses on language skills and basic language knowledge.

<table 4> Subcategories of Standard Korean Curriculum in 2013 by National Institute of Korea

Category	Sub-category	Description method
Theme	Topic	Detailed description
Language skills	Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing, Tasks	Abstract description
Language knowledge	Vocabulary, Grammar, Pronunciation, Text	Detailed description
Culture	Cultural knowledge, Cultural performance, Cultural perspective	Abstract description

### 3.2.4. Using Assessments

The need of language learners for curriculum design and material development is related to how to use the results of language assessments. For example, immigrant women or immigrant workers need only basic skills of communication in Korean. However, a minimum of a level 4 is required to enter a university at the intermediate level. The certification of advanced levels is required to graduate from a university. Therefore, a certification of certain level provides a prerequisite condition for qualifying in specific areas. Contrast to the TOPIK, the CEFR is focused more on listing language skills instead of qualified conditions for each level. Therefore, adaptation of the CEFR could be modified by the need of areas in Korean language teaching.

## 4 The Problems and Implication in Implementing of the CEFR

One of the important issues of this paper is whether the CEFR could be easily adapted in Korea. The answer depends on the areas of language education. In this final section, the study points out some of the problems and discusses the implications while considering the situation of the field of foreign language education in Korea. From the perspective of language

education and adapting a new framework, there are three challenges to implement the CEFR.

First, since the basic goals of learning foreign languages in Korea is different from the perspective of the CEFR, the first and most important goal of learning Korean is acquiring a proficiency certificate to improve an individual's foreign language competency.

Second, many language experts in academia and government officers who designed and promoted the language policies might not pay much attention to the CEFR until now. Also, in-service teachers hardly concern themselves with new-methods and assessment systems.

Lastly, it is difficult to applied new assessment system to educational fields without devoting efforts of many professionals even though the great methods and assessment systems are introduced for the first time. In Korea, there existed assessment tools and systems in the areas of foreign language education following the assessment system of English such as TOEFL and OPI (ACTFL) because the learners need to have official scores of these kinds of tests. Therefore, it is believed that change in the perception of importance of foreign language education and the need of new assessment tools for integrating among many foreign languages assessment systems is demand to adapt the CEFR to Korea.

## **References**

Council of Europe (2001), *Common European Framework of Reference for Language*,  
( Korean translation version)

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