

## ASSESSMENT CRITERIA IN WRITING

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### Introduction

This essay provides an evaluation of the writing section of the national language test (the CEFR test) for English language teachers in Uzbekistan. The essay evaluates the writing section of the CEFR exam, analysing the content of the writing exam and the validity and reliability of the exam.

### The CEFR writing test: context

In Uzbekistan, practicing foreign language (FL) teachers have to take, and pass, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)-level exams. The CEFR was adopted as the national system for certifying foreign language teachers in Uzbekistan and the exams for the CEFR system are developed, implemented and assessed by the National Testing System in Uzbekistan which is dedicated to certification processes across different organisations within Uzbekistan.

The specific agency that is in charge of examining FL teachers in Uzbekistan is the National System for Assessment of Foreign Language Competency (NSAFLP) Agency. This Agency measures teacher's competencies using the CEFR proficiency levels as a benchmark and awards certificates of language competency according to the CEFR standards. The CEFR exams complement the National Olympiads on foreign languages which enable an evaluation of the progress in both foreign language proficiency and foreign language teaching (Yuldashev, 2016).

The people who take the CEFR writing exam are teachers in Uzbekistan who want to certify as foreign language teachers. If the FL teacher gains their FL certificate, they can then earn 15% more in rural areas and 30% more in urban areas so there is a clear incentive for teachers to earn their FL certificate by passing the CEFR-level exams.

As Museova (2020) discusses, the perception across FL teachers in Uzbekistan is that the CEFR certification system (which was implemented in 2013 across Uzbekistan following the 2012 Presidential Decree Number 1875 about "The measurers strengthening the system of learning foreign languages", as a response to the need to internationalise higher education (Altbach and Knight, 2007; DeYoung et al., 2018) is a success. As such, the CEFR exams and certification process have been welcomed by FL teachers across Uzbekistan (Museova, 2020). Many teachers have begun to modify the contents of their syllabus and their teaching methods in response to the CEFR certification (Tolibjonov et al., 2020).

The CEFR exam has four parts: listening, reading, writing and speaking. The writing exam is considered to be the most difficult of all four parts, and only those students who pass the writing exam are allowed to move forward with the examination process and take the speaking exam. One of the reasons that a lot of candidates fail the writing section of the exam is because

Uzbekistan students/teachers do not know the basics of formal writing including the structure of essays and letters and how to compose these forms of writing (Makhkamova and Kusanova, 2020).

A high percentage of candidates fail the writing section of the exam (Uzbekistan Education, 2021): when the writing section is failed, then they are unable to sit the speaking section and there is no possibility of gaining a pass score over the “average” of all of the four sections of the exam (Musoyeva, 2019).

### **The CEFR writing test: discussion**

The CEFR writing test is comprised of two different parts: the first part asks the candidate to write a formal letter which could be any one of several different types of letter. This letter should be no more than 150 words long. The second part of the writing exam asks the candidate to write an essay on one of a range of different topics that are specified during the exam. These questions vary across time with each exam having a different possible set of essay questions. The essay for the second part of the writing section of the exam should be no more than 250 words in length.

In terms of how the marks for the two different parts of the writing section of the exam are allocated, more marks are given for the second question because of the longer word count. The CEFR writing assessment sub-scales show that the examiners are not only looking for language competency but also for relevant content, communicative achievement and organisation (Emak and Ismail, 2021).

The rubric for the “content” part of the assessment sub-scales shows that all content “must be relevant to the task” so that the “target reader is fully informed” with the rubric for the “communicative achievement” part of the assessment sub-scales suggesting that the written response must “use the conventions of the communicative task effectively to hold the target reader’s attention and communicate straightforward and complex ideas as appropriate” (Emak and Ismail, 2021; p. 1958).

The rubric for the “organisation” part of the assessment sub-scales suggests that the text should be “well organised and coherent” and “use a variety of cohesive devices and organisational patterns to generally good effect” (Emak and Ismail, 2021; p. 1958). The “language” rubric suggests that, in order to get a good mark in the writing exam, the candidate must “use a range of vocabulary, including less common lexis, appropriately” and that they must “use a range of simple and complex grammatical forms with control and flexibility” (Emak and Ismail, 2021; p. 1958).

These rubrics suggest, therefore, that the writing exam is graded not only on the basis of the language usage of the candidates but also on the candidate’s ability to assess what would be relevant as an answer and then talk only about that in their answer, and also to select appropriate devices to make their response flow appropriately, allowing the target reader to understand the response (Musoyeva, 2019). Indeed, the “language” rubric states that “occasional errors may be present but do not impede communication”, suggesting that the presence of errors will not cause the examiners to grade the answer(s) lower.

Candidates are given an hour to produce both the 150-word letter and the 250-word essay which gives a competent candidate enough time to write their response and then check it over several times to check for any errors, to ensure that the flow of the responses is appropriate and to ensure that the responses respond on-point to the questions posed and that the target reader can easily understand what the response aims to convey.

The writing exam is graded from 1 to 100 and the score is mapped on to several levels of the target language, from A1 to C2, including A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 with the “A” level being the highest level a candidate could obtain in the overall CEFR certification and in each of the four component exams, including the writing exam, and “C1” being slightly above the threshold level which means that a language learner has grasped the very basics of the target language (Council of Europe, 2022). As Musoyeva (2019) notes, A1 is “basic initial user level” (just above threshold) and C1 is “proficient initial user level”.

Analysing the writing exam item by item, one of the previous writing exams had the following two parts. The first part of this particular writing exam was meant to be completed within 20 minutes and asked the candidate the following:

“You are going on vacation and want a friend to take care of your flowers while you are gone. Your friend agrees with you. Write your friend a letter”, giving the following directions for the specific content of the letter that was required: it would include your contact information whilst you are on vacation; it should explain why you are leaving; and should tell your friend how to care for the flowers”. The instructions indicated that the candidate should write the letter in “150 words, correctly” and that there was no need to include their home address in the letter. The instructions, additionally, suggested that the letter should begin, “Dear Sir or Madam”

The instructions clearly contain conflicting information which could confuse candidates: the instructions state, for example, that the “friend agrees with you”, but the purpose of the exercise is to write a letter to the friend to ask if they would agree to the request; additionally, it is unusual, in English, that a letter to a friend would begin “Dear Sir or Madam” and so this part of the instruction is confusing.

Despite these contradictions in the instructions, the exercise is quite straightforward: the instructions are clear and the candidate should be able to complete the exercise competently by organising their response according to the specific instructions provided. The task is, however, clearly complex for candidates who do not have a competent level of English because of the contradictions inherent in the instructions and also because of the fact that the four rubrics that the examiners will use to mark the responses are difficult to achieve in such a short word count.

It is clear that the writing exam, as much as testing the language ability of the candidate, is also testing their ability to organise their ideas and, on the basis of how well they organise their ideas, how well they can then transfer these ideas to their writing so that target readers can understand their ideas (Figueras, 2012). This is an important skill for FL teachers, in particular, to possess because unless a teacher knows how to transmit their knowledge effectively to their students, their students will not learn effectively and will, themselves, find the CEFR exam difficult should they decide to take it themselves.

The second part of this particular writing exam gave the following instruction: “How much do you agree or disagree with what’s said? Everyone should have to do some service for the

community. Use specific examples and reasons to back up your point of view” The following specifications are provided for the response from the candidate: “State if you agree or disagree with what is said”, “give examples to back up your point of view” and “use personal examples when it makes sense”. The instructions also state that the essay should have a beginning, a body (which the instructions specify is the “main part” and a conclusion. The instructions also say that the essay-format response should be written in the “right style” and “right format”

The second part of the written exam is clearly more complex than the first part: it provides eight specific instructions that the candidate has to follow to ensure that they have met the guidelines for the essay response: 1) the response should state whether the candidate agrees or disagrees; 2) the candidate should use examples to back up their opinion; 3) the candidate should use personal examples; 4) the candidate should write a beginning section; 5) the candidate should include a body to their response; 6) the candidate should write a conclusion; 7) the candidate should use the right style for their response (in the tone of an essay); and 8) the candidate should use the right format for their response (i.e., an essay).

These complex instructions imply that the candidate not only needs to select and use the correct language (vocabulary, style etc) but, also, that they need to know how to write an essay and how to write an appropriate response to a complex question in a very tight word count. It is not an easy task to complete this second part of the writing exam and, also, the rubrics for the second part of the exam are themselves complex which adds an additional layer of complexity to the task. It is easy to see why the pass rate for this part of the CEFR certification is relatively low in Uzbekistan (Bezborodova and Radjabzade, 2022).

The writing exam, therefore, whilst it seems to be a straightforward task for someone who is competent in English, is a complex exercise for many reasons. Firstly because the instructions are contradictory, and so could confuse some candidates which would lead to them getting stressed and not being able to think clearly during the exam, which would lead to them getting a worse score than if the instructions were clearer. Secondly because the rubric for the assessment and evaluation of the written responses of the candidates is complex and divided into four different areas (only one of which is language) which means that the writing exam is actually testing skills that are beyond “simply” language skills.

Additionally, whilst an hour is given for both parts of the writing exam, it is clear that for many candidates this is not sufficient time, due to the complex nature of the questions and the very strict requirements for the responses due to the very specific instructions for each part of the exam. It is not difficult to see, therefore, how difficult it can be for candidates to get a good score on the writing exam: candidates not only need to have excellent language skills but also a high level of competence in other skills including time management and the ability to follow complex instructions under stressful conditions. Not all candidates will possess these three distinct “sets” of skills and, if students do possess all of these skills, they might not be able to manage to coordinate the delivery of these skills within the stressful conditions of the writing exam. Passing the exam is to be congratulated and getting a high score for the writing part of the exam is definitely a major achievement, given the complexity of the exam and the skills sets required to satisfactorily complete the exam.

Regarding test validity – which is understood as “whether a test measures what it aims to measure” (Giraldo, 2020) – it is clear to see that whilst the CEFR writing exam does test language ability (which is what the overall CEFR certification is designed to test and certify),

the CEFR writing exam also measures the degree of readiness of a student for taking the test, in terms of whether they have a) a sufficient level of language; b) the skills necessary to understand, decipher and follow complex instructions; and c) the skills necessary to follow the specific instructions in each part of the writing exam.

This means that the CEFR writing exam, whilst ostensibly aimed at measuring a candidate's language ability is, actually, measuring – and putting to test – their skills and their ability to effectively utilise these skills to meet the dictates of the rubric that examiners will use to grade the writing exam. For this reason, as Cambridge English (2022) suggests, it is important that any student who is preparing to take any language proficiency certification exam should take time to look over past exams, to improve the skills that support their language learning and to conduct “test runs” of previous exams, marked using the same rubric that the examiners use to grade the real exams for that certification.

Without undertaking this process of familiarisation, and without making the time to practice, the stressful conditions of the exam (on which so much depends for candidates, including the ability to teach and/or their salary level) might cause the candidate to freeze and to fail the exam, even if their language competency is excellent. There are many cases in which a candidate might attain level A2 or B1 in the classroom but, in the writing exam, they receive a C1 or C2 level, simply because they did not follow the complex instructions for their written responses and/or because they did not achieve a good score across all four of the rubrics.

The reliability of the CEFR writing exam – where test reliability is defined and understood as “the extent to which test scores are *not* affected by chance factors” (Livingston, 2018) – is therefore fairly variable across students because the scores attained on the CEFR writing exam can fairly easily be affected by factors such as the specific time and day of the test, the specific questions asked (and whether candidates have experience of these scores) and the specific examiners who are scoring the responses and how much they adhere to the specific guidelines provided in the four rubrics for the CEFR writing exam (Emak and Ismail, 2021).

Consistency cannot be guaranteed for the CEFR writing exam, either in the candidates or the examiners, especially because the responses are not “multiple choice” answers and so involve a certain amount of subjectivity, and so the reliability of the CEFR writing exam can be questioned. The CEFR writing exam is, however, part of a four-pronged examination that determines the level of language proficiency for certification and has been used Europe-wide for decades now, which means that the examiners who are responsible for scoring the responses must have a) had extensive training in how to score responses and b) extensive experience in scoring the responses to the written exams. This means that the scores have to be relied upon because the examiners scores should, by now, be fairly standardised.

### **Relevance of this discussion to my own teaching/testing context and implications for issues of language testing and assessment**

As Madaminov and Ashurova (2019) discuss, the introduction of the CEFR certification to Uzbekistan has meant that language teaching, in general, has had to improve. Since the introduction of the CEFR certification system by the Uzbekistan government, for example, the professional competence of FL teachers has increased significantly as identified by Yuldashv (2016).

As Yuldashev (2016; p. 11) discusses, this is partly because the CEFR certification process has encouraged policymakers and teachers to create new education standards, curriculum, syllabus and textbooks which has led to improvements in the knowledge of the foreign language amongst teachers, in their professional knowledge of teachers and also in the quality of their teaching (Zenkova and Khamitova, 2018).

The CEFR writing exam has contributed to this acceleration of the professional development of foreign language teachers (Ruziev and Burkhanov, 2018) by providing standards to which their professional knowledge, and development, can be measured (Cabinet of the Ministry of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2014). This process is precipitating an overall improvement not only in the language proficiency of teachers but also the language proficiency of their students (World Bank, 2018). This is a similar process to that in other nations that have recently implemented the CEFR certification system (Nguyen, 2017).

Regarding the implications of the findings from this evaluation of the CEFR writing test for issues of language testing and assessment in general, it is clear that the low validity and relatively low reliability of the CEFR certification system, for the written part of the exam, is problematic and poses problems for how candidates need to prepare for the exam.

As has been discussed, the writing exam requires the coordinated application of multiple complex skills beyond that of simply having a good command of the target language: to get a good score on the writing exam requires a good ability to identify, understand and follow instructions and a good level of ability to ensure that the flow of the writing is appropriate and that the writing meets the requirements of the target audience.

If students have not practiced these skills, they are likely to fail to get a good score on the writing exam. Language teaching and assessment is, therefore, about so much more than simply knowing the target language at a proficient level (Cumming, 2006). As Javanmiri and Bdaiwi (2021) discuss, whilst language proficiency affects the ability to understand the content of the exam, writing skills dictate the degree of success of satisfactorily meeting the guidelines for the exam.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has evaluated the writing section of the CEFR exam, analysing the content of the writing exam and the validity and reliability of the exam, finding that to be successful in the CEFR writing exam, candidates need a range of skills, additional to language proficiency, due to the low validity and relatively low reliability of the test.

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