A Scoping Review on CEFR: Methods used in Past Studies

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ABSTRACT

CEFR has been perceived to be an effective platform that could assist in improvising the standard of ELT in the country dominantly to achieve an international standard. Hence, some countries have adopted this framework to enhance their citizens' English Language proficiency. Nevertheless, the implementation of CEFR occurs in accordance to the specific needs, purposes and aspiration of particular countries. A myriad of researches has been conducted to investigate various issues and challenges faced in the verge of implementing CEFR. Therefore, this scoping review has a specific purpose of analyzing the current trends in the study of CEFR focusing mainly on the choices of methodologies applied during the conduction of the research. A total of 48 empirical studies on CEFR were compiled and analyzed to discover the variation of methodologies used while categorizing them into four parts including research method, sample, instruments and data analysis. Findings show that there is a balance between quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods and the samples used are mostly teachers. It is worth noting that the combination of questionnaires and structured interviews are the most popular instruments used and descriptive statistics appear to be the most prevalent data analysis method used. The research gap discovered through this analysis will assuredly assist further choices of research for the betterment of CEFR implementation. It can be concluded that further research on the effectiveness and the outcomes of CEFR should be conducted apart from merely focusing on issues and challenges faced.

Keywords: CEFR; english language teaching; research method; scoping review

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) has introduced the implementation the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) since the year of 2013 with the aim of transforming our Malaysian education system to be in parallel with international standards (Johar & Aziz, 2019). Connecting this to the Malaysian English Education, the focus would be to improve pupil's proficiency and achieve an international ideal. This includes nurturing pupils into developing effective communicative skills in schools through the enhanced and well-planned teaching of the four main skills; Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening to produce competent English language users who will later be able to excel locally and globally (Paneer selvam & Mohamad, 2019). These needs claim the alignment of the latest curriculum which is acknowledged as Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM) or Standard Curriculum for Secondary School that has been implemented under the Malaysian Education Blueprint of the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) (Azlina & Ying, 2020). This Framework is targeted to standardise the language proficiency that has been adopted in many countries in their education system for the same purpose; to reach a standardized global standard of proficiency

In addition, education agendas like fostering pupils with communicative skills in school years, Consequently, this warrants the alignment of the latest curriculum called Kurikulum

Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM) or Standard Curriculum for Secondary School that has been implemented under the Malaysian Education Blueprint to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), a framework of reference developed by the to standardize language proficiency that is adopted by many countries in their education system (Azlina & Ying, 2020). In order to ensure a systematic implementation, the MOE has taken the effort to develop a Roadmap, a detailed document which outlines the reformation of the Malaysian English education. The English Education in Malaysia is reformed highlights the usage of a range of textbooks and the teacher training process in understanding the CEFR scales as a whole as well as on the usage of the textbooks in accordance to the need of the blueprint (Eddie & Aziz, 2020).

At this point, it is worth noting that CEFR has six reference levels or scales which has a range of achievement descriptors from level A1 to level C2. A1 and A2 describes basic users, B1 and B2 for independent users and C1 and C2 for proficient users (Mohd Dzaquan, Abdul Halim & Tina, 2021). This scales act as a major reference scale to identify different languages users and becomes a basis for an internationally recognized scale for language users essentially to become a map to display language learning (Mohd Dzaquan, Abdul Halim & Tina, 2021). Massive changes are needed mainly among the educators and partially among the pupils in order to effectively achieve the outcomes intended through CEFR (William, 2018). The prominent transformation occurs in the adaptation of various new teaching pedagogies, choices of materials as well as deciding the best assessment style which takes into account both formative and summative assessment becomes a major challenge among the educators not only in Malaysia but also in other countries which has resorted to the CEFR framework too (Mohd Dzaquan, Abdul Halim & Tina, 2021).

In Malaysia, there are claims mentioning that the lack of teacher training and understanding towards this new implementation has led to an ineffective outcome of CEFR execution (Nur Asiquin, Abdul Halim & Masdinah, 2021). In addition, other factors such as teachers' motivation, time, knowledge in material adaptation, teachers' proficiency level and facilities play becomes a factor that affects the efficiency of a CEFR lesson delivery (Nur Asiquin, Abdul Halim & Masdinah, 2021). On the other hand, Thailand faces challenges in fostering new teachers into effective ones with the necessary theoretical knowledge and practical ability who could successfully execute CEFR into their English Education System (Kanjana & Anamai, 2021). In one of the higher education institutes in New Zealand, the educators seem to have difficulties to build assessment items which would judge their global language proficiency accurately and therefore they had the need to refer to many standard-setting procedures which would assist them in creating efficient assessment tools that would do justice in evaluating one's proficiency level (Fleckenstein, Leucht & Koller, 2018). Local and International researches regarding the implementation of CEFR has highlighted various issues from myriad of angles. Majority of them highlights on the readiness of the teachers in exploring numerous pedagogical methods that would help cater the CEFR lesson delivery. Challenges appear in delivering the message regarding the seriousness and the importance of this reformation to every educator in the countries that has adapted CEFR framework into language teaching while expecting them to be extra creative and innovative into developing materials and lesson delivery that would accommodate to the aim of CEFR.

The lack of scoping review that looks into the methodologies of previous studies in investigating the problems and gaps ascending from the implementation of CEFR has led to the aim of this scoping review which is the various methods employed in previous research to investigate the issues as well as the accomplishment made through the implementation of CEFR in both local and international curriculum. Among the objectives of this scoping review are:

1. Determine research methods that have been employed
2. Determine the samples of previous studies
3. Determine the instruments that have been used
4. Determine the data analysis techniques used in previous studies

This will then contribute in creating an understanding on the trends of issues and accomplishments that often occur in CEFR execution focusing on the methodologies many researches have used before. Hence, other options of data collection methods and samples in order to investigate the gaps exist on CEFR based research can be discovered for the usage of future researchers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DEFINING CEFR

Forty years of thorough effort from the Council of Europe emerged The Common European Framework of References which is now widely used around the globe with little adaptation and modification in terms of pedagogy, choices of materials, and methods of assessment (Tosun & Glover, 2020; Nurul Farehah & Muhammd Sallehudin, 2018). CEFR operates on an 'action-oriented' approach and vastly provides priority on students' learning preferences and needs apart from encouraging self-assessment in order to enable learners to be aware of the skills and knowledge attempted to be developed (Faez, Majhanovich, Taylor, Smith, & Crowley, 2011). It has a systematically described language learning descriptors and abilities required for learners to be an effective communicative user of language (Tosun & Glover, 2020).

This framework has six distinguished level of descriptors which is divided into three different clusters. Proficient users would fall into C1 & C2 level whereas Independent Users would be in B1 & B2 levels and lastly would be the Basic Users, A1 & A2 level. The descriptors on what the learners are able to do is termed as 'can do' statements highlighting on four main skills which are reading, listening, writing and speaking (Nurul Farehah & Muhammd Sallehudin, 2018)

Initially, CEFR was designed to provide a common Framework and guidelines of an elaborative language syllabuses, curriculum design, assessment and examinations, as well as textbooks across Europe (Europe, 2001). Nevertheless, as years went by, CEFR has been adopted in many countries such as Turkey, Vietnam, Japan, and Malaysia. However, the focus of study in the usage of CEFR varies according to different countries. Some investigates on the effectiveness of CEFR on pupils' proficiency, some seeks for information on educators' perception on the implementation of CEFR, some evaluates teacher's readiness in executing the reformation in the English education some researches on best ways to assess learners and explore variety of pedagogical methods in order to cater learners from different background, interest and needs (Nurul Farehah & Muhammd Sallehudin, 2018 & Nabilah & Hamidah , 2020)

CEFR IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Japan has utilized CEFR prominently in teaching and learning, curriculum designing and assessment designing while modifying the existing global scale to accommodate the needs of Japanese learners (Nurul Farehah & Muhammd Sallehudin, 2018).

A study in 2011, conducted in Japan highlights on investigating the application of CEFR in language education, revealing the positives as well as the challenges and difficulties faced in

the execution of CEFR (O'Dawyer, 2011 & Nurul Farehah & Muhammd Sallehudin, 2018). In addition, a study discussing on the pedagogical principles, assessment and choices of textbooks aligned with CEFR was also conducted to evaluate the fundamental factors that upholds the execution of CEFR in Japan (O'Dawyer, 2011). In addition to that, the ideologies of material selection and modification was assessed along with the e-learning system that could enhance the application of CEFR in their English language curriculum (Gaynor et.al, 2011).

On the other hand, researches pertaining CEFR in Taiwan focus on how English language tests have been applied in CEFR contexts, investigating the challenges and responsibilities faced by local exam boards and to present the effectiveness of CEFR examination through the analysis of their GEPT examination (Chou,2022). Furthermore, the quality of proficiency in speaking skills through CEFR is also investigated in Taiwan (Huang, Kubelec, Keng & Hsu, 2018).

In Vietnam, research was conducted to elicit the perception of integrating CEFR Framework in Vietnam public university curriculum (Tiep, 2017). Since English language is a pre-requisite for college and University entrance in Vietnam, the quality of English level proficiency was intended for improvisation through CEFR (Tiep, 2017). Apart from that, in Canada, the perception of novice teachers was taken into account during the consideration of implementing CEFR in their language learning curriculum (Diez-Bedmar & Byram, 2018). It elicits teachers' attitude towards autonomous learning and focuses more on the communicative and task-based teaching.

CEFR IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

Narrowing down the scope from an international context to local context in the implementation of CEFR, it has been claimed that it is rather challenging to foresee the impact of CEFR in our English Language Curriculum within a short period of implementation timeline (Nurul Farehah & Muhammd Sallehudin, 2018). Nevertheless, previous studies have brought forward some issues that has potential to impact the implementation of CEFR (Nabilah Yasin & Hamidah Yamat. 2020). One of the significant issues is related to teacher readiness. Though a significant amount of time was allocated to cascade the Curriculum Induction course in order to familiarize the teachers with the reformation in the English Language Curriculum, teachers still found it challenging to execute this curriculum in their lessons. This proves that theoretical knowledge itself may not be suffice but training sessions upon considering the limitations, the challenges, and the reality of Malaysian classrooms should be conducted along the execution of CEFR as a scaffold for the teachers to embrace the English Language education reformation gracefully.

Sidhu et al. (2018) conducted a study on school-based formative assessment which was introduce by Malaysian Education Ministry with the CEFR align curriculum found that the ESL teachers find it difficult to adopt the formative assessment method. Findings revealed that the teachers were not providing feedback on assessment which highlighted the failure of formative assessment due to the limited understanding revised CEFR-aligned school-based assessment. In another study (Le, 2018), shows that the teachers were more concerned with students achieving the required learning outcomes than students improving their language proficiency. The can-do descriptors of CEFR A1 B1 to improve students' language proficiency were not give adequate attention (Chen et al, 2021). Therefore, the whole idea of to fully achieve students' autonomy and proficiency improvement in learning cannot be accomplished. Answering to this downfall of formative assessment, a study by (Abd Samad & Haron,2021), insisted extra aid need to be supplied through Ministry of Education to teachers as to make certain formative assessment is practiced extensively through English teachers in the country considering the fact that years after the introduction, little utility of the assessment may be visible in schools.

Other than that, teachers' incompetency is also another challenge as research claims that only 25% of English teachers in primary school particularly are qualified to teach English (Nurul Farehah & Muhammd Sallehudin, 2018). Majority of English teachers have managed to attain only B1 and B2 level while the Education Director General insisted on English teachers to possess a minimum of C1 level (Nabilah Yasin & Hamidah Yamat. 2020). The content of the textbook vastly highlights oversea context and this becomes another challenge for many teachers as familiarizing the pupils with the international context in learning materials appear to be another task for the teachers rather than focusing on the development of skills among the learners (Kok, 2019). Hence, teachers have to take their own initiatives to develop their own materials that accommodates the local context which again consumes additional time and effort (Kok, 2019). Since CEFR is also crawling into the higher education institutions, study applying to the proficiency level in polytechnic and varsities are also conducted. (Nabilah Yasin & Hamidah Yamat. 2020), researched on the level of English vocabulary and grammar acquisition against CEFR descriptors among polytechnic students

Challenges, issues, shortcomings, imitations and gaps in the research related to CEFR execution in various nations calls for a scoping review that would analyze the approach and the methodology used to conduct these researches in depth. This would inform readers and future researches on the breaches that can be taken into account when conducting studies related to the implementation of CEFR

METHOD

SEARCH TERMS

For the purpose of this scoping review, the database from Google scholar, ERIC and Research gate were used. The primary keywords that were used include 'cefr' and a combination of related terms such as 'implementation', 'challenges', 'perceptions', 'effectiveness', and 'action research'. The Boolean method was applied in the search in order to capture all of the possible variations of this topic and to identify relevant papers that have been published which address the implementation of CEFR in an education system.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

The research questions of the scoping review became the guide for searching relevant studies. In ensuring the focus of the search process is maintained, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined. Five inclusion criteria were determined which are:

1. CEFR is the main component of the article
2. The article must be published between 2015-2022
3. The article must be an empirical study
4. Samples or respondents can be from various level of education
5. Findings report on the topics or issues related to the implementation of CEFR

Any articles that do not fit these criteria are excluded. This means articles that do not put CEFR at the main issue of the article, although the term is present, are excluded as they do not report on topics related to CEFR. Secondly, articles that were published before 2015 were excluded as they were outdated and may reflect different findings as compared to current studies. Thirdly, papers that are not empirical, meaning that they do not report on methodology and findings, are excluded. This means that review papers are not included in this scoping review. Identifying empirical studies is crucial for this scoping review because the aim of this

paper is to determine the methodologies that have been used to study the implementation of CEFR.

CODING SCHEME

This scoping review focuses on the methodologies that have been used to study the implementation of CEFR. By referring to the research objectives, the coding scheme was developed and divided into four categories namely; research design, sample, instrument and data analysis. All of the methodologies from the previous studies were analyzed and categorized according to these four items.

CATEGORIZATION OF RESEARCH METHODS

The first coding category was research methods. Research method is the process of collecting and analyzing data in order to understand the issues at hand (Creswell, 2012). It is at the core of any empirical research as it is the way in which researchers gather information about a particular topic. The research methods are divided into three categories namely quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. All of the papers included will be categorized into these three research methods.

CATEGORIZATION OF SAMPLE

The second coding categorization was the sample or respondents of the research. This is divided further into three subcategories which are the respondents, the country of origin and the sampling technique used. In this scoping review, the respondents were educators, including school teachers and English language instructors in colleges, and students, both in school and college levels. In terms of country of origin, the countries were not categorized into continents as there were not many variations of the countries which carried out research on CEFR. Then, in terms of the sampling technique, all of the techniques were listed out. All of the findings were calculated using frequency distribution. By analyzing the sample, the findings will point out who were the most and least studied participants, which country carried out the most research on CEFR and which sampling techniques were the most popular.

CATEGORIZATION OF INSTRUMENT

The third coding categorization was the instrument used in the previous studies. Instruments are the tools used in collecting data from respondents in a study. The instruments that have been used include survey questionnaires, interviews, checklists and tests among others. All of the instruments used in previous studies will be outlined in the findings section.

CATEGORIZATION OF DATA ANALYSIS

The final coding category is data analysis. Data analysis is the process of analyzing and interpreting the gathered data from the instrument. It is an important part of any research as the researcher will try to make sense of the data to find insight, answer their research questions and draw conclusions. As with the research method, data analysis is divided into three main categories namely quantitative data analysis, qualitative data analysis and a combination of the two (a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data analysis).

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection began in January 2022. The search process was conducted by four researchers. The keywords mentioned in the search terms were used. Researchers read the abstracts and full text in order to determine the article's relevance based on the research objectives. All of the

articles found were compiled in a google drive. The total initial articles collected were 66 articles. The 66 articles were reviewed and the researchers discussed and evaluated the relevance of the articles using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. As a result, 48 papers were selected to be included in this scoping review.

Once the number of articles were finalized, the data from all of the empirical articles were analyzed using content analysis. The details including author, year of publication, location, research method, findings and conclusions were tabulated on a google spreadsheet. The data was categorized, compiled and its frequency distribution was calculated.

DATA ANALYSIS

The content analysis technique was used to analyze the data in the spreadsheet. The methodology of the previous studies were further divided into research method, sample, instrument and data analysis. Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency distribution was used to calculate the data. The analytical results are presented and further discussed in the next section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The search used the terms 'cefr' and a combination of related terms such as 'implementation', 'challenges', 'perceptions', 'effectiveness', and 'action research'. The search engines include Google scholar, ERIC and Research gate. All of the results on the search engines were analyzed and 66 initial articles on CEFR were identified. After analyzing the articles using the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 18 articles were identified as not relevant because they were not empirical papers. Finally, a total of 48 were included in the scoping review.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the research method is divided into three main categories namely quantitative, qualitative and mixed method. Figure 1 below shows the pie chart and percentage distribution of the research methods used in the previous studies.

FIGURE 1. Pie chart of research methods
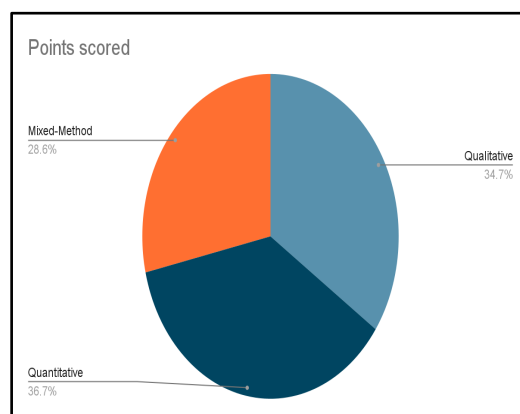
From the 48 papers that were included, the figure shows that there is a balance between all three methods. Quantitative method is the most popular method (n=18; 36.7%), followed by qualitative method (n=17; 34.7%). There is only 1 difference between quantitative and qualitative articles. Finally, the mixed method is the least popular method (n=14; 28.6%). There

is not much difference between all of the methods used when studying CEFR. Quantitative papers utilize numerical analysis to understand their findings and test their hypothesis. Researchers can easily answer their research questions as the numbers can be calculated definitively. When it comes to qualitative research, the issue at hand is explored thoroughly. Hence, a deeper understanding of the situation as thoughts, feelings and opinions are interpreted. Mixed methods support their findings by incorporating both numerical and narrative data.

Most of the articles focus on the perceptions and views of teachers and students towards CEFR implementation. They rely on questionnaires and interviews to collect data on the respondents' perceptions. Data is analyzed descriptively and reported using frequency distributions. According to Henson (2001, as cited in Hung, 2018), researchers tend to utilize familiar research methods in order to increase their chance of getting their papers published. While this may be important for expanding the literature pool, less common research methods such as longitudinal study, action research and quantitative methods which utilizes inferential statistics such as correlational study and causal comparative should also be utilized.

SAMPLE

The sample is the set of respondents selected from a larger population for the purpose of a research study (Fridah, 2002). In this scoping review, the categorization of samples is divided into three items namely, the location (countries involved), the respondents themselves, and the sampling technique used. In terms of location, the majority of the articles studied respondents from Malaysia (n=27; 56.2%). Other countries from Asia include Thailand (n=6), Vietnam (n=5), Indonesia (n=1), Japan (n=1) and China (n=1). Moreover, European countries include Germany (n=1), Spain (n=1) and Turkey (n=4). There is 1 article that studies the usage of CEFR in Australia (n=1). The overwhelming number of samples in Malaysia may be attributed to the search location of the researchers. Besides that, there is a growing interest in CEFR among English language educators in Malaysia. CEFR is integrated into the Malaysian curriculum in an effort to improve the language proficiency of students to the international standards. CEFR is a part of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) (Ministry of Education, 2013; Pillai, 2021). The Implementation of CEFR occurs in waves. The first wave was the preparation stage, conducted from 2013-2015 which concentrated on reviewing all of the English materials and improving the proficiency of teachers. The second wave was the implementation, carried out from 2016-2020 which will produce the first batch of students who took the CEFR aligned curriculum (Noor Azli, 2021). This batch will be the first to take the Malaysian Education Certificate. Hence, there is a growing interest from local researchers to examine the students of this relatively new curriculum.

Moving on to the respondents, they are divided into four categories which are school teachers, school students, university language instructors and university students. More than half of the respondents are school teachers (n=29; 60.4%). This is followed by university students (n=8; 16.6%), university instructors (n=7; 14.5%) and finally school students (n=3; 6.3%). There is one article which analyzed the textbook used by the school called 'Pulse 2'. It can be seen that the teachers are the most studied respondents when it comes to CEFR as their opinions and perceptions will point out the benefits and disadvantages of CEFR implementation. Most of the scoped articles highlight the challenges faced by teachers. This is in line with the first (2013-2015) and second (2016-2020) waves of the CEFR implementation (Noor Azli, 2021). Teachers become the main focus of education researchers in Malaysia. While the main focus was on school teachers, the university instructors and students were also analyzed. This means that there is a growing need for CEFR in tertiary education. In spite of

all this, school students, who should be at the forefront of the CEFR implementation, are given the least attention (n=3; 6.3%).

An example that could be highlighted is the research done by Precintha & Azlina (2020) where they viewed the students' perception on the foreign textbook for form 2 students called Pulse 2. It was found that students prefer a textbook that talks about culture and experiences that are familiar with the students. The Pulse 2 textbook only has cultural content from the United Kingdom. Thus, teachers are encouraged to bring in English materials that are suitable for the students. From this example, it can be concluded that more research needs to be done on the students' perspective as it will give the most valuable insight on the matter. Students are the clients in the education system. Hence, it is imperative that their views and learning experiences should be analyzed and documented to see if the curriculum is effective and suitable for them.

In addition, in terms of sampling techniques used, the most used sampling technique used was purposive sampling (n=21; 43.8%). Convenience sampling and random sampling have the same number (n=7; 14.6%). Criterion sampling and snowball sampling also have the same number (n=2; 4.2%). The other 9 articles did not mention the sampling technique.

INSTRUMENT

Among the many instruments used, a combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews ranked the first in terms of frequency (n=20; 41.6%), followed by questionnaire (n=19; 39.6%). The other instruments include video recordings (n=2; 4.2%), proficiency tests (n=2; 4.2%), text analysis (n=2; 4.2%), semi-structured interviews (n=1; 2.1%), assessment checklist (n=1; 2.1%) and extensive reading protocol (n=1; 2.1%). The combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews is the most used instrument as it is excellent in collecting and verifying data. A triangulation process can be done to affirm the findings of each instrument, thus making it the most versatile instrument in data collection. The second most popular instrument is the questionnaire itself. This is because the instrument can collect data from a large number of samples (Ng, 2006).

DATA ANALYSIS

When it comes to data analysis methods, the most popular methods are descriptive statistics (n=15; 31.2%) and a combination of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis (n=15; 31.2%). This is followed by thematic analysis (n=9; 18.8%), inferential statistics (n=7; 14.6%) and content analysis (n=2; 4.2%). These findings reflect the instruments used in articles in this scoping review as the most popular instrument is the combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Data analysis is important for interpreting and understanding the data collected. It can be suggested that researchers should use inferential statistics rather than simply descriptive statistics so that predictions and inferences can be made. This will allow policymakers to make a decision that will have a long-term impact on CEFR and the English curriculum as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This scoping review has analyzed 48 articles on the implementation of CEFR. The methodologies of the articles were extracted and analyzed to identify the research trends. This will enable other researchers to explore other methodologies that have not been used in order to expand our understanding of CEFR, specifically in the Malaysian context. The findings are divided into four categories namely research methods, sample, instrument and data analysis. From the findings, it can be concluded that there is a balance between quantitative, qualitative

and mixed methods, Malaysia has the most articles on CEFR and the focus is primarily on the teachers, the most used instrument and data analysis is the combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and the combination of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis respectively.

Consequently, the gaps that can be identified include the lack of experimental research and non-experimental methods that focus on the effectiveness of CEFR. While perceptions of teachers and students are important, the outcome of the CEFR aligned curriculum must be identified to see whether or not it achieves what it set out to achieve. Besides that, more research should be conducted on students. Finally, inferential statistics should be used to measure the projection of student achievement and outcome in the long run. In conclusion, these are the research gaps that researchers could use to carry out future research in regards to CEFR.

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