

## The CEFR in a Saudi Classroom: Implications for Academic Labor in Language Teaching

الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي المشترك في الفصل الدراسي السعودي:  
الآثار المترتبة على العمل الأكاديمي في تدريس اللغة

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### الملخص:

هدف البحث الحالي إلى استقصاء العلاقة التفاعلية بين معايير الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي المشترك والعمل الأكاديمي في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، وهو مجال تم إهماله على نطاق واسع في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية، وتمثل الهدف الرئيسي من البحث في التحقق من صورة العمل الأكاديمي الذي يقدمه المعلمون السعوديون في فصول تعليم اللغة وما إذا كانوا يتفاوضون ويبررون تجاربهم مع العمل الأكاديمي في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، تم جمع بيانات البحث من خلال الأدوات التالية: (1) المقابلات الفردية، (2) الملاحظات الصفية، و (3) المقابلات الجماعية، شارك في هذا البحث مُدرّسان سعوديان للغة الإنجليزية يعملان في إحدى الجامعات الحكومية في المملكة العربية السعودية، وقد كشفت النتائج أن معايير CEFR وجميع العناصر الفنية المرتبطة به (على سبيل المثال، العروض التقديمية، والكتب المدرسية، والأقراص المدججة، ودليل المعلم) قد شكلت بشكل كبير الإطار الفكري والوجداني للمشاركين، كما أشارت النتائج أن كلا المعلمين عانوا من صراعات فكرية ووجدانية في الفصول الدراسية بسبب فرق القوة بين مؤسستهم التي تدعم معيار الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي المشترك، وآراءهم في تعليم اللغة، ويختتم هذا البحث بدعوة للمشاركة العلمية الجادة في التفاعل بين الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي المشترك، والعمل الأكاديمي في الفصول الدراسية المعاصرة لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المكون الوجداني، الفكري، العمل الأكاديمي، اللغة، الإطار المرجعي الأوروبي المشترك.

### Abstract:

This research explores the interplay of the CEFR and academic labor in English as a foreign language classroom, an area that has been widely neglected in the contemporary English language teaching. The main aim of the research was to investigate the forms of academic work that Saudi labor experience in their language classroom and whether they negotiate and justify their experiences with academic work in ELT. The data of the research were gathered via the following instruments: (i) individual interviews, (ii) classroom observations, and (iii) group interviews. The participants of this research were two Saudi English language lecturers working in one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia. The findings revealed that the CEFR and its associated products, goods and services (e.g., PowerPoint Presentations, textbooks, DVDs, and teacher's guidebook) have enormously shaped the intellectual and emotional labor of the participants. It was also found that both teachers experienced intellectual and emotional struggles in classrooms due to the power differential between their institution that supports the CEFR and their own beliefs in language education. This research closes with a call for serious scholarly engagement with the interplay of the CEFR and academic labor in our contemporary EFL classrooms.

**Keywords:** Emotion, intellectual, academic labor, language, CEFR.

## Introduction:

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a framework that "provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (CEFR, 2001, p.1).

It serves a variety of useful functions, including describing language policies, creating syllabuses, designing courses, creating learning materials, creating exams/tests, marking exams, determining the level of language learning required, continuous/self-assessment, and teacher training initiatives. The most well-known framework for presenting, the self-assessment grid, has a vertical scale (6 levels: A1 to C2) and a horizontal scale (5 skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing<sup>1</sup>). Illustrative can-do descriptors, which outline what language learners can achieve with language at a specific level, are used to specify each level. The B1 level is known as the "Threshold level," above which students can use the language independently and successfully interact with others in society. Therefore, the main goal of teaching foreign languages in primary and secondary school is to provide an environment where students may develop the requisite language skills up to the B1 level; the B2 level is seen as being covered at the university level (CEFR, 2001, pp. 26–27).

The CEFR has grown in importance around the world, not just in Europe, particularly in the field of language assessment. For instance, the CEFR is presently used to align key language proficiency assessments for 25 different languages. For the first ten years after its publication, the CEFR's influence on curricula or instruction was very limited, but over the past ten years, there has been an increase in interest in using the CEFR to create the syllabuses, practical tasks, and teaching materials (North, 2007). Since its introduction in early 2000s, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), as a neoliberal project, aims to facilitate employability and upward social mobility across Europe. This market-oriented agenda is boldly stated in the official document of the Council of Europe (2001) language policy:

[The CEFR] provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis. (p. 1)

What could be interpreted from the above objectives is that (i) the CEFR can be adopted in any context across Europe, and (ii) it has the potential of providing an ideal language learning, teaching, and assessment situation. It also has the potential to offer effective guidelines for language education in core areas, including (a) approaches to English language teaching, (b) levels of language learners, (c) language users/learners, (d) issues of language competency among language learners, (e) language teaching/learning, (f) tasks in language classrooms, (g) issues of language curriculum, and (h) language assessment practices (see The Council of Europe 2001 for detailed accounts on these issues).

Strikingly, since its introduction in the early 2000s until now, the debates on the pedagogical effectiveness of the CEFR and its political, ideological, economic, and neoliberal agendas still unrest in Europe, "which is the framework's main target" (Barnawi, 2018). Language scholars across Europe have been examining the pedagogical effectiveness of this framework from different perspectives, including promoting language learning through CEFR (Jaakkola, et al., 2001), the CEFR in relation to globalization of language policy (Byram & Parmenter, 2012), issues of context sensitivity in the CEFR (Coste, 2007), the CEFR and the production of spoken English (Don, 2020), criteria for language assessment quality in the CEFR (Fulcher, 2008), and 'achieving transparency, assuring quality, sustaining diversity' in the CEFR (Moe, 2008), to name a few.

While the debates for and against the adoption of this framework across Europe have been on going, higher education institutions in non-European contexts, including Saudi Arabia—SA (which is the focus of this research) have been quick to adopt this framework throughout their language programs. At the same time, as Barnawi (2018, 2020) convincingly argues, leading international publishers such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Pearson Education, and McGraw Hill Education invaded and have been invading the global English language education industry/market with different CEFR-oriented products, goods, and services. Such a package includes ready-made PowerPoint Presentations, teacher guidebooks, test banks, DVDs, CDs, textbooks, audio materials, and professional development package for teachers. Indeed, language researchers in different English as a foreign and second language contexts and settings have extensively examined and documented issues surrounding the CEFR in language classrooms and beyond from different epistemological, theoretical, historical and pedagogical perspectives as well as through different research methods, tools, and designs (see, Alih, Abdul Raof, & Yusof, 2021; Barnawi, 2018; Ng & Ahmad, 2021; Savski, 2020; Shin & Yunus, 2021; Sidhu, Kaur, & Lee, 2018; Uri

& Abd Aziz, 2018; Waluyo, 2020; Yüce & Mirici, 2019). Common in the arguments posited by the aforementioned researchers is that the CEFR and its implementation in different English as a foreign and second language contexts and settings have brought about issues of linguistic and social inequality, pedagogical inappropriacy, cultural and ideological tensions in language classrooms, unfairness in language assessment practices, and instrumentalization of language education (see, Sahib & Stapa, 2021). Indeed, it should be acknowledged that the above researchers have made valuable scholarly contributions to the current debates on the implementation of the CEFR and its impacts in different geographical locations. These researchers have also opened a new space to further explore the CEFR and its complexities and nuances in non-English dominant societies, with intentions of contributing to the existing research literature. To that end, this research attempts to join the current debates on the CEFR in English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms through the prism of academic labor, an area that has been widely neglected in the current research literature. It is argued that examining the intersection of the CEFR in EFL classrooms and academic labor profoundly matters and is of dire importance. First, this line of inquiry allows us to delve into the inner workings of this neoliberally charged framework in a particular social and education context. Second, investigating the CEFR through the prism of academic labor enables us to critically conceptualize language teachers' 'emotional experiences and emotional labor behaviors' (Benesch, 2012), thereby offering new directions of understanding the impacts of implementing the CEFR in the field of English language teaching (ELT).

In what follows, the researcher critically discuss the CEFR and its different players in our contemporary English language education market/industry, with a particular focus on the ways in which this neoliberally-charged framework has contributed to 'commodification' (Gao, 2017), 'quantification' (Luke, 2017), and 'instrumentalization' (Kubota, 2011) of English language education today. The researcher then make a conceptual connection between the impact of implementing the CEFR and academic labor in EFL classrooms. Through a phenomenological approach, the researcher examine the experiential, lived aspects of academic labor in the implementation of the CEFR and its associated products, goods and services in EFL classrooms. The phenomenological approach is appropriate to investigate the aforementioned line of inquiry for it emphasizes "the research of direct experience taken at face values; and one which see behavior at determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by external, objective and physically described reality" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 23). This research closes with a call for serious scholarly

engagement with the interplay of the CEFR and academic labor in our contemporary EFL classrooms.

### **The CEFR as Neoliberal Language Policy**

While "language policies generally seek to establish, regulate, and conform linguistic practices – whether explicit or implicit – that occur within an 'authorized' domain" (De Costa et al., 2020, p. 1), neoliberal rationalities in English language teaching and learning refer to the "philosophy of sustaining entrepreneurial and competition-seeking practices under the umbrella of free markets" (Phan & Barnawi, 2015, p. 546). Today, neoliberal discourses of individualism, self-interests, incessant competition, profit-generation, self-management, accountability and other business-friendly rhetoric have shaped and continued to shape pedagogical policies and practices of the CEFR in many ways and forms. Conceptually, the framework is aimed "to equip all Europeans for the challenges of intensified international mobility and closer co-operation not only in education, culture and science but also in trade and industry" (The Council of Europe, 2001, p. 3). In this context, English is construed as an essential tool through which users could capitalize on in order to engage in international mobility, transnational interaction and business communication across Europe and beyond. While this is all happening, it has been believed that "the user of English can, through effort and hard work, be transformed into a better form of human capital through increasing his/her formal or measurable competence in English" (Warriner, 2016, p. 495). Notably, this neoliberal ideology of English language education circulates what types of language skills and competencies users/learners need; what forms of curriculum, syllabus, and teaching materials are needed by universities to prepare their students for a global job market; what types of assessment practices testing publishers should devise in order to sell their products and goods to different clients (e.g., schools, students, companies, etc.); and what types of teaching approaches language teachers should use in order to comply with the CEFR framework.

A close analysis of the CEFR policy document shows that this framework has created a huge market for different players, with different levels of power. Since its inception in the early 2000s, The Council of Europe, in collaboration with Cambridge University, has been successful in marketing the framework across Europe and beyond. Under their direct logistic and academic support, the framework has been translated into over forty languages, including Indo-European and Asian languages (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). Importantly, today the framework has created a breeding ground for language testers to correlate their tests products such as *Test of English as a*

*Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and successfully sell them to clients in different parts of the world. Likewise, leading international publishers used the CEFR as a coherent and comprehensive reference tool to devise various products and services, including international textbooks tagged with A1, A2, B1, B2 Levels and the like; teacher manuals and guidebooks that describe how to spend every single minute in classrooms; and guided learning hours that describe how many hours of instruction are needed in order to move between levels. Policymakers and curriculum specialists at different universities around the world use the CEFR document to regulate their day-to-day operations as well as language program evaluations. Language teacher educators and professional development specialists use different CEFR-oriented materials produced by*

international publishers such Cambridge University Press, Pearson Education and McGraw Hill Education to train both in-service and pre-service teachers to devise western-oriented classroom pedagogical practices (predominantly the communicative approach to ELT and task-based learning) in their local contexts.

For instance, the framework postulates six levels of language proficiency that could be used to measure users' language ability, with descriptors to each level (known as 'Can Do' descriptors). Can Do statements describe what language learners can do in the four core skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing (The Council of Europe, 2001). Table 1 below illustrates the CEFR six levels of language proficiency alongside their descriptors.

**Table 1: The CEFR six levels and their descriptors**

PROFICIENT USER	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.
	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.
INDEPENDENT USER	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. 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.
	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 & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
BASIC USER	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.
	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.

In addition to the above, a close analysis of the above CEFR six levels and their descriptors demonstrate that this framework has been using language as an acquisitional hierarchy in that students would move from A1 Level to A2 Level, for example, after certain periods of instruction without taking into account issues of motivation, and language attitudes and aptitudes in a given social and educational context (Barnwi, 2018; Little, 2007). This is evident in the guided learning hours proposed by the framework as shown below.

**Common European Framework Guided Learning Hours**

**Table 2: CEFR and Guided Learning Hours**

CEFR LEVEL	GUIDED LEARNING HOURS
A1: Beginner	90-100
A2: Elementary	180-200
B1: Intermediate	350-400
B2: Upper-intermediate	500-600
C1: Advanced	700-800
C2: Proficient	1000-1200

Overall, this framework has not only restructured English language to fit the neoliberal aspiration imaginary by projecting it as “a set of flexible skills, acquired by the entrepreneurial self in the market” (Shin, 2016, p. 511), but it also commodified language learning and teaching by depicting “students...[as] as consumers, educational practices as services, faculty/teachers as employees or service providers, and education as resources or product” (ibid). What we learn from this neoliberal-charged framework is the “ways in which language can be objectified, standardized and quantified in the service” (Morgan, Pennycook & Kubota, 2017, p. xiv) global market agendas for English education. English has been projected as an object that can be easily and quickly acquired through quantification (Luke, 2017) and instrumentalization (Kubota, 2011). The accountability of the CEFR is thus determined by teachers’ ability to successfully operationalize it in their classrooms. The researcher argue that the ways in which this framework quantifies and instrumentalizes language has serious

implications for academic labor in language instruction. In the following section the researcher elaborate on this argument.

**The CEFR and academic labor in EFL classrooms**

Broadly speaking, in the context of university language programs, language teachers are laborers. That is, they are regulated by upper management (e.g., deans, department head, etc.), policies, curricula, and other institutional rules and regulations. This suggests that there is always a hierarchy in academic labor, as Benesch (2018) argues. At the same time, teachers adjust their intellectual labor, emotional labor and/or physical labor according to regulations and expectations set by their institution. Indeed, definitions, orientations, processes and operations of academic labor vary from one country to another (see, for example, Kogan et al. 2001). Nevertheless, under today’s neoliberal, global higher education market, characteristics of academic labor among different countries are seemingly universal, and centered on “salaries, status, recruitment procedures, workloads, career patterns, promotion rules, [and other day-to-day scientific and classroom pedagogical practices]” (Musselin, 2005, p. 135).

In this context, the researcher argue that the CEFR, as a neoliberal project, today has significantly regulated the internal works of language teachers in different higher education systems around the world in a seemingly common patterns, thereby challenging national particularities on the one hand and putting the notion of “academic production (knowledge) as a public good” (Musselin, 2005, p. 135) under incessant attack on the other. By way of illustration, one of the core theoretical, historical, and pedagogical values of the CEFR is to promote employability and upward social mobility across Europe. Such top-down values set by the Council of Europe, in collaboration with Cambridge University, have re-shaped the desired topics to be taught in international ELT textbooks as well as approaches to language teaching and learning in these textbooks.

Guided by the neoliberal ideology of the CEFR, leading international publishers such as Pearson, Cambridge University Press, and McGraw Hill Education publish textbooks that focus on jobs, foods, entertainments, sports, fashion, travel, celebrity, future, and dreams to prepare language learners for both local and global job markets. Because the CEFR and its associated products (e.g., teacher's guide books, DVDs, and PowerPoint Presentations) emphasize communicative approaches to ELT as well as task-based learning, language teachers are compelled to abandon other locally relevant classroom pedagogical practices. Because the CEFR postulates that language learners would need between 90 to 100 learning hours in order to move from A1 level to A2 level, for example, language teachers have to strictly frame their teaching strategies accordingly to the CEFR's logics and values, thereby sacrificing their own autonomy as teachers. In order to help language learners to move between levels, teachers have to complete teaching a set of prescribed materials (e.g., a commercial textbook, online learning resources, PowerPoint Presentations, test banks, DVDs, and CDs) in a given period of time. This, indeed, could shape the types of instructional activities teachers use in classrooms as well as the amount of time they dedicate to teach certain language skills, thereby regulating their day-to-day scientific and classroom pedagogical practices. Furthermore, when the CEFR becomes an operating mechanism within a university language program (i.e., curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, and assessment practices), rules and incentives of professional developments activities and decisions are also organized according to the objectives and standards of the same framework. This research explores how language teachers in one of the Saudi English medium of instruction (EMI) oriented universities negotiate their academic labors.

### Method Research setting, methodology, and participants

This research explores the interplay of academic labor and the CEFR in one of the public Saudi universities; an area that has been widely neglected in the contemporary research literature. English is the medium of instruction across the university. It offers both undergraduate and graduate programs in a wide range of disciplines, including humanities and social sciences as well as science, technologies, engineering, and medicine. It has both local (Saudis) and international English language teachers.

### Methodology:

This research uses a phenomenological approach to examine the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ: What forms of academic labor do Saudi language teachers experience within their CEFR-oriented language classrooms?

- RQ: How do they negotiate and justify their experiences with academic labor in ELT?

The phenomenological approach is relevant to address the above questions for it helps us learn from the experiences of others. Furthermore, it emphasizes an individual's lived experiences in a given social and educational context. It helps us to answer the question of the 'what and how of human experience' (Vagle, 2018). Guided by a phenomenological qualitative approach, this research attempts to learn how two Saudi English language teachers experience and negotiate their academic labor while teaching at the CEFR-oriented preparatory English program of one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia. The data of this research emerged from three sources: (i) individual interviews, (ii) classroom observations, and (iii) group interviews. Table 1 below offers a comprehensive background about the two participants.

**Table 3: Background information of participants in the research.**

No	Teachers	Qualifications	Teaching experiences	Courses
1	The first participant	MA in Applied Linguistics TESOL Certificate	2 years	Skill-based English for academic purposes
2	The second participant	Med. in TESOL	3 years	Skill-based English for academic purposes

The individual interviews aim to elicit the participants' views about the CEFR and its various products, goods and services. It is important to emphasize that classroom observation allow us to research the experiences of the two participants in naturalistic settings on the one hand, and offers detailed accounts about effective pedagogical practice (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000) on the other one. At the same time, the group interview gives both the participants and researcher opportunities to discuss and exchange ideas and potential problems (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). All classroom observations were scheduled with the participants in advance. During the course

of classroom observations, both participants were informed that the goal of these observations was to document overall pedagogical efforts they are making in order to comply with their school's CEFR-oriented curriculum, policy and practice. The data of the research were codified, analyzed and thematized based on the themes the above research questions.

### **The CEFR in Saudi classrooms: One-size-fits-all**

The findings of the individual interviews revealed that both participants were aware about the CEFR and the ways in which it has been aligned with different components of the preparatory year intensive English program of their university. Both participants reported that this framework is rich and offers a detailed description of language learners and their levels by skills. The first participant described his first experience with the CEFR as follows:

I was first introduced to this framework during my induction week at one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia. I still vividly remember when the course coordinator shared a full set of teaching and learning resources such as teacher's manual, textbooks, PowerPoint Presentations, and test banks tagged with CEFR, and informed me that this is the ideal map of your successful teaching journey here. I felt so relaxed! This is because I thought by strictly following instructions given in this framework my teaching would be effective. At the beginning I thought the framework is flexible in a sense that both experienced and new teachers like me can successfully implement it. Throughout the time, it caused confusion and made my teaching difficult.

Likewise, the second participant acknowledged that the framework gives him the impression of "one-size-fits-all" in your classroom. It has many tools and online resources". He further elaborated that:

I was nervous when I first joined one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia because I am worried that I may not pass my probation period. Fortunately, all classroom observations I had with the course coordinator were successful. Thanks to the CEFR-driven teacher's book! It gave me a detailed guideline on how to start and end my class; what forms of activities I should use to keep my students engage; and how I should assess them to ensure that they are learning. It is seriously one-size-fits-all framework.

Both the first participant and the second one were novice teachers with a few years of teaching experience. Their seemingly positive views about the CEFR is not surprising for several reasons. The *Introductory Guide to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for English Language Teachers* published by Cambridge University Press (2013) often entails bold claims

such as "it is flexible", "non-descriptive" and "teachers can adopt it according to their teaching contexts". Also, in the CEFR, it has been claimed that "different sets of materials have been developed for different circumstances and languages – but they all fit into a general approach designed by the Council of Europe" (The CEFR-Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 11). Indeed, such vague, generic vocabularies and other rhetorical flashes about the effectiveness of the CEFR are still not empirically substantiated. Thus, such claims need to be critically examined, especially through the lens of neoliberal English language education policy agendas in today's higher education market where English "is increasingly treated as a thing that can be exchanged for economic profit" (Shin & Park, 2016, p. 445). In order to better understand the two participants' experiences with the CEFR framework in their everyday classroom practices and its effects on their academic labor, classroom observations were conducted with them. It is important to note that the classroom observations were mainly focused on emotional labor and intellectual labor in the context of the implementation of the CEFR. The classroom observations were also focused on the ways in which they negotiate and justify their academic labor inside classrooms. Below the researcher summarizes each participant's experience with the CEFR in classrooms. After that, she critically analyzes how each participant negotiate and justify his academic labor at one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia.

### **The first participant: With this framework I am mentally and emotionally exhausted**

The first participant teaches an 8-credit hour course called English I (CEFR Level A1-A2) to first semester students. It is a skill-based course offered to students at one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia. He teaches Reading and Writing. The content of the course is centered on topics such as job, immigration, vacation, and sports. Notably, in classrooms, the first participant's teaching strategies seemed to be systematic, and repetitive as well.

- He would often spend the first 10 minutes of the class by asking a volunteer student to read aloud the assigned topic. After that he would put students in pairs or small groups to share their opinions or views about the text. Then he would call on volunteers to share their opinions with the class. He would then share some photos related to the text and ask students to take turns describing them.
- He would spend the second 10 minutes of the class by asking unit-specific questions to help students focus more on the unit they are studying.

- He would then spend 5 minutes playing the audio recording of the Q classroom in order to help students engage in conversation with each other. He sometimes would replay the audio if needed.
- He would then spend around 15 minutes asking students to complete the activities from their book and then check their answers with their partners. While students were working on the activities from the book, he would go around the class and offer support if needed.
- He would then spend the last 10 minutes of his class by inviting students to ask each other questions and share some of their answers with the class. He would then finally ask them to complete the remaining writing activities from the unit as homework. These activities included writing short sentences about topics such as job and sports. He would always use Unit Assignment Rubrics to grade students' writing.

Interestingly, the first participant seemed to have several justifications for using these seemingly systematic approaches to teaching reading and writing. "Although it was difficult to relate my current teaching strategies to the Practicum in TESOL Course that I had during my MA program, they serve the needs and expectations of my institute here. Here, everything in our teaching needs to be documented for accreditation purposes. Also, because we have over 20 sections for the same course, the institute always wants to maintain a fixed standard of teaching and learning among students. Thus, following the teacher's handbook is the best way to make everybody happy, and keep your job" (The first participant, Interview). Notably, this response suggests that the first participant is not naïve about the pedagogical challenges caused by the CEFR policy in his institute in general and classroom in particular. Instead, he is attempting to be pragmatic with the current status quo and avoiding putting his job at risk. Yet, he still feels that "this framework" made him "mentally and emotionally exhausted":

I know my teaching style has become robotic, and I feel like moving inside ready-made templates. But eventually I had to because the merit of my teaching is evaluated based on how effectively I use the instruction of teacher's handbook, CD-ROM, and PowerPoint Presentations associated with the textbook. I do not have enough time, nor do I have the autonomy to use my own teaching materials or even create my own way of teaching and assessment practices. For example, all teachers are required to assess students' writing using a pre-defined assessment rubric at the end of each unit. There is no room for innovation and creativity. It is painful!" (The first participant, Interview).

What we can observe from the experiences shared by the first participant above is that the CEFR has regulated and controlled his both intellectual and emotional labor in classrooms. Intellectually, he could not use his intuitions and varying sense of plausibility to devise context-sensitive classroom pedagogical strategies that are responsive to the immediate needs of his students. Despite the first participant not being passive about the pedagogical challenges caused by the adoption of the CEFR, the expectations of his institute compelled him to adopt western-generated approaches such as task-based learning (TBL) and communicative language teaching (Canagarajah, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). These western-oriented approaches perpetuated in the CEFR and its associated materials severely contrast with the current trends of English language teaching that emphasize the adoption of post-method pedagogy and its three parameters—'particularity', 'practicality' and 'possibility'—as an ideal framework for responding to local intellectual conditions (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The first participant felt emotionally drained because, as Benesch (2012) describes, language teaching is a very emotional experience. The ways in which the CEFR policy shaped his classroom pedagogies and treated his students in classrooms as well as testing have put him in multiple cross-roads, including frustration, anger, and other states of mind.

### **The second participant: It is flexible in theory, but the reality is different**

Similar to The first participant, the second participant teaches an 8-credit hour course called English I (CEFR Level A1-A2) to first semester students. It is a skill-based course. He teaches Listening and Speaking. The content of the course is centered on topics such as business, 21st century skills, foods, and famous names. In classrooms, the second participant's teaching strategies can be labelled as "by book". The notion of 'by-book' refers to the way in which he has been strictly following the teaching strategies provided in the teacher's handbook in classrooms. Below the researcher summarizes his classroom strategies:

- He would often spend the first 15 minutes of his class by putting students read sentences and definitions from the text and then circle correction definitions for each sentence. He would then go over each sentence with his students to discuss vocabulary words, elicit parts of speech and use the word in a new example or context. As a tip for success, he would encourage students to monitor each other's responses and expressions (e.g., for example, such as, how about, and so on).
- He would spend around 10 minutes from the class by reading words and definitions from the textbook aloud, and at the same time asking students to practice pronouncing the words correctly. After that



he would call on two volunteer students to read conversations from the textbook.

- He would spend from 3-5 minutes asking students random questions from the lesson, and encouraging them to speak in English as much as possible.
- He would then play the listening audio and ask students to guess some main ideas from the conversation and at the same time respond to some listening comprehension questions. Finally, he would replay the audio and then ask students to compare answers with a partner and visit the Q Online Practice to improve their listening and speaking skills.

What is interesting about the second participant's classroom strategies is that he felt that the CEFR is flexible in terms of pedagogical choices and rich online audio resources available for students to practice their listening and speaking. However, factors such as large classrooms, time-constraints, unified quizzes and exams, and institutional standards and expectations hinder the flexibility of the framework:

When I first joined the English Language Institute at one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia, I thought, as a university lecturer, I can freely develop my own syllabus and course materials; I can adopt teaching materials that are relevant to the needs of my students; and use classroom strategies that I see fit. I also used to view the CEFR as a flexible framework through which I can choose, adopt, modify and reject particular teaching strategies, course materials and assessment practices. Gradually, I learned that it is an inverted flexibility. I noticed that the framework has a soft power that forces you to regulate your teaching strategies and assessment techniques according to its logics and values. Worse, because all our language program components are based on the CEFR, it is difficult to detach yourself from it. Importantly, when dealing with large class, teaching loads and upper management that strongly support the CEFR, it is difficult to put your job at risk. I often do not enjoy the way I am currently teaching, but I had to! (The second participant, Interview)

A close analysis of the second participant's response revealed that the CEFR and its rich ready-made materials are deceptive for teachers in non-English dominant societies such as Saudi Arabia. Because the framework has shaped the listening and speaking syllabus, curriculum guidelines, examinations, and textbooks at one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia, it seems a daunting task for a language teacher to abandon it and then justify that his student would move from Level A1 to A2. Consequently, a teacher has to struggle with his emotional labor and

institutional power in his everyday classrooms. One of the noticeable gaps of the CEFR, despite its popularity across the world, is that it does not consider issues of teachers' emotional labor in English as a foreign or second language teaching. The researcher argues that this critical scholarly gap needs further scholarly attention. This framework seems to project teachers as handmaidens of its content. It does not allow teachers to play more visible and active roles while teaching, thereby assuming more autonomy and ownership in their teaching practices. It subordinates the EFL teachers by imposing ready-made policy, curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, pedagogies and assessment practices on them. This is in line with Benesch's (2018) arguments on issues of 'needs analysis' and 'rights analysis' in English for Academic purposes that states in many cases the language "teacher was seen as the person who would make that content approachable and understandable to the...students, with no modification on the part of the content teacher" (p. 545).

### **We need a transformative framework of ELT in Saudi Arabia**

The findings of the group interviews further revealed that the participants were grappling to negotiate their academic labor in their CEFR-oriented language institute due to the mixed feelings—joy, frustration and disappointment—brought about by this framework. These constellations of feelings were captured by the first participant as follows:

I successfully passed my probation period by strictly following the CEFR guidelines. I am currently painfully consuming this framework, and the upper management, some students and colleagues are happy with my performance. But this framework does not give me time and space to use strategies such as drilling and memorization which are not only relevant but some of my students badly need them to cope with the course requirement. I also cannot design my own assessment practices. I feel like my teaching skills are not advancing anymore. We are just followers, not creators or contributors. We do not have enough space! (The first participant, Interview)

Supporting the first participant's concerns, the second one also reported that "with the CEFR our A to Z teaching strategies are quantified. Thus, our everyday jobs become systematic, and boring sometimes. Also, the absence of national framework of English language made it challenging for us to imagine and create alternative discourses" (The second participant, Interview). He further added: Sometimes I wonder why senior teachers and professors at my schools are not interested in questioning the inner workings of this framework. Do they have different perspectives? Or they have

already raised this issue with the upper management? But I am confident that they are aware of the ways in which this framework has been framing our teaching profession. (The second participant, Interview)

The refusal to fully accept the adoption of the CEFR is evident in the responses shared by the first participant and the second one above. At the same time, both participants call for the importance of developing a national framework that is sensitive to the local context and has the potential to advance their teaching profession. The above participants' experiences with the CEFR in relation to academic labor in English language teaching necessitate that we, as critical applied linguists, need to study this framework from a post-structuralist perspective in order to identify, discuss and document its nuances and complexities in a given social and education context. The contention is that poststructuralism states that just because the official document of the CEFR says this framework is flexible, non-prescriptive, non-dogmatic and context sensitive, that does not mean it is true. The conflicting experiences shared by the first participant and the second one in this research is one piece of concrete evidence. Thus, we need to look at the social, and cultural politics of naming in the CEFR (e.g., levels, descriptors, flexible, and so on) alongside the consequences of such practices and their relation to power in ELT.

### Limitations of the Research

- The present research is limited to a small sample size (two participants) as they willingly agree to take part in the current research.
- The present research is also limited to males only which does not reflect equality between the genders.
- The present research is also limited to two novice instructors which might be avoided in future research.

### Conclusion

Through the phenomenological approach, in this research the researcher examined the experiential, lived aspects of academic labor in the implementation of the CEFR and its associated products, goods and services in EFL classrooms. Specifically, through individual interviews, classroom observations, and group interviews with two Saudi lecturers working the English Language Institute of one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia.

The research questions were: "What forms of academic labor do Saudi language teachers experience within their CEFR-oriented language

classrooms?', and 'how do they negotiate and justify their experiences with academic labor in ELT?'.

The findings of this research emphasize the importance of this line of inquiry, especially in under-researched contexts such as Saudi Arabia. This research demonstrated that the CEFR, as a neoliberal project, labeled English language education into different categories and quantified them as well. This 'commodification' (Gao, 2017) and 'quantification' (Luke, 2017) of language has not only regulated and turned the job of language teachers at one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia into a systematic way, but they have also brought about intellectual fatigue and emotional struggles. Crucially, it was found that because the CEFR has been logistically and financially supported by the upper management (e.g., deans, department head, program coordinator, and course coordinator), their teaching practices have also been regulated significantly. This created a hierarchy at the English Language Institute of one of the public universities in Saudi Arabia where the two participants work. This very hierarchy of power affected their autonomy in classrooms. This is because decisions about curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, and assessment practices are made at the top and imposed on them, thereby depicting them as laborers irrespective of their beliefs, training and education. Although this is a small-scale research, it is tempting to pronounce that the findings, as shown above, raised red flag pertaining to language teachers' emotions and power in English as a foreign language classroom. The researcher argues that this very notion of power in the context of CEFR in relation to academic labor needs to be critically examined, identified, discussed, and theorized in the contemporary research literature. Thus, a further large-scale ethnographic research is needed to conceptualize different aspects of academic labor in the context of the CEFR in particular and English as a foreign or second language in general.

### Suggestion for Further Research

In the light of the results attained in the present research, it is suggested conducting research considering adopting the mixed method to investigate the interplay of the CEFR and academic labor in English as a foreign language classroom. It is suggested replicating the same research with a larger sample size in future research.

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