



UNILANG: using the CEFR to express language learning outcomes in UK and Irish higher education

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The context

- Development of non-commercial language certification schemes in universities across Europe.
- Focus on the linguistic requirements of higher education students and graduates.
- Aims: to provide a transparent and reliable certificate, and to facilitate academic and professional mobility (NULTE, 2018).



UNILANG: its aims and scope

UNILANG is a certification scheme that “serves to help UK university students articulate and translate what their language learning outcomes mean in terms of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)”

(UNILANG website, <http://www.unilang.ac.uk/>).

Why is the CEFR suitable to institution wide language programmes (IWLPs)?



- IWLP: importance is placed on helping students to develop the ability to apply linguistic knowledge in speaking, writing, listening and reading to achieve particular functional goals.
- The CEFR offers descriptors which include these competences.

How does it work?



- UNILANG approved external examiners validate the learning outcomes against the CEFR.
- Students issued "certificates of recognition".
- Approval of external examiners based on written attestation, supported by a senior colleague.
- Not all languages, not all levels, not all institutions.
- Supported by HEA, UCML, AULC.

Take-up to date



- **56 registered examiners**
- **Certificates: 1,368**
- **Participating universities**
 - Durham University
 - The University of Bristol
 - The University of Manchester
 - The University of Sheffield
 - The University of Warwick
 - The University of Exeter

The validation process



- Module outlines and syllabi are sent to the UNILANG approved external examiner.
- The external examiner verifies that the learning outcomes are aligned with the CEFR.
- Assessment tasks prepared by internal examiners are reviewed and approved by the external examiner.
- During the assessment period, samples of students' work are made available to external examiners.

External examiners' review of assessment samples



- Variations in examinations' content and style: two examinations at the same CEFR level can be remarkably different in style.
- CEFR bands of language proficiency are quite wide, and the cut-off levels for different examinations (e.g. for the same level in different institutions) can be pitched at different points within the range.
- Standard setting: “a process of establishing one or more cut scores on examinations. These cut scores divide the distribution of examinees' test performances into two or more CEFR levels” (Council of Europe, 2009: 7).

Managing students' expectations



The scheme certifies the achievements of individual students by benchmarking their internal grades against the external CEFR standard as follows in this example:

Stage 2	A1 for a mark of 64% and below A2 for a mark of 65% and above
Stage 3	A2 for a mark of 64% and below B1 for a mark of 65% and above
Stage 4	B1 for a mark of 64% and below B2.1 for a mark of 65% and above
Stage 5	B2.1 for a mark of 64% and below B2 for a mark of 65% and above



Managing students' expectations

- Students not achieving the CEFR threshold mark can be issued with a UNILANG certificate for the band below (e.g. a mark of 55% at Stage 3 does demonstrate ability at A2 level).
- Alternatively, UNILANG certificates can be issued exclusively to students who have achieved the cut-off point (i.e. 65%).

Managing students' expectations



- The range of pass marks in most universities is very wide (e.g. 40%-100%).
- Students in different bands of this range have attained different levels of language knowledge and communicative competence.



Managing students' expectations

A pass mark of 40% does not necessarily imply that the student has attained the level of communicative competence that would justify progression from one CEFR band to the next.



CEFR descriptors encompass a wider, more complex range of competences than university modules' learning outcomes.

Managing students' expectations



- Therefore, discrepancies between pass marks (e.g. 40%) and UNILANG cut-off points (e.g. 65%) exist (as with official language certification exams).
- This can be perceived as a problem with regard to the management of students' expectations: if a student passes a module advertised as A2 with a 42% mark, why would they not receive an A2 UNILANG certificate of recognition?

Managing students' expectations



- Students' expectations should be managed through early and transparent statements of the module's level and requirements...



Managing students' expectations

- in module outlines, advertising every module as allowing to achieve the level ratified by the external examiner and the immediate lower level (e.g. A1/**A2**, A2/**B1**, B1/**B2**, etc.);
- if the UNILANG cut-off point is already known, advertising this in the module outline (e.g. "Students who achieve a mark of 65% or more will receive a UNILANG certificate of validation at ... level").



Issue of UNILANG certificates of recognition

- The hosting institution issues certificates of recognition to students. These should be signed by the director of the IWLP and the external examiner.

Using the CEFR to express learning outcomes in higher education



- In UNILANG, the application of CEFR-based indicators of communicative competence conflicts with the traditional assessment system in universities.
- Do you know of any other instances where this is the case?

Sources



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