



## **Necessity of Empirical Research for Adapting CEFR Proficiency Levels to Burmese as a Foreign Language**

**San Yu Wai Maung**

De Le laboratoire EDA (Éducation, Discours, Apprentissages (URP 4071))

Corresponding Author: [sanyuwaimaung@gmail.com](mailto:sanyuwaimaung@gmail.com)

Received: 1st February 2026

Revised: 10st June 2026

Accepted: 11st June 2026

DOI: <https://doi/10.55981/salls.2026.15179>

### **ABSTRACT**

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has become one of the most influential frameworks in second and foreign language learning, teaching, and assessment since its publication in 2001. While originally developed for European languages, its proficiency descriptors have been widely adopted and adapted across diverse linguistic contexts worldwide. However, in the field of Burmese as a foreign language, the absence of standardized proficiency benchmarks and reference levels continues to create challenges for curriculum design, instructional planning, learner progression, and assessment practices. Consequently, key questions concerning what should be learned at different stages and how language proficiency should be defined remain insufficiently addressed.

This study investigates the potential application of the CEFR to Burmese language education through a qualitative descriptive research design. The study draws on document analysis of CEFR policy documents, proficiency descriptors, and existing literature on Burmese language teaching and assessment. Data were analyzed through comparative and contextual analysis to identify opportunities and challenges in adapting CEFR principles to the specific linguistic and sociocultural characteristics of Burmese.

The findings indicate that the CEFR provides a valuable reference framework for structuring Burmese language learning outcomes, establishing proficiency benchmarks, and supporting the development of more systematic assessment practices. However, direct adoption of CEFR descriptors is insufficient because several linguistic features of Burmese, including its script, sociolinguistic conventions, and communicative practices, require contextual adaptation. The study therefore argues for a localized CEFR-informed framework that integrates international standards with the specific needs of Burmese language learners.

Theoretically, this study contributes to ongoing discussions regarding the transferability and adaptation of global language proficiency frameworks to less commonly taught languages. Practically, the findings offer recommendations for curriculum development,

proficiency assessment, and future research on CEFR adaptation in Burmese language education and other underrepresented language contexts.

**Keywords:** proficiency scales; proficiency levels; communicative competence; Burmese as a foreign language; CEFR

## Introduction

In second and foreign language teaching, learning, and assessment, proficiency scales and frameworks provide the standard for defining and measuring language proficiency. Comparable norms and standards are essential for certifications, assessments, furthermore, they facilitate the design of language programs and learning outcomes. Determining 'what' should be taught is a central concern in language didactics and clear structuring of learning content, stages, sequencing, and grading is indispensable for effective instruction and a well-defined learning process.

In the case of Burmese as a foreign language, its status as a less commonly taught language has resulted in relatively limited research on language proficiency development and assessment. Burmese is often perceived as a difficult language to acquire due to its linguistic complexity and the scarcity of pedagogical studies, a perception that may discourage potential learners despite their diverse motivations for studying the language. Furthermore, the absence of clearly defined proficiency benchmarks and functional language descriptors has made it difficult to establish systematic learning pathways and measurable learning outcomes. Consequently, proficiency frameworks developed for other languages, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), are often adopted without sufficient consideration of their suitability for the Burmese language context. However, the use of externally developed proficiency scales without empirical validation or contextual adaptation may limit their effectiveness in supporting Burmese language learning and assessment.

Although the CEFR has become a globally recognized framework for language education, questions remain regarding its applicability to languages with linguistic and sociocultural characteristics that differ substantially from the European languages for which it was originally designed. In particular, the distinctive features of Burmese, including the divergence between spoken and written forms, present challenges for the direct application of CEFR proficiency descriptors. Despite the increasing use of CEFR terminology in Burmese language programs, there remains a lack of research examining how the framework can be meaningfully adapted to the specific requirements of Burmese as a foreign language. This gap highlights the need for a critical examination of the relationship between global proficiency frameworks and local language-learning contexts.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the relevance and potential adaptation of the CEFR to Burmese language education by examining the theoretical principles underlying the framework and evaluating their applicability to the linguistic and pedagogical characteristics of Burmese. Particular attention is given to the ways in which CEFR proficiency descriptors can be contextualized to accommodate the unique features of Burmese, especially the differences between spoken and written language use. Through this analysis, the study seeks to demonstrate why further empirical research is necessary before CEFR levels can be systematically implemented in Burmese language teaching and assessment. By addressing these issues, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on the adaptation of international proficiency frameworks for less commonly taught

languages and provides insights for curriculum development, assessment design, and future research in Burmese language education.

### **Understanding the CEFR as a Framework Beyond Its A1–C2 Proficiency Scales**

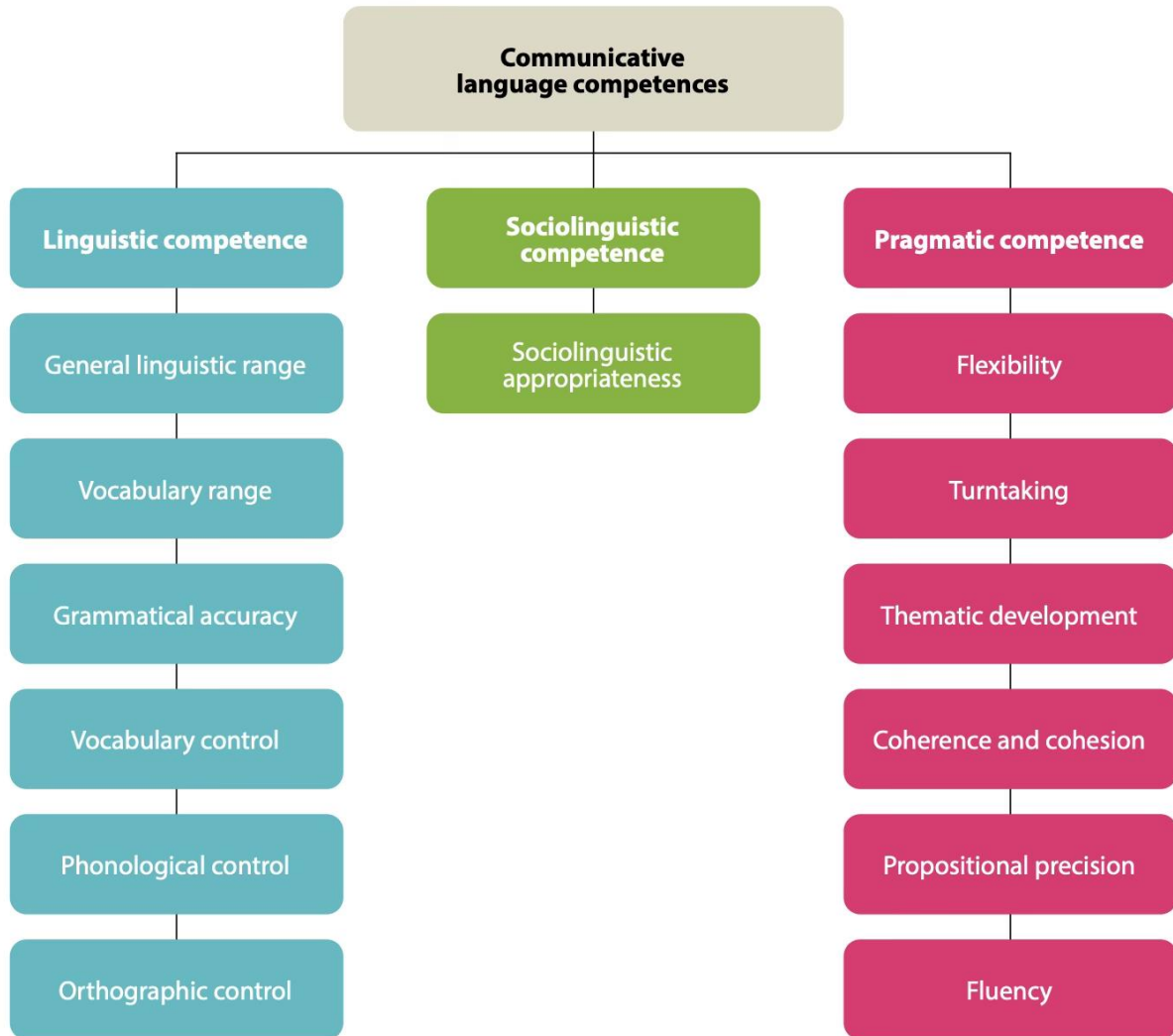
The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), developed by the Council of Europe and first published in 2001, serves as a comprehensive framework for language learning, teaching, and assessment. Its title itself reflects an important principle: learning and teaching are positioned before assessment, highlighting the framework's pedagogical orientation rather than its function as a testing instrument (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 11; Council of Europe, 2018, p. 28). The CEFR was designed to provide a common basis for the development of language curricula, syllabi, textbooks, examinations, and educational policies across diverse linguistic contexts (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1).

Rather than functioning solely as a proficiency scale, the CEFR offers a multidimensional conceptual framework for understanding language use and language learning. The framework is organised into nine chapters covering its objectives, theoretical foundations, action-oriented approach, language activities, proficiency descriptors, pedagogical implications, and assessment principles. As Beacco (2017, p. 4) argues, the CEFR functions as a reference instrument that systematically identifies and describes the constituent elements of language knowledge and the parameters involved in language learning and teaching. Consequently, its role extends beyond assessment to include curriculum design, programme development, and educational planning.

A central feature of the CEFR is its broad conception of language use. The framework conceptualises language learning as a form of social action in which individuals operate as social agents who mobilise a range of competences to accomplish communicative tasks in specific social contexts (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 9). Within this action-oriented approach, language users are not viewed merely as learners acquiring linguistic forms but as active participants engaged in meaningful social interaction. The CEFR therefore distinguishes between general competences and communicative language competences. General competences include declarative knowledge (*savoir*), skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*), existential competence (*savoir-être*), and the ability to learn (*savoir-apprendre*) (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 16). Communicative language competence, meanwhile, comprises three interrelated dimensions: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence.

Figure 1 illustrates the multidimensional structure of communicative language competence proposed in the CEFR. The figure demonstrates that language proficiency is not confined to grammatical knowledge alone but encompasses sociolinguistic appropriateness and pragmatic effectiveness. This conceptualisation reflects the CEFR's view that successful communication depends on the interaction of multiple competences operating simultaneously in authentic communicative situations.

**Figure 1.** Communicative language competences (Council of Europe 2020, 129)



The communicative competence model underlying the CEFR draws on earlier theoretical contributions from Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), Bachman (1991), and Savignon (1997). Although organised differently, the CEFR incorporates linguistic, strategic, pragmatic, and sociocultural dimensions of communication (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 135). As a result, the framework provides a rich and multidimensional description of language proficiency rather than a purely linguistic or grammatical model (Harsch, 2017, p. 252; Piccardo et al., 2019, p. 104).

Despite this comprehensive orientation, the CEFR is frequently reduced in practice to its proficiency scales ranging from A1 to C2. While these levels have become widely recognised in language education and certification, they represent only one component of the broader framework. As stated in Chapter 2 of the CEFR, proficiency levels were introduced primarily as practical tools to support programme development, curriculum

planning, and examination design (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 20). Little (2007, pp. 644–645) similarly observes that the framework's influence on language testing has often exceeded its impact on curriculum development and pedagogy. Likewise, Piccardo (2013, p. 191) argues that practitioners frequently limit their understanding of the CEFR to its scales and descriptors because these are the most visible and accessible elements of the framework. However, reducing the CEFR to its proficiency scales risks overlooking its broader pedagogical and curricular functions.

Indeed, the CEFR offers a much wider range of applications than proficiency assessment alone. Beacco (2017, p. 43) demonstrates that the framework can guide the definition of educational objectives, learner needs analysis, curriculum and syllabus design, content selection, specification of communicative situations and text genres, determination of learning outcomes, and the development of teaching methodologies. These applications illustrate that the CEFR functions not merely as a classification system for language proficiency but as a comprehensive framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating language education programmes.

Consequently, the CEFR should not be applied mechanically or transferred directly from one language context to another. Instead, it requires contextualisation through needs analysis, curriculum adaptation, and careful consideration of learner characteristics and target-language specificities (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 13). This principle is particularly relevant for less commonly taught languages such as Burmese, where linguistic structures, sociolinguistic realities, and educational objectives may differ substantially from the European contexts in which the CEFR was originally developed. Therefore, understanding the CEFR as a multidimensional framework rather than merely a set of proficiency scales is essential for any meaningful discussion of its adaptation to Burmese language education.

## Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design using a document analysis approach. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected because the study seeks to understand and interpret the conceptual foundations of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and examine its potential applicability to Burmese as a foreign language. Rather than measuring variables quantitatively, qualitative descriptive research aims to provide a systematic and contextualized understanding of complex educational and linguistic phenomena (Puren, 2013). This approach is particularly suitable for exploring how a reference framework developed within a European context may be adapted to the specific linguistic and pedagogical characteristics of Burmese language education.

The primary data sources consist of key CEFR reference documents, including the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) and the *CEFR Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2020). These documents were selected because they constitute the principal theoretical and operational foundations of the CEFR. To contextualize the analysis, secondary sources were also examined, including studies on Burmese language teaching and learning, publications on less commonly taught languages, curriculum-related materials, and scholarly literature addressing CEFR adaptation and implementation in non-European contexts. The inclusion of these documents was based on their relevance to language proficiency frameworks, curriculum development, and Burmese language education.

Data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis procedure. First, the selected documents were read repeatedly to identify key concepts related to language proficiency, communicative competence, curriculum development, learner needs, and contextual adaptation. Second, relevant data were coded and categorized according to major thematic areas derived from the research objectives, including (1) the conceptual foundations of the CEFR, (2) the functions of proficiency levels, (3) principles of contextual adaptation, and (4) challenges associated with Burmese language education. Third, the identified themes were compared and interpreted to evaluate the extent to which existing CEFR concepts correspond to the linguistic and pedagogical realities of Burmese as a foreign language. Finally, the findings were synthesized to identify implications for future research and the development of Burmese-specific reference levels.

Because the study also draws upon the author's expertise as a native speaker of Burmese and an experienced instructor of French as a Foreign Language, researcher positionality was considered as an important interpretive resource. However, personal experience was not treated as primary data. Instead, it served to support the interpretation of documentary evidence and to provide contextual insights into language teaching practices. To minimize subjective bias, interpretations were grounded in published sources and cross-checked against existing scholarship on language education, CEFR implementation, and Burmese language learning.

Through this qualitative document analysis, the study aims to provide a theoretically informed and context-sensitive examination of the relationship between the CEFR and Burmese language education, while identifying areas that require further empirical investigation for the development of appropriate proficiency benchmarks.

### **Overview of Burmese Language**

Burmese is the official language of Myanmar and serves as the principal medium of communication across the country. Despite Myanmar's linguistic diversity, which includes 135 officially recognized ethnic groups and hundreds of languages and dialects, Burmese has developed as the dominant lingua franca and national language (Bradley, 2016, p. 1; Bradley, 2018, p. 117). Since independence in 1948, Burmese has functioned as the primary language of instruction in schools and has been widely used in government administration, the judiciary, media, and public communication (Vittrant, 2019, p. 56). Consequently, many members of minority ethnic groups use Burmese either as a first language or as a second language for interethnic communication (Bradley, 2018, p. 117; Wheatley, 2003, p. 195).

From a genealogical perspective, Burmese belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Similar to many Sino-Tibetan languages, Burmese exhibits tonal distinctions and predominantly monosyllabic lexical structures, although multisyllabic words are also common (Allott, 1985, p. 132). These typological characteristics distinguish Burmese from many Indo-European languages and contribute to some of the challenges encountered by foreign language learners.

The Burmese writing system is derived from the Brahmi script tradition, which has also influenced the orthographies of several South and Southeast Asian languages. Although originally developed for Indo-Aryan languages such as Pali and Sanskrit, the script was later adapted to represent Burmese phonology (Vittrant, 2019, p. 56). Because Burmese

is a tonal language with phonological features that differ substantially from those of Indo-European languages, the adaptation of the writing system involved a number of orthographic adjustments and historical developments (Bernot et al., 2010, p. III).

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Burmese is the substantial divergence between its written and spoken varieties. This phenomenon is commonly described in the sociolinguistic literature as diglossia, referring to the coexistence of functionally differentiated language varieties within the same speech community (Vittrant, 2019, p. 57). In Burmese, the formal written variety is used in official documents, literature, educational materials, and public communication, whereas the spoken variety is employed in everyday interaction. Importantly, these differences extend beyond stylistic variation and involve systematic distinctions in vocabulary, grammatical markers, particles, and discourse structures.

To illustrate this distinction, Figure 2 presents a comparison between spoken and written Burmese using the sentence “He works in Yangon.” The figure demonstrates how grammatical markers and particles differ across the two varieties while conveying the same propositional meaning. Such differences exemplify the complexity of Burmese diglossia and highlight an important linguistic characteristic that learners must acquire when developing proficiency in the language. For example, to express ‘He works in Yangon’ in both spoken and written forms:

<b>In spoken form:</b>						
သူ	(က)	ရန်ကုန်	မြို့	မှာ	အလုပ်လုပ်	တယ်။
/θù/	(/gǣ/)	/jàu̯.gòsɔ̯/	/mjɔ̯/	/mà/	/ʔə.lɔsʔ.lɔsʔ/	/tɛ̯/
He/She	subject marker (optional)	Yangon	city/town	in	work	sentence final marker in the present tense
<b>In written form:</b>						
သူ	သည်	ရန်ကုန်	မြို့	တွင်	အလုပ်လုပ်	သည်။
/θù/	/θi/	/jàu̯.gòsɔ̯/	/mjɔ̯/	/dwiu̯/	/ʔə.lɔsʔ.lɔsʔ/	/θi/
He/She	subject marker	Yangon	city/town	in	work	sentence final marker in the present tense

Figure 2: ‘He works in Yangon’ in Burmese spoken and written forms

The example presented in Figure 2 shows that differences between spoken and written Burmese are particularly evident in the use of subject markers, tense markers, and sentence-final particles. In spoken Burmese, the subject marker (က) /gǣ/ may be omitted in certain contexts, whereas its use is generally expected in the written variety. Similar distinctions can also be observed in the selection of verbs, adverbs, and grammatical constructions, resulting in a written form that is often more elaborate and lexically dense than everyday spoken Burmese.

The divergence between spoken and written Burmese is further reinforced by the influence of Pali, the liturgical language of Theravāda Buddhism. Pali-derived vocabulary occurs more frequently in formal and written registers, contributing to the prestige and formality associated with written Burmese. Literary texts, official documents, and academic writing typically contain a higher concentration of Pali loanwords than ordinary spoken communication. Consequently, learners must acquire not only

grammatical knowledge but also register-specific lexical choices in order to communicate effectively across different contexts.

This diglossic situation presents important implications for Burmese language education. While native speakers acquire spoken Burmese naturally through everyday interaction, they are generally introduced to the written variety through formal schooling (Bradley, 2016, p. 8). However, the linguistic principles underlying the distinction between spoken and written forms are not always explicitly explained in educational contexts. As a result, both native speakers and foreign learners may encounter difficulties when determining which forms are appropriate in formal writing or public communication. Understanding this structural complexity is therefore essential when considering the development of proficiency frameworks and reference levels for Burmese language learning.

The existence of two functionally distinct varieties also has significant implications for the adaptation of the CEFR to Burmese. Since communicative competence in Burmese involves navigating both spoken and written forms, any proficiency framework designed for Burmese must account for this diglossic reality. This linguistic characteristic suggests that proficiency descriptors developed for Burmese may require different emphases from those used in many European languages, particularly with regard to register awareness, sociolinguistic competence, and the ability to alternate appropriately between spoken and written language varieties.

### **The Current State of Burmese Language Learning**

The development of Burmese language teaching for foreign learners gained momentum during the early 2000s as Myanmar gradually became more accessible to international engagement. This process accelerated after the political and economic reforms initiated in 2010, which increased the presence of expatriates, researchers, development practitioners, investors, and humanitarian workers in the country. As documented in educational and sociolinguistic literature, these developments contributed to a growing demand for Burmese language instruction among non-native speakers seeking professional, academic, or social integration within Myanmar.

For many international actors working in Myanmar, acquiring Burmese became essential for establishing direct communication with local communities and accessing social, cultural, and professional networks. Consequently, the demand for Burmese language courses expanded considerably. However, despite this increasing demand, the field of Burmese as a foreign language remains relatively underdeveloped. Existing literature reveals a limited degree of institutionalization, standardization, and pedagogical research compared with more widely taught languages.

The teaching of Burmese to non-native speakers can be traced back to the late nineteenth century through the work of British missionaries and scholars who produced some of the earliest grammatical descriptions and pedagogical materials. Although these efforts cannot be considered foreign language didactics in the contemporary sense, they provided an important foundation for subsequent studies of Burmese language structure and usage. Later contributions by scholars such as Bernot (1980), Bernot et al. (2001, 2020), Okell (1969, 1994a, 1994b, 2002), and Okell and Allott (2001) significantly expanded the resources available for learners and researchers.

Nevertheless, document analysis conducted in this study indicates that Burmese as a foreign language remains insufficiently defined as an academic and pedagogical field.

Unlike many internationally taught languages, Burmese lacks an established framework that clearly specifies learning objectives, proficiency stages, curricular progression, and expected learning outcomes. This absence creates difficulties in determining what should be taught, how learning content should be sequenced, and how learner achievement should be assessed.

The importance of defining Burmese as a foreign language can be understood through van Ek's (1986, p. 3) distinction between decisions concerning *what to learn* and *how to learn it*. Without a clear conception of the language as an object of foreign language instruction, it becomes difficult to establish coherent pedagogical objectives or design appropriate learning pathways. Existing teaching materials further illustrate this challenge. Most available resources focus primarily on beginner and intermediate learners, while advanced-level materials remain scarce. Moreover, some instructional programmes continue to rely on materials originally developed for native-speaking children, despite the substantial differences between first-language acquisition and foreign-language learning contexts.

Document analysis also reveals the absence of a comprehensive language policy supporting Burmese as a foreign language at either the regional or international level. In contrast to languages promoted through established international institutions—such as the Alliance Française, the British Council, the Goethe-Institut, or the Instituto Cervantes—Burmese lacks comparable organizations dedicated to the international dissemination and standardization of language teaching. Furthermore, Burmese does not function as a major transnational language within Southeast Asia, reducing incentives for large-scale policy development and international promotion.

Several contextual factors help explain this situation. Myanmar's complex political history, prolonged periods of internal conflict, and shifting national priorities have limited investment in international language promotion. In addition, the enduring influence of English as the principal foreign language in education, business, and international communication has reduced the perceived necessity for foreigners to acquire Burmese. As a result, Burmese remains a less commonly taught language, and research on its teaching, learning, and assessment continues to be relatively limited.

The observations presented in this section are derived primarily from document analysis of relevant scholarly literature, language-learning resources, and policy contexts. In addition, the author's professional experience as a Burmese language instructor provides contextual insights that support the interpretation of these findings. However, such experiences are used as supplementary reflections rather than as primary empirical evidence.

### **Presentation of Teaching Burmese for Foreign Learners**

As discussed, Burmese language teaching and learning are closely tied to the country's political climate. Political shifts significantly affect the economy, society, and culture, shaping Burmese language learning in response. Over the past three decades, Burmese language teaching has undergone substantial changes, particularly following the country's economic opening in 2010 and the subsequent 2021 coup d'état, which led to the country's closure.

Well in advance of the political shifts of 1988, the academic study of Burmese was already established in international institutions such as SOAS (School of Oriental and African

Studies), INALCO (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales) in France, and Northern Illinois University (NIU) in the United States, as well as in various universities across Japan, China, and neighbouring countries.

As mentioned before, demand for Burmese language courses steadily rose from the early 2000s onwards. This growth was particularly noticeable after Myanmar's political opening and democratic transition began in 2010, alongside the growing presence of expatriates and foreign nationals. The University of Foreign Languages in Yangon, the country's economic hub, and the university in Mandalay, the second-largest city, introduced Burmese courses for foreigners. However, these programmes were primarily designed for full-time students and required three years of study to earn a diploma. This made them unsuitable for working professionals, instead catering mainly to learners seeking a formal academic degree in Burmese. As a result, private Burmese language courses and learning centres for foreigners gradually emerged across the country.

Following the 2021 coup, the country's political economic and social landscape suffered profound repercussions leading to a decline in Burmese course demand. However, despite this drop in demand within Burmese territory, there are still foreign learners wishing to learn Burmese, particularly those who have managed to remain in the country. Even with decreasing local demand, there are still learners interested in studying Burmese in other countries. The rise of distance learning and the digital era have reduced geographical constraints. Today, many universities worldwide continue to offer Burmese programs, complemented by a growing number of private online platforms and digital learning offerings.

### **Need for Reference Levels**

As discussed in the previous sections, Burmese as a foreign language currently lacks a standardized reference framework capable of defining learning objectives, organizing learning progression, and describing language proficiency in a systematic manner. In the absence of a national or international language policy specifically dedicated to Burmese language education, institutions have independently developed their own curricula and assessment systems. Consequently, learners who have completed Burmese courses at different universities or language centers often possess substantially different levels of competence despite being classified under similar labels such as "beginner," "intermediate," or "advanced."

This situation raises a fundamental question: what do proficiency labels such as *intermediate* or *advanced* actually mean in the context of Burmese language learning? At present, there is little consensus regarding the knowledge, skills, and communicative abilities that learners are expected to acquire at each stage. Moreover, it remains unclear whether these labels refer primarily to spoken communication, written proficiency, literary comprehension, or a combination of these competences. As a result, proficiency classifications often lack transparency and comparability across learning contexts.

The issue becomes even more complex when considering the diglossic nature of Burmese discussed earlier. Since spoken and written Burmese differ substantially in vocabulary, grammatical markers, and stylistic conventions, defining language proficiency requires determining whether learners should master one variety, both varieties, or different combinations of the two. Furthermore, much of the existing linguistic literature focuses on colloquial spoken Burmese, while formal written Burmese remains comparatively

underrepresented in pedagogical research, with notable exceptions such as Okell (1994a). These factors make the development of coherent learning pathways and proficiency descriptors particularly challenging.

The absence of standardized benchmarks has encouraged some institutions to adopt internationally recognized proficiency frameworks. For example, the Australian National University (ANU) indicates that completion of its first-year Burmese program corresponds approximately to the A1 level of the CEFR (The Australian National University, 2024). Similarly, several universities in the United States have attempted to align Burmese language instruction with the guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), including curriculum and textbook development initiatives at institutions such as Arizona State University and the University of Wisconsin–Madison. These examples illustrate the growing recognition of the need for proficiency benchmarks, even though a systematic adaptation to Burmese has not yet been fully developed.

A similar tendency can be observed in digital language-learning environments. The expansion of online courses and self-directed learning platforms has increased access to Burmese language instruction. However, most platforms focus primarily on vocabulary acquisition and basic grammatical explanations organized around thematic topics. While some providers claim alignment with CEFR proficiency levels, the pedagogical content often emphasizes isolated linguistic forms rather than the broader communicative competences envisioned by the CEFR. For instance, Loecsen (2019) states that learners can achieve an A1 level after completing a series of thematic units. Nevertheless, an examination of the platform's content suggests that the learning activities primarily target vocabulary and formulaic expressions, without systematically addressing sociolinguistic, pragmatic, or strategic dimensions of communication.

Evidence of the growing influence of the CEFR can also be observed in learner communities, language-learning websites, and institutional course descriptions, where proficiency labels such as A1 and A2 are increasingly used as indicators of achievement. However, because no empirically validated CEFR descriptors currently exist for Burmese, the meaning of these labels remains ambiguous. This raises important questions regarding what A1 or A2 proficiency actually means in the context of Burmese language learning. Without language-specific descriptors and empirical validation, such classifications may provide only a superficial indication of learner ability and may not accurately represent communicative competence in Burmese.

The challenge is particularly significant because the CEFR was originally developed for European languages and educational contexts. Although the framework has subsequently been adapted for a number of non-European languages, including Japanese and Arabic, these adaptations were supported by extensive empirical research, curriculum development, and descriptor validation studies. In contrast, comparable research remains largely absent for Burmese. Therefore, while the CEFR may offer a useful conceptual foundation for future proficiency development, meaningful adaptation requires systematic investigation into the linguistic characteristics of Burmese, the needs of learners, and the communicative demands of real-world language use.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that the application of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to Burmese language education cannot be reduced to the simple adoption of proficiency labels such as A1, A2, B1, or B2. Rather, any attempt to develop reference levels for Burmese must begin with an understanding of the CEFR as a comprehensive framework for language learning, teaching, and assessment. As discussed in the preceding sections, the CEFR conceptualises language use as a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses communicative language competences, general competences, communicative activities, strategies, and the contextual conditions under which communication occurs. Consequently, the development of Burmese proficiency levels requires consideration not only of linguistic knowledge but also of sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences, as well as learners' ability to engage in reception, production, interaction, and mediation activities.

One of the most significant findings emerging from the analysis concerns the diglossic nature of Burmese. The coexistence of spoken and written varieties presents a challenge that differs substantially from many languages for which CEFR-based descriptors have already been developed. As demonstrated in the overview of Burmese, communicative competence cannot be adequately described through a single linguistic system because learners must navigate two distinct yet interconnected forms of language use. This characteristic has important implications for the development of proficiency descriptors. For example, a learner may demonstrate relatively advanced oral interaction skills while possessing only limited competence in formal written Burmese. Conversely, learners trained primarily through literary texts may develop reading proficiency that exceeds their ability to participate in spontaneous spoken interaction. Therefore, future CEFR adaptation projects for Burmese may need to differentiate descriptors according to spoken and written communicative domains, particularly at intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. Such differentiation would better reflect the linguistic realities of Burmese language use and provide more accurate descriptions of learner achievement.

The findings also suggest that the CEFR can provide a valuable conceptual foundation for Burmese language education precisely because its action-oriented approach extends beyond grammatical competence. The framework encourages educators to consider how language is used in authentic social contexts and how communicative tasks are shaped by social, cultural, and pragmatic factors. In the Burmese context, where language choice is influenced by distinctions between literary and colloquial forms, this broader perspective is especially relevant. Rather than focusing exclusively on vocabulary and grammar, curriculum developers can use the CEFR to identify communicative situations, learner needs, and target competences that are appropriate for specific learning contexts.

Another important consideration concerns the role of proficiency levels within the CEFR itself. The analysis demonstrates that the A1–C2 scales represent only one dimension of the framework. While the vertical dimension describes progression in proficiency, the CEFR also includes a horizontal dimension consisting of communicative activities and communicative language competences. As a result, language development should not be understood solely as movement upward through increasingly higher proficiency levels. Learners may also make progress by expanding their communicative repertoire across different domains, activities, and contexts of language use.

This interpretation is consistent with North's (2007, p. 656) observation that the CEFR functions as a "concertina-like reference tool." The metaphor refers to the flexibility of a concertina, a musical instrument that can be expanded or compressed according to need.

Similarly, the CEFR is not intended to be applied mechanically as a fixed instrument. Instead, it allows educators and researchers to adapt, expand, combine, or refine its categories according to the requirements of particular educational contexts. This flexibility is particularly important for less commonly taught languages such as Burmese, where linguistic structures, sociolinguistic realities, and educational objectives may differ considerably from those of European languages.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of needs analysis as a prerequisite for developing Burmese proficiency descriptors. The CEFR explicitly emphasises that language programmes should be designed according to learners' needs, motivations, characteristics, and available resources (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 5). Consequently, future efforts to establish Burmese reference levels should be grounded in empirical investigations of learner profiles, communicative purposes, instructional contexts, and language use domains. Without such evidence, proficiency descriptors risk remaining overly generic and may fail to reflect the actual requirements of Burmese language learners.

Overall, the findings suggest that the CEFR offers a useful framework for Burmese language education, but only through careful contextualisation rather than direct adoption. The absence of standardised reference levels for Burmese, combined with the language's diglossic characteristics and the limited availability of pedagogical research, underscores the need for systematic empirical studies. Such research would provide the foundation for developing context-sensitive proficiency descriptors capable of supporting curriculum design, assessment practices, teaching materials, and language certification systems for Burmese as a foreign language.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined the relevance and potential adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to Burmese as a foreign language. The analysis demonstrates that, despite the growing use of CEFR labels such as A1 or A2 in Burmese language programmes, there is currently no empirically validated system of reference levels specifically designed for Burmese. Consequently, proficiency labels are often used without a clear definition of the knowledge, skills, and communicative competences that learners are expected to achieve at each stage of learning.

The findings further highlight that the challenges of developing reference levels for Burmese extend beyond the absence of assessment benchmarks. The linguistic characteristics of Burmese, particularly the distinction between spoken and written forms, raise important questions regarding the nature of language proficiency itself. These characteristics suggest that proficiency cannot be understood solely in terms of grammatical knowledge or vocabulary acquisition, but must also account for sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and contextual dimensions of language use. In this regard, the study argues that the CEFR should be understood as a multidimensional framework for language learning, teaching, and assessment rather than merely as a set of proficiency scales.

The principal contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that CEFR adaptation for less commonly taught languages requires a process of contextualisation grounded in linguistic realities, learner needs, and educational objectives. Rather than directly

transferring existing proficiency descriptors, language-specific research is needed to determine how communicative competence is manifested within the target language and its sociocultural environment. This contribution extends current discussions on CEFR adaptation by highlighting the importance of considering language-specific features, such as Burmese diglossia, when developing proficiency frameworks.

From a practical perspective, the findings provide a foundation for curriculum developers, teachers, and educational institutions seeking to establish more coherent Burmese language programmes. The study suggests that future curriculum development should move beyond arbitrary classifications such as “beginner,” “intermediate,” or “advanced” and instead be supported by systematically defined learning outcomes and proficiency descriptors.

Future research should therefore focus on several interconnected areas. First, empirical needs-analysis studies are required to identify the communicative purposes and learning objectives of different groups of Burmese language learners. Second, corpus-based investigations of spoken and written Burmese could provide evidence for the development of language-specific proficiency descriptors. Third, curriculum design and descriptor-validation studies are needed to test the applicability of proposed reference levels in real instructional settings. Finally, comparative research examining CEFR adaptation in other less commonly taught languages may offer valuable methodological insights for the development of Burmese proficiency frameworks.

In conclusion, while the CEFR cannot be transferred directly to Burmese without adaptation, it provides a valuable conceptual framework for guiding future developments in Burmese language education. Its strength lies not in the universal application of existing proficiency scales, but in its capacity to support the creation of context-sensitive reference systems grounded in empirical research and local educational needs.

## References

- Allott, A. J. (1985). Language policy and language planning in Burma. In D. Bradley (Ed.), *Language policy, language planning and sociolinguistics in South-East Asia* (p. 131-154). Pacific Linguistics. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/160608324.pdf>
- Bachman, L. F. (1991). What Does Language Testing Have to Offer? *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(4), 671–704. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587082>
- Beacco, J. C. (2017). *Les utilisations du CECR. Un manuel (version française)*. [https://www.academia.edu/35979837/Les\\_utilisations\\_du\\_CECR\\_Un\\_manuel\\_version\\_francaise](https://www.academia.edu/35979837/Les_utilisations_du_CECR_Un_manuel_version_francaise)
- Bernot, D. (1980). *Le Prédicat en birman parlé* (pp. 91–93). SÉLAF.
- Bernot, D., Cardinaud, M.-H., & Yin Yin Myint, M. (2010). *Manuel de birman* (2nd ed.). L’Asiathèque - Maison des langues du monde.
- Berruto, G. (2020). Langue, dialecte, diglossie, dilalie (D. Elmiger & M. Matthey, Trad.). *Langage et Société*, 171(3), 55–87. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ls.171.0055>
- Bradley, D. (2016). *The Languages of Myanmar*. UNICEF Myanmar. [https://www.academia.edu/32976865/The\\_Languages\\_of\\_Myanmar](https://www.academia.edu/32976865/The_Languages_of_Myanmar)
- Bradley, D. (2018). Languages. In A. Simpson, N. Farrelly, & I. Holliday (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar* (p. 117-135). Routledge.

- Calvet, L.-J. (2021). Politique linguistique. In *Langage et société, 2021/HS1 Hors série* (Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, pp. 275–280). <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-langage-et-societe-2021-HS1-page-275>
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/1.1.1>
- Cardinaud, M.-H., & Yin Yin Myint, M. (2001). *Grammaire birmane : Manuel de Birman, volume 2*. Langues & Mondes - L'Asiathèque.
- Castellotti, V. (2012). Recherches qualitatives : Épistémologie, écriture, interprétations en didactique des langues. Dans C. Goï (dir.), *Quelles recherches qualitatives en sciences humaines ? Approches interdisciplinaires de la diversité* (p. 29-44). L'Harmattan, Coll. Espaces Discursifs. <https://hal.science/hal-01390214>
- Conseil de l'Europe. (2001). Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues : apprendre, enseigner, évaluer. Éditions du Conseil de l'Europe.
- Conseil de l'Europe. (2018). *Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues : apprendre, enseigner, évaluer – Volume complémentaire*. Éditions du Conseil de l'Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/cecr-volume-complementaire-avec-de-nouveaux-descripteurs/16807875d5>
- Council of Europe. (2001). Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe. (2020). Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume. Council of Europe.
- Goullier, F. (2007). Le Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues, instrument de normalisation ou document instrumentalisé pour une normalisation de l'enseignement et de l'évaluation? *Les Cahiers de L'APLIUT*, 26(2), 12–22. <https://doi.org/10.4000/apliut.1973>
- Harsch, C. (2017). Proficiency. *ELT Journal*, 71(2), 250–253. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccw067>
- Hymes, D. H. (1972). On Communicative Competence. *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings*, 269–293.
- Little, D. (2007). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Perspectives on the Making of Supranational Language Education Policy. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91(4), 645-655. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00627.2.x>
- Loecsen. (2019). *The best Burmese course for beginners | Free*. Loecsen.com. <https://www.loecsen.com/en/learn-burmese>
- North, B. (2007). The CEFR Illustrative Descriptor Scales. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91(4), 656-659.
- Okell, J. (1969). *A reference grammar of colloquial Burmese* (Vols. 1–2). Oxford University Press.
- Okell, J. (1994a). *Burmese: An introduction to the literary style*. Northern Illinois University, Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

- Okell, J. (1994b). *Burmese: An introduction to the script*. Northern Illinois University, Center for Southeast Asian Studies.
- Okell, J. (2002). *Burmese By Ear or Essential Myanmar*. Audio-Forum.
- Okell, J., & Allott, A. J. (2001). *Burmese/Myanmar dictionary of grammatical forms*. Routledge.
- Okell, J., U Saw Tun, & Daw Khin Mya Swe. (1994). *Burmese (Myanmar): An introduction to the spoken language* (Vols. 1–2). Northern Illinois University Press.
- Piccardo, E. (2013). Assessment recollected in tranquillity: The ECEP project and the key concepts of the CEFR. In E. D. Galaczi & C. J. Weir (Eds.), *Exploring Language Frameworks: Proceedings of the ALTE Kraków Conference, July 2011* (pp. 187–204). Cambridge University Press.
- Piccardo, E., North, B., & Maldina, E. (2019). Promoting innovation and reform in language education: The CEFR in Canada and Switzerland, a comparative study. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 22(1), 103-128.
- Puren, C. (2013). *Mettre en œuvre ses méthodes de recherche, dans Cours de la méthodologie de la recherche en DLC*. <http://www.christianpuren.com/cours-méthodologie-de-la-recherche-en-dlc/chapitre-5-mettre-en-oeuvre-ses-méthodes-de-recherche/>
- Py, B. (2004). *Un parcours au contact des langues : textes de Bernard Py commentés* (L. Gajo, M. Matthey, & D. Moore, Eds.). Didier.
- Savignon, S. J. (1997). *Communicative Competence* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- van Ek, J. A. (1986). *Objectives for foreign language learning: Volume 1: Scope*. Council of Europe.
- Vittrant, A. (2019). Burmese. In A. Vittrant & J. Watkins (Eds.), *The Mainland Southeast Asia Linguistic Area* (p. 56-130). De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110401981-003>
- Wheatley, J. K. (2003). Burmese. In G. Thurgood & R. J. LaPolla (Eds.), *The Sino-Tibetan Languages* (p. 195-207). Routledge.