

Analysis of Present English Language Curriculum of Upper-Secondary Education in Mongolia

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Cite this article as: Nyamkhuu, B., Horváth, A. C., & Pereira, A. (2021). Analysis of Present English Language Curriculum of Upper-Secondary Education in Mongolia. *International Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 1(2), 38-47. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijfle.v1i2.121>

Abstract

Several changes have been made within short periods in the education sector of Mongolia. In the last decade, two curriculum reforms were adopted to strengthen the education system and improve the quality of the curriculum. Thus, the current English language curriculum of upper-secondary education has adopted a competency-based approach. This approach has been reflected significantly in the area of education, particularly curriculum. It was developed by aligning with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The present article aims to investigate the influence of the CEFR's in the English language curriculum of upper-secondary education. The learning objectives in the English language curriculum of upper-secondary education and the CEFR's communicative language activities were examined in terms of reception, production and interaction activities to attempt to explore the inaccuracy and the differences between the learning objectives and communicative language activities. It embraces document analysis which is a form of qualitative research. As it applies this methodological approach, it aspires to provide possible implications to respond more effectively to the English language teaching and learning in Mongolia.

Keywords: competency-based curriculum, competency-based education, Mongolian education, Mongolian curriculum

1. Introduction

Before the democratic revolution of 1990, Mongolia was a socialist nation where the Russian language was considered to be the most important foreign language (Dovchin, 2017). Following the revolution, Mongolia has started to embrace a free economy market, diverse culture, urbanization, and democratic society that contributed to the replacement of the Russian language and the increase in the usage of the English language. English has become the most widely desired foreign language to learn for Mongolian citizens as it provides more access to connecting to the world, obtaining job opportunities, and studying abroad. Its widespread use has changed the face of education, professional life, and interpersonal communication. This spread has occurred so suddenly and overwhelmingly that, in some situations, English has become necessary to perform vocations or professional tasks (Cohen, 2005). Subsequently, the policy was the English language was developed that indicated "English mandatory for all secondary schools" (Cohen, 2005). It is still one of the mandatory subjects in upper-secondary schools and it has been taught from primary education - 5th grade to upper-secondary education -12th grade.



Under the decision in 2011, The Government of Mongolia determined to adopt the Cambridge International teaching methods and assessment standards in Mongolia, with the aim of training a globally competitive, skilled labor force (Nookoo, 2016). The curriculum needed to be modernized, and the government wanted to introduce a new, more modern, and interactive pedagogical approach (CAIE, 2018). Therefore, the current upper-secondary English language curriculum is developed with a competency-based approach and is based on The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) which is a part of the Council of Europe's work. The CEFR is perhaps the most widely known document which describes illustrative descriptor scales and defines levels of language proficiency. It aims to facilitate transparency and coherence between the curriculum, teaching, and assessment within an institution and transparency and coherence between institutions, educational sectors, regions, and countries (Council of Europe, 2020). Thus, the present article aims to investigate the influence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in the English language curriculum of upper-secondary education and to acquire a better understanding of the upper-secondary English language curriculum. Following this general aim, it has twofold specific aims: 1) to describe upper-secondary English language curriculum and the CEFR illustrative descriptor scales of communicative language activities and 2) to analyze the learning objectives of the upper-secondary English language curriculum with CEFR A2 and B1 descriptors of communicative language activities.

The English language curriculum is divided into two parts; compulsory content and elective content to study. Each content delineates the speaking skill, the writing skill, the listening skill, the reading skill, and the use of grammar part. It is noted that the four skills of the English language are investigated but the use of grammar part is not analyzed in this article. Within the scope of this study, compulsory content of the 10th, 11th and 12th grades' English language curriculum is examined with the CEFR's illustrative descriptor scales of A2 and B1 levels as the curriculum's learning objectives were developed in accordance with those two levels. Thus, this paper aims to respond to the following research question.

1) To what extent do the learning objectives of the upper-secondary English language curriculum encompass the CEFR illustrative scales of communicative language activities?

To respond to this research question, the CEFR original version and the updated version printed in 2020 were explored in terms of communicative language activities. Moreover, the upper-secondary English language curriculum with its guidelines for 10th, 11th and 12th grades, which was updated by the Ministry of Education, and Science (MES) in 2019, were studied.

Recent studies revealed that curriculum reforms in the last decade were performed without proper research, theoretical background and poor preparation (MIER, 2019a) and the development of current competency-based curricula lacked reports on curriculum research conducted in modern times, and the reports of implementation and progress of previous curricula and standards (MECSS and JICA, 2018). Additionally, very little attention has been paid to this date to the analysis of the current competency-based English curriculum in upper-secondary schools. This indicates that there is an urge to analyze the English language curriculum. As result of this article, it will add up to the research relevant English language curriculum of upper-secondary schools that is requisite in the field and contribute to the further development of the curriculum. Over and above that the result of the study also hopes to provide an insight into the curriculum and the CEFR to the English language teachers who plan

to adopt both documents for English language teaching and learning. A brief description of the English curriculum and the CEFR is provided below.

1.1. English Language Curriculum of Upper-Secondary Education

On 13 April 2011, the Government of Mongolia signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) for cooperation on the reform of standards and curricula for elementary and secondary education. Under the Mongolia–Cambridge Education Initiative program, the curricula English language shall be adjusted to the Cambridge International standards (Nookoo, 2016). The present curriculum was reformed and implemented according to the following stages as illustrated in Table 1 (MIER, 2019b). In 2019, all curricula including the English language curriculum was revised based on the nationwide research on the implementation of the curricula where I, as a researcher, was part of it. Following the revision of the curricula, the learning guidelines for the implementation of the English language curriculum in general education have been updated for each grade of upper-secondary education.

Table 1.

Timeline of implementation of the competency-based English curriculum

Year	Education level
2014	Primary education
2015	Lower secondary education
2016	Upper secondary education – 10 th grade
2017	Upper secondary education – 11 th grade
2018	Upper secondary education – 12 th grade
2019	Revised and updated all curricula

Note. The table used from *MIER, 2019e*

The English language curriculum in Mongolia has been developed as the CEFR's learning objective-oriented for English education. The aim of English language teaching is to provide learning conditions for students to achieve communicative competence in social context including family, school, local community, country and global world, environmental issues studied through curriculum content given in a spiral form from easiness to difficulty. The English course for each grade aims to fulfill learning objectives and develop students' English language skills such as listening and speaking, reading, and writing with some relevant vocabulary and pronunciation patterns within the social contexts. Some learning objectives have been reformulated in accordance with the cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy to assess and evaluate the student's knowledge and abilities (MIER, 2019b).

Mongolia has a 12-year education system. There are 5 years for primary education, 4 years for lower-secondary education, and 3 years for upper-secondary education. From 5th grade, the English language has started being taught in public schools beginning with A1 level and the students are graduated with low B1 level as shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Language levels of English language curriculum in Mongolia based on the CEFR

Primary education (English language is taught starting from the 5th grade)	5 th grade	working toward A1
	6 th grade	Low A1
	7 th grade	Mid A1
Lower-secondary education	8 th grade	High A1
	9 th grade	Low A2
	10 th grade	Mid A2
Upper-secondary education	11 th grade	High A2
	12 th grade	Low B1

Note. The table used from *MIER, 2019b*

It can be expected that students could have completed more than a low B1 level in the English language. Nevertheless, the curriculum corresponds to the CEFR's flexibility in a branching approach. The advantage of a branching approach is that a common set of levels and/or descriptors can be 'cut' into practical local levels at different points by different users to suit local needs and yet still relate back to a common system (CEFR, 2001). Therefore, the curriculum embedded flexibility in a branching approach, and A1, A2, and B1 levels are divided into low, mid, and high levels to suit students' needs to be practical.

The aim of the upper-secondary English language curriculum is that students learn the skills to utilize information and further, use foreign language knowledge creatively and communicate in accordance with needs and interests within the framework of society, culture, science, and life (MECSS, 2019). The curriculum content is given in a spiral form from easiness to difficulty (MIER, 2019, B). Moreover, the scope of the curriculum is to develop skills and knowledge to international standards and formative assessment practices where teachers can evaluate their students' skills as well as subject new content. At this education level, teachers focus on developing students' listening and speaking skills in the 11th grade, reading and writing skills in the 12th grade (MECSS, 2019).

The curriculum is divided into five language skills; listening, speaking, reading, speaking, and use of English. The use of English is related to English grammar and some new vocabulary. Each of them has learning objectives, as illustrated in Table 3, that are aligned with the CEFR's communicative language activities.

Table 3.

Number of learning objectives in each skill (by grade)

L1-L8	Listening	8 learning objectives
S1-S8	Speaking	8 learning objectives
R1 - R10	Reading	10 learning objectives
W1-8	Writing	8 learning objectives
UE1-UE17	Use of English	17 learning objectives

Note. The table used from *MIER, 2019d*

These learning objectives are introduced to the students through the curricular topics. According to MIER, 2019, D, the upper-secondary English language curriculum has common themes in the curricular topics including daily life, individual and social life, environment, education, employment, business world, information communication, external world, arts, cultures, creative thinking. For successful curriculum implementation, the curriculum should be read and understood by teachers at first. In order to provide better understanding of the

learning objectives, it is important to analyze the learning objectives with the CEFR's illustrative descriptor scales of communicative language activities.

1.2. The CEFR Illustrative Descriptor Scales: Communicative Language Activities

The CEFR was developed as a continuation of the Council of Europe's work in language education during the 1970s and 1980s. The Common European Framework provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks. 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 (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020). Fundamentally, the CEFR is a tool to assist the planning of curricula, courses, and examinations by working backward from what the users/learners need to be able to do in the language (Council of Europe, 2020). The aim of the CEFR is to promote and facilitate cooperation among educational institutions in different countries, provide a sound basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, and assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts (Council of Europe, 2001).

To further promote and facilitate co-operation, the CEFR also provides Common Reference Levels A1 to C2, defined by the illustrative descriptors as shown in Table 4. The main function of descriptors is to help align curriculum, teaching and assessment. Educators can select CEFR descriptors according to their relevance to the particular context, adapting them in the process if necessary (Council of Europe, 2020).

Table 4.

The levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Proficient user	C2	Mastery
	C1	Effective Operational Proficiency
Independent user	B2	Vantage
	B1	Threshold
Basic user	A2	Waystage
	A1	Breakthrough

Note. The table used from the Council of Europe, 2020

According to the Council of Europe (2020), the reference levels are categorized into reception activities and production activities. Reception involves receiving and processing input: activating what are thought to be appropriate schemata in order to build up a representation of the meaning being expressed and a hypothesis as to the communicative intention behind it. Reception activity is divided into oral comprehension, audio-visual comprehension, and reading comprehension. On the other hand, production includes speaking and writing activities. Lastly, Interaction, which involves two or more parties co-constructing discourse. The CEFR scales for interaction strategies reflect this with scales for turntaking, co-operating, and asking for clarification. The interaction activities involve oral interaction, written interaction, and online interaction.

1.2.1. Reception Activities

Oral comprehension is a listening activity where the listener receives the information to comprehend what is said by the speakers. The expression "oral comprehension" covers comprehension in live, face-to-face communication and its remote and/or recorded equivalent.

Illustrative scales are provided for oral comprehension, understanding conversation between other people and for understanding as a member of a live audience, understanding announcements and instructions, and understanding audio (or signed) media and recordings.

Audio-visual comprehension includes live and recorded video material plus, at higher levels, film. Key concepts operationalized in the scale include following changes of topic and identifying main points, identifying details, nuances and implied meaning in C levels and delivery which is from slow, clear standard usage to the ability to handle slang and idiomatic usage.

Reading comprehension is taken to include both written and signed texts. Illustrative scales are provided for reading correspondence, reading for orientation, reading for information and argument, reading instructions, and reading as a leisure activity.

1.2.2. Production Activities

Oral production is a speaking activity. The language user produces an oral text which is received by an audience of one or more listeners (Hazar, 2021). The scales are provided for sustained monologue: describing an experience, sustained monologue: giving information, sustained monologue: putting a case, public announcements, and addressing audiences.

Written production, on the other hand, includes the scales of creative writing, reports and essays.

1.2.3. Interaction Activities

Oral interaction allows a person to be a speaker and listener in the communication via live and face-to-face signing. It includes the scales of understanding an interlocutor, conversation, informal discussion, formal discussion, goal-oriented cooperation, obtaining goods and services, information exchange, interviewing and being interviewed, and using telecommunications.

Written interaction concerns interactive communication through the medium of script or sign. The scales are provided for overall written interaction, correspondence, and notes, messages and forms.

Online interaction is always mediated through a machine, which implies that it is unlikely ever to be exactly the same as face-to-face interaction. It comprises the scales of online conversation and discussion, and goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration.

2. Methods

It embraces document analysis which is a form of qualitative research. The document analysis process combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis is the process of organizing information into categories related to the central questions of the research and thematic analysis is a form of pattern recognition within the data, with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis (Bowen, 2009). In this matter, public records related to the current English language curriculum of upper-secondary schools were collected and listed up according to their dates, types, genres and authors in this article. The themes of the analysis were constructed on the basis of main English language skills which are speaking, writing, listening and reading skills. Based on the themes, categories were created according to the

CEFR's format that are reception activities, production activities and interaction activities. The process involved a careful, more focused re-reading and took a closer look at the learning objectives of the curriculum along with the CEFR's communicative language activities.

In document analysis, the CEFR original version and the updated version printed in 2020 were explored in terms of communicative language activities. The upper-secondary English language curriculum was also examined in terms of learning objectives to compare with A2 and B1 levels of the CEFR. In addition, guidelines for the implementation of the English language for 10th, 11th, and 12th grades, which was updated in 2019, were studied. The learning objectives of the English language curriculum are aligned with the CEFR's A2 and B1 illustrative descriptors of communicative language activities, specifically reception activities, production activities, and interaction activities. Thus, these three components of illustrative scales were examined with the curriculum.

3. Results

3.1. Reception and Production Activities in the Curriculum

Oral comprehension and reading comprehension: The study showed that the learning objectives are general. They are vague and incomprehensible. The following table exemplifies L8 of 10th grade. As it can be seen that this learning objective used the word 'typical features at word'. However, it is unclear that what a 'typical feature' means. Thus, it is challenging to align with the CEFR descriptor. Furthermore, the words 'a limited range, a growing range and a wide range of curricular topics or text etc' mentioned in the learning objectives caused difficulty to analyse the learning objectives with the CEFR illustrative descriptor scales.

Table 5.

Examples of learning objectives in the curriculum relevant to oral comprehension descriptor in the CEFR

The CEFR – oral comprehension	English language curriculum of upper-secondary education (10 th grade – Low A2 level)
Understanding conversation between other people	L8: Recognize <u>typical features</u> at word, sentence and text level of a <u>limited range of spoken genres</u>
Understanding as a member of a live audience	L8: Recognize <u>typical features</u> at word, sentence and text level of a <u>limited range of spoken genres</u>
Understanding announcements and instructions	L8: Recognize <u>typical features</u> at word, sentence and text level of a <u>limited range of spoken genres</u>
Understanding audio (or signed) media and recordings.	L8: Recognize <u>typical features</u> at word, sentence and text level of a <u>limited range of spoken genres</u>

Audio-visual comprehension: An examination of the learning objectives reveals that the CEFR illustrative scales of "Watching TV, film and video" are not addressed in the English language curriculum. It is one of the key scales that allows learners to view live and recorded videos that they can learn to identify main points, changes in the topic, and grasp slang and idiomatic usages. In the curriculum, the learning objectives suggest gaining skills through extended talks in listening skills or texts in reading skills.

Table 6.

Examples of learning objectives in the curriculum relevant to audio-visual comprehension descriptor in the CEFR

	10th grade (Mid A2)	11th grade (High A2)	12th grade (Low B)
L1	Understand the main points in talk on a growing range of general and curricular topics with some support	Understand the main points in extended talk on a wide range of general and curricular topics with limited support	Understand the main points in extended talk on a wide range of general and curricular topics, including talk on a limited range of unfamiliar topics with minimal support
R3	Read a limited range of fiction and non-fiction texts on familiar and some unfamiliar general and curricular topics with confidence and enjoyment	Read an increasing range of fiction and non-fiction texts on unfamiliar general and curricular topics with confidence and enjoyment	Read a growing range of extended fiction and non-fiction texts on unfamiliar general and curricular topics with confidence and enjoyment

3.2. Interaction Activities in the Curriculum

Oral interaction and written interaction are not portrayed in a detail in a separate section of the curriculum. It was rather embedded in the learning objectives of the speaking and writing skills section of the curriculum. Table 7 demonstrates an example of oral interaction. For example, there are 8 learning objectives for speaking skills in the curriculum. S6, and S7 learning objectives address oral interaction. Interaction is fundamental in learning and is as important in collaborative learning as they are in real-world communication (Council of Europe, 2020). However, a little emphasis has been paid to this part while it may let learners engage in real-life conversation.

Table 7.

Example of learning objectives in the curriculum relevant to oral interaction descriptors in the CEFR

	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
S6	Link comments with some flexibility to what others say at sentence and discourse level in pair, group and whole class exchanges	Link comments with an increasing flexibility to what others say at sentence and discourse level in pair, group and whole class exchanges	Link comments with a growing flexibility to what others say at sentence and discourse level in pair, group and whole class exchanges
S7	Interact with peers to negotiate, agree and organize priorities and plans for completing classroom tasks on a limited range of general and curricular topics	Interact with peers to negotiate, agree and organize priorities and plans for completing classroom tasks on an increasing range of general and curricular topics	Interact with peers to make hypotheses about an increasing range of general and curricular topics

Online interaction is also a lack in the curriculum. Especially, when we are living in a digital age. However, it is crucial to note that this scale is newly added to the CEFR updated version of 2020. It was added after the upper-secondary English language curriculum was developed and revised. If the upper-secondary English language curriculum is improved in the future, this aspect should be considered.

4. Conclusion

The adoption of the CEFR was a significant step in the development of the English language curriculum. However, very little attention has been paid to this date to the analysis of the current competency-based English curriculum in upper-secondary schools since its adoption. The present article aims to investigate the influence of the CEFR's in the English language curriculum of upper-secondary education. It explores the inaccuracy and the differences between the learning objectives and communicative language activities by examining the learning objectives in the English language curriculum of upper-secondary education and the CEFR's communicative language activities in terms of reception, production and interaction activities to attempt.

In this particular study, the CEFR illustrative descriptor scales of communicative language activities and the English language curriculum of upper-secondary education are carefully examined from a critical perspective in a way to examine the overall nature of the CEFR and the English language curriculum. The analysis revealed main themes. Firstly, the learning objectives are general and vague. According to MIER (2019), it stated that "some curricula content and learning objectives are general and incomprehensible". This document analysis for the English language curriculum further demonstrates that learning objectives are imprecise. Thus, it indicates that they need to be specified as the learning objectives are the main part of the English language curriculum. In line with them, the public secondary school teachers develop their lesson plan, tasks and activities in the classroom. The learning objectives should be accurate with the tasks engaging with real-world situations as it is core element of the competency-based curriculum. Secondly, an examination of the learning objectives reveals that the illustrative scale of audio-visual comprehension is not addressed in the English language curriculum. The curriculum explicitly ignored the category as it is crucial component for students to develop their reception activities. Lastly, the interaction activity of the CEFR is not portrayed in a separate section in the curriculum. It was embedded in the speaking and writing skills of the curriculum. Interaction is fundamental in learning and is as important in collaborative learning as they are in real-world communication (Council of Europe, 2020). The curriculum disregards the two-way conversation. Interpersonal interactions are as important in collaborative learning as they are in real-world communication (Council of Europe, 2020). Nevertheless, it was underestimated in the curriculum. It can be concluded from the results of the study that the learning objectives of the upper-secondary English language curriculum should contain specific statements and consider the CEFR's updated version for the further development of the curriculum.

Acknowledgment

I would like to extend my appreciation to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Attila Czabaji Horváth, a professor at Faculty of Education and Psychology of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. Furthermore, I would like to express gratitude to my mother and sister. Without all of them, I would not have been able to pursue my doctoral studies in Hungary.

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