

Second Language Acquisition and Assessment Among ELT Learners at NUML Peshawar: A Case-Based Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and assessment practices among English Language Teaching (ELT) learners at NUML Peshawar, with a focus on CEFR levels A1, B1, and C1. The research examines how learners at these distinct levels experience and respond to SLA methods, as well as how assessment tools integrate with their linguistic capabilities. Drawing on case-based analysis, the study presents 30 detailed learner profiles and analyses their progression through SLA processes. The methodology comprises qualitative interviews, classroom observations, and performance assessments, which are analysed using thematic and comparative approaches. Data reveal key pedagogical and institutional challenges, highlighting the importance of contextualized instruction and appropriate assessment methods. The study also argues that CEFR standards can be more effectively implemented to support learner outcomes. By proposing practical implications for curriculum designers, language instructors, and policymakers, the research contributes to ongoing discussions on effective SLA and fair, level-specific assessment. This article gives a conclusion with suggestions for promoting learner-centred teaching and aligning teaching methods with CEFR objectives. The article is a valuable contribution to the expanding body of evidence for research-based enhancements in ELT programs in Pakistani higher education settings. The study concludes by providing recommendations for SLA-based curriculum development, along with instructor development strategies, and the impact of the CEFR on creating fair and efficient assessment frameworks.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, CEFR, ELT, Assessment, Case-Based Analysis.

Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has been a foundational framework in the fields of linguistic and educational research, providing insights into how learners acquire expertise in using a new language (Ellis, 1994). Students at NUML Peshawar, learning English at various CEFR stages—from beginners at A1 to advanced learners at C1, exhibit distinct challenges and growth patterns that reveal broader global trends in Second Language Acquisition. This research examines their learning experiences, the effectiveness of assessments, and how theory is applied in practice within the Pakistani context. Over time, SLA models have undergone significant changes. While theorists and researchers, such as Swain, emphasize the significance of output (Swain, 1985), others, like Stephen Krashen, propose the idea of intelligible input, which the learner needs that is just a little bit above their existing stage and level (Krashen, 1982). The development of language is also

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influenced by learners' motivation, social contact, and cultural resources (Dörnyei, 2005). In academies and institutions like NUML, these theories help explain how language learners interact with English inside and outside the classroom (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Despite the increased adoption of CEFR in Pakistani higher education, limited research exists on how learners at different CEFR levels acquire English and how assessment methods influence their learning outcomes. This study addresses this gap by focusing on ELT learners at NUML Peshawar. The research aims to analyse learner performance across CEFR levels and investigate the effectiveness of assessment methods in capturing learners' accurate language acquisition and learning abilities.

Research Questions

1. How do ELT learners at NUML Peshawar procure English across CEFR levels (A1, B1, C1)?
2. What challenges and trials are most common at each proficiency level?
3. How effective are the assessment methods used in assessing learner progress?
4. What learner-centred tendencies appear in case-based analyses at each level?

Literature Review

This chapter examines prevailing literature on Second Language Acquisition (SLA), CEFR, and assessment performances in ELT.

SLA and Assessment

Old-fashioned assessment methodologies and approaches (e.g., grammar-focused exams) often fail to seize communicative competence. Researchers advocate for performance-based assessment, portfolio evaluation, and formative assessments to align better with CEFR objectives. Gulzar & Qadir (2021) highlight a mismatch between classroom teaching and assessment strategies in Pakistani ELT programs. Recent research (Rahman, 2020; Aslam, 2022) emphasizes the sociocultural and institutional challenges that affect English acquisition in Pakistani universities. These include limited exposure to real-life English usage, exam-oriented teaching, and resource constraints.

Among the primary concerns of language teaching over many years has been how to effectively assess students' progress and understand how individuals acquire a second language (Brown, 2007). As the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in curriculum development increases, particularly in institutions such as NUML Peshawar, there is a need to align teaching approaches with proficiency descriptors (Council of Europe, 2001). This chapter revisits major concepts and studies in second language acquisition (SLA) and language testing, with a special emphasis on vocabulary acquisition, grammar, and classroom-based assessment at A1, B1, and C1 levels.

How Learners Acquire Language: Theoretical Perspectives

Language acquisition is a dynamic process that is influenced by cognitive, social, and environmental factors (Gass & Selinker, 2008). The most influential notion of SLA is intelligible input (Krashen, 1982)—the idea that learners develop over time when they receive input in a language that is marginally beyond their existing comprehension level. This is often denoted as "i+1", where "i" is the learner's current level and "+1" represents the subsequent stage in their linguistic growth. In the context of NUML Peshawar, at the A1 level, learners benefit most when language instructors use slower and reduced language, basic texts, and visuals to create input that

is stimulating enough to drive them forward in their learning. These are crucial to learning; without such scaffolding, these learners become disengaged and overwhelmed.

Krashen claims that if the input given to learners is not comprehensible, then there will be no language acquisition, regardless of the amount of exposure a learner has (Krashen, 1985). Consequently, CEFR-guided instruction, which prescribes what language learners should be able to grasp and produce at each separate stage, naturally lends itself to the implementation of comprehensible input in language learning classrooms.

Another critical theory relevant to this research is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which accentuates the social aspect of learning. Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with the support and guidance of a more knowledgeable other. This theory supports the collaborative approaches applied in the B1 and C1 classrooms at NUML, where instructor scaffolding, group discussions, and peer feedback help bridge the gap between current knowledge and new learning. Language learners at the B1 level move beyond passive learning and enter a zone where social interaction promotes deeper language processing when they are engaged in presentations, speeches, or debates. Sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of learner engagement and shared knowledge construction, both of which are essential in advancing learners along the CEFR scale.

A third essential and foundational theory in SLA is Interlanguage Theory, presented by Selinker (1972), which posits that learners construct an evolving and unparalleled linguistic system as they acquire a second language. This "interlanguage" is well systematic and rule-based, although it often contains errors, yet it reflects the learner's existing stage of progress. At NUML Peshawar, C1 learners exhibit signs of stabilizing interlanguage, displaying characteristics of near-native fluency, albeit with occasional slips and errors in stylistic manifestation or academic tone. Selinker emphasizes that these errors are not just random mistakes—they are an indication of language learning in progress.

Instructors and evaluators, therefore, must evaluate and interpret learners' output not as failure but as developmental markers. Responses, feedback, and repetition—primarily through portfolio-based assessments—help learners improve their interlanguage toward the norms of the target language. This is a direct connection to the need for formative assessment practices aligned with the CEFR, where language productivity is monitored and refined through ongoing feedback rather than a single summative test.

Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985) is considered another noteworthy contribution, which states that learners acquire language not only by receiving input but also by producing language through speaking and writing. The act of output, Swain argued, forces learners to process language at a deeper level because it involves them in organizing and retrieving language structures in real-time. At NUML, this hypothesis plays a crucial role in evaluation strategies, mainly for B1 and C1 learners who are assessed based on their ability to perform in discussions, presentations, and written tasks. When learners are required to express themselves in the target language, they become aware of the gaps in their knowledge and learn how to address them, often through peer or teacher feedback. This prolific struggle contributes to the development of language and helps elucidate why learners at advanced CEFR levels accomplish better with task-based activities that require meaningful output.

All of these theories highlight the importance of contextualized, level-appropriate, and interaction-rich instruction and assessment. All these SLA theories not only rationalize differentiated teaching across CEFR levels but also offer a theoretical foundation for assessing learners' needs and

development at NUML Peshawar. By aligning instructional strategies with these principles—whether with the help of basic input for A1 level learners, social association and collaboration for B1 level learners, or academic output for the learners of level C1 —educationalists can more efficiently support language acquisition and learning and provide just and rational, CEFR-aligned evaluation assessment opportunities and conditions.

Understanding CEFR Levels in Practice

The CEFR provides descriptors for listening, speaking, reading, and writing across six levels (A1–C2). Studies (Little, 2006; North, 2007) demonstrate that the CEFR helps structure curricula and enhance transparency in assessment. In South Asian contexts, CEFR has been adapted to measure learner progress and design outcome-based syllabi.

The CEFR provides a designed way to define what learners at different stages should be able to do with the language (Council of Europe, 2001). It does not just offer labels (such as A1 or C1), but outlines real-world abilities, helping teachers plan lessons and assess learning more effectively. At the A1 level, students are usually new to the language. They know rudimentary and straightforward vocabulary—often just a few hundred words—and rely profoundly on repetition, translation, and classroom routines. Their grammar is limited, and they usually struggle with both understanding and producing language in real-time. B1 learners are more independent. They begin to combine lexis, terminologies, and grammar to express more complex ideas. Tasks such as giving short presentations, writing paragraphs, or participating in group discussions become more practicable and feasible. Their confidence improves, but sporadic errors in tense, structure, or word choice are common (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). By C1, learners can understand and produce language in academic or professional settings. They write essays, lead discussions, and analyse texts with less support. At this stage, accuracy and style become more important than just precision. Teachers often shift focus from "what" learners say to "how" they say it (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Building Vocabulary and Grammar

Over Time, one of the most distinctive indicators of progress in SLA is vocabulary growth (Nation, 2001). At the beginner level, students often struggle due to a limited word bank. They may understand individual words but not know how to use them correctly in a sentence or context. Teaching strategies such as visual aids, real-life examples, and simple storytelling are highly effective in this context. At the B1 level, learners not only multiply their vocabulary but also start using it adaptably. They learn to choose the right word for different situations and gain confidence in using grammar structures like modals, relative clauses, and passive voice (Ellis, 2003). Advanced learners (C1) focus on refining their ability to express complex ideas. They focus on synonyms, academic language, idioms, and collocations. Grammar is generally accurate, but feedback focuses on improving sentence flow and ensuring tone aligns with the task (e.g., formal writing vs. conversation).

Assessment in the Language Classroom

Assessment plays a huge role in language learning (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). The way we test students can support or obstruct their progress. A one-size-fits-all approach

Does not work, especially when dealing with students at different CEFR levels. For A1 learners, low-pressure assessments are ideal. Short quizzes, oral questions, or matching

Tasks help measure understanding without causing stress. These learners often need more motivation and encouragement than critique (Bailey, 1998). At B1, teachers can introduce project-

based work, presentations, or writing tasks with clear rubrics. These exercises allow learners to apply grammar and vocabulary in context, demonstrating not only what they know but also how well they can use it. C1 learners benefit from real-world assessment methods, such as writing academic essays, assembling portfolios, or giving structured presentations (Norris & Ortega, 2000). These tasks require planning, organization, and the ability to self-correct—all indispensable for higher-level communication. Assessment tools should be aligned with learning goals and objectives, as well as instructional strategies (McNamara, 2000). When learners understand what is expected at each level, and assessments reflect that, they are more likely to succeed.

Why CEFR Alignment Matters

In multilingual classrooms like those at NUML Peshawar, students often come from assorted backgrounds, with varied exposure to English. Having a precise reference, such as the CEFR, enables teachers to differentiate instruction and be realistic about expectations (Little, 2007). Teachers can align assignments with learners' current stage and guide them step by step. When teaching, learning, and assessment are all aligned with CEFR descriptors, the classroom becomes more focused, compassionate, and productive. Students understand what success looks like at each level, allowing teachers to monitor progress more effectively. Overall, learning a second language is a continuous process influenced by exposure, interaction, feedback, and context (Loewen & Reinders, 2011). The CEFR serves as a valuable framework for structuring this journey, especially in academic settings where clear milestones are essential. As learners move from A1 to C1, their needs shift—from building foundational vocabulary to refining expression and style. Likewise, assessment strategies must evolve to keep pace with these changes (Taguchi, 2013). For institutions like NUML Peshawar, using CEFR as both a guide and a goal ensures that teaching remains learner-centred, effective, and transparent (Reinders, 2010).

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative, case-based study involving 30 ELT learners from NUML Peshawar. Participants were divided across CEFR levels A1, B1, and C1. The data were collected by applying semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of performance assessments. Thematic coding was employed for analysing interview responses, while comparative evaluation informed classroom analysis. The triangulated practice incorporated the validity of findings, enabling a detailed understanding of how learners respond to different instructional and assessment methodologies across various levels.

Data Analysis

Case-Based Insights Across CEFR Levels

This chapter deals with a detailed case-based analysis of second language acquisition and assessment results among English Language Teaching (ELT) learners at NUML Peshawar. The participants include 30 students divided equally across CEFR levels A1, B1, and C1. Data was collected through learners' classroom observations, interviews, academic performance records, and instructor feedback. This multi-source triangulation approach enabled a detailed and inclusive understanding of learners' language progress, focusing on key domains such as vocabulary acquisition, fluency in communication, and grammar usage, as well as assessment outcomes. Tables and charts have been utilized to present quantitative and qualitative tendencies for precision and comparison.

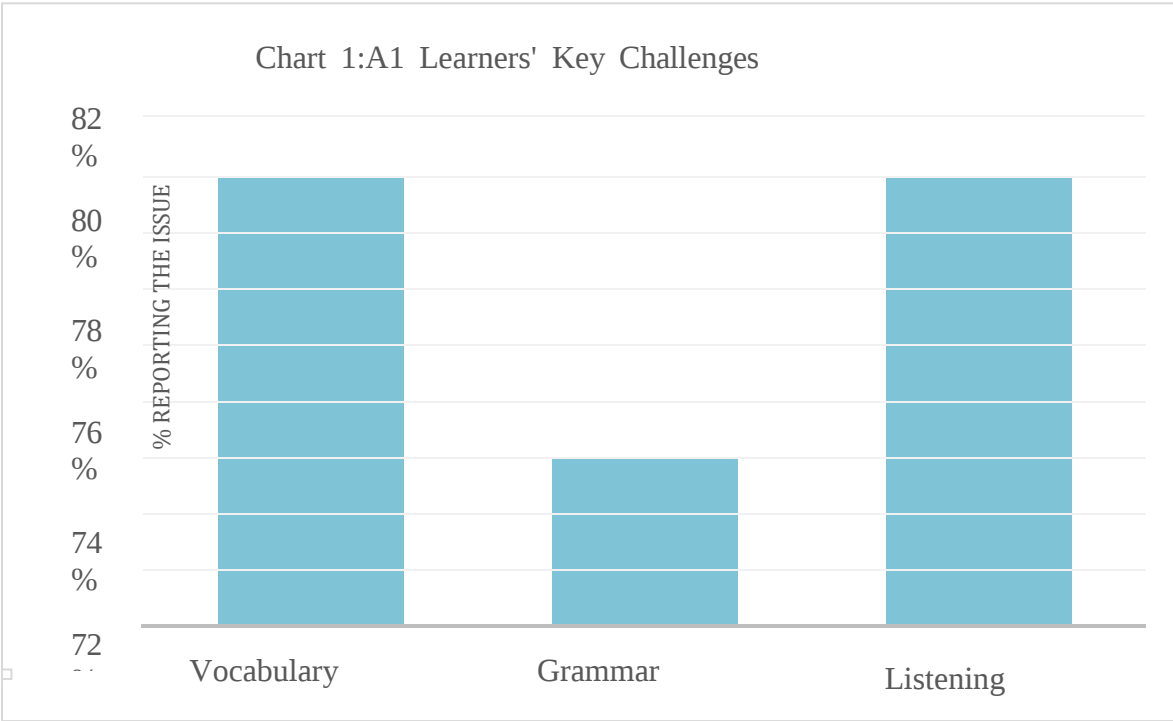
A1 Level Learners: Foundational Phase

A1 learners, demonstrating beginner-level aptitude, faced primary and fundamental challenges. Most of the learners struggled with vocabulary recall and sentence structure. They also displayed difficulty in understanding spoken English, particularly in fast-paced or unfamiliar contexts. Classroom involvement and participation remained restricted and limited, and many required repetition-based tasks to reinforce a better understanding. Listening comprehension was a significant challenge.

Table 1: Common Issues Among A1 Learners (n=10)

Issue Type	% Reporting the Issue
Vocabulary Limitation	80%
Grammar Confusion	70%
Listening Difficulties	80%

Figure 1: Learners Key Challenges



The bar chart above depicts the top three challenges for A1 learners. Vocabulary limitation (80%) was the most frequent issue, followed by grammar confusion (70%) and listening difficulties (80%). These statistics highlight the need for scaffolding strategies, such as visual aids and controlled practice, to support beginner learners.

B1 Level Learners: Intermediate Progress

At the B1 level, learners exhibited noticeable improvement in both receptive and productive skills. Their writing fluency and grammatical range expanded, and most were able to structure their ideas more coherently in written and spoken tasks. The following table illustrates score improvements

from midterm to final exams among three representative B1 learners.

Table 2: Writing Score Improvement (B1 Learners)

Learner ID	Midterm Score	Final Score	Improvement
B1-03	5.5	7.0	+1.5
B1-07	6.0	7.5	+1.5
B1-10	4.0	6.5	+2.5

The improvement in scores suggests that B1 learners responded well to classroom instruction that emphasized paragraph organization, cohesive devices, and targeted grammar revision. Learner B1-10 showed the most progress (+2.5), likely reflecting the benefit of individualized feedback and task repetition.

C1 Level Learners: Advanced Application

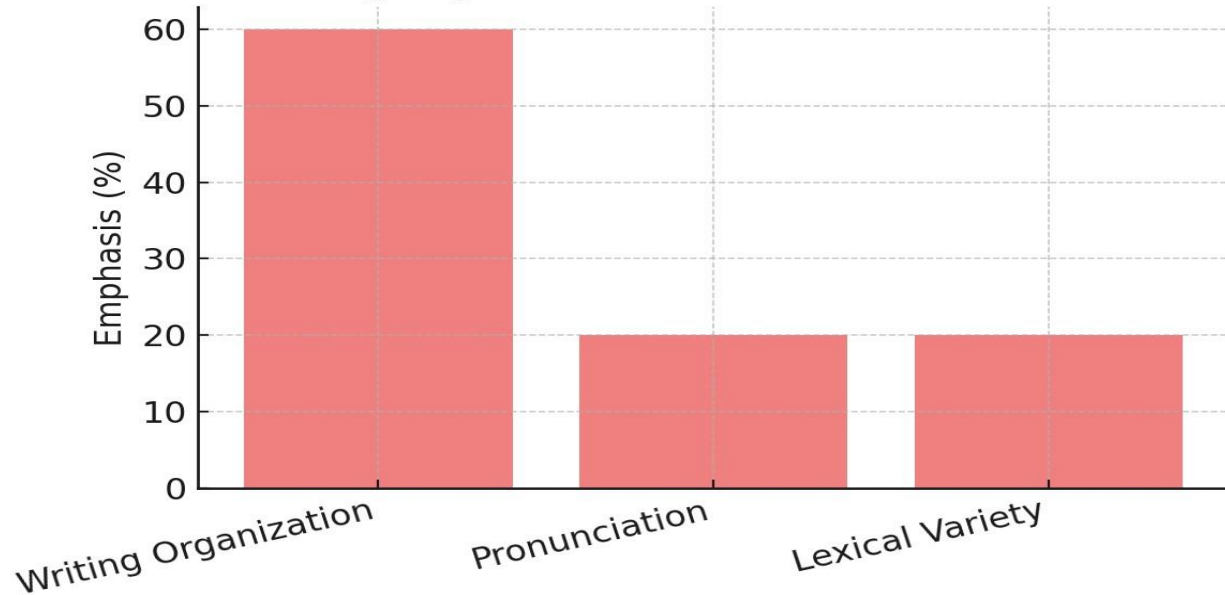
At C1, learners had more control over academic language, fluency and usage. Their verbal comebacks were spontaneous and intelligible, and comparatively high lexical diversity was witnessed in written tasks. Nevertheless, minor weaknesses were observed in stylistic domains like writing structure and occasional mispronunciations when speaking.

Table 3: Instructor Feedback on C1 Learners

Focus Area	Emphasis (%)
Writing Organization	60%
Pronunciation	20%
Lexical Variety	20%

Figure 2: Instructor’s feedback

Chart 2: Areas Highlighted in Instructor Feedback (C1 L



The data exposes that although C1 level learners are proficient in expressing multifaceted ideas, yet they benefit from direction on academic writing rules and principles and formal presentation techniques.

Cross-Level Summary: Comparative Trends Across CEFR Levels

This section offers a comparative snapshot of performance of learners at A1, B1, and C1 levels. The information draws attention to evident developmental progress in vocabulary size, grammatical correctness, fluency, and test-taking modes preferred.

Table 4: Comparative Analysis Across CEFR Levels

Feature	A1	B1	C1
Vocabulary Range	300–400 words	1200–1500 words	>3000 words
Grammar Accuracy	Low	Moderate	High
Fluency	Basic	Improving	Fluent
Preferred Task	Repetition Flash Cards Picture Description	Presentations Picture Description Prompts	Academic Essays Debates Shadowing Techniques
Assessment Methods	Quizzes/Orals Worksheets	Rubrics/Projects	Portfolio Reviews

The mentioned table highlights the gradual development of linguistic and cognitive skills across CEFR levels. Each level exhibits distinct strengths and learning needs. It is therefore crucial for ELT classes that Instructional strategies and assessment designs must be adapted according to the learners' expertise. For beginners, listening support is vital, and vocabulary building should be in focus. For intermediate learners, prerequisites include reinforcement of grammar and writing structure. Meanwhile, advanced learners benefit primarily from critical comments and feedback on writing style and the exquisiteness of pronunciation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study support that language learning differs significantly at different CEFR levels among ELT students at NUML Peshawar. Beginner-level students (A1) often struggle with basic features, including vocabulary and grammar. Intermediate students (B1) improve in terms of fluency but need more feedback to internalize complex structures. Similarly, advanced learners (C1) display not only near-native proficiency and confidence but also appreciate stylistic and academic improvement.

Assessment practice is increasingly aligning with the CEFR, but an increased emphasis on formative and technology-supported assessment would further improve learner performance.

This research also investigated the SLA process and assessment procedures of ELT students in NUML Peshawar at different CEFR levels. The findings affirm that language ability enhances with level-specific teaching support and exposure. Even so, recurring concerns such as poor vocabulary, speech fluency, and limited interactive practice can interfere with progress, particularly at lower CEFR levels.

Recommendations

1. *For curriculum designers:* Incorporate CEFR-aligned communicative activities and feedback mechanisms to encourage balanced development of skills.

2. *For instructors:* Offer additional speaking and writing exercises with peer and teacher feedback, particularly at A2 and B1 levels.
3. *For test developers:* Implement performance-based and formative testing that aligns with CEFR descriptors and learner progression.
4. *For policy makers:* Encourage professional development in SLA models and CEFR alignment to enhance instructional quality.

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