Thai First-Year University Students' English Proficiency on CEFR Levels:
A Case Study of Walailak University, Thailand

Budi Waluyo

Walailak University Language Institute (WULI)

Walailak University, Thailand

Email: budi.business.waluyo@gmail.com

Abstract

Interests in the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for English teaching and learning have been growing among countries beyond Europe since 2001. The framework offers practical interpretations of language proficiency levels relating to real-life situations and is open to multimodality and adaptations in various educational contexts. However, little research has been conducted on English proficiency and CEFR with a specific focus on a country or region. Therefore, this study intends to address such gap by examining the English proficiency of Thai EFL learners on CEFR levels. By using Walailak University – Test of English Proficiency (WU-TEP), a comprehensive university standardized test framed by the Classical Test Theory (CTT) and CEFR, this study, conducted in July 2018, measured the English proficiency of 2248 Thai EFL learners (74% female and 26% male). The results of the analyses revealed that 77.3% of the students were at the levels of basic users (A1 and A2) in CEFR. Such levels are equal to the abilities of primary and junior high school students in the Thai education system. This study, further, suggests the implementation of a school level-focused curriculum development for future improvements.

1. Introduction

The importance of English proficiency is simply too obvious to be overlooked, not only being one of the main goals and expected outcomes in English language teaching and learning, but also serving as the foundation of initial English curriculum development for future improvements. Often, to some extent, English proficiency is also used as both the measurements of success of a language program or education and a standard language ability of a person to be able to perform certain duties or attain certain goals (e.g. studying overseas, tour guide, etc.). In the literature, much of the research in the area of English proficiency explores the relationships between English proficiency encompassing listening, reading, speaking, and writing, with other aspects, starting from academics (e.g. Stoffelsma & Spooren, 2018), business/employment (Blake, Mcleod, Verdon & Fuller, 2018), health (e.g.

Murphy, Smock, Hunter-Adams, Xuan, Cochran, Paasche-Orlow, & Geltman, 2018), etc. to specific, minor circumstances which most people might have ignored, such as humour appreciation (Chen & Dewaele, 2018), competence perceptions (Li, Yuan, Bazarova & Bell, 2018), and so forth. Another area of exploration in English proficiency that has interested many researchers since the early age of English language teaching and learning is on how to improve learners' English proficiency in both general and specific skills in various contexts.

Nonetheless, although the importance of English proficiency is undebatable and it has extensively been explored in the literature, there is still a limited number of studies that specifically examines EFL learners' English proficiency levels in countries across the globe. Consequently, people often rely on the data from the results of international tests (e.g. TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC) provided by private, educational companies rather than from scholarly articles to obtain the information of EFL learners' proficiency levels in a country or region. Therefore, the present study intends to address such need in the literature. The purpose of this study is to provide empirical evidence on the English proficiency levels of Thai EFL learners and reveal the correlations between productive and receptive skills contributing to Thai EFL learners' English proficiency. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is adopted as the theoretical framework. The findings of this study are expected to be useful for English curriculum developments in Thailand specifically, and other countries generally. The interest in English language teaching and learning is increasing among Asian countries driven by market forces and global competitiveness, but the issue of English proficiency is also persisting despite the implementations of some initiatives, for instance, making English as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools, employing native and foreign English speakers, and others (Bolton, 2008). For this reason, Thailand is chosen as the case study, which will probably initiate future studies around English proficiency and CEFR levels with implications on curriculum developments.

Briefly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1) What are Thai EFL learners' English proficiency levels on CEFR in the four English skills, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing?
2) How do Thai EFL learners' receptive skills correlate with their productive skills?

As the background of this study, the following sections discuss English language teaching (ELT) in Thailand and related issues, then continued by a brief overview of reports of Thais' English proficiency levels from Education First (EF) and English Testing Service (ETS) and an explanation of the significance of the study.

1.1. ELT in Thailand and Related Issues

English was first introduced to Thailand in the 18th century, brought by European Empires who intended to approach the Kings for the country's wealth in agricultural production as well as natural resources. The Protestant missionaries who came from the U.S. during the reign of King Rama III (1824-1851) in the 1830's, then, stimulated the progress (Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). Since 1895, there have been paradigm shifts with regards to the implementation of English as a school subject, such as from implementing English as an elective to compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools and from studying English for academic to specific purposes (Foley, 2005), as detailed in table 1. The country's swift growth in tourism and foreign investment has made it crucial for Thai graduates to acquire English as their first foreign language to succeed in professional trainings, job recruitment, and work performance. Thus, nowadays, the idea of perceiving English as a Lingua Franca is being pushed, linking Thailand culturally, intellectually,

commercially with countries across the globe (Baker, 2012; Kongkerd, 2013). English has been extensively used in various domains of communication, encompassing banking, economic affairs and trade, tourism, diplomacy, academic conferences, and science and technology (Foley, 2005; Khamkhien, 2010).

Table 1. A brief history of ELT in Thailand

Year	Events
1800	English was first introduced to Thailand.
1895	English became an optional subject in secondary schools.
1909	English was studied in primary schools.
1921	English became a compulsory subject beyond grade 4.
1960	English became a compulsory subject for upper elementary level.
1978	English was reversed to be an optional subject, grouped with Work Oriented Experience Area in the Special Experience Group.
1980	English was classified as an elective subject in primary schools, but a compulsory subject in secondary schools.
1996	The revised version of English language curriculum was introduced.
2001 - onwards	The English curriculum was revised again with the introduction of the national foreign language standard and benchmarks. English became a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools. At university level, English courses have twelve credits, which consist of six credits in general English and six credits in English for specific purposes (ESP).

(**Source:** Foley (2005); Khamkhien (2010); Methitham and Chamcharatsri (2011)

English language teaching and learning Thailand has shown some progress since the education reform occurring between 1996 and 2007, involving four main areas: 1) school; more autonomy has been given, 2) curriculum; an independent, learner-centered approach with analytical learning has been emphasized, 3) teacher; more attention has been paid to teacher education, research, and teaching development, and 4) administrative reform; families and local communities have been involved in school policy and administration processes (Wiriyachitra, 2002). The Basic Education Core Curriculum (BEC) was implemented in 2008, intended to cope with the demands of globalization and to improve the English language skills of Thais, as explained by Kaur, Young, and Kirkpatrick:

> The English language section in BEC 2008 focused on four major strands: Language for Communication, Language and Culture, Language and Relationship with other Learning Areas, and Language and Relationship with Community and the World. As a whole, the four strands emphasized that learning of English should facilitate learners' communicative competence, enabling them to exchange and present data and information, express their feelings, opinions, concepts and views on various matters (2016, p. 348).

The education reforms have also encouraged the growth of international schools, bilingual programs, international programs in higher education, and support organizations for English teaching and learning in Thailand. Nonetheless, sadly, in terms of the improvement in English language skills, there has been only a little progress made. The top-

bottom approach practiced by the Thai government in the education reforms seems to be unsuccessful in addressing some fundamental issues as pointed by several studies. For instance, in his exploration of teachers' practices and dispositions of Thai English teachers, Fitzpatrick (2011) found that there were a few examples of student-centered learning being applied; instead, practices of teacher-centered approach were apparent due to the demand of helping students pass the national examinations. Educational resources, teaching materials, and curriculum are still problematic for Thai English teachers (Limsangkass, Worasaktayanan & Nuchuay, 2016). Some other issues that are still happening despite the education reforms include the use of old teaching methods emphasizing on grammar and vocabulary (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Saengboon, 2004), unskilled Thai English teachers in primary and secondary schools (Kirkpatrick, 2012), and the influence of Thai dialects (Chamcharatsri, 2013), etc.

1.2. Reports of English Proficiency Levels

Several reports have been issued regarding Thais' English proficiency levels. The latest reports came from Education First (EF) (2018), an education company based in Sweden. Since 2011, EF have examined the acquisition of English skills by secondary and tertiary students that involves 260.000 students from hundreds of partner schools and universities across 26 countries or regions. The EF's English proficiency index test, however, only involves the measurements two English skills: reading and listening. The results are put under five proficiency bands, including Very Low Proficiency, Low Proficiency, Moderate Proficiency, High Proficiency, and Very High Proficiency; each band has its specific descriptions.

For Thailand, over eight years, the proficiency trends are at Very Low and Low Proficiency bands, which indicate that 1) for Very Low Proficiency, Thai EFL students can only introduce themselves on name, age, and country of origin, understand simple signs, and provide basic directions to foreigners, and 2) for Low Proficiency, Thai EFL students can only understand simple e-mails, participate in small talks, and enter an English-speaking country as a tourist. From the results, Thai EFL students' proficiency levels have progressed from Very Low proficiency (2011 – 2015) to Low proficiency (2017 – 2018), as seen in table 2; however, such progress is still insufficient to accommodate the activities for a country that is well-known for its tourism and growing international trade. By gender, Thai EFL female students performed better than their counterparts, yet still their average scores (49.15/ 100) were lower than those in other countries in Asia or globally (54.47/ 100). In 2018, Thai EFL students' proficiency levels sat on 16th from 21 countries in Asia.

Table 2. Results of EF EPI for Thailand (2011 – 2018) compared to other countries in the world

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Proficiency Band	Very Low	Very Low	Very Low	Very Low	Very Low	Very Low	Low	Low
Rank	42	53	55	48	62	56	53	64
Total Countries	44	54	56	63	70	72	80	88

(**Source:** https://www.ef.co.th/epi/regions/asia/thailand/)

Another report came from Educational Testing Service (ETS), the world's largest organization for educational testing and assessment based in Princeton, New Jersey, USA. ETS has issued reports on the results of TOEFL Internet Based and Paper Based/ ITP Tests. On TOEFL IBT, Table 3 below provides the details of sections and total score means for Thailand in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2017. These results reflect the English proficiency levels of Thais – the latest total score mean in 2017 was 78 out of 120. Among the four English skills, reading seems to be the weakest point for Thais. Compared to other Asian countries, Thailand is apparently not among the best and still struggling to increase the total scores. Moreover, the results of TOEFL paper-based tests or ITP also do not show high proficiency levels (table 4), where the latest total score mean was 484 out of 677. Thailand seems to have managed having better ranks only due to some unreported results from some countries. Unlike in TOEFL IBT, grammar was to Thais' weakest point in ITP tests based on the reports.

ETS also reported the results of TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) from 2012 to 2017. In the reports, Thailand was consistently among the poor performing countries, in which, over the six years, the average scores on listening were always below 300, and the average scores were worse on reading – never achieved half of the total score: 248. Reading seems to be the weakest point, but the scores were also low on listening. Table 5 presents the detailed sections and total score means for both listening and reading.

Table 3. Results of TOEFL Internet-Based Test (IBT) – Section and Total Score Means (in Comparison to other Asian Countries)

Year	Reading (30)	Listening (30)	Speaking (30)	Writing (30)	Total (120)	Rank	Total Countries (Asia)
2010	18	19	18	20	75	21	33
2012	18	19	19	20	76	23	35
2014	18	19	19	19	74	22	35
2017	19	20	19	20	78	20	35

(**Source:** ETS's reports in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2017)

Table 4. Results of TOEFL Paper-Based Test/ ITP - Section and Total Score Means Section and Total Score Means (in Comparison to other Asian Countries)

Year	Listening Comprehension (68)	Structure and Written Expression (68)	Reading Comprehension (67)	Total (677)	Rank	Total countries (Asia)
2010	49	48	49	486	20[1]	31
2012	48	48	50	485	10[2]	27
2013	49	45	46	467	24[3]	33
2014	49	45	47	470	21[4]	31
2015	49	45	47	466	22[5]	32
2016	48	43	46	457	20[6]	32
2017	53	45	48	484	15[7]	32

(**Source:** ETS's reports in 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017)

Note: [1] – Results from 11 countries are not reported.; [2] – Results from 16 countries are not reported.; [3] – Results from 6 countries are not reported.; [4] – Results from 4 countries are not reported.; [5] - Results from 4 countries are not reported; [6] – Results from 6 countries are not reported.; [7] – Results from 8 countries are not reported.

Table 5. Results of TOEIC - Section and Total Score Means Section and Total Score Means (in Comparison to Other Participating Countries Globally)

Year	Listening (495)	Reading (495)	Total (990)	Rank	Total participating countries
2012	280	219	499	40	45
2013	279	214	493	41	48
2014	274	207	481	37	44
2015	282	210	492	40	46
2016	287	209	496	44	49
2017	278	204	482	44	47

1.3. Significance of the Study

The two previous sections have highlighted that despite huge efforts and initiatives done by the Thai government on the education reforms, the level of improvement of Thais' English language skills is still low, and the results of English proficiency tests from prominent English testing echo poor performances compared to other countries in Asia, let alone the rest of the world. This study intends to use these circumstances as the foundation to discuss further about the English proficiency levels of Thai learners on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). There are still a few studies exploring the English proficiency levels of Thai learners in the literature, and most of them have been outdated, more than 10 years. Meanwhile, since recommended by the European Union in 2001, CEFR has been gaining more popularity as the standard of foreign language teaching and language ability assessment in countries around the world, including Thailand. Thus, this study essentially attempts to address the gap between the need for latest empirical research on Thai EFL learners' English proficiency levels and the interest in using CEFR as the framework for language assessment. The findings are expected to provide guidelines for curriculum and country development vis a vis advancing Thai EFL learners' English language skills. This study also uses a comprehensive standardized English proficiency test designed using CEFR framework, which measures the four English skills: Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

Council of Europe (2001) elaborates that, essentially, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is designed to serve as a common foundation for developing materials and assessments for language teaching and learning, which include, for instance, developing textbooks, syllabus, curriculum guidelines, examinations, etc. beyond political and educational contexts. The framework outlines the

range of knowledge, skills, and competences that a language learner should learn and acquire to be able use a language for communication in all forms effectively. More importantly, CEFR provides clear definitions of proficiency levels, which can be used for progress monitoring assessments at each stage of language learning. In global scale, the proficiency levels are divided into three categories (i.e. Proficient User, Independent User, and Basic User), that consist of six levels (i.e. A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2). Each of these levels has its specific descriptions with regards to language knowledge, skills, and competences that a learner can perform. Such levels are created for common references which offer flexibility for language education actors or providers in applying the framework for their own language teaching and learning objectives. The following table details each CEFR proficiency level.

Table 6. CEFR levels in global scale

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of Proficient meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and Independent disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate Basic need.

| Basic User | A1 | Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. |

(**Source:** Council of Europe (2001, p. 24)

Since its launch in 2001, CEFR has been adopted in a wide range of language proficiency assessments for various purposes. Recent studies, for instance, have used CEFR to investigate criterial discourse features in second language learners' essays (Chen & Baker, 2016), assess young learners' writing (Hasselgreen, 2013), develop a computerized adaptive testing system for Chinese proficiency (Wang, Kuo, Tsai & Liao, 2012), and measure the impact of EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) at Tertiary level (Muñoz, 2014). The popularity of the framework has also made other predominant international standardized tests that have existed earlier, such as TOEFL and TOEIC, to conduct studies linking their scores to CEFR levels (Tannenbaum & Wylie, 2008). Figueras (2012) argues that the widespread adoption of CEFR in language teaching and assessment lies on two factors: 1) the framework provides practical descriptions of language proficiency levels that relate to real-life situations or contexts; it helps explain learners' language proficiency levels in simple terms, and 2) the framework is open to multimodality and adaptations.

Although CEFR was created by the European Union, the influence on language teaching and assessment has reached non-European countries, such as Japan (Negishi, Takada & Tono, 2013), Canada (Mison & Jang, 2011), Ethiopia (Wanna, Tilahun & Pawlos, 2018), Taiwan (Wu & Wu, 2007), Vietnam (Nguyen, 2016) and others. In Thailand, the adoption of CEFR for the conceptualizations of English teaching and learning at any levels and purposes has begun since 2014 (Anantapol, Keeratikorntanayod & Chobphon, 2018). The framework is used as the guidelines for curriculum development, proficiency test, evaluation, and teacher development. Schools and universities are encouraged to benchmark their students' English proficiency levels upon CEFR. The adoption of CEFR also stimulates some other reforms, such as the emphasis on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which replaced the old-fashioned grammar teaching methods, and the use of information technology. In addition, schools and universities are encouraged to provide extra-English programs to help weak students and improve levels of English proficiency.

2.2. Review of Related Studies

There are no previous studies that specifically examine English proficiency of Thai learners using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The most popular study in the literature that explores English proficiency of Thai learners is from (Prapphal, 2003). The study investigated English proficiency of Thai students who took the Chulalongkorn University Test of English Proficiency (CU-TEP) in 2001. Prapphal's study found that most of the students' proficiency levels were below the minimum requirement and very unlikely to be admitted by graduate studies in English speaking countries. Another study is from Wongsothorn (2001) who examined levels of English skills of Thai students in secondary schools and university level. The findings disclosed low levels on reading and writing for both secondary school and university students. The study also found that productive and receptive English skills of the students were significantly correlated. However, it is worth noting that these two studies have been outdated and did not include

the CEFR in their examinations. Hence, the present study will pioneer research in English proficiency of Thai learners on CEFR and explore the implications of English curriculum development in Thailand.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study applied a quantitative research design examining correlations and exploring group comparisons. Quantitative research design enables researchers to quantify relationships among variables of interest presented in effect statistics, i.e. correlations, means differences and frequencies (Hopkins, 2008). The variables of interest involve Thai students' scores in the four English skills (i.e. listening, reading, speaking, and writing) on a university standardized English proficiency test. Meanwhile, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is fundamentally utilized as the framework to map students' proficiency levels.

3.2. Subjects

The subjects were first-year students (N = 2248) of Walailak University, Thailand, who just graduated from high schools. When this study was conducted, the subjects had not started their English learning at the university level. The subjects had more than eight years of learning English in primary and secondary schools and their ages ranged from 17 to 22 years. Female was 74% (1664), while male was 26% (584) of 2248 subjects. These subjects came from different schools at Walailak University, such as school of engineering, school of nursing, school of allied health sciences, school of management, school of liberal arts, school of pharmacy, etc.

3.3. Instruments

To assess students' English proficiency levels, this study used a university standardized test named "Walailak University – Test of English Proficiency (WU-TEP)". WU-TEP assesses students' levels of English proficiency in listening, reading, writing, and speaking, framed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and Classical Test Theory (CTT). The constructions of the test items followed CEFR guidelines from A1 to C1. The test does not cover C2 level as it was designed for university students. Listening and reading have fifty questions each in total, in which, in percentage, each CEFR level is distributed: 20% (A1), 20% (A2), 20% (B1), 30% (B2), and 10% (C1). The test put more percentage on B2 level because the university's goal is to have graduates at B2 level of English proficiency. The test format can be seen in table 7 below.

Table 7. The test format - WUTEP

Test Format	Total Questions	Duration
1. Listening consists of four parts:	50	
Part 1: Statements and pictures	5	
Part 2: Statements and responses	15	40 minutes
Part 3: Conversations	15	
Part 4: Talks	15	
2. Reading consists of three parts:	50	
Part 5: Sentence completion	20	60 minutes
Part 6: An e-mail completion	5	
Part 7: Reading comprehension: single passage and double passages	25	
3. Writing	1	
Topic prompt essay		40 minutes
4. Speaking		
A discussion with a lecturer involving self-introduction, speaking about a topic, and questions-answers.		5 minutes

WU-TEP scoring system involves raw scores (0 – 120) and converted scores (0 – 100). Raw scores are obtained through the assessments of each skill, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Listening and reading are assessed by using multiple choice questions, which are constructed based on CEFR levels (20% A1, 20% A2, 20% B1, 30% B2, and 10% C1). Meanwhile, speaking and writing are assessed by using a set of tasks and assessment rubrics, which are designed by referring to the functions of each CEFR level. Raw scores from each skill are, then, added up to obtain total raw scores. Afterwards, total raw scores are matched with converted scores. It is the converted score that will be disclosed to test takers (table 8). WU-TEP scores can also be linked to other standardized tests' scores, such as TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC (table 9).

Table 8. WU-TEP Marking Schemes

CEFR levels	Listening		Reading		Speaking	Writing	Raw Scores	Converted Scores
	%	Score Range	%	Score Range	Score Range	Score Range		
Mastery (C2)					9 – 10	9 – 10	118 – 120	94 – 100
Mastery (C1)	10%	46 - 50	10%	46 - 50	7 – 8	8	107 - 117	83.5 – 93.99

Upper Intermediate B2	30%	31 - 45	30%	31 - 45	6	7	75 - 106	63.5 – 83.49
Lower Intermediate (B1)	20%	21 – 30	20%	21 – 30	5	6	53 – 74	48.5 – 63.49
Beginner (A2)	20%	11 – 20	20%	11 – 20	4	5	31 – 52	33.5 – 48.49
Remedial (A1)	20%	0 – 10	20%	0 – 10	0 – 3	0 – 4	0 – 30	0 – 33.49

Table 9. Comparison of WUTEP Scores for Various Exams

CEFR Level	WU-TEP (Converted Scores)	IELTS	TOEFL IBT	TOEFL Paper	TOEIC			CU-TEP
					Listening & Reading	Speaking	Writing	
C2	94 – 100	8.5 – 9	115 – 120	650 – 677	990	200	200	
C1	83.5 – 93.99	7 – 8	94 – 114	627 – 647	945 – 980	180	180	99 – 120
B2	63.5 – 83.49	5.5 – 6.5	46 – 93	543 – 624	785 – 935	160	150	70 – 98
B1	48.5 – 63.49	4 – 5	31 – 45	460 – 540	550 – 775	120	120	35 – 69
A2	33.5 – 48.49	N/A	N/A	337 – 457	225 – 540	90	70	14 – 34
A1	0 – 33.49	N/A	N/A	N/A	120 - 215	50	30	N/A

3.4. Data analyses

The data were, first, analyzed by using WU-TEP marking schemes (table 8), which disclosed frequencies and means differences for students' English proficiency on each CEFR levels. The process of mapping students' proficiency levels on CEFR levels is illustrated in table 10. The results of this first step provided the answer for the first research questions about English proficiency of Thai learners on CEFR levels. Then, the data were examined by using correlation and regression analyses by using SPSS software. The results were used to answer the second research question.

Table 10. The example of mapping students' proficiency on CEFR using WU-TEP marking schemes (referring to table 8)

Student	Scores				Total Raw Scores (0 – 120)	Converted Scores (0 – 100)	CEFR Level
	Listening (50)	Reading (50)	Writing (10)	Speaking (10)			
1	40	40	4	8	92	70	B2
2	15	13	3	3	34	29	A1
3	30	30	5	6	71	57.5	B1
4	13	20	5	5	43	41.5	A2

3.5. Procedure

This study began with administrative preparations, including test books, schedule arrangement, exam rooms, proctors, and examiners. The test took place at Walailak University in July 2018, covering approximately one week for both examinations and grading activities. The proctors of the exams, the examiners of the speaking tests, and the graders of students' essays consisted of foreign and Thai English lecturers at Walailak University Language Institute (WULI). After the four-skill examinations, students' scores were collected and analyzed by using MS Excel and SPSS. Then, the results are presented in the following section.

4. Results

4.1. English proficiency of Thai learners on CEFR levels

First, the analyses were focused on students' total raw and converted scores, then WU-TEP marking schemes (table 8) were used to map students' proficiency on CEFR. The descriptive statistics ($N = 2248$) displayed that the means of students' total raw scores of English proficiencies on the four English skills were 44.93 or 35.05 in converted scores. These reflected that, on average, the proficiency level was at A2 in CEFR. The lowest raw score was 18 or 10 in converted scores (A1 in CEFR), while the highest raw score was 98 or 77.5 in converted scores (B2 in CEFR). Further, the frequencies revealed that most of the students' raw and converted scores were at A2 in CEFR (1519/ 67.6%), then followed by B1 (431/ 19.2%), A1 (218/ 9.7%), and B2 (80/ 3.5%) (table 13). None of the students had C1 or C2 proficiency level in CEFR.

Table 11. The results of students' raw scores

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	S.E.	Statistic	S.E.
Listening	6	44	18.62	5.453	.906	.052	1.533	.103
Reading	1	45	20.02	6.565	.856	.052	.710	.103
Writing	0	9	3.08	2.112	-.046	.052	-.679	.103
Speaking	0	8	3.22	1.321	.513	.052	.129	.103
Total	18	98	44.93	13.017	1.020	.052	1.175	.103

Table 12. The results of students' converted scores

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	S.E.	Statistic	S.E.
Listening	3.0	22.0	9.308	2.7266	.906	.052	1.533	.103
Reading	.5	22.5	10.010	3.2824	.856	.052	.710	.103
Writing	.0	22.5	7.689	5.2801	-.046	.052	-.679	.103
Speaking	.0	20.0	8.043	3.3088	.503	.052	.134	.103
Total	10.0	77.5	35.050	11.7380	.578	.052	.093	.103

Afterwards, the analyses were continued to the explorations of students' proficiency levels in each English skill (i.e. listening, reading, writing, and speaking). The results revealed that most of the students had A2 CEFR proficiency level in listening (1497/ 67%) and reading (1298/57.8%); in contrast, most of the students were at A1 CEFR proficiency level in writing (1709/ 76%) and speaking (1425/ 63.5%). Nevertheless, although most of the students had A1 level in writing, a small number of the students were found to possess C1 (10/ .5%) and C2 (18/ .8%) CEFR proficiency levels, while in speaking, 29 (1.3%) students were at C1 level. Chart 1 below illustrates the distribution of students' English proficiency on CEFR levels in percentage. Then, table 13 provides the detailed numbers of the results for the first research question.
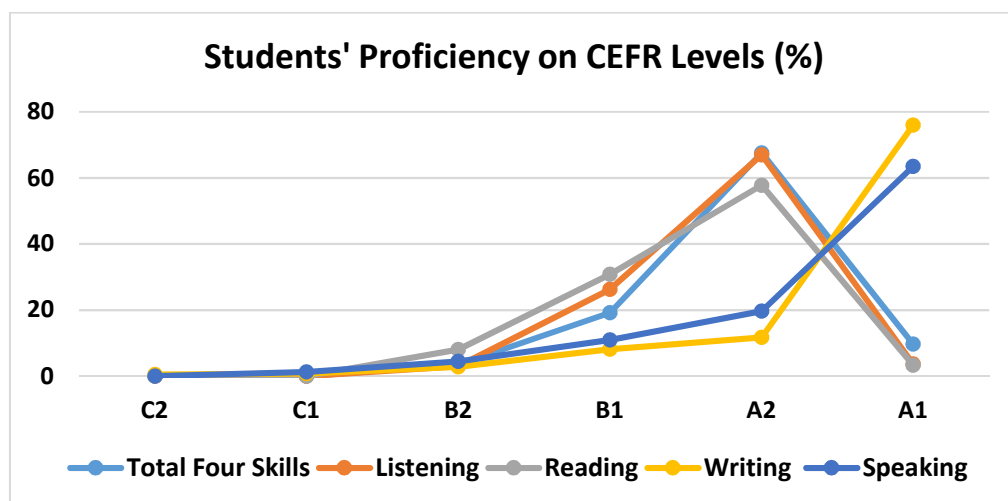
Chart 1. The distribution of students' proficiency on CEFR levels

Table 13. Students' proficiency levels calculated using raw and converted scores

CEFR levels	Total four skills	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking
			Students' proficiency levels		
C2	0	0	0	10 (.5%)	0
C1	0	0	0	18 (.8%)	29 (1.3%)
B2	80 (3.5%)	77 (3%)	183 (8.1%)	64 (2.8%)	100 (4.5%)
B1	431 (19.2%	592 (26.3%)	693 (30.8%)	185 (8.2%)	251 (11%)
A2	1519 (67.6%)	1497 (67%)	1298 (57.8%)	262 (11.7%)	441 (19.7%)
A1	218 (9.7%)	82 (3.7%)	74 (3.3%)	1709 (76%)	1427 (63.5%)

4.2. The correlations between Thai EFL learners receptive and productive skills

The results of the correlation analyses disclosed that both receptive skills, i.e. listening and reading, were significantly correlated with the two productive skills, i.e. speaking and writing. Students' reading skill had stronger correlations with speaking ($r = .521$, $p < .001$) and writing ($r = .526$, $p < .001$), than listening with speaking ($r = .472$, $p < .001$) and writing ($r = .475$, $p < .001$). However, despite having high coefficients, the effect size correlations were small (table 14). Then, the analyses were continued to explore how much of the variance in students' English proficiency on CEFR levels can be explained by their receptive and productive skills with linear regressions. Writing proficiency explained 72% of the variances in students' proficiency on CEFR levels, followed by reading (66%), speaking (58%), and listening (58%). The values of each skill were more than 50%, displaying that these skills were influential for Thai students' English proficiency development (table 15).

Table 14. Pearson correlations between Thai students' receptive and productive skills

	Writing		Speaking	
	Pearson coefficient	Effect size correlation	Pearson coefficient	Effect size correlation
Listening	.475**	.18 (small)	.472**	.20 (small)
Reading	.526**	.26 (small)	.521**	.29 (small)

Notes. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, two tailed tests.

Table 15. Regression results

Predictor variables	Dependent variable	R^2	F (Sig.)	B (S.E.)	T (Sig.)
Listening		.577	3065.16 (.000)	3.27 (.059)	55.36 (.000)
Reading	Students' English proficiency on CEFR levels in total	.661	4381.10 (.000)	2.91 (.044)	66.19 (.000)
Writing		.719	5745.86 (.000)	1.89 (.025)	75.80 (.000)
Speaking		.580	3106.62 (.000)	2.70 (.048)	55.74 (.000)

5. Discussion

There has been a growing interest in English language teaching and learning in Asian countries due to market forces and global competitiveness (Bolton, 2008). In Thailand, since 1996, the government has been trying to reform the English curriculum and concentrate the Basic Education Core Curriculum (BEC) on improving the English language skills of Thai learners, focusing on "Language for Communication, Language and Culture, Language and Relationship with other Learning Areas, and Language and Relationship with Community and the World (Kaur, Young, & Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 348)." The changes in the landscape of English teaching and learning are also supported by educational policies that give schools more autonomy, provide teacher development and trainings, include families and local communities in administrative business, and put more emphasis of learner-centered approach curriculum (Wiriyachitra, 2002). In 2014, the government announced the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to be implemented across schools and universities in Thailand, influencing curriculum development, test, evaluation, and teacher development (Anantapol et al., 2018). English has been encouraged to be used in various domains of communications, including banking, tourism, academic conferences, science and technology, etc., thereby raising the idea of perceiving English as a Lingua Franca (Baker, 2012; Foley, 2005; Khamkhien, 2010; Kongkerd, 2013). In a micro context, a survey study conducted by Chamcharatsri (2013) found that Thai people themselves perceive English as a crucial language for social mobility, accessing information, and connecting with others.

However, the findings of this study suggested that the focus of the educational reform should begin with developing curriculum that fit Thai EFL learners' needs and circumstances. At one time, it is necessary looking at how others are doing in terms of English proficiency, but improving English proficiency should start by understanding learners' current English proficiency levels. At this point, this study has found that, on average, Thai EFL learners had A2 English proficiency level, considered as basic users in CEFR. Out of 2248 learners, 67.6% of them were at A2 and 9.7% were at A1, which count for 77.3% of the total subjects. There were only 19.2% at B1 and 3.5% at B2, considered as independent users. In each English skill, Thai EFL learners had very low proficiency in productive skills and low proficiency in receptive skills. The findings of this study sustain the findings of previous studies from international standardized tests conducted by ETS (English Testing Services) on TOEFL IBT (2010, 2012, 2014, & 2017), on TOEFL ITP (2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, & 2017), and on TOEIC (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017), and EF (English First) (2018), and from early studies by Wongsothorn (2001) and Prapphal (2003) that disclosed Thais' low level of English proficiency.

To put it into perspectives, in the Thai education system (table 16), A2 is considered as the ability of junior high school students, while A1 is the ability of primary school students. This means that most of the subjects of this study, who were senior high school graduates and first-year university students, should have reached, at least, B1 level, which is the standard for the ability of high school students. Instead, the results of this study noted that 77.3% of 2248 Thai students fell in the levels of basic user (A2 and A1); there were only 22.7% of the students who had the levels of independent user (B2 and B1). These results indicate that Thai EFL learners are likely to be at one level short of the targeted English proficiency level implemented by the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, on each skill, the results of this study disclosed that most of the students were at the ability of elementary school students in speaking and writing (A1) and at the ability of junior high school students in listening and reading (A2). These results imply that Thai EFL learners are likely to be at two levels short in speaking and writing and one level short in listening and reading of the

targeted English proficiency level. Nonetheless, it is also worth mentioning that there were still a small number of students who had the ability equal to English speakers in writing and speaking (C1 and C2), which is one or two levels higher than the targeted English proficiency level. Saengboon (2004) argues that, in English learning, there are a few Thai students would succeed, but many would fail. The problems are rooted in the use of traditional teaching methods, Thai cultures in Buddhism, and status and hierarchy, Thai students' characteristics, and the rare use of English in everyday life.

Table 16. The six levels of CEFR and the interpretations in the Thai Education System

CEFR Level	The ability/ proficiency of …
A1	Primary school students
A2	Junior high school students
B1	Senior high school students
B2	University students
C1	English speakers
C2	English speakers

It is argued that the English curriculum development in Thailand should fully embrace the concepts of CEFR and apply them in each level of schooling. CEFR provides practical descriptions of language proficiency levels that relate to real-life situations or contexts and it is open to multimodality and adaptations (Figueras, 2012). The English curriculum should be designed following the targeted level of proficiency and the teaching and learning materials should not be confused with the details of other levels. The monitoring progress should be placed on each level of schooling and a set of assessment and evaluation should be created, thereby enabling the government to see how much improvement happens on each level of schooling and to assess what needs to be added. The availability of the teaching and learning materials in each specific CEFR level is one important thing, while teacher training and professional development ensuring each teacher understands what the targeted level of proficiency is and how to achieve it are the other crucial things in this process.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study provide empirical evidence on the English proficiency levels of Thai EFL learners and disclose the correlations between productive and receptive skills contributing to Thai EFL learners' English proficiency. Thai first-year university students are at the levels of Basic Users of English, while they should be at the levels of Independent Users of English. Among the four English skills, their listening and reading proficiency levels are better than writing and speaking. The correlational analyses between the receptive and productive skills reflect strong correlations, suggesting that future improvement should address the skills altogether, not separately. Furthermore, based on the results, the English curriculum development in Thailand is encouraged to consider the needs and issues in each level of schoolings and address them contextually based on CEFR guidelines. Teachers in schools need to have better understandings of CEFR in theory and practice, and teaching and learning materials, such as books, handouts, etc., that follow CEFR must be accessible for

teachers and students in schools. Studies on students' English proficiency levels need to be conducted regularly to monitor learning progress.

As much as this study intends to offer, it has some limitations to be considered. This study specifically explored the first-year university students' English proficiency levels at one university, implying that studies conducted at other universities may find different results. In addition, this study assessed the students' English proficiency levels by using Walailak University – Test of English Proficiency (WUTEP), meaning that other types of English proficiency tests may give different results. However, regardless of these two limitations, this study has achieved its objective, i.e. to report Thai first-year university students' English proficiency levels based on CEFR. It is expected that the findings of this study can stimulate future studies in this area and there will be comparative studies among Thai university students in the future. Future research around English proficiency and CEFR with a specific focus on a country or region is strongly recommended since it will offer some meaningful insights for future improvements in terms of English proficiency.

7. Acknowledgement

8. References

Anantapol, W., Keeratikorntanayod, W., & Chobphon, P. (2018). Developing English Proficiency Standards for English Language Teachers in Thailand. *Humanities Journal*, *25*(2), 1-35.

Baker, W. (2012). English as a lingua franca in Thailand: Characterisations and implications. *Englishes in Practice*, *1*(1).

Blake, H. L., Mcleod, S., Verdon, S., & Fuller, G. (2018). The relationship between spoken English proficiency and participation in higher education, employment and income from two Australian censuses. *International journal of speech-language pathology*, *20*(2), 202-215.

Bolton, K. (2008). English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the issue of proficiency. *English Today*, *24*(2), 3-12.

Chamcharatsri, P. B. (2013). Perception of Thai English. *Journal of English as an International Language*, *8*(1), 21-36.

Chen, Y. H., & Baker, P. (2016). Investigating criterial discourse features across second language development: Lexical bundles in rated learner essays, CEFR B1, B2 and C1. *Applied Linguistics*, *37*(6), 849-880.

Chen, X., & Dewaele, J. M. (2018). The relationship between English proficiency and humour appreciation among English L1 users and Chinese L2 users of English. *Applied Linguistics Review*.

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Education First (EF). (2018). *EF EPI 2018 – EF English Proficiency Index – Thailand.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ef.co.th/epi/regions/asia/thailand/

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2011). *Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL® Internet-based and Paper-based Tests January 2010—December 2010 Test Data.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/TOEFL-SUM-2010.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2013). *Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL iBT® Tests and TOEFL® PBT Tests January 2012– December 2012 Test Data.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/543124/23607949/1380563842453/TOEFL+Scores.pdf?token=O8btazW0RLs0G8qsKpsysHGxdsA%3D

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2014). *Test and Score Data Summary for the TOEFL ITP Test January 2013– December 2013 Test Data.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ets.org/s/toefl_itp/pdf/TOEFL_ITP_TSDS_2013_data_unlweb-acc.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2015a). *Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL iBT® Tests January 2014– December 2014 Test Data.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from http://www.toefl.com.tw/iBT/pdf/2014_TOEFL%20Test%20and%20Score%20Data%20Summary%E2%80%8B.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2015b). *Test and Score Data Summary for the TOEFL ITP Test January 2014– December 2014 Test Data.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ets.org/s/toefl_itp/pdf/toefl-itp-test-score-data-2014.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2016). *Test and Score Data Summary for the TOEFL ITP Test January 2015– December 2015 Test Data.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ets.org/s/toefl_itp/pdf/114643_unlweb-acc.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2017). *Test and Score Data Summary for the TOEFL ITP Test January 2016– December 2016 Test Data.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ets.org/s/toefl_itp/pdf/toefl-itp-test-score-data-2016.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2018a). *Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL iBT® Tests January 2017– December 2017 Test Data.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227_unlweb.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2018b). *Test and Score Data Summary for the TOEFL ITP Test January 2017– December 2017 Test Data.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ets.org/s/toefl_itp/pdf/toefl-itp-test-score-data-2017.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2013). *The TOEIC Test Report on Test Takers Worldwide 2012.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ets.org/s/toeic/pdf/2012_ww_data_report_unlweb.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2014). *2013 report on test takers worldwide.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from http://toeic.cn/download.aspx?file=/upload/file/20160905452.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2015). *2014 report on test takers worldwide.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.etsglobal.org/content/download/15178/259610/file/2014_Report_on_Test_Takers_Worldwide-The_TOEIC_Listening_and_Reading_Test.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2016). *2015 report on test takers worldwide.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.etsglobal.org/content/download/16378/276472/file/2015%20Report%20on%20Test%20Takers%20Worldwide%20-The%20TOEIC%20Listening%20and%20Reading%20Test.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2017). *2016 report on test takers worldwide.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from http://www.iibc-global.org/library/default/toeic/official_data/pdf/Worldwide2016.pdf

Education Testing Service (ETS). (2018). *2017 report on test takers worldwide.* Retrieved on December 12, 2018, from https://www.ets.org/s/toeic/pdf/2017-report-on-test-takers-worldwide.pdf

English First (EF). (2018). *The world's largest rangking of countries and regions by English skills.* Retrieved on July 18, 2019, from https://www.ef.co.th/epi/

Figueras, N. (2012). The impact of the CEFR. *ELT journal*, *66*(4), 477-485.

Fitzpatrick, D. (2011). *Making sense of the English language policy in Thailand: An exploration of teachers' practices and dispositions.* Retrieved on July 8, 2019, from https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/3314/FitzpatrickD.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y

Foley, J. A. (2005). English in… Thailand. *RELC journal*, *36*(2), 223-234.

Hasselgreen, A. (2013). Adapting the CEFR for the classroom assessment of young learners' writing. *Canadian modern language review*, *69*(4), 415-435.

Hopkins, W. G. (2008). Quantitative research design. *Sportscience, 4*(1). Retrieved on July 18, 2019, from https://www.sportsci.org/jour/0001/wghdesign.html

Kaur, A., Young, D., & Kirkpatrick, R. (2016). English Education Policy in Thailand: Why the Poor Results?. In *English language education policy in Asia* (pp. 345-361). Springer, Cham.

Khamkhien, A. (2010). Teaching English Speaking and English Speaking Tests in the Thai Context: A Reflection from Thai Perspective. *English Language Teaching*, *3*(1), 184-190.

Kirkpatrick, R. (2012). English education in Thailand: 2012. *Asian EFL Journal*, *61*, 24-40.

Kongkerd, W. (2013). Teaching English in the era of English used as a lingua franca in Thailand. *Executive Journal*, *33*(4), 3-12.

Limsangkass, S., Worasaktayanan, N., & Nuchuay, J. (2016). States and Problems of English Teaching Management in Chinese Foundation Schools in Three Southernmost Provinces of Thailand. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *12*(1), 39-75.

Li, H., Yuan, Y. C., Bazarova, N. N., & Bell, B. S. (2018). Talk and Let Talk: The Effects of Language Proficiency on Speaking Up and Competence Perceptions in Multinational Teams. *Group & Organization Management*, 1059601118756734.

Methitham, P., & Chamcharatsri, P. B. (2011). Critiquing ELT in Thailand: A reflection from history to practice. *Journal of Humanities, Naresuan University*, *8*(2), 57-68.

Mison, S., & Jang, I. C. (2011). Canadian FSL teachers' assessment practices and needs: Implications for the adoption of the CEFR in a Canadian context. *Synergies Europe*, *6*, 99-108.

Muñoz, A. J. J. (2014). Measuring the impact of CLIL on language skills: a CEFR-based approach for Higher Education. *Language Value*, (6), 28-50.

Murphy, J. E., Smock, L., Hunter-Adams, J., Xuan, Z., Cochran, J., Paasche-Orlow, M. K., & Geltman, P. L. (2018). Relationships Between English Language Proficiency, Health Literacy, and Health Outcomes in Somali Refugees. *Journal of immigrant and minority health*, 1-10.

Negishi, M., Takada, T., & Tono, Y. (2013, January). A progress report on the development of the CEFR-J. In *Exploring language frameworks: Proceedings of the ALTE Kraków Conference* (pp. 135-163).

Nguyen, A. T. (2016). Towards an examiners training model for standardized oral assessment qualities in Vietnam. *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*, *11*(1), 11.

Prapphal, K. (2003). English proficiency of Thai learners and directions of English teaching and learning in Thailand. *Journal of English Studies*, *1*.

Saengboon, S. (2004). Second language acquisition (SLA) and English language teaching (ELT). *PASAA. Bangkok*, *35*, 11-34.

Stoffelsma, L., & Spooren, W. (2018). The Relationship Between English Reading Proficiency and Academic Achievement of First-Year Science and Mathematics Students in a Multilingual Context. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 1-18.

Tannenbaum, R. J., & Wylie, E. C. (2008). Linking English-language test scores onto the common European framework of reference: An application of standard-setting methodology. *ETS Research Report Series*, *2008*(1), i-75.

Wanna, W., Tilahun, A., & Pawlos, A. (2018). The English Language Proficiency Level of First Year Students in Dilla University. *The Ethiopian Journal of Education*, *36*(1), 111-147.

Wang, H. P., Kuo, B. C., Tsai, Y. H., & Liao, C. H. (2012). A CEFR-based Computerized Adaptive Testing System for Chinese Proficiency. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET*, *11*(4), 1-12.

Wiriyachitra, A. (2002). English language teaching and learning in Thailand in this decade. *Thai TESOL focus*, *15*(1), 4-9.

Wongsothorn, A. (2001). Levels of English skills of Thai students. *Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. Retrieved on February*, *23*, 2013.

Wu, J. R., & Wu, R. Y. (2007). Using the CEFR in Taiwan: The perspective of a local examination board. *The Language Training and Testing Center Annual Report*, *56*, 1-20.