



Revisiting English-in-Education Policies in Thailand: Ambitious Goals, Contradictory Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the development and challenges of English-in-education policies in Thailand over the past two decades. While the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) reflects a clear governmental intention to upgrade English proficiency, implementation across basic and higher education has been marked by fragmented responsibilities, unrealistic expectations, and contradictory outcomes. Policies set ambitious CEFR goals, from A1 at Grade 6 to C1 or higher at the graduate level, often assuming linear language development, which overlooks the complex and non-linear nature of language acquisition and development. Additionally, the increasing use of commercial English tests poses financial burdens on institutions and learners, raising concerns about equity, especially in institutions with limited funding.

Despite these challenges, the CEFR offers a shared and internationally recognized framework that enables policymakers, administrators, and teachers to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This paper promotes the use of complementary classroom-based formative assessments and

<p>CEFR-aligned learner portfolios to ensure a more equitable and sustainable implementation.</p> <p>These methods not only reduce the high-stakes pressure of standardized testing but also empower teachers as key agents in the assessment process. Teachers can design tasks that are developmentally appropriate and responsive to learners' needs. Overall, a more coherent and context-based approach is needed to close the gap between the goals of the CEFR policies and learners' achievement.</p> <p>Keywords: English-in-education policies, English language assessment, Thai basic education, Thai higher education, CEFR</p>

Introduction

English-in-education policies in Thailand are centralized and top-down. Two major government parties are involved in introducing the policies, which are the Ministry of Education (MoE) who governs the public and private schools that offer basic education, and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESRI) who oversees the higher education institutions. The ultimate goal of these policies is for Thai learners to be equipped with a good command of English, aiming at academic and economic advancement and competitiveness.

For the first time in Thai basic education history, in 2014, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was officially introduced. The Office of the Basic Education Commission under the MoE (2014) published the manual aimed at upgrading the English language proficiency of learners by referring to teaching, learning, and assessment through the use of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). The manual clearly states the achievement goals for learners in Grades 6, 9, and 12, who are expected to perform at A1, A2, and B1 levels, respectively. Building on this initiative, the Office of the Higher Education Commission (2016)¹ introduced a similar policy, to improve English language proficiency among university learners. More recently, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (2024b) revised the earlier policy by clearly specifying the expected CEFR proficiency levels for learners at the higher educational level.

While these efforts represent a significant shift toward international standards, several critical issues deserve further discussion. In this article, I will begin with a review of English language policies over the past two decades and discuss how such policies and outcomes are unbalanced, despite

the formal adoption of CEFR-based frameworks. The results from CEFR-informed assessments with contradictory outcomes will be discussed. Such contradictions make it difficult for stakeholders to see the realities of learners' English proficiency. Finally, I will discuss the directions of English language policies and practices.

English-in-Education Policies in the Past Two Decades

The significance of English proficiency among Thai learners became more concrete and apparent, probably since the ASEAN Summit in November 2007, when the ASEAN Charter was officially introduced. Article 34 of the Charter, titled "*Working Language of ASEAN*," explicitly states that "*The working language of ASEAN shall be English.*" (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2007). This is the Charter's only reference to a working or official language, thereby formalizing English as the sole language for official communication within ASEAN institutions. Since then, ASEAN member states, including Thailand, have recognized English as a vital language for economic cooperation, diplomatic interaction, and regional integration.

According to Wudthayagorn et al. (2024), the government implemented the following English-in-education policies between 2010 and 2020:

- 2010 English as a Second Language Policy
- 2012 English Speaking Year
- 2014 The CEFR policy for basic education
- 2016 The CEFR policy for higher education
- 2020 The CEFR policy for basic education (revised)

It can be concluded, from these policies, that determined efforts to upgrade English proficiency are ongoing. The first two policies in 2010 and 2012 by the MoE, faded quickly because they did not fit with the Thai context, where English functions more as a foreign language than a second language. Most Thai learners have limited exposure to the language, except in a formal classroom. The 2012 English Speaking Year policy is more symbolic than practical. There was no concrete preparation for both in-service and pre-service teachers.

The CEFR has been in effect since 2014. The expected CEFR levels in basic education are specified, stating that by the end of grade 6, grade 9, and grade 12, learners should achieve A1, A2, and B1, respectively (The Office of Basic Education Commission, 2014). Two years later, the Office of Higher Education Commission (2016) notes that university students should take standardized English tests developed by their universities or appropriate ones recommended by their university before graduation. The scores should

conform to the CEFR or other recognized standards, and they should be recorded in transcripts or certificates. It is noted that the expected CEFR levels were not specified for university learners. Then, the Office of Basic Education Commission (2020) expanded the scope of CEFR assessment to include, in addition to learners, all teachers and administrators, requiring them to meet CEFR standards.

Recently, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (2024a) has circulated the “Announcement of the Higher Education Standards Committee: Policy on Raising English Language Standards in Higher Education Institutions, B.E. 2567 (2024).” One of the highlights of this policy is the English language assessment before graduation, with the expected CEFR levels, which indicate, at the end of the announcement, that:

“Higher education institutions shall arrange for all learners to take an English language proficiency test before graduation. This may be a test developed by the institution itself or an internationally recognized standardized test, with results benchmarked against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The aim is to assess each learner’s English language proficiency. Institutions may also consider reporting the test results on the academic transcript or certificate. The target proficiency levels are as follows:

1. Diploma level: Institutions should set the expected English proficiency outcome before graduation at B1 or higher.
2. Bachelor’s degree level: Institutions should set the expected English proficiency outcome before graduation at B2 or higher.
3. Graduate level (Master’s and Doctoral): Institutions should set the expected English proficiency outcome before graduation at C1 or higher.”

(Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, 2024a, translated by the author)

After a few months of implementation of the latest policy, growing concerns have emerged regarding the lack of clarity in expected outcomes and assessment practices. Institutions are left to interpret the policy independently, resulting in inconsistent implementation and uncertainty about how to measure progress, ensure accountability, and quality assurance. Later, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (2024b) responded to the concern raised by the Council of the Graduate Studies Administrators of Thailand regarding the ambitious CEFR goal for graduate learners. The Ministry clarified that its announcement is not intended to enforce a compulsory English language exit examination for graduation. Instead, it serves as a policy direction for higher education

institutions to use English proficiency data to inform their English language development plans for learners.

As seen, while the intention to upgrade English proficiency, based on the CEFR, has persisted, the lack of concrete guidelines, support materials, and monitoring systems has hindered the effectiveness of these policies. These centralized, top-down policies are frequently left to be interpreted and applied independently by institutions, which leads to inconsistent results, ambiguous evaluation procedures, and a lack of accountability.

From A1 to C1 or Higher: (Un)realistic Expectations?

The expected CEFR levels of Thai learners, set by the government, can be summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Expected CEFR Levels of Thai Learners

Education level	Expected CEFR Level	Government body
Grade 6	A1	The Office of the Basic Education Commission (2014), MoE
Grade 9	A2	The Office of the Basic Education Commission (2014), MoE
Grade 12	B1	The Office of the Basic Education Commission (2014), MoE
Diploma	B1 or higher	The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (2024a)
Bachelor's degree	B2 or higher	The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (2024a)
Graduate	C1 or higher	The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (2024a)

Table 1 illustrates the CEFR expectation, ranging from basic A1 to advanced levels C1 in higher education. A key challenge lies in the implicit assumption that learners' language development will progress in a linear and uniform manner across educational stages. This expectation suggests that

learners should smoothly advance from CEFR A1 in Grade 6 to C1 by the end of graduate studies. Such expectation oversimplifies the complex and non-linear nature of language acquisition and development. Knight (2018) suggested that motivated adult learners typically need between 100 and 200 hours of guided learning to get from one CEFR level to the next. Learners need more hours to move to the next level. From A1 to A2, learners typically need 100-150 hours of guided learning, but 180-260 hours to get from B1 to B2.

Advancing from one level to the next requires substantial instructional input and learner effort. Current curricular structures and contact hours in many Thai programs may not be sufficient to support such gains. For instance, Chulalongkorn University bachelor's learners are required to take four English courses (a total of 12 credits). Thus, a total of 180 hours (45 hours per course) is spent on four courses. Therefore, it would be ambitious to expect learners to progress to B2 upon completing their bachelor's degree studies. This is because the learners may be admitted with different CEFR levels. Moreover, many of them may not receive adequate support to advance to the next level or beyond, especially when English is treated as a required subject rather than an integrated part of their content learning.

One interesting point regarding these policies is that they prescribe general proficiency goals, which can be misleading because, in practice, learners may meet the CEFR descriptors for one particular skill but not the others. For example, they may be good at reading, achieving B1, but struggle with speaking, performing at A2. Several questions arise. For example, are some language skills more critical than others for different positions or specific job roles? Should policies be flexible by outlining expected levels for each skill rather than overall proficiency levels? What tests and test results are relevant and applicable in a given situation? These issues deserve further investigation.

English Language Proficiency of Thai Learners: Ambitious Goals, Contradictory Outcomes

While the policies set ambitious goals, empirical evidence demonstrates a more complex picture. A review of several studies and test results reveals contradictory outcomes with no definitive conclusion. Here are some examples.

Franz and Teo (2017) revealed that the majority of Thai secondary school English teachers did not meet the CEFR benchmark set by the Ministry of Education. In the 2015 national CEFR-referenced online placement test, 57% of teachers scored at A1 or A2 levels, with only 43%

achieving B1 or above. This mismatch raised concerns about the adequacy of teachers' English proficiency to effectively implement CEFR-aligned instruction. Waluyo (2019) assessed the English proficiency of 2,248 Thai EFL university learners (74% female and 26% male) using the Walailak University Test of English Proficiency (WU-TEP), a comprehensive standardized test developed by the University. The results showed that 77.3% of the learners were at the basic user level at A1 and A2.

Educational Testing Service reported the TOEFL ITP scores taken by Thai test-takers. Over the past three years, out of the maximum score of 677, they earned an average score of 463 in both 2022 and 2023, and 470 in 2024 (Educational Testing Service, 2022a, 2023a, 2024a). These scores roughly correspond to B1. (See the TOEFL ITP score interpretation to the CEFR in Tannenbaum & Baron, 2011). In addition, based on the TOEFL iBT results, Thai test-takers earned an average score of 82 out of 120 (Educational Testing Service, 2023b), and 83 in both 2022 and 2021 (Educational Testing Service, 2022b, 2021). Notably, these scores exceed the B2 threshold, which is generally set at a cut-off score of 72. (See score interpretation in Papageorgiou et al., 2015). Educational Testing Service (2024b) also reported that Thai test-takers earned an average TOEIC score of 546 (out of 990), comprising a listening score of 316 and a reading score of 230. The score exceeds the B1 level but does not meet the B2 threshold (See the TOEIC score interpretation to the CEFR (Educational Testing Service, 2024c)).

In addition, for IELTS results from 2023-2024, Thai test-takers earned an overall band score of 6.1 out of 9 (based on components of listening band score of 6.4, reading band score of 6.2, writing band score of 5.8, and speaking band score of 5.9) (IELTS, 2025a). The overall band score of 6.1 is equivalent to B2. (See the IELTS score interpretation to the CEFR (IELTS, 2025b))

The other two studies, conducted by Thai researchers, using self-assessment questionnaires to collect data, also demonstrated conflicting CEFR results. In a mixed-method study, Ngonkum and Deerajviset (2024) collected data, based on convenience sampling, from 177 Thai EFL learners at a large university in the northeast part of Thailand. Then, 12 participants, representing each CEFR level from A1 to C2, were selected for the interview. The results indicated that learners rated their English proficiency at A1 and had moderate awareness of the CEFR.

In contrast, Piamsai (2023) reported on a study involving sixty-eight third- and fourth-year learners from the Faculty of Education at a public university who volunteered to participate in the research project. It was found out that about 20% of the participants rated their listening skills at B1, while about 80% perceived their ability to be at B2. For the speaking skill, about

44% of the participants perceived their speaking skill to be at B1, while about 56% of the participants rated themselves at B2. Regarding reading skills, approximately 15% of the participants evaluated their reading proficiency at B1, while about 85% rated their reading skills at B2. For writing skills, about 41% of the participants perceived their performance to be at B1, while about 59% of the participants rated themselves at B2. These learners rated themselves relatively high because they were about to take an English proficiency test upon graduation to certify their English ability. Also, the participants had taken two fundamental English courses in their first year and an English for Academic Purposes course in the second year. They were about to graduate and ready to take the teachers' license examinations. Thus, it is likely that their confidence in the upcoming license examination, combined with prior English coursework, contributed to relatively high self-assessment.

So far, we have seen that different types of assessments, such as commercial tests, in-house tests, and self-assessment surveys, frequently produce contradictory outcomes, which highlight the challenges in gauging English proficiency at a national scale and raise important questions about the appropriateness and feasibility of current policy benchmarks.

What Directions Lie Ahead?

In my opinion, the CEFR policies will remain crucial to the Thai education system. One of the key advantages of these policies is the provision of a clear, structured, and globally recognized framework for describing language proficiency. The CEFR offers common reference points that enable key stakeholders like policymakers, administrators, and teachers to "speak the same language." It is, thus, straightforward when discussing teaching goals, designing curricula, materials, and assessment. In other words, the CEFR promotes a shared understanding of what constitutes a particular level of English ability, ranging from beginning A1 to proficient C2. The shared terminology and its descriptors reduce ambiguity, support more coherent decision-making, and enhance communication and coordination across different institutions and educational levels.

While the CEFR policies offer many benefits, one notable concern is the growing reliance on testing, probably commercial testing, which can put a financial burden on institutions and learners. Several institutions, in the absence of in-house tests, turn to internationally recognized English proficiency tests or other CEFR-informed tests as a way to measure learners' proficiency. These tests are often costly, and their use in high-stakes decisions, such as graduation or placement, shifts the financial responsibility to institutions and, in some cases, to learners themselves. For smaller

institutions with limited funding, this creates equity concerns and may widen the gap between urban and rural learners, as well as between well-funded and financially constrained institutions.

I also predict that a standardized, large-scale assessment will remain in place for university admission and exit decisions. To track students' English language development over time, I encourage each institution to also use formative, classroom-based assessments and portfolios aligned with the CEFR. It will relieve the pressure of a single, standardized, large-scale assessment and shift the focus toward ongoing language development. By doing this, institutions can reduce the burden on learners (and likely on teachers as well) and promote more purposeful teaching and learning in a classroom. At the same time, teachers are empowered as active agents in the assessment process. Teachers, with the proper training and assistance, can design CEFR-informed tasks and materials that are suited to learners' levels, creating more equitable and learner-centered learning environments

Testing has its value, but it is not the only aspect of the educational milieu. Before testing, teach and foster well. Do not be trapped in the testing business.

About the Author

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Endnote

¹ Later in 2016, the Office of the Higher Education Commission, which had previously operated under the Ministry of Education, was integrated into the newly established Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESRI).

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