

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF THAI UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS USING CEFR IN KHONKAEN

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to (1) study the English proficiency of Thai students referencing Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by using online placement test and (2) study the differences and similarities of problems which were found in the placement test. The research instruments were an online English placement test and an interview. The population of this study were from 200 undergraduate students who enrolled in the test in 2018 academic year. The participants were 100 students and 6 of them were randomly selected for the interview. The 6 students consist of three students with good grade of English and three students with poor grade of English. The statistics used in this study were percentage, average, and standard deviation. It was found that average of English proficiency level of the participants referencing CEFR was A1.

Keywords: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), Oxford Online Placement Test, English Proficiency

Introduction

English has been recognized and acknowledged as a global language that has played an important role for a long time. Communication is the major purpose that people use English especially for communicating with other people in different countries. In some countries, people use English as an official language and in some others do not but still it is useful for communication. Crystal (2003: 1) mentions that English is a global language because wherever we travel, we usually see English signs and advertisements. Therefore, it can be said that English is an international language which is intermediary for people around the world to communicate and understand each other (Office of the Basic Education Commission of Thailand, 2008: 9).

English also serves as an important tool for education and access to knowledge. Many schools and universities around the world require their students to have a basic or intermediate understanding of the English language. Therefore, it is a crucial part of development for the population's potential in the country. Due to the fact that since 2015 Thailand has participated in the ASEAN community and English has been the official language for communication of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Association (2008: 29) states that "The working language of ASEAN shall be English" which is relevant to Grzega's statement (2009: 50), English is a door-opener to other languages and cultures. Consequently, Thai people are aware to gain more English competence for their education and work that would lead to a better opportunity for their lives.

In Thailand, English has been taught as a foreign language. Thai students spend twelve years studying English in primary and secondary schools, but the results are questionable. Thai students have problems with English skills although new techniques and methods are introduced; they are still encountering the problems when they try to learn English.

European citizen language study in 1989-1996 used the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Language) which has the objective to evaluate qualities of teachings in all English language institutes in Europe and all major European languages. CEFR was used as a standard to check language skill by ministers of the European Union in 2001. This assessment has been widely accepted and used as an evaluation tool for all individual English language ability until now. It is applicable for all nonnative English learners using this standard of evaluation.

The CEFR framework has been used to evaluate English language proficiency in schools starting with English teachers in Thailand's education system for moving towards developing teachers and students English proficiency skills. The Thai Ministry of Education has announced a policy to reform the teaching of English in primary education; it is the reason that all sectors recognize the necessity to accelerate the upgrading of education quality and development of students' measurement. This is leading to have increased the competitiveness of the country. In teaching English, it is a universal paradigm to teach English in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) preparing for entry into ASEAN in 2015 by policy reform. The main idea of CEFR will be Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) including the ability to elevate teachers' capacities in English communication.

Consequently, the objectives of this study are to investigate the CEFR level and to investigate the problems toward the CEFR test of Thai undergraduate students of a private university in KhonKaen.

Purposes

1. To investigate the CEFR level of Thai undergraduate students of a private university in KhonKaen.

2. To investigate the problems toward the CEFR test of Thai undergraduate students of a private university in KhonKaen.

Research Methodology

1. Participants

One hundred out of two hundred students participating in this study were, randomly selected, 1st – 4th year students of a private university in KhonKaen, Thailand. All of them were asked to complete the Oxford Online Placement Test or OOPT test which is acknowledged worldwide as a proficiency test of CEFR – invented by Oxford University. The test consists of two parts: the use of English and listening. The students had fifty minutes to complete the test. After finishing the test, six students from poor English grade ($n = 3$) and good English grade ($n = 3$) were asked to take the in-depth interview.

2. Instruments

2.1 Oxford Online Placement Test:

The Oxford Online Placement Test or OOPT is divided into two parts. The first part is the Use of English and the second part is Listening skills. The exact number of questions depends on the students' English proficiency. After one or two mid-level questions, the test will start giving them slightly harder questions and keep giving them slightly harder questions until they start getting questions wrong. That borderline between where they get questions right and get questions wrong is their score. The more inconsistent they are, the longer the test will take to judge their English level. So if they get some midlevel questions right but others wrong, the system will need to ask them more questions to make sure what level they are. So the number of questions is between forty to forty-three.

For the first part: Use of English is divided into three types of test including i) knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, ii) knowledge of phrasal

verbs, idioms, and irony and sarcasm, and iii) Cloze test. Most of them are Multiple-choice format except the cloze test that the test taker has to type their own answer in each blank or item.

2.2 Computer lab

Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT) is considered in worldwide as a standard test to evaluate the level of CEFR of each individual. The test must be done online only. Therefore the computer lab was chosen to be the place for testing. This computer lab can contain thirty-five test-takers per each round.

2.3 Interview Questions

To gain in-depth information from interviewees, interviewing is a popular method for collecting this kind of data (Kumar, 2015). This study used semi-interview so the number of interview questions depended on the case students. The purposes of interview questions aimed to investigate students' attitude and problems during doing the test.

2.4 Audio Recorder

During interviewing processes, the case students' answers were recorded through audio recorder.

3. Procedure

First, all one hundred students were divided into three groups because the computer lab can contain thirty-five students per round. All of them were asked to complete the Oxford Online Placement test with fifty minutes. They were assigned to do the test at the computer lab. The testing procedure took approximately an hour per round.

After finishing the OOPT test, six case students were interviewed using in-depth interview method for investigating their attitudes and problems toward the OOPT test. The audio recorder recorded case students from the

beginning to the end of interviewing. The whole research procedure took approximately four hours.

4. Data Analysis

The results of OOPT tests from one hundred students who were 1st – 4th year students of the private university in KhonKaen were analyzed using statistics: percentage, average, and standard deviation in order to present the average level of CEFR, Use of English, and Listening of the students. The data from the interview were analyzed using content analysis and verbal transcribing.

Results

The results of this study were presented into two parts including results of the Oxford Online Placement Test and interviewing as follows;

1. The Result of the Oxford Online Placement Test

The results of Oxford Online Placement Test were divided into four figures consisted of i) CEFR level, ii) Use of English level, iii) Listening level, and iv) the comparison of three levels of CEFR, Use of English, and Listening.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of seven levels of CEFR including A0, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 (C2 is the highest level while A0 is the lowest level). The result of Oxford Online Placement test indicated that the largest number of students' CEFR proficiency level was A1 level (n=42), follow with A2 level (n=38), B1 level (n=9), A0 (n=7) and B2 level (n=4), respectively. There is no student that can reach C1 level and C2 level.

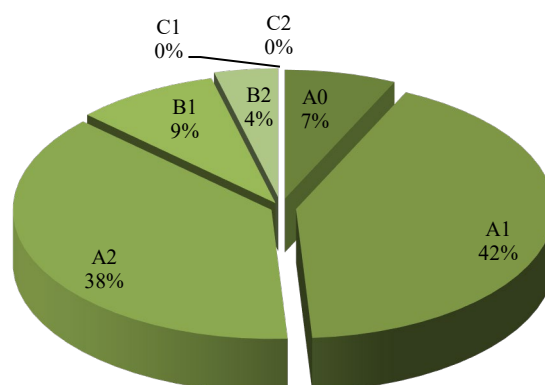


Figure 1 CEFR level

Since Oxford Online Placement test is a test consisting of two parts which are the use of English and listening, it also indicates the level of each part which is demonstrated below in figure 2 and figure 3.

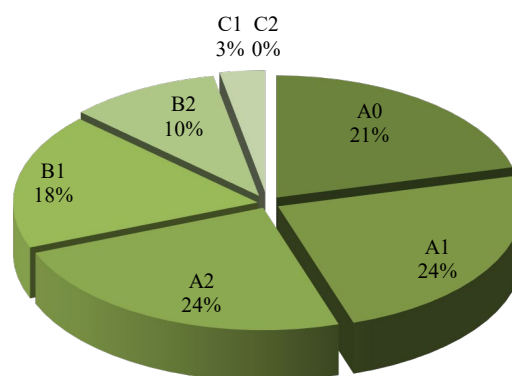


Figure 2 Use of English level

Figure 2 shows the percentage of seven levels of Use of English part including A0, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 (C2 is the highest level while A0 is the lowest level). The result of Oxford Online Placement test indicated that the largest number of students' Use of English proficiency level was A1 level (n=24) and A2 level (n=24), followed with A0 level (n=21), B1 level (n=18), B2 (n=10)

and C1 level (n=3), respectively. There is no student that can reach the C2 level in this part.

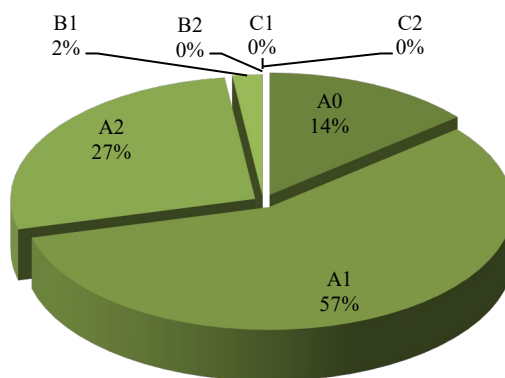


Figure 3 Listening level

Figure 3 shows the percentage of seven levels of listening including A0, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 (C2 is the highest level while A0 is the lowest level). The result of Oxford Online Placement test indicated that the largest number of students' listening proficiency level was A1 level (n=57), followed with A2 level (n=27), A0 level (n=14), and B1 (n=2), respectively. There is no student that can reach the B2 level, C1 level, and C2 level.

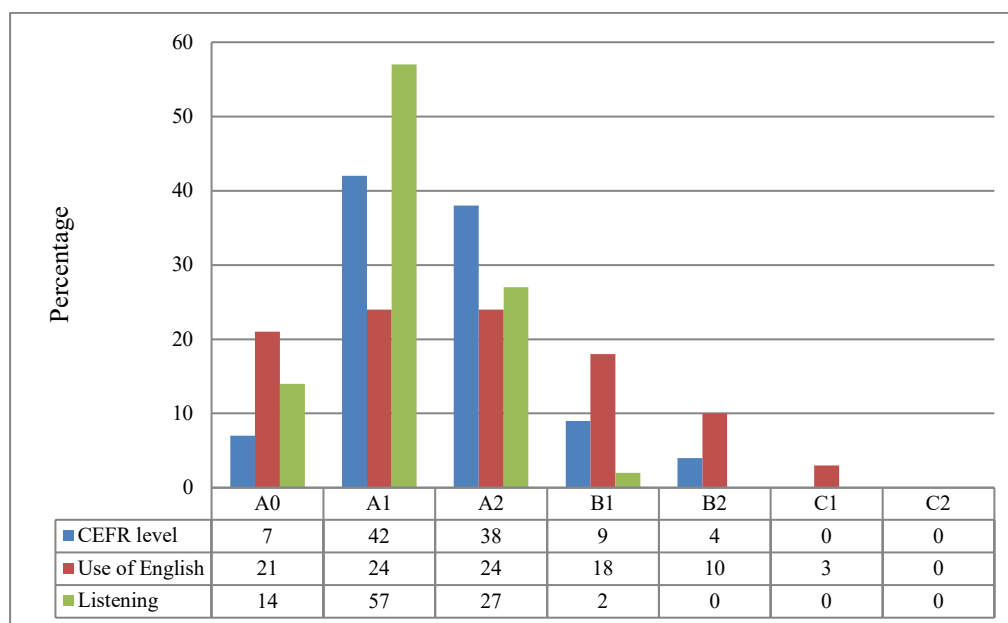


Figure 4 The comparison of three levels of CEFR, Use of English, and Listening

Figure 4 illustrates the comparison of three proficiency tests of CEFR, Use of English, and Listening in each level. The results show that the largest number was A1 level.

Table 1 The Level of CEFR, Use of English, and Listening

	N	Lowest	Highest	Average	Std. Deviation
CEFR	100	A0	B2	A1	.870
Use of English	100	A0	C1	A2	1.351
Listening	100	A0	B1	A1	.682

Table 1 shows the lowest level, the highest level, average level, and S.D. deviation of the students. It indicated that the lowest level of CEFR, use of English, and listening was A0. While the highest level of CEFR, use of English, and listening were B2, C1, and B1, respectively. The average proficiency level of CEFR, use of English, and listening were A1, A2, and A1, respectively. The standard deviation in each proficiency part indicated that the proficiency of

English in each part of the students is similar – especially in listening proficiency level.

2. Interviewing

The interview was conducted in order to examine students' attitudes and problems towards the OOPT test. The results of this part were aimed to answer the purposes of this study.

Question	Good			Poor		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Contents	Learn	Difficult Never see	Easy Had seen	Never seen	Very difficult To read	seen
Understanding	Understand	Did not understand	Understand	Understand some points	Can guess the meaning of text	Understand and some points
Problem	Lexical, phonological motivation	Lexical, phonological, motivation	Orthographic phonological	phonological	Lexical and orthographic	Anxiety, lexical and phonological

Table 2 shows the results of interviewing six case students consisting of three good English grade students and three poor English grade students. It indicated that one student of good English grade and poor English grade stated that they never learnt or saw the content that was shown in the test before whereas the other four said they had seen it somewhere before. Two students from good and poor English grades claimed that the content of the test was

difficult to read. Two good English grade students claimed that they understood the context while three students of poor English grade could understand some content. All case students stated that they encountered problems on linguistics factor the most such as lexical, phonological, and orthographic, following with affective factor such as motivation to read and anxiousness.

Discussion

The findings of this study aimed to answer the research question of the study that is what are the average CEFR level and the lowest and highest level of CEFR that Thai undergraduate students of the private university in KhonKaen can reach? The results of the study revealed that the average proficiency level of CEFR was the A1. The lowest level of CEFR, the use of English, and listening were A0. While the highest level of CEFR, use of English, and listening were B2, C1, and B1, respectively. According to the result of CEFR, it showed that students can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. The student 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. They can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. This level is too low for their education level which has defined that they have to reach the B1 level in order to graduate.

Conclusions

The objectives of this study entitled Thai Undergraduate Students' CEFR Level of Private University in KhonKaen were to investigate the problems toward CEFR test of one hundred Thai undergraduate students of a private university in KhonKaen through Oxford Online Placement test in order to

examine the average CEFR level and the lowest and highest level of CEFR of the students, also to investigate the difference and similarities of OOPT test problems between good grade English students and poor English grade students. One hundred students were chosen to participate in this study. All one hundred students were divided into three groups and were asked to complete the Oxford Online Placement test with fifty minutes. After finishing the OOPT test, six case students were interviewed using semi-interview method for investigating their problems toward the OOPT test. The audio recorder recorded case students at the beginning to the end of interviewing. The results of the study revealed that the average proficiency level of CEFR was A1. The lowest level of CEFR, the use of English, and listening were A0. While the highest level of CEFR, use of English, and listening were B2, C1, and B1, respectively. The result of the interview indicated that the linguistics factor was the most difficult knowledge that students encounter.

Recommendations

According to the findings of the present study, further research should investigate on the OOPT test and also develop some method to increase the participant proficiency of English in order to increase their CEFR level.

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