

A Study Of Undergraduate Students' Problems Toward Taking An English Proficiency Test Based On CEFR

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Abstract

The purposes of this research were to investigate the CEFR level of Thai undergraduate students and also to identify the students' problems toward taking the proficiency test. This study was conducted with thirty fourth-year Thai undergraduate students at a public university in Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand. The data were collected through English proficiency testing and participants' demographic information to see the CEFR levels in percentage and frequency, Interview questions were analyzed by verbal transcribing. Additionally, the result of the study revealed that the majority of students were at the A2 level, followed by B1 and A1 levels, the highest was B2 level and none the students reached C1 and C2 levels. Six participants in the interview faced challenges during the exam, particularly in the listening part. Students struggled with fast and unclear accents, understanding conversations, and unfamiliar vocabulary. In the Use of English part, difficulties were related to vocabulary and grammar structure. Finally, this study will be valuable for helping students be well prepared and enhancing student scores on the English Placement Test.

Keywords: English Proficiency Test, Common Europe Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), Oxford Online Placement Test, Problems, Undergraduate student

I. Introduction

English is the most significant language in the world. English is widely used as a global language of communication in many fields, such as education, business, and technology. English also plays an important role in the education system. In English education, The English proficiency test is the most important part. The English proficiency test shows the student understands and indicates the student's language ability. Moreover, English proficiency also provides an outcome for English teaching and learning. There are various English proficiency tests to evaluate the

students' skills, for example, The International English Languages Testing System (IELTS) and The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). These international standards have been used as an English proficiency test for a long time. According to the EF Proficiency Index (2022), Singapore ranked 2 out of 111 countries that are very high proficiency in English. The Philippines and Malaysia also have a high proficiency in English, but Thailand ranked 97 out of 111. This report shows Thailand is very low proficiency in English.

The new policy of the Thai Ministry of Education announced that English language teaching and learning could be enhanced by following the Common European Framework

(CEFR). The CEFR is a framework, published by the Council of Europe in 2001, which describes language learners' abilities in terms

of speaking, reading, listening, and writing at six levels (Council of Europe, 2001).

According to the policy of Thai universities, the CEFR framework is used as a standard tool for evaluating the English language score. One of the criteria for graduating students is they are required to pass the standard score of The English Placement Test and obtain a score that relates to the level of The Common European Framework (CEFR). Regarding the private university policies, this university is diverse in student backgrounds and the students have quite low proficiency in English. Undergraduate students are required to submit the English proficiency score at the A2 level of CEFR. An example of a student English proficiency test is The Oxford Online Placement Test. Students require a score above 21 points (A2 level of the CEFR). If the students do not pass the test it may cost them the exam fee again and again.

The focus of this research is to explore the CEFR level of Thai fourth-year undergraduate students and investigate the students' problems toward taking the English Proficiency Test. This study could be beneficial for a student who enroll in the English Placement Test to be well prepared. Moreover, it will help to understand the students' problems and increase scores of CEFR levels. Two research questions in this study are: 1. What is the CEFR level of Thai undergraduate students at a private university in Nakhon Ratchasima? 2. What are the problems of students toward taking the English Proficiency Test?

II. Literature Review

A. English Proficiency

English proficiency is a measure of a student's ability in English for any purpose such as academic or occupational purposes. With higher English proficiency, people have an advantage in accessing educational and professional opportunities on a global scale. There are various English proficiency tests, for example, The International English Languages

Testing System (IELTS) and The Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT) are international standardized tests of English proficiency. According to the policy of the Thai Ministry of Education, it has been announced that there is a need to improve the English proficiency of students in order to achieve higher scores on standardized tests. They adopted CEFR into the English curriculum. The CEFR serves as a standardized assessment system for language proficiency in international tests, with its score tables linked to various CEFR levels.

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

The Council of Europe (2001) stated that The CEFR is a framework, published by the Council of Europe in 2001. The CEFR helps to design curricula and syllabuses and can be used as a guidance tool for enhancing teaching and learning. The use of the CEFR is prevalent in many language proficiency evaluations for diverse objects. More importantly, The CEFR provides clear definitions of proficiency levels that can describe student ability in language learning (Waluyo, 2019). The framework describes learners' proficiency and the CEFR consists of six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2). The popularity of the CEFR framework has led to international standardized tests such as TOEIC and IELTS aligning their scores with CEFR levels. Thai universities use the CEFR as a reference point to assess the English language proficiency level of their students. In this study, the researcher designed an evaluation of English language students using the Oxford Online Placement Test as a proficiency test based on the CEFR.

C. The Oxford Online Placement Test

The Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT) is a computer-based test designed to assess a person's English language proficiency in listening, reading, and language use skills. The

Oxford Placement Test uses computer adaptive technology, which means that the test adapts the level of difficulty of the questions based on the student's answers. The Oxford Placement Test has two sections which are The Use of English and Listening. The Use of English section measures students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and the Listening section measures students' listening ability. The Oxford Online Placement Test is widely used by educational institutions to assess the English proficiency of students. The result of The Oxford Online Placement Test reports each student separately for two sections and shows a standardized score toward score into the CEFR level. It takes approximately 60 minutes to complete and provides immediate results. A total of 120 points on the Oxford Online Placement Test are equal to the 6 levels of the Common European Framework of References (A1-C2). This CEFR standard indicates the level of student ability and presents a comprehensive breakdown of what a person is able to do at varying stages of language learning. The Oxford Online Placement Test proves to be a reliable and widely used standardized test, providing adaptive scores based on students' proficiency levels. It is highly regarded internationally and offers a clear interpretation of scores for each section.

Problems is an essential part of the Oxford Online Placement Test. Darti and Asmawati (2017), analyzed that ten problems of listening comprehension are lack of vocabulary, poor grammar mastery, accent, pronunciation, lack of concentration, speed of speech, anxiety, noise, inability to apply listening strategy and bad quality of the recording. It means there are a variety of difficulties that students faced through the exam. Grammar Problems are one of the sections that affect the Oxford Online Learning Test. Grammar is a language skill that is essential for foreign language learners. Problems and difficulties students faced through the exam came from a lack of grammar skills which is important in the Use of English part.

D. Problems in English Online Placement Test

English online placement tests are becoming popular nowadays. Online placement tests have gained popularity in education due to their convenience and flexibility. The online placement test is a new technology that is convenient for students to attempt the exam from anywhere and anytime and provides immediate feedback on students' proficiency levels. There are various advantages to using the online placement system. But sometimes, there are some problems when students use online exams such as technical problems, Listening problems, and Grammar problems. Technical problems in the Online Placement Test are the technical problems that occur such as device problems, equipment breakdowns, power outages, and internet connectivity issues. To mitigate such issues, students are advised to make adequate preparations prior to the examination by ensuring that all internet connectivity, devices, and equipment are in optimal working condition.

Additionally, students can engage in a mock examination in order to familiarize themselves with the testing process and carefully read the instructions before commencing the examination. Listening

Relevant Research

Nathaporn et al., (2019) investigated Thai Undergraduate Students' CEFR Level of a Private University. This study aims to investigate the problems toward the CEFR test and examine on the average CEFR level of the student. The data was collected through the Oxford Online Placement test and using-semi interviews to investigate the problems. The result of this study revealed the average proficiency of CEFR was A1 and the highest score of CEFR was B2. The interview section revealed that the linguistics factor was difficult for the student. This study method and research instrument can analyze and answer the research objective as well.

Another study by Waluyo (2019) was Thai First-Year University Students' English Proficiency on CEFR Levels. The study aims to investigate Thai EFL learners' English proficiency levels on CEFR in four skills and how do learners' receptive skills correlate with their productive skills. This research used a university-standardized test and converted the score to CEFR. The result shows that the most of students' proficiency was at A2 in CEFR. This study reports the student performance by using university measurements and interpreting the CEFR level.

A more recent study has been carried out by Natthamma (2022), who conducted a study on Perception towards the CEFR-based English Proficiency Test. The study investigated the awareness and familiarity towards the CEFR-based English Proficiency test of the student-teachers who joined the Teacher for Local Development Project. The researcher used a questionnaire to collect the data. The result of this study indicated that the Darti & Asmawati (2017) investigated the problems in students' listening comprehension by collecting a questionnaire, interviews, and observations during a listening exercise from thirty-seven students. The finding indicated that listening is challenging for language learners due to three factors likes listening material, listener aspects, and physical setting. The problems encountered by the student are accents, pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and speech speed. Solutions for the problems include adapting and improving listening material and exposing students to various accents.

III. Research Methodology

This study used a mixed-method approach for data collection. The quantitative data were collected from the results of taking The Oxford Online Placement Test. The qualitative data was collected from participants' demographic information and interview questions.

participants' perceived levels of awareness and familiarity at moderate to high levels based on the CEFR.

Hariswan et al., (2021) studied the performance of listening comprehension, the problems faced, and the cause of the problems of the sixty-seven bachelor students of English education by using the instruments of listening tests and questionnaires from the TOEFL listening test of fifty questions and a questionnaire of listening comprehension. The result of this study revealed that students' listening was poor. Three main problems were identified: limited linguistic knowledge, challenges with unfamiliar topics, accents, slang words, and fast audio. Moreover, environmental issues such as noise, poor audio quality, and inadequate equipment were identified. Listening factors like limited vocabulary, unfamiliar accents, and difficulties with fast-spoken language are also problems.

The population comprised 106 Management students and the participants were selected using a convenient sampling method. The participants were 30 students who were currently studying in the fourth year in a school of Management Technology at a private university in Nakhon Ratchasima. They were diverse in terms of gender, major of the participant, grade point average, elective course, and number of times taking Oxford Online Placement Test. The students came from different backgrounds. There are three research instruments, The Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT) is a standard test to evaluate the level of CEFR. Students enrolled in the OOPT which is widely used to access the English proficiency of students. The test has two parts which are The Use of English and Listening. The results show a score out of 120 and are separate for each section and CEFR level after completing the test.

Participants' Demographic Information collect to answer the first research question, the first section is collecting data which are gender,

major of the participant, grade point average, elective course, and number of times taking The Oxford Online Placement Test from the participant to provide the students' demographic information.

Interview Questions from 6 participants were selected from (3 participants) with high performance (B2 level) and (3 participants) with low performance (A1 level). The purpose of this section is to investigate the students' problems during taking the Test.

The data collection procedure first collects the Participants' Demographic Information of 30 Participants. Next, complete the Oxford Online Placement test. 30

IV. Research Results

In this chapter the result and discussion of the study were presented from using the Oxford Online Placement Test to investigate the students' level of English Proficiency framed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The results of the Oxford Online Placement Test from thirty students who were studying in the Fourth year in a school of Management Technology at a private university in Nakhon Ratchasima are shown. Additionally, the data acquired from the participant's demographic information and interview of six students were analyzed to address the following research questions: 1) What is the CEFR level of Thai undergraduate students at a private university in Nakhon Ratchasima? 2) What are the problems of students toward taking the English Proficiency Test? The results of the analysis were divided into three main sections.

A. Participants' Demographic Information

This section presents the data analysis of Management students' demographic information; gender of the participants, major of the participants, Grade Point Average, and Elective Foreign Languages Course.

Table 1 Genders of the Participants

participants take the test for approximately an hour. follow by analyze the data from the results of the OOPT score and appoint 6 participants a week later for an interview. The information will be kept confidential due to the Ethics of Human Research. the result of the Oxford Online Placement Test uses statistical methods such as percentages, and averages in order to present the level of CEFR. and link the OOPT score equivalent to the CEFR level. The results were used to answer the first research question. The data from interviews were analyzed by using content analysis and verbal transcribing.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	26	86.67
Male	4	13.33
Total	30	100.00

Table 1 reveals the frequency and percentage of 30 participants in this study, 86.67% were female and 13.33% were male.

Table 2 Major of the Participants

Major of study	Frequency	Percentage
Logistics	21	70.00
Marketing	6	30.00
Entrepreneur	3	10.00
Total	30	100.00

As shown in Table 2, twenty-one participants (70%) were studying in a major of Logistics followed by six students who were studying Marketing (30%) and three students (10%) studying in a major of Entrepreneurship.

Table 3 Grade Point Average of the Participants

Grade Point Average	Frequency	Percentage
3.50 - 4.00	5	16.67
3.00 - 3.49	11	36.67

2.50 - 2.99	11	36.67
2.00 – 2.49	2	6.67
1.50 – 1.99	1	3.33
Total	30	100.00

In terms of the GPA of the participants, the high performance of five students (16.67%) had a

Table 4 Elective Foreign Languages Course

Foreign Languages	Frequency	Percentage
English languages	16	53.33
Other languages	14	46.67
Total	30	100.00

Table 4 reveals that sixteen (53.33%) of the participant's had electives in the English language, while fourteen (46.57%) had studied in other languages.

Table 5 Number of Times for Taking Oxford Online Placement Test

Number of times for taking OOPT	Frequency	Percentage
1	15	50.00
2	9	30.00
3	2	6.67
4	3	10.00
5	1	3.33
Total	30	100.00

Table 5 shows that half of the participants (50.00%) took the Oxford Online Placement Test the first time and followed by nine participants (30.00%) taking it the second time and three participants (10.00%) took the exam in the fourth time.

GPA of 3.50 – 4.00, followed by eleven students (36.67%) who had a GPA of 3.00 – 3.59 and another eleven students had a moderate GPA of 2.50 – 2.99. Only two students (6.67%) had a GPA of 2.00-2.49 and 1.50 - 1.99 were the minority (3.33%).

B. The Oxford Online Placement Test Score

To answer the first research question, what is the CEFR level of Thai undergraduate students at a private university in Nakhon Ratchasima?, this section reports the CEFR level of Thai undergraduate students at a private university in Nakhon Ratchasima by using the Oxford Online Placement Test. The results of Oxford Online Learning Placement are divided into three tables consisting of The Use of English score, Listening Part score, Overall CEFR level, and the comparison of the three parts of CEFR.

Table 6 The Use of English Score

CEFR Levels	Use of English	percentage
C2	0	0
C1	1	3.33
B2	3	10.00
B1	8	26.67
A2	12	40.00
A1	5	16.67
pre-A1	1	3.33
Total	30	100

According to Table 6, the majority of the participants (40.00%) achieved the CEFR level at A2 level, followed by B1 level (26.67%) and A1 level (16.67%). The highest level that a student achieved on the Use of English Score was C1 while pre-A1 is the lowest level.

Table 7 Listening Part Score

CEFR Levels	Listening	percentage
C2	0	0
C1	0	0
B2	2	6.67
B1	5	16.67
A2	16	53.33
A1	7	23.33
Total	30	100

Table 7 shows that most participants were in A2 level (53.33%) and the second one (23.33%) were A1 level followed by B1 level (16.67%). None of the participants reached the C1 and C2 level.

Table 8 Overall CEFR Levels

CEFR Levels	Overall	Percentage
C2	0	0
C1	0	0
B2	3	10.00
B1	6	20.00
A2	16	53.33
A1	5	16.67
Total	30	100

As shown in Table 8, the highest CEFR level attained by the participants was B2 (10.00%), closely followed by B1 (20.00%). The majority of participants achieved the A2 level (53.33%), while A1 represented the lowest level (16.67%). Notably, none of the students reached the C1 and C2 levels.

Question 2: Which part of the Oxford Online Placement Test that you found confusing or difficult to answer?

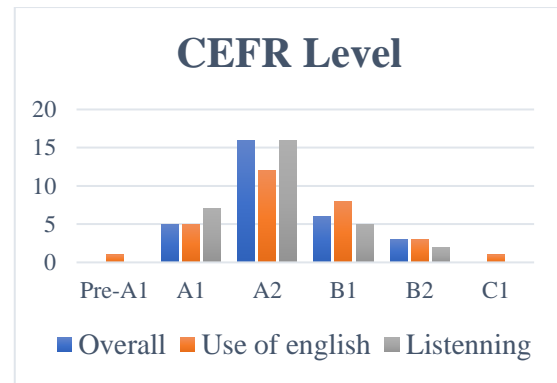
**Figure 1 Comparison of the Three Parts Levels of CEFR**

Figure 1 compares three levels of CEFR, and according to the results of the Oxford Online Placement test, it was found that the Use of English and Listening scores were equal at the A2 level (n=16). Additionally, it was observed that the Use of English score was slightly higher than the Listening score at the C1 level, as indicated by the right side of the bar chart. Furthermore, at the pre-A1 level (n=1), the Use of English had the lowest score.

C. Interview Questions

To answer the second research question, what are the problems of students toward taking the English Proficiency Test?, The interview was carried out with six students divided into 2 groups high (B2) and low (A1) performances. This interview consisted of 4 questions and the results of this part were aimed to address the students' problems toward taking the English Proficiency test.

Question 1: How did you prepare yourself before taking the exam?

In preparation for the test, students employed different methods such as studied online classes, read and followed test guides, watched YouTube lessons, and did practice exams for self-study.

In the part of the difficulties, students revealed that the listening part of the exam was a problem due to the speaker's speed and unclear accent, making it time-consuming to

comprehend conversations, and they were hindered by an insufficient vocabulary. In the use of English part, students encountered difficulties with vocabulary and unfamiliar words, and experienced trouble with grammar structure and fill-in-the-blank questions.

Question 3: Did you experience any technical difficulties while taking the Oxford Online Placement Test? Please explain.

The exam environment was found to be affected by disruptive behavior, with some students submitting their exams early and causing noise. Time management emerged as a significant challenge, particularly in the grammar section, resulting in difficulties in completing the exam within the issue of time. Consequently, concerns were expressed by students regarding insufficient time to thoroughly review their answers.

Question 4: Do you have any advice for others who will be taking the test in the future? How? Please explain.

In a recommendation for the future test, the students suggested several recommendations to improve exam performance. Intensive tutoring and practice with sample exams were highlighted as beneficial strategies. They emphasized the importance of utilizing online resources such as Duolingo, engaging in regular exercises, and attending classes. Additionally, participating in extracurricular activities related to the exam and focusing on conversation,

The results imply that the students' language skills are primarily at the beginner to intermediate levels, with just a small amount of higher-level language skills. The finding in this study are in accordance with the previous studies by Waluyo (2019) The result shows that the most of students' proficiency was at A2 in CEFR. The finding indicated that students employ various self-study methods such as online classes, test guides, and YouTube lessons, as well as practice exams and group tutoring with friends. They spend dedicated

listening, and vocabulary were advised. Adequate preparation in grammar and vocabulary, along with the repetitive practice of exam papers, were also seen as advantageous approaches. Lastly, students highlighted the importance of careful preparation due to exam fees.

V. Discussion

Based on the data from the study, it was observed that the majority of the participants were female, accounting for 30 out of the total participants. Among the participants, 21 (70%) were enrolled in the Logistics major, while 6 (30%) were pursuing Marketing, and 3 (10%) were studying Entrepreneurship. Regarding the participants' GPA distribution, 5 students achieved high performance with GPAs ranging from 3.50 to 4.00. There were 11 students with GPAs between 3.00 and 3.59, and another 11 students obtained moderate GPAs in the range of 2.50 to 2.99. In terms of the Oxford Online Placement Test attempts, it was noted that 16 participants took the test for the first time, 9 participants attempted it for the second time, and 3 participants made their fourth attempt.

From the study's analysis of participants' overall CEFR levels, the majority of sixteen students were at the A2 level, followed by six students and three students who were at the B1 level, respectively. B2 is the highest level that three students reached. Five students were evaluated at the A1 level as well, but none of the participants attained the C1 or C2 levels of proficiency.

time on vocabulary and listening and attend teacher-led classes to improve study techniques. In the Listening Part, students face challenges with fast and unclear accents, understanding conversations, and a lack of vocabulary. The results of this study align with Hariswan et al. (2021) as they confirmed the existence of three main problems faced by students. These issues include limited linguistic knowledge, difficulties with unfamiliar topics, accents, slang words, and fast audio.

Additionally, the findings are consistent with the work of Darti & Asmawati (2017), who also investigated the challenges encountered by students. Their study identified issues such as accents, pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and speech speed as the major problems faced by students. Overall, the results from both studies provide valuable insights into the common difficulties that students encounter in the context of English language learning and proficiency assessment. In the Use of English Part, difficulties with vocabulary, listening speed, grammar, and fill-in-the-blank questions were noted.

The result supports the previous study by Nathaporn et al., (2019) who found that the linguistics factor was difficult for the student. The exam environment can be disruptive due to early submissions, and time management is a concern, particularly in the grammar section. Respondents recommended intensive tutoring, sample exams, online resources like Duolingo, regular exercises, and extracurricular practice for better preparation. They emphasized focusing on conversation, listening, vocabulary, grammar, and repetition of exam. The exam environment was found to be affected by disruptive behavior, as some students submitted their exams early, causing noise and creating challenges in time management, especially in the grammar section, to complete the exam within the given time. This lack of time also resulted in some students having insufficient opportunities to thoroughly review their answers. Based on the feedback from students, they suggested several helpful approaches for future tests. These included intensive tutoring, practicing with sample exams, utilizing online resources, participating in extracurricular activities related to the exam, and engaging in the repetitive practice of exam papers. These strategies were seen as advantageous ways to better prepare for the exam and improve overall performance.

VI. Limitations of the Study

papers. Finally, careful preparation is stressed due to exam fees.

Moreover, environmental issues existed such as noise, poor audio quality, and inadequate equipment. Listening factors like limited vocabulary, unfamiliar accents, and difficulties with fast-spoken are also problems.

V. Conclusion

The OOPT test revealed that the majority of students were at the A2 level, followed by B1 and A1 levels. Only three participants reached the highest B2 level, while none of the students attained C1 and C2 levels. The interview questions investigating the challenges faced during the exam highlighted that students encountered difficulties in the listening part. They struggled with the speaker's speed and unclear accent, which made it time-consuming to comprehend conversations. Additionally, students were hindered by an insufficient vocabulary in this section. Regarding the use of English part, students faced difficulties with vocabulary, encountering unfamiliar words that posed challenges. Furthermore, they experienced trouble with grammar structures in this segment of the exam.

The study's limited sample size of 30 participants raises concerns about the generalizability of the findings. It is crucial to acknowledge the influence of participants' backgrounds, such as language learning history and prior exposure to English, on their CEFR levels. Larger and more diverse samples are needed for more generalizations and insights into language teaching and learning practices.

VII. Recommendation for Further Research

There are some recommendations for further research on the topic of undergraduate students' problems toward taking an English Proficiency Test (CEFR). Participants should include a more diverse participant pool from various institutions to enhance generalizability. and employing a mixed-methods approach with in-depth interviews can provide deeper insights into students' perspectives and experiences.

Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of different language learning strategies and test preparation methods would be beneficial for optimizing language programs and supporting students in achieving their language proficiency goals.

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