UNDERSTANDING THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE (CEFR) AND THE FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THAILAND (FRELE-TH): IMPLICATIONS FOR THAILAND'S EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Since Thailand is a member of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), English plays a vital role in this region for communication (Lekpetch, 2022). To integrate and compete in AEC, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has adapted a version of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001; Lekpetch, 2022) to develop a curriculum, teach, and assess Thai students learning competency. CEFR is a well-recognized framework in European countries. Many countries worldwide have adapted this framework to fit their local context, and Thailand is one of those. To help Thai students improve their English proficiency, in 2017, Thai scholars adapted CEFR as a Framework of References for Languages-Thailand (FRELE-TH). The aim was to establish the proficiency standards: the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) and the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFRLs) (Hiranburana et al. 2017) so that Thai learners would be able to compete not only within the ASEAN community but globally.

Keywords: ASEAN Economic Community, CEFR, Common Core Standard Initiatives (CCSSI), FRELE-TH, Thailand Education

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Introduction

Like in other developing countries, the role of English in Thailand is essential. The shift of different areas to digitalization and the influence of technologies in business, education, science, and society's lifestyle have resulted in high demand for English proficiency, especially in Thailand (Lekpetch, 2022). With the economic downturn in Thailand a few years ago, large numbers of Thai companies have gone through mergers, integration, and takeovers by companies from foreign countries. As a result, English is used to communicate, negotiate, and execute transactions between partners. De facto, Thailand has always been a country with one official language, Thai, and Thais are proud to have never been colonized. According to Wiriyachitra (2002), having one language is part of stability. Because of globalization, however, Thai people realize that English is one of the most essential required foreign languages not only for school but to be competitive at work. One of the reasons why many private English institutes in Thailand tend to successfully provide English lessons for working individuals, mainly in productive skills.

According to Wiriyachitra (2002), the English curriculum in Thai universities cannot meet the demands of English used in the workplace. The demands surmise that Thailand tends to be not prepared to help Thais communicate globally. So English language teaching needs to focus on what learners need to know the language for different purposes. The reasons are, firstly, most English lessons are aimed heavily at studying grammar. Since English is a foreign language and Thailand belongs to the expanding circle, Thai people would feel more secure in knowing the rules of the language before using it to avoid any face-losing situation. However, having ability in grammar and vocabulary is not enough to be able to communicate properly and effectively. Secondly, the Thai testing system has failed to reform with the changes in the curriculum. Lastly, students may experience getting negative attitudes toward learning English. Many reasons include vocabulary memorization, incorrect language classroom experience, inability to comprehend the grammar rules, and the washback effect from testing. Since globalization dominates the social, economic, and educational arena, the first important factor that Thai language learners need to consider is to acquire communicative competence, which enables them to communicate successfully and effectively in real-life situations (Lekpetch, 2020).

Effective communication is one of the keys to success and survival. Consequently, the Thai government needs to reform the education system, including teaching the English language, curriculum, teaching, and assessment to maximize its benefits to the country. English has become a medium for communication between countries around the world. Therefore, it is important for non-English speakers, especially those who belong to the expanding circle, such as Thailand, to use the language efficiently and effectively as it is the gateway to a promising future.

CEFR and the European Policy Forum

The Common European Framework (CEFR) was formulated in 2001 to establish an international standard for foreign language education (planning, teaching, learning, and assessing languages) to tailor the needs of the learners both academically and professionally (CEFR, 2001, 2018). Initially, the Common European Framework intends to overcome the barriers to communication among professionals working in the field of modern languages arising from European educational systems (Council of Europe, 2011), designed to be comprehensive and neutral. CEFR views learners as language users and social agents and sees language as a vehicle of communication rather than as a subject to study (CEFR, 2018). The CEFR is a descriptive scheme containing a vertical and horizontal axis. The vertical axis provides "can do" descriptors representing progress in proficiency in 6 levels which are A1 – A2 (a beginner level), B1 – B2 (an intermediate level), and C1 – C2 (advanced level). A horizontal axis describes different activities and aspects of competence. CEFR has become the language proficiency framework used worldwide as it has impacted the whole system of English language learning (Figueras, 2012, as cited in Foley, 2019b).

The goals of the CEFR in its current form are a descriptive, not normative, tool (North, 2014a). However, in many European contexts today, the CEFR descriptors are used in a normative way, like performance standards, or as labels to facilitate score transparency (Fulcher, 2012; O'Sullivan & Weir, 2011; Roever & McNamara, 2006). As a result, such interpretation of score transparency could be why most test developers rely on CEFR descriptors in developing the rating scale, while CEFR is a common heuristic practice (North 2014a, 2014b; Weir, 2005). Since CEFR descriptors are the framework, two different tests can claim that they are in the same CEFR level. However, with the differences in test specifications, it would be unfair to consider them equivalent just because both tests share a CEFR label (Taylor, 2004). Harsch and Martin raised another issue (2012), the specific details should be added to the CEFR descriptors when using it in a rating context. To reach the objectives of the designed test, test developers must add specific details to the CEFR descriptors. The different interpretations of the CEFR descriptors could have happened in this step of test development which can cause the deviation of the two tests from the stated descriptors of each CEFR level. According to different researchers, CEFR descriptors are unclear and inconsistent across levels (Alderson, 2007; Harsch & Rupp, 2011; Papageorgiou, 2010) and also for "descriptional inadequacy." (Fulcher, Davidson, & Kemp, 2011, p.8). Moreover, there are pieces of evidence that the vague and inconsistent CEFR descriptors affect the trained raters when interpreting the same test with specific criteria (Deygers & Gorp, 2015; Lumney, 2002). The test developers' and trained raters' different backgrounds and experiences may also influence the interpretation of the CEFR descriptor. The last and vital issue of the CEFR framework concerns the rating scale used with the CEFR (Galaczi, Ffrench,

Hubbard, & Green, 2011; Harsch & Martin, 2012; Papageorgiou, 2015). Alderson (2007) and Papageorgiou's (2010) those studies are trying to rectify the blurred lines between levels in terms of vagueness and inconsistency of the CEFR descriptors and fitting them into the rating scale. Nevertheless, the study of Deygers and Gorp (2015) showed that the CEFR-based rating scale was constructed repeatedly by raters and did not assure the same understanding of the descriptors, notwithstanding high-inter reliability indices.

According to Foley (2019c), in 2018, the CEFR 2001 version was updated. These include the need analysis, validation of descriptors, the wording used on the descriptors, and the question of sustaining a native norm. The revised version of CEFR (2018) focuses on 'plurilingualism' and mediation. The new scales for language activities are added, defined as plus level, pre-A1 level, and C levels.

Summary of the significant modifications/additions in CEFR 2001-2018:

- developing the illustrative descriptors of second/foreign language proficiency
- to produce versions of CEFR for young learners (7-10\11-15) and sign language
  to develop more detailed coverage in the descriptors for A1 and the C levels
- complement the original illustrative scales with descriptors for mediating a text
  mediating concepts, mediating communication
- the provision of descriptors for plurilingual/pluricultural competence
- the removal of any reference to 'native speaker' is being replaced with the speaker of the target language
- The proficiency level of speakers of the target language is not specified and uses the term 'partial' competence, arguing that language users' are fundamentally uneven in different contexts. (Lekpetch, 2020, pp. 36-37)

The CEFR assesses the learners' communicative competence, which is relatively subjective. Using ELP could be one of the significant alternatives to signal learners/users in the right direction to reach their language learning goals. The sole use of statistical analysis interpretation may not be ideal in assessing learners/users' communicative competence because the psychometric assessment is statistically examined and constructed to be objective and unbiased. Since CEFR has been adopted as a guideline to enhance the learners' language ability in many countries, many local proficiency tests tend to employ statistical analysis in mapping those tests to the CEFR. The results from the mapping may not be practical because pieces of evidence from statistical data may not be enough to assess learners'/users' language competence (Foley, 2019a).

According to Trim (2010), CEFR intends for the European Policy Forum as a reflection, communication, and empowerment tool. Develops to facilitate shared understanding for language learning, teaching, and assessment and provide an arena

for discussion in language education. A set of references to identify levels of language proficiency, from near-beginners (A1) to a very advanced level (C2) and over a range of skills and areas of use, are designed. These features are an appropriate tool for comparison practices across different contexts in Europe and beyond (Council of Europe, 2011). These do not apply to contexts without interventions and should adapt to local contexts with clear objectives. So, contextual uses should be deliberate interventions in a given environment that can take various forms, apply on different levels, and have different aims. Considering alignment issues with other assessments is essential as there is no single 'best' way to account for the alignment of an examination within its context and purpose (Foley, 2019b; Lekpetch, 2020).

Significantly, the CEFR (2018) version emphasizes that language learning should direct towards enabling learners to act in real-life situations, express themselves, and accomplish different tasks. The action-oriented approach puts the co-construction of meaning (through interaction) at the center of the learning and teaching process. Construction may occur across languages and draw upon users/learners' plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires (translanguaging). CEFR (2018) distinguishes between multilingualism (the co-existence of different languages at the social or individual level) and plurilingualism (the developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner). The fundamental point is that a plurilingual is a single, interrelated repertoire that can combine with general competencies to accomplish tasks. Such tasks might require moving from one language to another or giving an explanation in another language to make sense of what is said or written (Council of Europe, 2020).

English language curriculum reform and the Framework of Reference for English Language Education in Thailand (FRELE-TH)

The English Language Institute (ELI), a branch of the MOE, announced a policy of basing all aspects of English language curriculum reform on the CEFR framework. Consequently, the Framework of Reference for English Language Education in Thailand (FRELE-TH) was developed in April 2014 to enhance the ability of Thais to use English effectively and efficiently. The framework needs to address not only the functions and forms but also the strategies of the language (Hiranburana et al., (2018).

According to Hiranburana et al. (2018):

The adaptation of the CEFR with (+) levels (A1, A1+, A2, A2+, B1, B1+, B2, B2+, C1, C2) to FRELE-TH was a challenge. FRELE-TH encourages partners, practitioners, and stakeholders in English language education to reflect the actual use of English in context. Communication in real-life situations, the design of curricula,

textbooks, course materials, tests, and teacher education need consideration for the development of English standards for professionals and should benchmark according to regional and international standards. (cited in Lekpetch, 2022, pp. 80-81)

Given an emphasis on assessing Thai learners' English proficiency, teachers must understand the language testing process. This valuable source helps language teachers with students' performance evaluation. Improves and adapts teaching plans that place students at the center of the teaching and learning process. On the language learning side, this assessment becomes an important indicator to let learners understand where they are in the language class. That is more to say that when evaluating students, assessment is a great source to motivate students to improve learning rather than just a test (Lekpetch, 2020).

Tests and syllabi found in the context of Thailand tend to be problematic. Firstly, each school uses different texts and materials in the classroom. Although a national syllabus needs to be followed by institutions and teachers, they have the freedom to choose textbooks and other teaching materials. In other words, there is a lack of common consensus on what type of teaching materials recommended by MOE of Thailand an institution can use. Secondly, students who study in Metropolitan Bangkok schools and other significant provinces have more benefits because they have modern teaching facilities than students studying in rural and remote areas. These have caused problems among both teachers and students in teaching and learning English (Lekpetch, 2020). Because of these issues, FRELE-TH adapts a framework with certain specifications for standardized assessments of Thai students' English proficiency and international benchmark standards. Students' performance could be measured, tracked, and calibrated for education and professional purposes (Foley, 2022; Hiranburana et al., 2018).

The latest ranking from the EF English Proficiency Index (2019) has placed Thailand the third-lowest among Southeast Asia for English proficiency, behind Vietnam, the 52nd rank. EF English Proficiency Index (2019), prepared by Swiss-based Education First, Thailand ranked 74th with a score of 47.62, regarded as very low English proficiency. In 2018, Thailand was 64th out of 88 countries and scored 48.54. In 2017, it was 53rd out of 80 countries, scoring 49.7.

It is essential to enhance the English ability of Thai people as the English language is the working language of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Also, with English, people can go across borders to fulfill their social, economic, and educational purposes. In April 2014, the English Language Institute (ELI), a Ministry of Education (MOE) branch, announced a policy of basing all aspects of English language curriculum reform on the CEFR framework. A local version of the Common

European Framework of Reference for Languages-Thailand, FRELE-TH (Hiranburana et al., 2017), published including Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality Language Services (EAQUALS).

The Framework of Reference for English Education in Thailand (FRELE-TH), based on CEFR's inception in 2001, that CEFR does not offer ready-made solutions but can use as requirements of particular contexts (Council of Europe, 2001). To make sure that the derived frameworks are not too high for Thai learners/users to achieve the performance, the FRELE-TH follows the CEFR using the plus (+) levels (A1, A1+, A2, A2+, B1, B1+, B2, B2+) from the Swiss Project (Goullier, 2007 as cited in Hiranburana et al., 2018). FREE-TH offers two scale types to describe the English proficiency level of the learners/users: global scale and illustrative scale.

The global scaling descriptors give an overview of the language proficiency of all levels supported by the illustrative scaling, communicative activities, communicative strategies, and communicative competence.

The communicative activities or "Can Do" descriptors cover reception, interaction, and production. Reception involves listening and reading comprehension. Interaction involves spoken and written interaction, while production involves spoken and written production (Foley, 2019b).

The communicative strategies include the strategies Thai users of English can apply. These include reception strategies in identifying clues and making inferences; interaction strategies in turn-taking, cooperating, and asking for clarification; and production strategies in planning, compensating, monitoring, and repairing (Foley, 2022; Hiranburana et al., 2018).

Communicative language competence refers to the knowledge of Thai users to perform communicative activities in English. Linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence are among them. Linguistic competence covers 'range'. These are linguistic and vocabulary. Control involves grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, phonological, and orthographic control. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the knowledge and skills needed to cope with the social dimension of language use. Pragmatic competence concerns the language user's knowledge of how messages organize, structured, and arranged. It also focuses on the user's knowledge of the practical use of linguistic resources. Pragmatic competence in this framework includes precision, coherence, and fluency.

The framework also offers examples of language functions, discourse markers, topic, vocabulary range, grammar and some exponents, and micro-skills, all of which are appropriate to English use in the local, regional, and international context of Thai communication. In addition, a word family list based on the Word Family Framework (West, 2015 as cited in Hiranburana et al., 2018) classified according to the FRELE-TH 10 levels is provided in a separate appendix of the framework.

There are criticisms of the adaptations of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) in Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam for the English Language Educational context. The heavy emphasis on the frameworks' proficiency scales set results in excessive focus on testing, the primary tool for raising the competence level in English (Foley, 2019). In addition, the added parts (language functions, discourse markers, topic, vocabulary range, grammar, some exponents, and micro-skills) could prove that the framework still relies heavily on grammatical competence rather than communicative competence. Professional training on how to implement the framework in terms of curriculum and syllabus designing, material developing, teaching, and assessing the course should be provided to the users/learners to achieve the goals of FRELE-TH.

A local version of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages-Thailand, FRELE-TH (Hiranburana et al., 2017) published, including Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality Language Services (EAQUALS). The FREE-TH development becomes the springboard for holistic English educational reform rather than a ready-made solution for English language learning. The provided descriptors in both the global scale and illustrative scale framework can interpret and adapt to the local contexts of the learners/users. The notion of the FRELE-TH framework is that the use of English is not limited only to the linguistic knowledge of grammar. However, it covers a range of skills and abilities to enhance language learners/users of English to perform activities in everyday life and promote life-long learning skills. Based on the basic principles in the Vygotskian framework, new learning takes place in a "Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) of the learner. ZDP can lead to a lifelong learning process since the social context plays an important part at any person's age. The life-long learning process can achieve through mediation, which is called the 'social tool' (people, family, teachers, friends, language, and other semiotic systems (Foley, 2019c; Lekpetch, 2020).

More importantly, the descriptors of the FRELE-TH framework are not ready-made solutions for assessing the learners'/users' English communicative competency. Therefore, they have to be interpreted within Thailand's local context.

FREE-TH aimed to develop a 10-level reference framework for the English language to best suit the local and international use of English as a medium of communication (Foley, 2019c). There are many criticisms about using FRELE-TH among stakeholders in Thailand's educational system, which in retrospect, was similar to those arising from the original CEFR (2001). A significant issue was on the development and validation of the descriptor Fulcher (2004) and Alderson (2007), while Krumm (2007) questioned why the scales comprised only a minimal for multilingualism (as cited in Foley, 2019c). The current issue that FRELE-TH confronts is the interpretation of the descriptors for each level, including the proposed cut-off score. As used by the FRELE-TH framework, the scale also needs to be interpreted, while stakeholders can interpret each level of descriptors in their context.

The FRELE-TH framework aims to use the English language for 'communicative purposes' focusing on the Thai context' and on 'Can Do' statements that are illustrative and not prescriptive or exhaustive checklists (Lekpetch, 2020). These 'Can Do' statements guide educators to recognize and identify the ability levels of their students. If available illustrative scales in the CEFR toolkit do not match the context, they can supplement with 'Can Do' statements from other sources or new ones related to the context (Lekpetch, 2022).

FREE-TH and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP)

To achieve the 'Can Do' of FRELE-TH, one of the essential theoretical frameworks in social constructivism was developed by Vygotsky in 1962. The study considered that learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP). In the ZDP, the assistance from adults or peers who are more advanced can guide the learners to achieve what he or they can do today or in the future as a lifelong learning process. Learning is a constant process of moving from the 'inter-psychological (between people) to the intra-psychological (learner himself)' (Lekpetch, 2020). The mediation of the instructions can be formal or informal, as Vygotsky gave credit to both formal and informal environments in helping learners to bridge their actual and potential development (Foley, 2013). The mediation attains language and other semiotic systems in the social environment or significant others, such as the learners' family, teachers, and friends.

Vygotsky's ideas about learning had essential implications for CLT (Foley 2012).

- Readiness to learn: students establish the ZDP with the help of others and move on to another level of understanding.
- Scaffolding: teaching is about providing support structures to help the learners move from one stage of development to the next.
- Spiral Progression: this suggests that learning is not linear. For example, students know how to draft and re-draft to make the writing more effective.

Bachman and Palmer (1997) stated, "the characteristic of individuals that is of primary interest in language assessment is language ability" (p. 61). In other words, language ability means the ability of an individual to use all four language skills of a particular language efficiently. The claim might be the ultimate goal of language learners since the English language tends to be a prestigious language among non-native English learners, especially in the expanding circle of countries. However, such a term as 'language competence' does not mean producing patterns of native-like proficiency. Instead, it should be viewed more as a system for communication that is fluid and flexible.

Advantages and challenges of FRELE-TH

There are some advantages to communicative activities ('can do'). Communication strategies and communicative competence explicitly be used to enhance learners' understanding, specifically in the Thai context. The framework suggests practical strategies regarding teaching assessment. As one of the concerned problems among teachers is teaching strategy; thus, professional development related to teaching and assessing skills could be essential for them (Hiranburana et al., 2018). In the communication strategies part, the teachers (users) can adapt activities regarding reception, interaction, and production strategies in teaching and assessing the lessons. For example, identifying clues and inferences can be helpful for the reception strategy. In contrast, turn-taking, cooperating, and asking for clarification are activities suggested in the interaction strategy. Lastly, planning, compensating and monitoring, and repairing are some of the activities that can be helpful for the production strategy.

FREE-TH framework does provide not only language scaffolding for learners but also cognitive scaffolding. As descriptors in each level are flexible, they can be categorized and integrated appropriately. Accordingly, the framework suggests that scaffolding tasks and materials should reflect on the actual use of English in communication in real-life situations and, thus, can help learners to reach a suggested level. Correspondingly, the suggested tasks and materials need to be well connected to provide scaffolding to the next level. One example of language scaffolding can be the grammar and exponents feature in the B1 level, such as past tenses, adverbs, and comparatives, to support the micro-skills part. For this, learners would be able to produce, in the form of writing or speaking, for example, details about an event, recent trip, experiences, and feeling with details based on reality or imagination (Foley, 2019c).

Then again, like other educational frameworks, in the context of Thailand, the FRELE-TH framework is not free of any challenges. First, it heavily emphasizes language forms and grammar rules. Thus FRELE-TH should look at language learning in discrete points rather than integrated skills. Also, if language learning emphasizes language forms, it would be hard for the learners to develop ZDP in learning.

The second concern is on the descriptors of the FRELE-TH framework. Because of the flexibility of descriptors, learners or teachers might misinterpret the framework concept. For example, in Lekpetch's (2022) study, some teachers found that FRELE-TH is a ready-made solution for teaching and assessing rather than adapting the suggested activities to the requirements of particular contexts. Besides, teachers tend to set heavy emphasis on the frameworks' proficiency scales resulting in excessive focus on testing as the primary tool for raising the competence level of Thai learners in English. They have viewed FRELE-TH as additional work and

encountered difficulty integrating the framework into their teaching, thus, resisting change.

Conclusion

Measuring language ability is subjective and complicated because competency in a language is a multi-dimensional system. Therefore, CEFR and FRELE-TH were built and designed to focus on the role of language in creating the space and conditions for communicating, learning, and collaborating to construct new meaning. Adopting and creating a language competency framework based on CEFR in Thailand (FRELE-TH) is still challenging work. However, many scholars see the potential for implementing FRELE-TH to help foster Thai English competency in the educational systems. Hence, to encourage learners, especially Thai learners, to construct or understand and pass new information appropriately, the measure of competence should be based on real-life communication. It should be data-driven based on what learners actually can do.

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