
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Overcoming Challenges: Implementing the CEFR in Thai Secondary School English Classrooms

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| ABSTRACT

In 2016, the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) as a guideline for teachers in primary and secondary schools. The CEFR is a six-point scale (A1-C2) that describes a language learner's proficiency. This study investigated how Thai EFL teachers implement the CEFR in the classroom. The participants were 300 Thai EFL teachers from public secondary schools in Northeastern Thailand, each with at least three years of teaching experience. Convenience sampling was used to select participants. Quantitative data were collected through a seven-point Likert scale questionnaire. In contrast, qualitative data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, purposefully chosen based on their willingness indicated in the survey questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, percentages, and standard deviation were used to analyse the quantitative data, while the qualitative data were coded into CEFR domains. The quantitative results showed that Thai EFL teachers moderately implement the CEFR in their classrooms. The study highlighted a significant need for better CEFR implementation in language teaching. The qualitative findings corroborated those teachers moderately applied the CEFR. The overall findings suggest that teachers and curriculum developers need more CEFR training, and further research is recommended.

| KEYWORDS

Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR): implementation, Challenges, EFL teachers

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The Thai education system has been under the control of the Ministry of Education for many decades. In the fiscal year 2023, the Ministry received an allocation of 325,900 million baht, more than any other ministry (Bureau of the Budget, 2023). The Ministry oversees the entire educational spectrum, from basic to higher education, despite the increasing prominence of private schools and institutions. Consequently, the Ministry plays a crucial role in providing mechanisms, regulations, measures, and frameworks for all educational institutions nationwide (Educational Management Information System Centre, 2016).

However, the overall quality of education in Thailand remains below the standards of other developing countries, particularly in terms of students' English proficiency. Despite substantial resources and budgets being allocated annually, Thailand ranks 56th out of 72 countries in English proficiency, where English is not the first language. Within Southeast Asia, it ranks just above Cambodia (EF English Proficiency Index, 2023). These poor results highlight the significant challenges and failures in English teaching and learning in Thailand, which are becoming a burden for all sectors striving to improve education quality and English proficiency. Public concerns frequently arise regarding the education system, as efforts by the Ministry to enhance educational quality appear to coincide with deteriorating English proficiency, ranking Thailand as the 3rd worst in Asia (James, 2015).

The Ministry of Education urgently addresses English proficiency among Thai students and teachers. To improve the quality of English teaching and learning at all school levels, the Ministry has introduced the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), initially implemented in primary education, to enhance English proficiency for both teachers and students. One of the immediate measures is to emphasize Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), as per the official announcement of the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2014). Although the CEFR implementation is in its early stages, it holds potential if executed correctly. This study aims to investigate how Thai EFL teachers implement the CEFR in their classroom practices and identify the challenges they face in the Thai context. The research questions guiding this study are.

1. To what extent do Thai EFL teachers implement the CEFR in the Classroom ?
2. What challenges do Thai EFL teachers face in implementing the CEFR in the Classroom ?

2. Literature Review

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been established as a primary language learning framework for citizens of European Union countries, facilitating the learning of different languages as a communication tool (Taylor, 2004). The English version of the handbook, titled "The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment," and versions in other languages, is published by Cambridge University Press (Council of Europe, 2015). Initially designed for Europe, the CEFR is now available in 39 languages globally. Its primary purpose is to provide a comprehensive framework and guidelines for teaching and learning foreign languages and serve as a standard for language assessment and proficiency enhancement. The CEFR is also widely used as a standard test for assessing language proficiency in teaching English as a foreign language, functioning as an international benchmark comparable to IELTS and TOEFL (Cambridge English, 2016). The CEFR scale is divided into six proficiency levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C.

The CEFR's assessment benchmark is straightforward, indicating the proficiency level a test-taker can achieve. It is highly influential in measuring actual language proficiency and is recognized as an international standard approach for language assessment, particularly in English (Cambridge English, 2016). Cambridge University Press describes the CEFR as an international benchmark for language proficiency, aiming to introduce a common reference framework into an accessible model of indexes (Martyniuk, 2011) and to serve as a valid test for second language proficiency (Weir, 2005). The CEFR has become the global framework for language development and testing, standardized as a benchmark for describing language proficiency (Morrow, 2004).

In Thailand, the CEFR has gained widespread acceptance, with numerous educational institutions adopting it to design curricula and assess English language proficiency in line with international standards. Despite its encouragement, research on the CEFR's implementation in Thailand is scarce. For example, Franz and Teo (2017) examined secondary teachers' understanding of the CEFR and English language teaching. They found that while the CEFR was recognized as a proficiency reference, it was not integrated into syllabi or classroom practices. Another study developed a ten-level reference framework, FRELE-TH, maintaining the CEFR's assessment descriptors for the Thai context (Hiranburana et al., 2017). Wudthayagorn (2018) mapped the CU-TEP to the CEFR using a standard-setting methodology. Recent research on perception and speaking competence indicated that Thai preservice English teachers acknowledged the benefits of the CEFR-TBL program (Phaisannan, Charttrakul, & Damnet, 2019). Similarly, Kanchai (2019) investigated lecturers' perceptions of the CEFR and its classroom application in a Thai EFL university, revealing that while lecturers understood the CEFR concept, particularly its assessment aspects, they had limited comprehension of its teaching and learning applications.

Although the CEFR has seen some implementation in Thailand (e.g., Hiranburana et al., 2017), secondary English teachers have not fully integrated it into their classroom practices (Franz & Teo, 2017). Phoolaikao and Sukying (2021) studied preservice English instructors' attitudes towards the CEFR, finding that many had poor comprehension of the framework. However, there has been no comprehensive examination of Thai EFL high school teachers' understanding and application of the CEFR in classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Context

The study involved 300 Thai English teachers from secondary public schools in the northeast of Thailand. Each participant had a minimum of three years of experience teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). The participants were selected using a convenience sampling technique, which allowed for a practical and efficient selection process given the geographic and logistical constraints. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of these teachers. The interviewees were purposively chosen based on their willingness to participate, as indicated in their responses to the survey questionnaire. This purposive sampling ensured that those who were most interested and willing to share their experiences and insights were included.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in native Thai to avoid any language barriers and to ensure that the interviewees felt comfortable and could express themselves freely. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes, providing ample time to explore the teachers' experiences and perspectives on implementing the CEFR in their classrooms.

During these interviews, the teachers discussed their roles in incorporating the CEFR into their teaching, learning, and assessment processes. They shared detailed accounts of how they applied the CEFR guidelines and the challenges they encountered. This qualitative data complemented the quantitative data collected through the surveys, offering a comprehensive view of the CEFR implementation in Thai secondary schools.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed, based on the CEFR documents in both Thai and English, to address the research questions. It comprised three sections and utilized a seven-point Likert scale to gauge the views of Thai EFL teachers. The first section included six demographic questions covering teacher gender, age, qualifications, English language teaching experience, and familiarity with the CEFR. The second section featured 25 closed-format items on a seven-point Likert scale, focusing on implementing the CEFR in classroom practices related to English language teaching, learning, and assessment. The third section was an open-ended question that invited participants to share their opinions on the application of the CEFR in classroom practice. The questionnaire's reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.948. Additionally, the questionnaire was validated by seven experts and piloted before the main study.

3.2.2 Semi-structured interview

Ten participants were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews based on their willingness indicated in the survey questionnaire. These interviews aimed to explore Thai EFL teachers' implementation of the CEFR in their teaching practices for content analysis. Each conversation lasted 15-20 minutes and was conducted after the participants had completed the questionnaire. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The researcher then verified the transcripts through member checking, which included feedback from the interviewees, peer teachers, and the researcher. Subsequently, the transcripts were categorized into three themes related to the CEFR: implementation in classroom practice, challenges, and the needs for CEFR application in Thailand.

3.3 Procedures

A total of 300 participants were recruited to complete the 25-item survey questionnaire. Following this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten purposefully selected participants to gather in-depth data on implementing the CEFR in English language classrooms. This study employed a mixed-method design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of participants' attitudes and facilitating a comparison between the two data types (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation was used to ensure the study's validity, reliability, and thoroughness.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were gathered through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The responses to the 25 questionnaire items were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Content analysis was employed to categorize the audio transcriptions of the interviews into three themes. To ensure accuracy, the interview transcripts were emailed to the participants for validation. Additionally, a peer teacher with expertise in the CEFR reviewed the transcripts for further verification.

4. Results

In response to determining the extent to which Thai EFL teachers implement the CEFR framework in their classroom practices, the quantitative 300 Thai EFL teachers. The data analysis indicated that Thai EFL teachers had varied perspectives of the CEFR and applied it to their classroom practices differently. The data analysis was coded and categorized into three main aspects : implementation, challenges and needs. The implementation involves the practices of the CEFR in the classroom. Such practices include language activities and language learning assessments. Challenges include difficulties and problems that teachers encountered with implementing the CEFR. Needs are related to things or issues that teachers lack and further require assistance from other stakeholders.

Table 1 Perspectives of the CEFR in Thailand: implementation, challenges and Needs of Thai EFL Teachers) .n=(300

Aspects of CEFR	Mean	%	S.D.
Levels of CEFR implementation in the classroom	3.82	54.51	0.85
Challenges of the CEFR implementation in the classroom	5.70	81.40	1.01

Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of Thai EFL teachers' perspectives on the implementation of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) in Thailand. It highlights two key aspects: the levels of CEFR implementation and the challenges faced by teachers in this process.

The levels of CEFR implementation in the classroom are represented by a mean score of 3.82, equating to 54.51% (S.D. 0.85). This indicates that Thai EFL teachers moderately implement the CEFR guidelines in their teaching practices. The moderate level of adoption suggests that while some teachers are incorporating CEFR standards into their classroom activities and assessments, there is still significant room for improvement to achieve a higher level of implementation.

On the other hand, the challenges associated with CEFR implementation are relatively high, with a mean score of 5.70, corresponding to 81.40% (S.D. 1.01). This high percentage reflects the significant obstacles that Thai EFL teachers face in integrating the CEFR into their educational practices. The challenges could stem from various factors, including a lack of resources, insufficient training, or difficulty in adapting the CEFR framework to local educational contexts.

The table summarizes the general sentiment among Thai EFL teachers, indicating that while there is a moderate level of CEFR implementation, notable difficulties persist. Interviews with participants further elucidated specific practices related to language activities and assessments, offering insights into the practical aspects of CEFR implementation in the classroom. These findings underscore the need for targeted support and resources to help teachers overcome challenges and integrate CEFR more effectively into their teaching practices.

Table 2 The CEFR in Thai EFL teachers' classroom practices)n=300(

Items	Statements	Mean	%	S.D.
1	I understand the concept of CEFR as appropriate in classroom practices	3.03	43.22	0.86
2	I focus on using the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in your language teaching and learning.	3.18	45.46	0.90
3	I understand how to design language activities for your teaching and learning.	3.35	47.86	0.85
4	I design a curriculum and course syllabus to develop students' English skills.	3.49	49.79	0.82
5	I design lessons and materials to develop students' English skills.	3.57	50.94	0.83
6	I design listening activities according to the CEFR concept for teaching listening in the classroom.	3.73	53.23	0.80
7	I design speaking activities according to the CEFR concept for teaching speaking in the classroom.	3.84	54.80	0.83
8	I create an atmosphere that allows students to participate in speaking activities.	3.99	56.99	0.84
9	I design reading activities according to the CEFR concept for teaching reading in the classroom.	3.97	56.78	0.84
10	I design writing activities according to the CEFR concept for teaching writing in the classroom.	4.07	58.13	0.88
11	I use pre-writing activities to practice writing skills.	4.16	59.38	0.91
12	I apply language activities to support students in reflecting on their competencies.	4.23	60.43	0.85
13	I choose a variety of activities to appropriately develop each skill.	4.34	61.94	0.83
14	I apply the concept of reference level and descriptors according to CEFR to assess students' competency.	4.49	64.18	0.81
Total		3.82	54.51	0.85

Table 2 provides an overview of how Thai EFL teachers implement the CEFR in their classroom practices. The table includes 14 statements regarding different aspects of CEFR application, with responses measured on a Likert scale.

The analysis of these findings reveals that the implementation of the CEFR in Thai EFL classrooms is somewhat moderate. The overall mean score of 3.82 or 54.51% (S.D. 0.85) indicates that teachers are applying the CEFR principles to a reasonable extent but with notable variability across different aspects.

The highest mean score of 4.49 or 64.18% was observed for the statement, "I apply the concept of reference level and descriptors according to CEFR to assess students' competency." This suggests that many Thai EFL teachers effectively use CEFR reference levels and descriptors to evaluate student abilities. Additionally, a mean score of 4.34 or 61.94% was noted for the ability to choose a variety of activities to appropriately develop each skill, indicating competence in selecting diverse activities for skill development.

However, the results also highlight areas needing improvement. For example, the statement "I understand the concept of CEFR as appropriate in classroom practices" received a mean score of 3.03 or 43.22%, showing that teachers have a limited understanding of how to integrate the CEFR fully into classroom practices. This gap underscores the need for further training and support to enhance teachers' comprehension and application of the CEFR framework.

While Thai EFL teachers are trying to implement the CEFR in their classroom practices, there are clear areas where additional support and professional development could enhance their effectiveness.

By the interview, the following are statements derived from the interviews:

"The CEFR gives me an idea of how to create speaking tasks/activities. I designed a speaking task based on communicative tasks. I apply some techniques of the CEFR in my classes, especially listening and speaking skills. It can guide how to teach and help learners improve their English more effectively." (Arden)

"I have used the CEFR for creating examinations aligned with the CEFR standard and created a language examination based on the suggested vocabulary lists at the beginning level. Indeed, I do not know whether the classroom grades can inform the student's language performance in speaking and listening." (Alex)

The statements from the participant interviews proved that Thai EFL teachers often integrated the CEFR into their classroom practices. The Thai teacher participants usually implemented it in designing the language learning activities or tasks. They also reported the practices of the CEFR in creating the tests to assess students' overall language learning achievements.

Table 3 The challenges of the CEFR implementation (n=300)

Items	Statements	mean	%	S.D.
15	I have difficulty understanding detailed descriptions of the CEFR.	5.12	73.10	1.14
16	I have difficulty understanding the CEFR concept regarding English grades.	5.72	81.65	1.02
17	I'm quite not sure how to design my English teaching activities according to the CEFR concept.	5.57	79.61	1.03
18	I have difficulty selecting the appropriate communication task relevant to my student's competency.	5.66	80.92	1.01
19	I have difficulty describing what students know and can do at each CEFR level.	5.85	83.52	0.94
20	I have difficulty designing the tests corresponding to the CEFR level.	6.27	89.57	0.90
Total		5.70	81.40	1.01

Table 3 shows the challenges of the CEFR implementation in language teaching, learning, and assessment. Overall, Thai EFL teachers showed relatively high challenges in implementing CEFR in the classroom, with a mean score of 5.70 or 81.40% (S.D. 1.01). In particular, Thai EFL teachers cannot design tests equivalent to the CEFR level (Mean=6.27). The results also showed that 83.52% of Thai EFL teachers cannot describe what students know and can do at each CEFR level. The lowest rated statement, with a mean of 5.12, referred to Thai EFL teachers not understanding the concept of CEFR in English language teaching and learning. This indicates that many participants better understand the concept of CEFR concerning English language teaching and learning. Notably, all participants reported their challenges in using it to develop language activities. Indeed, they said they had little idea how CEFR could be integrated into language tasks to improve different skills. Such challenges in integrating the CEFR into their classroom practices are noted as follows:

"Lack of effective training and professional development on CEFR to teachers. They needed more training and continuous professional development to enhance their implementation efforts." (Arden)

"The challenging factor impeding effective implementation in the classroom was a large class. This was made even more challenging as the classroom comprised students with mixed abilities in terms of language ability and proficiency." (Alex)

“The pupils’ proficiency level is the most challenging. As they come from different family backgrounds, their English level is different. So, pupils will have different paces to cope with the lesson and understand the learning content delivered by the teacher.” (Bowie)

The statements above evinced that Thai EFL teachers had challenges using the CEFR in their classroom practices. These findings suggest that Thai EFL teachers need assistance from those involved in the CEFR. Such challenges need to be taken into action.

5. Discussions

The study’s findings revealed that Thai EFL teachers have a moderate level of CEFR implementation in their classrooms, with a mean score of 54.51%. This suggests that while many teachers incorporate CEFR principles into their teaching practices, there is still significant room for improvement. One of the most effectively implemented aspects of CEFR is the use of reference levels and descriptors for assessing student competencies, with a mean score of 64.18%. This indicates that many teachers find the CEFR descriptors useful for evaluating students’ language abilities. This practice aligns with the CEFR’s emphasis on providing clear benchmarks for language proficiency, which can help standardize assessment across different contexts (Council of Europe, 2015).

Teachers also reported reasonably high levels of competence in selecting diverse activities to develop each language skill, with a mean score of 61.94%. This demonstrates an understanding of the importance of varied instructional methods to cater to different learning styles and needs. Activities that develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills are integral to the CEFR approach, promoting a balanced and comprehensive language education. However, the overall moderate implementation score suggests that many teachers are not fully integrating the CEFR framework into all aspects of their teaching. For instance, the lower mean score of 43.22% for understanding the CEFR concept in classroom practices highlights a gap in teachers’ comprehensive knowledge and application of the framework. This gap can result in inconsistent or superficial use of CEFR principles, limiting their effectiveness in enhancing language learning outcomes.

The study identified significant challenges that Thai EFL teachers face in implementing the CEFR framework, with a high mean score of 81.40%. One of the primary challenges is designing assessments that align with CEFR levels. The highest mean score (6.27) was for difficulties in creating tests equivalent to the CEFR level. This indicates that many teachers struggle to develop assessments that accurately measure student competencies as defined by the CEFR. Practical assessment is crucial for identifying students’ strengths and areas for improvement, and misalignment can hinder accurate evaluation of student progress.

Another major challenge is describing what students know and can do at each CEFR level, with 83.52% of teachers reporting difficulties. This suggests a need for clearer guidelines and training on interpreting and applying CEFR descriptors in the classroom context. Understanding these descriptors is essential for setting appropriate learning goals and providing meaningful feedback to students. Teachers also reported that large class sizes and mixed-ability groups complicate the implementation of CEFR-aligned activities. Managing diverse learning needs in large classes can be overwhelming and requires differentiated instruction strategies that many teachers may not be adequately trained for.

Variability in student proficiency levels poses another challenge. Teachers highlighted that students come from different family backgrounds, resulting in varied English proficiency levels, which affects their ability to cope with lessons and understand content. This highlights the need for tailored instruction that can address individual learning needs within the framework of the CEFR. A significant challenge is the lack of effective training and professional development. Teachers expressed a need for more comprehensive training to understand and apply the CEFR effectively. Continuous professional development is crucial for keeping teachers updated on best practices and new strategies for implementing the CEFR.

The findings of this study must be understood within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Thailand. The Thai education system, overseen by the Ministry of Education, has made significant investments in improving English proficiency among students. Despite these efforts, English proficiency levels remain low, as evidenced by Thailand’s ranking of 56th out of 72 countries in English proficiency, where English is not the first language (EF English Proficiency Index, 2023). This low ranking highlights the persistent challenges in English teaching and learning in Thailand.

The Ministry of Education has introduced the CEFR to improve English teaching and learning. The CEFR’s focus on communicative competence aligns well with the Ministry’s goal of enhancing students’ practical language skills. However, the successful implementation of CEFR requires more than just policy changes; it necessitates adequate training, resources, and support for teachers. Thai EFL classrooms often face challenges such as large class sizes and mixed-ability groups, which can impede the effective implementation of CEFR-aligned activities. Teachers need to be equipped with strategies for differentiated instruction to cater to diverse learning needs. Moreover, ongoing professional development is essential to help teachers understand and apply CEFR principles effectively.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the extent to which Thai EFL teachers implement the CEFR framework in their classrooms and identify the challenges they face. The findings revealed a moderate level of CEFR implementation among Thai EFL teachers, with significant variability in how different aspects of the framework are applied. While teachers showed competence in using CEFR reference levels and descriptors for assessment, their overall understanding of CEFR concepts and ability to fully integrate them into classroom practices were limited. This highlights the need for further training and support to enhance teachers' comprehension and application of the CEFR framework, ultimately improving English language education in Thailand.

7. Implications, limitations and suggestions for future studies

The study had several limitations. Firstly, the sample was limited to 300 Thai EFL teachers from secondary public schools in the northeast of Thailand, which may not represent all Thai EFL teachers. The use of convenience sampling could also introduce bias, as those who chose to participate may have different views and experiences from those who did not. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which could be influenced by social desirability bias. While rich and informative, the qualitative data was collected from a relatively small number of interviews, which may not capture the full range of experiences and perspectives.

Future research should include a more diverse range of practitioners, such as directors, policymakers, and various educational settings, including elementary and secondary schools and universities. Investigating the influence of aligned learning and teaching strategies on English teachers and how they adapt the CEFR in the classroom is another intriguing area of study. Future studies could also examine teachers before and after formal CEFR training sessions to determine what they learn and how they utilize the CEFR in practice. Employing additional methodologies, such as collecting qualitative data from multiple sources like lesson planning, classroom observations, and surveys, could further validate the findings.

To enhance the implementation of CEFR in Thai EFL classrooms, it is crucial to address the identified challenges through targeted support and professional development. This includes providing extensive training on CEFR concepts and practical applications to help teachers integrate the framework effectively into their teaching practices. Developing clear guidelines for assessment alignment to ensure that tests accurately reflect CEFR levels and provide meaningful evaluations of student competencies is essential. Offering resources and strategies for managing large, mixed-ability classes will help ensure all students benefit from CEFR-aligned instruction. Implementing ongoing professional development programs will keep teachers updated on best practices and new strategies for CEFR implementation.

By addressing these needs, policymakers and educational stakeholders can support teachers in fully integrating CEFR, ultimately improving the quality of English language education in Thailand and aligning it with international standards. Enhancing teachers' understanding and application of CEFR will improve classroom practices and contribute to better student outcomes in English proficiency, preparing them for global communication and opportunities.

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