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Needs Analysis for English Curriculum in Secondary School in Thailand: Learners' Perspectives

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Abstract

Despite the recognition of English as a vital language within the ASEAN community and academic contexts, English language instruction in Thailand remains largely ineffective. The curriculum is frequently shaped by the preferences of teachers or administrators rather than the actual needs of students. Although student input is essential for developing a learner-centered curriculum, few studies have examined the needs of secondary school students. This study addresses this gap by conducting a needs analysis of English curriculum from learners' perspectives. Data were collected from 159 secondary students, comprising 83 lower secondary (LS) and 76 upper secondary (US) students. A questionnaire was employed to assess their attitudes toward English, preferred learning environments, and the specific skills they aimed to improve. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyze differences between the two groups. The findings revealed that both groups strongly acknowledged the importance of learning English. The LS group prioritized communication with foreigners (71.10%), whereas the US group emphasized exam preparation (71.05%). Both cohorts expressed a strong need to improve speaking and listening skills. In terms of learning environment preferences, more than half of the students in both groups favored small group activities, incorporating games and various forms of interactive instruction. Significant differences emerged in exam-oriented topics: the US group showed a stronger preference for improving reading and writing skills for academic purposes. Additionally, both groups supported the use of both Thai and English in the classroom to facilitate comprehension and engagement. Open-ended responses underscored concerns regarding textbook quality, a desire for increased pronunciation practice, and an awareness of diverse English varieties. These findings suggest that the curriculum should be restructured to prioritize practical communication skills and address the distinct needs of both student groups.

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Introduction

Thailand, like many countries where English is taught as a foreign language, has increasingly emphasized English language education. This emphasis is unsurprising, as English has been recognized as the official working language for communication within the ASEAN community and as the global language for academic purposes (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). Consequently, English has become a compulsory subject in several countries. However, the decision to introduce English at the primary or secondary schools is often made by curriculum planners, rather than being informed by the specific needs of learners (Richards, 2001).

According to Thailand's educational policy, English is prioritized as the primary foreign language that all students must study, with a minimum requirement of 80 instructional hours per year, as stipulated in the Basic Core Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008). Despite this policy, the Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL (2011–2012) reported that Thailand's English proficiency remains comparatively low, significantly trailing behind other ASEAN nations. Specifically, from 2015 to 2019, Grade 12 students consistently scored poorly on the Ordinary National Education Test (O-Net) in English, with an average score of 27.72 (Mala, 2021). Barbin and Nicholls (2012) noted that English proficiency poses a major challenge for the Thai workforce in ASEAN, as many employers demand high levels of competence. Several factors contribute to this issue. Noom-ura (2013) argued that the failure of English education in Thailand stems from a curriculum that is both limited and impractical. In addition, many teachers lack a clear understanding of the core curriculum's principles and fail to adapt the school curriculum to their specific contexts (Vibulphol et al., 2021).

Despite policy-level efforts to prioritize English, Thai learners continue to underperform in standardized assessments, highlighting a disconnect between the curriculum and the learners' actual needs. The current English curriculum, developed with minimal student input, places heavy emphasis on rote memorization and grammar instruction, while neglecting practical communication skills. Addressing the specific needs of students is essential for creating a more effective and engaging English curriculum that enhances language proficiency and prepares learners for academic and professional success.

A crucial first step in developing an effective curriculum is conducting a needs analysis, which enables

curriculum developers to identify what learners truly require (Benesch, 1996). Instructional materials and course content can then be tailored to these needs, resulting in more relevant and engaging programs (Dooey, 2010). By systematically collecting and analyzing information about learners' needs, educators can bridge the gap between the current curriculum and the knowledge and skills necessary for students' future goals. Conversely, a lack of understanding of learners' needs may lead to ineffective course design (Sothan, 2015).

This study aims to gather data from learners' perspectives to inform the development of a more learner-centered English curriculum. Specifically, it investigates Thai secondary students' attitudes and beliefs, learning preferences, and skill development priorities. The findings are intended to support the creation of a more practical and responsive curriculum that reflects the voices of students—voices that have often been overlooked.

Objectives

1. To investigate secondary school students' attitudes and beliefs regarding English language learning
2. To identify preferred learning environments and instructional activities for English language acquisition among secondary school students
3. To determine the key English language skills and associated tasks that students aim to improve.

Literature review

Needs analysis

Brown (1995) identified needs analysis as one of the five principal components of the systematic curriculum development framework. It is a critical procedure for gathering essential data to inform curriculum design. The primary purposes of needs analysis include identifying the language skills learners require, determining specific skills for instruction, recognizing gaps between learners' current abilities and their target competencies, and collecting information about challenges learners face (Richards, 2001).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) proposed a framework for needs analysis by examining the target situation through three dimensions: necessities, lacks, and wants. Necessities refer to what learners must acquire to function effectively in the target context. Some scholars define needs in terms of skill priorities, while others adopt situational or functional definitions, such

as listening to lectures or engaging in telephone conversations (West, 1994). Lacks represent the gaps between learners' current knowledge and the competencies required. Wants reflect learners' personal preferences regarding what they wish to learn. Although this perspective may conflict with the views of other stakeholders—such as teachers or administrators who may question students' ability to make informed decisions—learners' perspectives are essential for designing learner-centered programs. This framework also encompasses learning styles, including preferences for classroom language use, text types, skills, and strategies. Additional elements such as goals, content, and teaching approaches are also relevant to learners' needs (Robinson, 2001).

Learners' beliefs and attitudes toward English are crucial, as they significantly influence second language acquisition (Imsa-ard, 2020). Positive attitudes and beliefs are associated with greater success in language learning. However, Wen and Clément (2003) found that despite learners' desire to communicate in English, factors such as speaking anxiety, stressful classroom and environments, and fear of losing face may inhibit their willingness to engage. A supportive learning environment is therefore essential (Boyle, 2000). Teachers play a vital role in creating non-threatening spaces where students feel confident to participate in activities tailored to their individual differences (Vibulphol et al., 2021).

Classroom language use is another important consideration. Studies have shown that using learners' first language (L1) can reduce anxiety and help teachers clarify complex content (Atkinson, 1987; Choomthong, 2014). However, excessive reliance on L1 may limit exposure to the target language (TL) and reduce learner engagement (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Sahan et al., 2022). Understanding learners' preferences regarding language use and its proportion in the classroom can offer valuable insights. Therefore, the learning environment encompasses not only instructional activities, community attitudes, and physical conditions but also the role of teachers in facilitating effective learning (Paci, 2013).

Needs analysis has expanded beyond English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to include general English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. In Thailand, Nuemaihom (2017) examined English language needs of 7–11 employees, focusing on four skill areas, relevant tasks, and perceptions of instructional materials through questionnaires and a semi-structured interview. Findings indicated a greater need for oral communication skills,

particularly in areas such as greetings, polite refusals, and product and price inquiries. Similarly, Changpueng and Pattanapichet (2023) investigated English meeting skills among Thai undergraduate engineering students, novice and experienced engineers, and teachers. Using three questionnaires and a semi-structured interview, they identified problem-solving as the most common meeting task and noted challenges with technical vocabulary, grammar, and accent comprehension. These studies highlight the diversity of learner needs across contexts, yet the needs of secondary students remain underexplored prior to their transition to higher education.

Although student perspectives have been considered in tertiary-level needs analyses, they are rarely addressed at the secondary level. Ng (2004) described student voices as a 'blind spot' in the educational system, often overlooked by adults. Previous research suggests that teachers alone may not fully identify learners' needs and challenges (Eslami, 2010; Robinson, 2001). A study of 180 Iranian high school students regarding their English textbooks and found an overemphasis on grammar and reading, with limited opportunities for real-world application. Learners called for textbook revisions to better reflect their needs. Student involvement in curriculum development can enhance relevance and engagement, making lessons more meaningful and motivating. Moreover, learner needs vary across contexts, influencing which aspects of TL should be prioritized (Richards, 2001).

In Thailand, most studies have focused on teachers' perceptions of English instruction and policy in secondary schools (Noom-ura, 2013; Yusuk, 2020). Research on learners' perspectives has primarily investigated attitudes and motivation (e.g., Imsa-ard, 2020; Vibulphol, 2016). Thai students report being motivated to learn English, yet they perceive it as impractical and misaligned with their needs. To date, Meadseena et al. (2023) conducted the only study investigating upper secondary students' needs, surveying 352 students from nine schools in Ubon Ratchathani. The study addressed the five areas: teaching and learning management, teachers, language use, listening and speaking skills, and assessment. Results indicated a strong need for activities that support vocabulary development and oral communication. However, the study focused solely on upper secondary students. The present study seeks to include both lower and upper secondary students, whose needs may differ.

Grounded in the work of Benesch (1996) and Dooley (2010), this study affirms that needs analysis is essential for identifying gaps between existing curriculum content and the language skills required to meet students' diverse goals. The findings aim to serve as an initial diagnostic tool to support curriculum developers in designing a more practical, learner-centered English curriculum.

Problems in English Language Learning in Thailand

Unlike ESP programs, foreign language curricula for primary and secondary schools in Thailand must align with the Basic Education Core Curriculum. This framework addresses four key areas: language for communication, language and culture, language in relation to other subjects, and language in relation to the community and the world. It also emphasizes the development of four essential skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—alongside other core competencies such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and life skills. This curriculum aims to stimulate learners' interest and foster positive attitudes toward English and other foreign languages.

Despite these intentions, students often fail to attain the expected level of communicative competence in English. Thai classrooms typically adopt a teacher-centered approach, emphasizing rote memorization over practical language use (Noom-ura, 2013). Tongpoon-Patanasorn (2011) reported that many teachers misunderstood the concept of learner-centeredness, resulting in classroom practices that fall short of expectations. Fitzpatrick (2011) found that washback effect of national examinations leads teachers to prioritize grammar instruction, with limited emphasis on communicative methodologies. The primary goal of English instruction in schools appears to be exam success rather than language application (Kimsuvan, 2004).

Furthermore, students often fail to acquire the foundational 3000 words necessary for everyday conversation and basic reading comprehension by the end of secondary school (Jeremy, 2009). Several factors contribute to this issue, including limited exposure to English, excessive non-teaching responsibilities among educators, and a shortage of qualified teachers (Hayes, 2010). In addition, Matthuchad (2012) examined English preparation ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) integration and found that many schools lacked native speakers, while Thai teachers demonstrated low English proficiency. This led to a reliance on grammar instruction

and predominant use of Thai in the classroom. According to the 2023 EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), Thailand ranks among the lowest in Asia, categorized as having 'very low proficiency.' The disconnect between language policy goals and classroom realities may hinder students' ability to use English for real-world communication (Choomthong, 2014).

The Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008), implemented in 2009, mandates that schools design curricula to meet the minimum standards, encouraging learner-centered approaches and sensitivity to individual differences (Vibulphol et al., 2021). However, this curriculum has been criticized for being outdated and overly content-focused, lacking relevance to 21st century demands (Sarasean, 2024). It has also been cited as a contributing factor to the persistent challenges in English language education (Klaichim, 2009; Noopong, 2002). Noom-ura (2013) found that teachers view the curriculum as ineffective, overly broad, and poorly balanced in terms of content and instructional time. Teachers often lacked clarity about curriculum details and had limited support. This curriculum covers numerous topics without offering clear guidance for activity design, fails to consider local contexts, and restricts teachers' autonomy in planning. It appears to be driven by top-down decisions from curriculum planners, overlooking learners' needs.

Vibulphol et al. (2021) reported that teachers were excluded from curriculum design and struggled to implement a standards-based instruction. In response, the Thai government has recently drafted a competency-based curriculum to replace the previous model. This new framework aims to develop essential skills based on learners' capacities and self-development, aligning with child-centered principles (Sangwanglao, 2024). Accordingly, school curricula should not only emphasize content but also address students' needs and abilities to prepare them for future workforce demands. This shift calls for schools to design curricula that reflect their unique contexts and involve all stakeholders.

Although Thailand's education reform promotes learner-centered policies, classroom practices remain misaligned. Teachers often lack understanding of learner-centered principles, rely heavily on commercial textbooks, and overlook authentic English usage beyond the classroom (Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2011). The learner-centered approach is grounded in the belief that educational programs must be tailored to learners' needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Robinson, 2001).

While current reforms emphasize learner-centeredness, few studies have explored secondary students' attitudes, learning preferences, and skill needs.

To develop a truly learner-centered curriculum for secondary students, a systematic needs analysis is essential. This process identifies what learners need, want, and lack as well as the learning environments in relation to English language learning. These insights are intended to inform necessary changes in current English teaching practice. With the goal of creating a more learner-centered and practical curriculum, the present study investigated the needs, lacks, wants, and preferred learning environments related to English language learning among secondary school students. This information was gathered to inform necessary changes in current English teaching practices.

Research methodology

Participants

The participants in the study were secondary school students from a demonstration school located in central Thailand. A purposive sampling method was employed, as the school board had initiated efforts to revise the curriculum to better reflect learners' needs and to ensure that students could use English effectively in both academic and everyday contexts. A total of 159 students participated in this study, comprising 83 lower secondary and 76 upper secondary students. The school size was relatively small, with an enrollment of approximately 400 students, and its curriculum emphasized science and mathematics. All participants received English instruction from both Thai teachers and a native English-speaking teacher. Specifically, students studied English with the native speaker for at least one hour per week as part of an additional English subject, and with Thai teachers for three to four hours per week for compulsory English subjects.

Data collection was conducted during the summer break, excluding newly enrolled students for the upcoming semester. Given the total number of students, approximately half of the current student body participated in the study. Differentiating between lower and upper secondary students was essential due to variations in time allocation under the Basic Core Curriculum, as well as the potential difference in their goals and perspectives regarding English language learning. One of the limitations of this study is that the data collection occurred during the school break, which may have resulted in lower participation from less

engaged students. Therefore, this could potentially skew the results, and therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to identify and address learners' necessities, lacks, wants, and preferred learning environments, based on the framework proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). To gather more detailed information, elements of task analysis, skill requirements, and learner attitudes were incorporated (Robinson, 2001). The instrument was adapted from previous studies by Oeamoum and Sriwichai (2020) and Pongklee and Sukying (2022). To minimize ambiguity and ensure comprehension, the questionnaire was written in Thai. An English teacher with six years of teaching experience and the school's academic vice principal collaboratively reviewed and validated all items to ensure content accuracy, clarity, and language appropriateness. Each item was revised until mutual agreement was reached.

The questionnaire consists of four sections. The first part employed a five-point rating scale to assess students' attitudes toward English and their self-rated proficiency. In the second part, participants were asked about their preferred learning environments. They could select multiple items and add additional preferences if applicable. The third part focused on specific skills students wished to improve and the tasks they wanted to learn. This section also included open-ended responses. In both parts two and three, data were collected as frequencies to provide comments or suggestions regarding the learning environment and classroom tasks they wished to explore further. The final part collected general background information.

Due to time constraints, semi-structured interviews could not be conducted. However, the questionnaire included open-ended items to elicit deeper insights from learners. The instrument distributed via Google Forms during a summer break, chosen for its convenience and familiarity among students. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, assured that their responses would be used to improve the school's curriculum, and reminded that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Teachers shared the survey link with students in their respective classes and provided clarifications when needed. To ensure data validity, all responses were screened for duplicate entries, and completion of all items was required.

Data analysis

This study employed quantitative data collection methods. The data obtained from the questionnaire responses were analyzed by frequency counts, percentage distributions, means, and standard deviations. Average scores from the 5-point rating scale were interpreted to reflect participants’ levels of agreement with each item, as follows: scores between 4.51 and 5.00 indicated a very high level of agreement; 3.51 to 4.50 represented a high level; 2.51 to 3.50 reflected moderate agreement; 1.51 to 2.50 suggested low agreement; and 1.00 to 1.50 indicated a very low level of agreement.

In addition to descriptive statistics, inferential statistical methods were applied to compare responses between the lower secondary (LS) and upper secondary (US) student groups. Specifically, an independent t-test and a z-test for independent proportions were used to examine significant differences between the two groups.

Results

What are secondary students' attitudes and beliefs about learning English?

Participants in both groups perceived English as highly necessary. The lower secondary (LS) group reported a mean score of 4.35, while the upper secondary (US) group reported a higher mean score of 4.64, as shown in Table 1. An independent sample t-test revealed that the US group rated the necessity of English higher than the LS group ($t = -2.332, p = .021$).

Regarding attitudes toward English learning, both groups expressed moderately positive views. The LS

group had a mean score of 3.77, and the US group scored slightly higher at 3.92. However, no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups, indicating that both reported similar levels of enjoyment in learning English.

According to Table 2, both groups identified reading as their most proficient English skill, with 64.10% of LS students and 66.58% of the US students selecting it. Writing was rated the second most proficient skills by the LS group (59.28%), while the US group placed listening second (57.59%). Speaking was consistently reported as the least confident skill, with 52.53% of LS students and 55.53% of the US students indicating lower confidence in the area.

The goals of learning English differed between the two groups, as shown in Table 3. For the LS group, the most frequently reported goal was to communicate with foreigners (71.10%). Other prominent goals included using English for future employment (65.10%) and studying or living abroad (54.20%), suggesting that LS students generally emphasized communicate and practical applications of English. In contrast, US students most commonly identified preparing for future examinations as their primary goal (71.06%), followed by using English for work (69.74%), and engaging leisure activities (65.79%). These findings indicate that the two groups held distinct perspectives on the purpose of learning English in school. A statistically significant difference between groups was found only in the goal of preparing for tests ($z = -5.157, p < .01$), highlighting a divergence in academic priorities between LS and US students.

Table 1 Participants’ Attitudes towards English

	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Level	Mean	SD	Level			
English is necessary	4.35	0.90	-2.332	4.64	0.68	Very High	-2.332*	152	.021
I like English	3.77	1.15	-0.843	3.92	1.07	High	-0.843	157	.400

* $p < .05$

Table 2 Students’ Self-Rated Proficiency on Each Skill

Skills	Lower Secondary				Upper Secondary				<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	%	Rank	Mean	SD	%	Rank			
Listening	2.81	1.05	56.14	3	2.89	1.01	57.59	2	-0.534	157	.594
Speaking	2.63	0.95	52.53	4	2.78	0.87	55.53	4	-1.031	157	.304
Reading	3.20	0.95	64.1	1	3.33	0.86	66.58	1	-0.855	157	.394
Writing	2.96	1.09	59.28	2	2.80	0.97	56.05	3	0.978	157	.330

* $p < .05$

Table 3 The Goals of Learning English

Goals	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			z
	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	
To get a good grade	41	49.41	5	48	63.16	4	-1.746
To prepare for future test	25	30.13	7	54	71.05	1	-5.157**
To study/live abroad	45	54.23	3	42	55.26	5	-0.135
To communicate with foreigners	59	71.10	1	48	63.16	4	-0.628
For travelling	32	38.56	6	42	55.26	5	-0.957
For working in the future	54	65.07	2	53	69.74	2	1.064
For other leisure activities	43	51.82	4	50	65.79	3	-1.787

** $p < .01$

Both groups demonstrated positive attitudes and beliefs toward learning English; however, the US group rated English as significantly more necessary for their lives compared to the LS group. In terms of self-rated proficiency, both groups expressed the highest confidence in their reading skills. Notably, their goals for learning English differed. The US group primarily focused on academic preparation, such as future examinations, while the LS group emphasized practical communication for daily use, including interacting with foreigners and future travel.

What is the learning environment that learners prefer in the English classroom?

Both groups of participants expressed a preference for learning English with a combination of Thai teachers and native English speakers. This option was selected by 42% of LS students and 55% of the US students. For the LS group, the second most preferred environment was learning exclusively with native English speakers (15%). In contrast, the US group's second preference was learning with both Thai and English-speaking teachers,

regardless of whether they were native or non-native (22%). These results (Figure 1) suggest that while both groups value exposure to native speakers, US students show a broader acceptance of diverse English-speaking instructors.

The findings align with earlier results, indicating that both groups of learners preferred a classroom environment where

English and Thai are used equally. This preference was reported by 53.00% of the LS group and 57.89% of the US group, as shown in Table 4. Only a small proportion of students favored an English-only classroom, with 7.23% of the LS group and 2.63% of the US group selecting this option.

Table 4 Language Use in the English Classroom

	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			z
	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	
Use English and Thai equally	44	53.00	1	44	57.89	1	-0.619
Use English most of the time and Thai when necessary	33	39.80	2	30	39.47	2	0.037
Only English	6	7.23	3	2	2.63	3	1.325

z = Standardized test statistic comparing group proportions

As shown in Table 5, students in both groups mostly preferred small group interaction, with 61.50% of the LS group and 57.89% of the US group selecting this option. The least preferred activity for LS students was whole-class participation (32.50%), whereas US students expressed the lowest preference for pair work with 31.58%. Interestingly, the US students rated whole-class activities and individual work equally, with 36.84% indicating a preference for each.

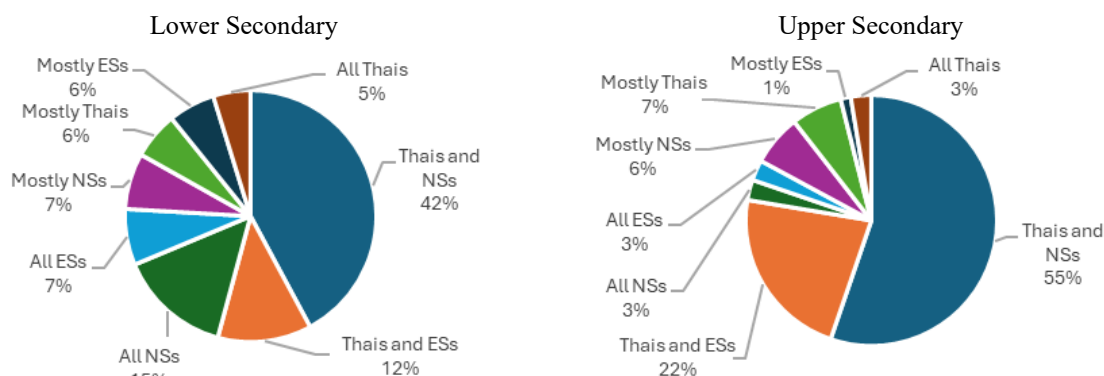


Figure 1 Preferred proportions of teacher types based on English language background
 Note: NSs = Native English Speakers; ESs = Non-native English Speakers.

Table 5 Preferred Types of Interactions in Classroom

Types of interaction	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			z
	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	
Individual	38	45.79	2	28	36.84	2	1.143
Pair work	29	34.95	3	24	31.58	3	0.449
Small group	51	61.46	1	44	57.89	1	0.456
Whole class	27	32.54	4	28	36.84	2	-0.571

z = Standardized test statistic comparing group proportions

As shown in Table 6, the most preferred activity for both groups was playing games to learn English, selected by 71.10% of the LS group and 68.42% of the US group. Conversation practice ranked second among LS students (61.5%) but was third among US students (57.89%). Both groups showed nearly equal preference for engaging in a variety of activities within a single class, with approximately 59% in each group. Writing practice was the least preferred activity overall, though it is slightly more favored by US students. Specifically, 27.7% of LS students selected writing practice (ranked seventh), compared to 44.74% of US group (ranked sixth). A significant difference between groups was found in writing practice, with the US group showing a stronger preference for writing-focused activities (z = value, $p < .01$).

Table 6 Preferred Learning Activities in Classroom

Types of activities	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			z
	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	
Conversation Practice	51	61.46	2	44	57.89	3	0.456
Writing Practice	23	27.72	7	34	44.74	6	-2.236*
Translation	33	39.77	5	37	48.68	5	-1.132
Using pictures	27	32.54	6	33	43.42	7	-1.415
Using songs	45	54.23	4	40	52.63	4	0.200
Using games	59	71.10	1	52	68.42	1	0.365
Using various activities in one class	49	59.05	3	45	59.21	2	-0.022

* $p < .05$

Responses to the open-ended question revealed several constructive suggestions. Many participants expressed satisfaction with learning from Thai teachers who employed varied teaching methods, including songs, games, and PowerPoint presentations. However, nine students indicated a desire for increased exposure to native English speakers. Several participants, emphasized the need for more practical conversation-based activities that they can be applied in real-life situations. One student noted that while vocabulary games were enjoyable, they offered limited opportunities to use the language outside the classroom. Another student described English as a relaxing subject attributing this to the supportive nature of her teachers, who encouraged learning through

mistakes. Although she initially found this approach unfamiliar, she came to appreciate it, especially when feeling nervous in class. Her response highlights the importance of a positive and reassuring learning environment.

Classroom environment preferences were largely similar across both groups. Students from both LS and US levels preferred learning with a combination of Thai teachers and native English speakers. Notably, the LS group expressed a stronger desire for instruction from native speaker. In terms of activity formats, both groups favored small group interaction and enjoyed engaging in games or a variety of activities within a single class session. The only statistically significant difference between groups was found in writing practice tasks, where the US group showing a greater preference for writing activities compare to their LS counterparts.

What English skills and related tasks do secondary students want to improve?

Table 7 presents a comparison of the English skills learners most wish to improve. Speaking emerged as the top priority for both groups, with 84.40% of LS students and 88.16% of US students expressing a desire to enhance this skill. Listening was the second most preferred skill, selected by 72.30% of LS students and 73.68% of US students. Writing ranked third among US students (69.74%), but was fourth among LS students (61.50%). Reading was the least prioritized skill for both groups. Interestingly, vocabulary improvement was reported at nearly the same rate as reading, with 60.30% of LS students and 55.26% of US students selecting it.

Table 7 Skills that Students Wish to Improve

Skills	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			z
	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	
Listening	60	72.30	2	56	73.68	2	-0.198
Speaking	70	84.35	1	67	88.16	1	-0.697
Reading	50	60.25	6	42	55.26	6	0.635
Writing	51	61.46	4	53	69.74	3	-1.068
Vocabulary	50	60.25	6	50	65.79	4	-0.723
Grammar	53	63.87	3	50	65.79	4	-0.255
Pronunciation	51	61.46	4	45	59.21	5	0.288

z = Standardized test statistic comparing group proportions

To gain deeper insight, participants were asked to identify specific listening tasks they wished to improve. Table 8 presents the results. Both groups expressed a strong preference for improving their ability to understand daily conversations, with 83.10% of the LS group and 90.79% of the US group. On the other hand, listening to English lectures was the least prioritized,

with only 34.90% of the LS group and 34.21% of the US group. Notably, the US group ranked listening for test preparation second (57.89%), while the LS group prioritized listening to differentiate words (56.6%) as their second most desired task.

Table 8 Listening Tasks Students Wish to Improve

Tasks	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			z
	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	
Listening to daily conversation	69	83.15	1	69	90.79	1	-1.424
Listening for leisure activities	41	49.41	4	39	51.32	3	-0.242
Listening to English lectures	29	34.95	5	26	34.21	5	0.097
Listening for tests	43	51.82	3	44	57.89	2	-0.770
Listening to differentiate words	47	56.64	2	36	47.37	4	1.167

z = Standardized test statistic comparing group proportions

Table 9 presents students' preferences for speaking tasks. Both LS and US groups showed remarkably similar priorities for the top three tasks. Speaking in daily conversation was the most preferred, selected by 86.80% of LS students and 86.84% of US students. Asking and giving answers in English ranked second for both groups (69.9% for LS; 69.74% for US), followed by speaking in a higher education and job-related contexts (56.6% for LS; 67.11% for US). The least preferred task among LS students was participating in class discussions (50.6%), while US students placed the lowest emphasis on having clear and correct pronunciation.

Table 9 Preferred Speaking Tasks of Students

Tasks	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			z
	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	
Daily conversation	72	86.76	1	66	86.84	1	-0.018
Asking and answering in English	58	69.89	2	53	69.74	2	0.012
Giving presentations	46	55.43	4	49	64.47	4	-1.162
Discussing in English	42	50.61	5	45	59.21	5	-1.089
Speaking in higher education/job related context	47	56.64	3	51	67.11	3	-1.357
Clear and correct pronunciation	46	55.43	4	42	55.26	6	0.020

z = Standardized test statistic comparing group proportions

Table 10 presents students' preferences for reading-related tasks. Both LS and US students' most preferred skill was the ability to read for gist, selected by 80.70% of LS students and 80.26% of the US students. The LS group ranked practicing critical reading second (59.00%), while the US group prioritized reading for exams (69.74%) in that position. Both groups placed guessing words from context third, with 54.20% of LS

students and 64.47% of US students selecting this task. Reading for pleasure was ranked sixth by both groups, (51.00% for LS and 46.05% for US), and using a dictionary was the least preferred task, with (26.5% for LS and 23.68% for US).

A statistically significant difference was found in the preference for reading exam-related texts, with US students showing a stronger desire to improve on this area. This suggests that US students are more focused on national examinations, and that exam-related washback may influence their learning priorities.

Table 10 Preferred Reading Tasks

Tasks	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			z
	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	
Speed reading	43	51.82	4	48	63.16	4	-1.445
Reading for gist	67	80.74	1	61	80.26	1	0.073
Critical reading	49	59.05	2	45	59.21	5	-0.022
Guessing words from contexts	45	54.23	3	49	64.47	3	-1.314
Using dictionary	22	26.51	7	18	23.68	7	0.409
Reading for exams	41	49.41	5	53	69.74	2	-2.605**
Reading for pleasure	34	40.97	6	35	46.05	6	-0.647

** $p < .01$

Table 11 presents students' preference for writing-related tasks. For the LS group, note-taking was the most preferred task (72.00%), followed by using correct grammar when writing (62.40%). In contrast, the US group prioritized using correct grammar and as their top choice (77.63%), followed by writing for job-related purposes such as applications and résumés (71.05%), and note-taking (69.74%). Writing emails and letters was the least preferred task for both groups, selected by 42.00% of LS students and 44.74% of the US students.

Statistical analysis revealed significant differences between groups in preferences for writing reports and using correct grammar. These findings suggest that US students place greater emphasis on writing accuracy and express a stronger need to develop academic writing skills compared to their LS counterparts.

Table 11 Preferred Tasks for Writing

Tasks	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary			z
	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	
SNote-taking	60	72.00	1	53	69.74	3	0.355
Essay writing	40	48.00	4	45	59.21	5	-1.391
Report writing	40	48.00	4	50	65.79	4	-2.236*
Writing emails/letters	35	42.00	5	34	44.74	6	-0.326
Work application/Resume	47	56.40	3	54	71.05	2	-1.888
Using correct grammar	52	62.40	2	59	77.63	1	-2.055*

* $p < .05$

Responses to the open-ended question were categorized into common themes, with frequencies noted in parentheses.

1. Pronunciation practice (LS: 7, US: 4) – Students suggested incorporating more pronunciation practice to help them differentiate unfamiliar sounds and build confidence in pronouncing words and applying sentence stress.

2. Textbook dissatisfaction (LS: 3, US: 4) – Participants expressed that commercial textbooks were outdated and overly focused on grammar drills (e.g., gap-filling exercises) with limited real-world relevance. In contrast teacher-made materials were viewed as more engaging and better suited to their needs.

3. Introducing different accents into the classroom (US: 2) – Some students emphasized the importance of exposure to varied English accents, especially in preparation for real-life situations such as job interviews. They believed this would enhance their listening comprehension.

4. Balancing daily use of English and academic English (US: 1) – One participant reflected on the tension between learning English for communication and preparing for national examinations. The comment highlighted the pressure to choose between enjoying classroom interaction and focusing on academic achievement.

Discussion

This section presents the shared needs of both learner groups, followed by a deeper discussion of group-specific preferences. Overall, participants from both lower secondary (LS) and upper secondary (US) levels expressed awareness of the importance of learning English and demonstrated a positive attitude toward it. These findings align with Imsa-ard (2020), who reported that Thai secondary students generally view English as a valuable tool for educational and professional advancement.

While both groups recognized the necessity of English, US students perceived it as significantly more essential than their LS counterparts. They also expressed greater satisfaction with their reading skills, consistent with Choomthong (2014), who noted that schools in Thailand often emphasize grammar and reading. Similarly, Pongklee and Sukying (2022) found that Thai learners tend to feel confident in reading. In this study, US students also placed stronger emphasis on writing accuracy, particularly in academic contexts.

Despite varied motivations, both groups shared a common goal of improving oral-aural communication. However, classroom practices appear to overlook these skills. Participants also expressed a shared preference for learning with both Thai and native-speaking English teachers. Choomthong (2014) emphasized that using learners' first language (L1) can help bridge the gap to second language (L2) acquisition, boosting confidence and fostering positive attitudes. Nevertheless, excessive use of L1 may hinder progress and may contribute to interlanguage fossilization (Al-Nofaie, 2010). Although Atkinson (1987) found that most learners often favor translation activities, participants in this study ranked translation fifth or sixth, suggesting that they may rely less on translation and instead prefer interactive communication tasks.

Game-based learning and varied classroom activities were consistently favored by both groups. This preference mirrors findings from Oeamoum and Sriwichai (2020), who reported that games enhance engagement. These results support the use of active learning strategies to foster a positive classroom atmosphere, build learner confidence, and encourage personal expression (Yusuk, 2020). In terms of interaction, small group activities were preferred, aligning with the goals of Thailand's competency-based curriculum, which promotes collaboration and teamwork (Sangwanglao, 2024).

Interestingly, class discussion was the least favored speaking activity. This may be culturally influenced, as Asian students often avoid public speaking to prevent losing face (Thongprasert & Burn, 2003). Many prefer speaking with familiar peers or working independently rather than sharing their ideas in front of the whole class. Both groups also voiced concerns about the relevance of classroom textbooks. Participants found commercial textbooks outdated and misaligned with their needs, echoing findings from Iran (Rashidi & Kehtarfard, 2014), where learners emphasized the importance of adapting materials to better serve EFL contexts. This highlights the critical role of textbook selection and teacher mediation in making English instruction meaningful. In Vietnam, for example, localized textbooks have been developed to include familiar topics, balance skill development, and emphasize communication (Van, 2016). To better meet learners' needs, teachers are encouraged to integrate updated and relevant materials alongside interactive teaching strategies. With the rise of digital tools, incorporating social media content,

podcasts, video clips, and online discussions can help make lessons more engaging and personally meaningful (Sukavatee & Khlaisang, 2023).

The most common goal for learning English among LS students was to communicate with foreigners. Most participants in this group expressed a desire to improve their speaking and listening skills, particularly through practical everyday tasks such as engaging in daily conversations, reading for gist, and taking notes. Additionally, LS students showed interest in developing critical reading skills, including identifying the author's viewpoints and evaluating sources. Given the alignment of these responses, the curriculum for LS learners should emphasize immersive, communicative experiences. This includes presenting learners with realistic daily scenarios, teaching relevant language functions, and creating opportunities to practice those functions in class. Rather than focusing on grammatical accuracy or some essay writing, instruction should prioritize confidence-building through small group interaction and interactive activities. Research supports this approach, noting that collaborative learning fosters both language development and interpersonal skills (Kim, 2013; Mihalache, 2015). Task-based instruction is particularly suitable, as it encourages learners to use the target language meaningfully through role-play, opinion exchange, and information gap tasks. (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

The LS group's preferred learning environment also aligned with their instructional needs. They favored learning from both Thai and native English-speaking teachers, though they placed greater value on native speakers. This may reflect their desire to model standard pronunciation and accent accuracy. However, Thai teachers remain essential for clarifying difficult concepts, and students expressed a desire for balanced use of both languages in the classroom. Critically, the LS students may not yet grasp the global nature of English, as evidenced by their preference for standard forms and limited recognition of non-standard varieties. Thai educators should address this by normalizing accent variation and preparing students to communicate with non-native speakers in real-world contexts (Boriboon, 2011). Learners should be encouraged to use English confidently, regardless of accent.

In contrast, upper secondary (US) students identified their primary goals as preparing for national examinations, pursuing higher education, and securing future employment. They emphasized the need to

improve speaking and writing skills, with preferred tasks including exam preparation (e.g., reading and listening) and career-related communication (e.g., giving presentations and job application writing). These findings align with prior studies on national washback effects in Thai education (Karnnawakul, 2004; Kimsuvan, 2004), which influence not only educators and school administrators, but also students. Similar pressures were reported in Singapore, where examination results created stress during transitional phases (Ng, 2004). Therefore, curriculum design US learners should address both immediate academic demands and long-term career readiness.

A notable tension emerged when one participant expressed difficulty balancing communicative English learning with exam performance. This dilemma underscores the need for targeted support. A dedicated course on test-taking strategies could help students succeed in national exams while also introducing them to international assessments such as TOEFL and IELTS, which evaluate a broader range of essential skills (Choomthong, 2014). These scores could enhance university applications and encourage students to value communication skills beyond multiple-choice formats. Teachers must emphasize that English is not solely an exam subject but a life skill that opens doors to global opportunities. Otherwise, students may internalize a narrow view of English as a tool for academic success alone.

US students expressed concern about writing accuracy, particularly in relation to extended essays and statements of purpose required for university applications. To address this, writing instruction should include scaffolding techniques and self-editing rubrics to build confidence and competence (Sangeetha, 2020). At this level, academic English instruction is needed to prepare them for higher education.

Regarding learning environments, US students preferred studying with both Thai and native speakers; but they showed less emphasis on nativism than the LS students. Nearly a quarter of students expressed interest in learning with non-native English speakers, suggesting a broader understanding of English as a global language. Some participants noted that future job interviews might involve non-native speakers, reflecting awareness of English varieties, especially in the ASEAN and international contexts (Jindapak, 2013). Hong Kong's curriculum reforms, which incorporate language and intercultural awareness, offer a useful model (Chan,

2020). Thai educators should similarly expose students to diverse English accents and varieties through audio and video materials (Passakornkarn & Vibulphol, 2020). This exposure should begin at the upper secondary school level and include goal-oriented interaction strategies—such as asking for clarification, repetition, or back-channeling—to prepare students for authentic communication. These strategies also align with the aims of Thailand's competency-based curriculum, which emphasizes market readiness and intercultural competence (Sangwanglao, 2024).

In summary, lower and secondary students express distinct needs and goals for English learning. Curriculum developers and educators must respond to these differences by designing learner-centered courses that integrate relevant skills and tasks. While learners from different contexts may hold varied perspectives, the findings of this study offer valuable guidance for creating instructional experiences that empower students to become competent English language users—capable of communicating effectively in academic, professional, and everyday settings.

Suggestions

Curriculum Development Suggestions from Students' Perspectives

1. Teachers should prioritize communicative tasks and provide many opportunities for practice when teaching lower secondary students. Learning activities should reflect their daily language use and include interactive formats such as games and role-play. Tailoring classroom activities to the specific needs of each learner group can help students see how English connects to their lives and build confidence in real-world communication.

2. At the upper secondary level, instruction should incorporate foundational academic English skills—particularly writing and speaking—to prepare students for university and future careers. Additionally, learners should be exposed to a range of English accents through video and audio materials to better equip them for authentic communication in diverse global contexts.

3. School administrators, teachers, and parents should support the use of both Thai and English in instruction. Students value Thai teachers for explaining complex concepts and native speakers for providing immersive English exposure. For upper secondary students, interaction with proficient non-native English speakers can raise awareness of varieties of English and prepare them for international communication.

4. There is a clear need for textbook reform in Thailand. Materials should be updated to reflect students' lives and interests. Teachers are encouraged to adapt vocabulary, reading passages and interactive activities to make content more relevant and engaging. Locally developed or teacher-modified materials may better serve learners' communicative and academic needs.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Further studies should involve larger and more diverse sample of participants to enhance generalizability. In-depth interviews with focus groups—including both students and teachers—could provide richer insights into instructional needs and beliefs, informing curriculum design tailored to specific educational contexts.

2. A longitudinal study could track students over time to evaluate whether curriculum adjustments based on needs analysis result in measurable improvement in English proficiency. This approach would offer valuable evidence on the long-term effectiveness of learner-centered curriculum reforms.

3. Further studies should explore the specific language functions and vocabulary students need in real-life contexts. These findings could inform the development of more practical and relevant textbooks that better support learners' communicative and academic goals.

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