

การใช้กรอบอ้างอิงสมรรถนะด้านภาษาแห่งสหภาพยุโรปในระบบการศึกษาไทย

The Implementation of CEFR in the Thai Education System

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the implementation of “The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages,” or CEFR, in the Thai education system between the low quality of education and low proficiency of English. It explores significant issues like the English proficiency of Thai students, definitions and frameworks of CEFR, the necessity of CEFR, the implementation of CEFR in Thailand, studies on the utilization of CEFR, and the major impact of CEFR in Thailand. This article is intended as a rich source of information for all sectors in educational management, particularly English proficiency improvement, and could be also directly used as guidelines for developing the quality of both teachers and students.

Keywords: *CEFR, English proficiency, education*

บทคัดย่อ

บทความฉบับนี้จัดทำขึ้นเพื่อนำเสนอการใช้กรอบอ้างอิงสมรรถนะด้านภาษาแห่งสหภาพยุโรปในระบบการศึกษาไทยท่ามกลางคุณภาพด้านการศึกษาและสมรรถนะด้านภาษาอังกฤษที่ตกต่ำ ผู้เขียนบทความสำรวจประเด็นที่สำคัญอันได้แก่ สมรรถนะด้านภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนไทย ความหมายและขอบข่ายกรอบอ้างอิง

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สมรรถนะด้านภาษาแห่งสหภาพยุโรป ความจำเป็นของกรอบอ้างอิงสมรรถนะด้านภาษาแห่งสหภาพยุโรป การใช้กรอบอ้างอิงสมรรถนะด้านภาษาแห่งสหภาพยุโรปในประเทศไทย งานวิจัยด้านการใช้กรอบอ้างอิงสมรรถนะด้านภาษาแห่งสหภาพยุโรปทั้งในและต่างประเทศ และผลกระทบจากการใช้กรอบอ้างอิงสมรรถนะด้านภาษาแห่งสหภาพยุโรปในประเทศไทย โดยบทความนี้จะเป็แหล่งข้อมูลที่เป็นประโยชน์ต่อทุกภาคส่วนในด้านการจัดการทางการศึกษา โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งการปรับปรุงสมรรถนะด้านภาษาอังกฤษ อีกทั้งยังสามารถใช้เป็นแนวทางโดยตรงสำหรับการพัฒนาคุณภาพของทั้งบุคลากรครูและนักเรียนต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: กรอบอ้างอิงสมรรถนะด้านภาษาแห่งสหภาพยุโรป, สมรรถนะด้านภาษาอังกฤษ, การศึกษา

Introduction

The Thai education system has been controlled by the Ministry of Education for many decades up until now. The Ministry of Education was allocated with 517,076.7 million baht in a fiscal year 2016, higher than any other ministries (Bureau of the Budget, 2016). It also dominates the entire system of education ranging from the basic education to the level of higher education, although the roles of private schools or private institutions are more active and prominent at present. In positions of authority, therefore, the Ministry of Education becomes a key player in providing the mechanism, regulations, measures, frameworks and so on for all education institutions throughout the nation (Educational Management Information System Centre, 2016). However, the overall quality of education in Thailand is still unable to reach at the same level as other developing countries, especially the English proficiency of students despite a huge number of resources and budgets being spent every year. Thailand is ranked near the bottom line of English proficiency at 56 out of 72 countries, where the English language is not used as the first language; and just in Southeast Asian Nations, Thailand only outdoes Cambodia (EF English Proficiency Index, 2016). These negative results clearly reflect the current situation and severe failure of teaching and learning English without doubt, and they turn to be a heavy burden for all sectors in developing the English proficiency and the quality of education in Thailand. Questions are sporadically raised about the Thai education system by the public because the more the Ministry of Education attempts to improve the quality of education, the more the English proficiency of Thai students is becoming deteriorate and undesirable, the 3rd worst in Asia (James, 2015).

As a result, the Ministry of Education is really concerned and urgently needs to handle the critical problem of English proficiency of Thai students and teachers with the steely determination. A new program for improving the quality of both teaching and learning English on all levels of schools called “The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)” is then introduced for all schools, initially employed on the level of basic education; and it is expected for lifting the English proficiency for both teachers and students. One of the most urgent measures in the initial step is putting more weight on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), according to the official announcement of the Ministry of Education (The Ministry of Education, 2014).

Even though the implementation of the CEFR is in the preliminary step of the employment, it

can be interesting if all things are done on the right path. This article then will demonstrate the substantial issues related to the implementation of the CEFR on the education system of Thailand for enhancing the English proficiency among Thai students and teachers, and also provide better comprehension of the implementation of the CEFR in Thailand.

What is CEFR?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR has been employed as a main language learning approach for citizens of European countries, learning different languages in European Union as a communication tool (Tylor, 2004). The handbook in English version named “The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment” and other languages are translated and published by Cambridge University Press (Council of Europe, 2015). Uniquely designed and used in Europe, it is now available in 39 languages all over the world. Its clear goal is to serve as a framework and guideline for developing teaching and learning a foreign language, as well as serving as a standard index for language assessment and enhancing language proficiency. It is also, in fact, being used as a standard test for assessing the language proficiency in teaching English as a foreign language and as an international benchmark for language proficiency (Cambridge English, 2016). The scale of the CEFR is divided into six levels for the language proficiency which are A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. The following table shows each level of proficiency.

The benchmark for the assessment of the CEFR is obviously simple because it will indicate what level a test taker will be able to reach. It is a very influential benchmark for measuring the real language proficiency (Cambridge English, 2016). It is claimed as the international standard approach for assessing the language proficiency, particularly the English language, as potentially important as other famous ones such as IELTS and TOEFL. To insist that the CEFR is a standard of language reference, Cambridge University Press describes the CEFR as international benchmark for language proficiency (Cambridge English, 2016). One of the most important reasons is that the main aim of the CEFR is to introduce a common reference benchmark into an easy model of indexes (Martyniuk, 2011) and to use as a validity test for the second language (Weir, 2005). In short, the CEFR becomes the common reference levels of language proficiency as the global framework for language development and testing which is standardized as a benchmark for describing language proficiency (Morrow, 2004).

Why CEFR in Thailand?

It is true that the CEFR is quite new for the government and the Ministry of Education. This is because it was just introduced into the system of Thai education since 2014 although it is originally invented and used in Europe for a long time. It might not be too exaggerating to point out that the government and the Ministry of Education are just aware of a new strategy for the reform of teaching and learning English when the current of the AEC becomes a significant issue for all sectors in Thai education development whereas the level of English proficiency of Thai students is still very low. It drives the

Ministry of Education to implement the CEFR for the reform of both learning and teaching of English across the country (Office of the Minister, 2016). The implementation of the CEFR is to believe that it will be the beginning of better changes. Insisting on the seminar entitled “Policy on the Reform of English Learning and Teaching”, the former Education Minister Chaturon Chaisaeng said that “if schools put the CEFR into practice effectively, I believe Thai students’ English skills will be improved and students will be able to compete with foreign students in other countries.” He also pointed out that a large number of students nationwide were illiterate, and the number of the students who had low English skills must be so high (Intatthep, 2014). Hence, the ministerial announcement on English learning and teaching reform in 2014 was released and has become an influential guideline for developing the national English-language education amid the public concern about the quality of education and the notorious English proficiency of students in Thailand (James, 2015). The announcement is not only used to seek for better way of the development of students’ English proficiency, but also for English teachers who are also encouraged to take the CEFR assessment test to evaluate their English proficiency, according to the director of the Office of the Basic Education Commission’s English Language Institute (Intatthep, 2014).

There is a high expectation that the CEFR can be significant for the development of the national English-language improvement because of its standard and criteria that will have many advantages for the process of teaching and learning English in Thailand. This new strategy will be more important if the English proficiency of teachers and students get better. To prove this, both teachers and students will have to take the CEFR examination to evaluate their levels of English; and they need to have a certain level of English. According to Deputy Minister of Education, Doctor Teerakiat Jareonsettasin, both Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) and Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) must have closer cooperation in various kinds of missions to strengthen students and teachers English proficiency (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2015).

The Implementation of CEFR in Education

As far as the CEFR has been introduced by the Ministry of Education, the main features of the implementation, which must be promptly adopted by schools, will mainly focus on the Communicative Language Teaching or CLT. The CLT, in fact, has been employed for many years in teaching English in Thailand (Saengboon, 2002 cited in Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015). In a bid to lift the English proficiency for Thai students and the quality of Thai education, the official announcement of the Ministry of Education (The Ministry of Education, 2014) gives guidelines for the implementation of the CEFR in English teaching reform as theses instructions.

(1) The CEFR is implemented for teaching and learning English. It covers the curriculum, tests, evaluation, and teacher development. These elements will be designated by the framework of the CEFR.

(2) The Communicative Language Teaching will play more crucial roles than the outdated grammatical based teaching and learning methods.

(3) Teaching English must be encouraged by benchmarks of CEFR, despite schools can employ

different teaching techniques and styles.

(4) To boost up the English proficiency, schools need to implement these key issues.

4.1 Different programs responding to the need of different kinds of learners: English Program (EP), Mini English Program (MEP), International Program (IP), English Bilingual Education (EBE), and English for Integrated Studies (EIS) must be set up.

4.2 The language classes will be built up through certain characteristics with learning skills, social skills, academic skills, and communicative skills.

4.3 Providing the atmosphere and activities that encourages using English such as joining a camp and launching campaigns on English learning environments: English Literacy Day, English Zone, English Corner etc.

4.4 Conversation courses in English are made up as general classes.

(5) Focusing on the CLT and teacher development, improving the quality of managing teaching and learning.

(6) The Information Technology will be used as a significant tool for developing the quality of both teachers and students.

1. For Students

In the wake of low English proficiency among students, the implementation of the CEFR for students is divided into six levels and implemented to the system of Thai education (The Ministry of Education, 2014).

- A1 is equal to the ability of primary schools students.
- A2 is equal to the ability of junior high schools students.
- B1 is equal to the ability of senior high schools students.
- B2 is equal to the ability of university students.
- C1 is almost equal to the ability of English speakers.
- C2 is equal to the ability of English speakers.

2. For Teachers

With the intention to reform the quality of education and the English proficiency of English teachers, the Ministry of Education has also set up the following guidelines to be performed by the schools and Office of Educational Service Area in every region as the following major steps.

- (1) To survey and evaluate levels of teacher's English proficiency
- (2) To develop, follow up, and assist teachers to increase quality of teaching and learning
- (3) To establish a mechanism for increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning
- (4) To provide channels for testing teacher's English proficiency

These procedures will ensure that the English teachers will have better English proficiency and able to reach the level of standard of English. Under the policy of the government, the Office of Basic Education Commission (The Ministry of Education, 2014) has also divided the levels of English proficiency into six levels for English teachers in accordance with the benchmarks of the CEFR. To assess the level

of the English proficiency among the English teachers, Mr. Watanaporn Rangubtook, the director of the Office of the Basic Education Commission, insisted that all English teachers all over the country in the basic education system have to take the CEFR assessment test (Intathep, 2014). For those who have low proficiency, they will be provided with a variety of training and other mechanisms. However, despite the fact that all English teachers are actively engaged to take the CEFR assessment test, there is no requirement for them to reach the highest level of the proficiency, according to the Secretary of Office of Basic Education Commission (Wanachayanont, 2015). The level that English teachers need to reach is just at least one level higher than the class they teach. For example, the minimum level of primary schools English teachers is A2, while the senior high schools English teachers must be able to reach at B2 at least.

Studies on the CEFR

A number of researches and studies on English language proficiency tests are being continuously done by researchers and educational institutions, mainly for developing teaching and learning and assessing individuals' levels of their English language proficiency. Apart from these, the applications of the outcomes of a number of researches as guidelines and suggestions for developing curriculum and managing education systems also play prominent roles. Chen, Mohammadi, and Benigno (2013) explained how the CEFR was used to develop a vocabulary list; for example, a number of words required for English reading skill must be at the range of 8,000-9,000 word families. And the speaking skill must be between 5,000 -7,000 word families. By using statistics from a language test, it can indicate the relationship between CEFR and knowledge of vocabulary (Chen et al., 2013). In addition, Nagai and O'Dwyer (2011) carried out "The actual and potential impacts of the CEFR on language education in Japan" in order to investigate how the CEFR has been applied into language learning in Japan. They claimed that the implementation of the CEFR had both some positive impacts and some drawbacks as well. For instance, the use of the CEFR is useful for score interpretation that is helpful for improving the standards of foreign language proficiency through developing both curricula and courses. On the contrary, the CEFR is suitable for applying to a specific context because of the issues of validity and distraction to the first language. Wachter and Heeren (2010) also developed a language at University of Leuven in Belgium for following the students' study performance. They found that well-designed test could be effective to follow up students' learning status and could play important roles for providing special need for particular groups of learners. The learners' academic achievement and the levels of language proficiency were significantly related. Constructing a practical test, the CEFR might not have a crucial role on the preliminary stage; but on the other hand, the basic requirements of each skill for a specific group of learners were more essential (Argument Approach, 2014). In terms of validity of the CEFR, Corrigan (2013) revealed that the levels of the CEFR could be interchangeable with other different tests because of the interpretation of the testing results. However, the testing results of the CEFR could be equivalent to some contexts of other tests.

In Thailand, since CEFR has been widely accepted in a global scale, numerous educational institutions have endorsed the CEFR to conceptualize a curriculum design and assessment of the English

language by attempting to be on par with international standard. Despite the fact that the framework is heavily encouraged, researches which were carried out in Thailand on CEFR are rarely found.

Used as a completed research prior to the announcement of the Ministry of Education, Vanijdee (2009) developed an online English reading test based on the CEFR level in order to study the reading performance level of test takers and to provide guidelines to improve their reading performance. The data were collected through 31 scholars and postgraduates to validate the quality of the test and to analyze common errors found in the test. The finding revealed that the average level of the test takers was at the B1 level. According to Thailand Library Integrated System (ThaiLIS) (2017), there were merely two researches conducted added in the system. First, Sinlapachai, Surasin, and Augkanurakbun (2016) assessed the validity of Cambridge English Placement Test and Oxford Online Placement Test to examine whether they were equivalent to CEFR test. The result demonstrated positive correlation among three tests; Oxford Online Placement Test had the highest positive correlation. The samples who took the test were 336 senior high school students in English Program (EP) of Chonkanyanukoon School who took the test. The average level of the students' proficiency was at A2. Chongdarakul (2015) measured English listening level of 42,712 English language teachers who were under the supervision of the Office of the Basic Education Commission. It was found that the majority of Thai teachers' average level was at A2, constituting 56.53%. Teachers with the B1 level who passed the criteria set by Office of the Basic Education Commission (2014) had an aggregate of 0.58%. She provided some suggestions to improve the A1 and A2 teachers; that is, the training should be in line with teachers' proficiency level, and conducted the activities at a proper time. Moreover, the availability of additional learning resources and English language consultants is necessary.

Regarding the study of CEFR alignment at Hatyai University, Ketamon (2016 b) who measured senior high school students in the lower south of Thailand and teachers under the supervision of the Office of Basic Education Commission in Pattani Province revealed that most teachers and students' average scores were at the A2 level. Promduang (2016) designed an Intensive English course in order to raise Didyasarin International College (DRIC) students' English language proficiency level to the B1 level and to consider what language skills were needed. The study pointed out that writing was the student's worst part, and A2 students dominated the sampling group. The results also revealed that few students elevated from B1 to B2, the average scores of the rest slightly improved but they were unable to reach the B1 level. As the consequence of Promduang's finding (2016), it contributed to enhancing the course design on how to improve students to attain the B1 level, which is aligned with the Ministry of Education's announcement. The Ministry of Education announced that English language learners should be at the B1 level when they graduated from a senior high school.

Indeed, the CEFR alignment test came to realization before the announcement from the Ministry of Education. An employment of the framework heavily tended to measure English proficiency level which is considered as a downstream because there aren't any tangible solutions after the test. Lacking in researches to focus on how to elevate language skills to meet the standard imposed aligning with CEFR,

it is appeared to be because the plan may be still in an embryonic step since it was first introduced since 2014. Therefore, more studies should be done on other aspects in terms of assessment. The public sectors should exert more effort to ensure that the framework is really applicable to educational institutions.

Impact

Since the CEFR was implemented on the system of Thai education in 2014, it has impacted on every sector of education management, in particular for teaching and learning English in basic education. At the moment, things are gradually changed. Both the English teachers and students across the country become more active in developing their English skills. One main reason could be the emerging of the AEC that requires them to have the better English and self-development for the high competition that is taking place right now (Mala, 2016). Therefore, at least two key sectors will need to conform to the implementation of the CEFR. One is the English teachers in the basic education level, who will be directly and inevitably impacted. They promptly need to develop themselves in line with the new system of English proficiency development. In the preliminary stage, the Ministry of education pumps up a huge number of budgets to reform the quality of those teachers. They are provided the CEFR training workshops as part of improving the teaching process by the government, for example, in collaboration with British Council's CEFR workshops (British Council, 2016). At the same time, nationwide primary schools from classes 1-3 have conducted their English classes for five hours a week instead of only one hour (Frederickson, 2015) to ensure the CEFR implementation will help boost up the English proficiency and quality of the education in Thailand.

Although the implementation of the CEFR in Thailand has just been employed for a period of two years, the Ministry of Education still doesn't have any conclusion if the CEFR is successful or not. Nevertheless, a research conducted in 2016 (Ketamon, 2016 b) to follow up and check out the progress of the implementation of the CEFR in the lower southern Thailand on senior high schools students disclose that the English proficiency of the students is still lower than the expectation of the Ministry of Education, at the level of basic user. However, another research carried out on the primary schools English teachers in Pattani Primary Educational Service Area Office 1 (Ketamon, 2016 a) revealed a slightly different result; that is, the English teachers in the study were able to reach the level of English proficiency required by the Ministry of Education, at the intermediate level. Hence, it is too early to draw a conclusion about the implementation of the CEFR on the Thai education system at the moment.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Education is now actively gearing up to improve the notoriously undesirable problem of English proficiency of students and also teachers to boost up the quality of education throughout the nation. As it has been allocated with a huge number of budgets in every fiscal year, the Ministry of Education is still a key role player in managing the education system of Thailand for years; and it is now

heavily pressured by the society and the changes of the current of the globalization, particularly the AEC which drives Thai students and people to use more proficient English. This is because the competency of in English language of Thai people is still very low when it is compared with the other nations worldwide. Thailand is ranked at 62 among 70 countries where the English language is used as the second language (EF English Proficiency Index, 2016). According to World Economic Forum (Schwab, 2016), just only the quality of education, Thailand is also ranked as number eight in Southeast Asian Nations. These reflect the failure in managing the quality of Thai education undeniably. It also becomes a serious concern for all stakeholders involved in education management.

The Ministry of Education then has introduced the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR and implemented it on teaching and learning English for the schools nationwide since 2014; and it has become an urgent approach to deal with the serious problem that is now troubling many sectors of education management. The CEFR implementation, therefore, in Thailand is expected as an immediate effective strategy for lifting up the English proficiency of both teachers and students because of its common reference levels (Martyniuk, 2011) in an easy form and validity (Weir, 2005). And since the CEFR was implemented into the system of Thai education, it has made some major changes for both students and teachers to actively respond to policy of the government and to improve their English proficiency. However, it is still too early to conclude whether the implementation of the CEFR in teaching and learning English in Thailand is successful or not because it is in the preliminary stage of the implementation. The longer period such as 3-5 years should be appropriated to draw a conclusion, but it at least reflects the current situation of the English proficiency of Thai teachers and students. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Education still needs to undertake the task of the CEFR implementation by following up the performance of every level of schools and look after closely. Other assists such as native English-speaking teachers and Thai teachers' improvement of English such as a training program must be sufficiently available for the basic education system because these things will ensure that the CEFR implementation will really help improve the English proficiency of Thai students. So far, both Thai English teachers and school administrators must adhere firmly and follow through this new approach of English language teaching and also have a self-development all the time, especially using modern technology to lift up the process of teaching and learning English as to improve the quality of Thai education.

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