International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)
Vol. 15, No. 6, December 2026, pp. 5693~5704
ISSN: 2252-8822, DOI: 10.11591/ijere.v15i6.38987

CEFR alignment in general education English course descriptions at Thailand's research universities

Chamnan Para[1], Chaiwat Kaewphanngam[2]
[1]Department of Western Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mahasarakham University, Maha Sarakham, Thailand
[2]Department of International Language Teaching, Faculty of Education, Silpakorn University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

Article Info

Article history:

Received Feb 5, 2026
Revised Aug 3, 2026
Accepted Oct 25, 2026

Keywords:

CEFR alignment
Course description
Documentary analysis
General education English
Higher education
Research-intensive universities
Thailand

ABSTRACT

Despite the mandatory adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in Thailand's research-intensive universities, its substantive operationalization within general education (GE) English curricula has been underexamined. This study employs quantitative documentary analysis to investigate how CEFR levels and language-skill orientations occur across 141 publicly accessible course descriptions. The corpus includes all English-language GE courses from 14 purposively selected research-intensive universities. Data were dual-coded and analyzed using Chi-square tests with Monte Carlo simulations, and a Skillcount index to measure skill integration patterns. Results reveal a concentration at intermediate levels (B1–B2) and a complete absence of C2-level provision. Remarkably, most core language skills, including reading, writing, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary, show no significant difference across CEFR levels ($p>.05$). Merely listening and integrated skills show significant but inconsistent variation across levels, which indicates a lack of progressive complexity in curriculum design. Regarding findings, they conclude that the CEFR functions primarily as a proficiency label for policy compliance in lieu of a roadmap for skill development. This symbolic alignment signifies a systemic policy-practice gap. Thus, a strategic shift from bureaucratic documentation to substantive curricular restructuring is crucial to ascertain genuine linguistic progression in the Thai research university group.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA license.

Corresponding Author:

Chamnan Para
Department of Western Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Mahasarakham University
Maha Sarakham, Thailand
Email: chamnan.p@msu.ac.th

1. INTRODUCTION

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has evolved from a Europe-based coordination tool into a globally adopted reference framework for language education [1]–[3]. Its widespread integration has been attributed to its competency frameworks, qualitative descriptors, and common denominators across multifaceted educational landscapes [2], [3]. Within the context of Asia and ASEAN, the systematic labeling of CEFR has been brought into program specifications and course documentation, where it serves as an indicator of standardization and international comparability. In addition to the global and local expansion of CEFR, it manifests differently within a plurality of individual contexts.

As observed in this widespread adoption, previous studies have uncovered that the proliferation of CEFR in these non-European, non-English-speaking countries constitutes more of a case of policy emulation

than a comprehensive pedagogical transfer. There are also studies on this framework conducted in Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan. They report that CEFR implementation has been primarily initiated by the national reform agenda and institutional pressure to leverage to align with international alignment [4]–[7]. It is noteworthy that the framework is primarily described as a policy instrument rather than a fully integrated pedagogical guide [4]–[7]. As Little [8] noted, the overwhelming tendency to make only partial use of the CEFR means that its impact has been least felt where it matters most in the language classroom itself. The CEFR has been embedded in documentation and benchmarking practices, while descriptor-based progression and action-oriented principles have been rarely applied at a practical level. The reconfiguration of the framework's original theoretical foundations [9], [10] toward its global expansion has also progressively accentuated the complexities of policy borrowing. While early studies focused on the framework's adoption as a benchmarking tool [11], [12], more recent evidence from the past decade [13], [14] lends credence to the notion that this process often leads to selective recontextualization in which primarily the CEFR reference levels are transferred, rather than substantive educational change. In parallel, some studies report that there are additional significant limitations, including limited teacher readiness, poor assessment literacy, and persistent institutional challenges [15], [16].

Inevitably, Thailand is one of the countries in the far outer circle of nativism that CEFR has been officially formalized as part of higher education policies since 2014 to accord with these regional trends. This notion is stated as the national initiatives aimed at strengthening its English proficiency and increasing its regional competitive ability and standards [16], [17]. The Thai context has also launched a major effort for its English language education through Framework of Reference for English Language Education in Thailand (FRELE-TH), which customizes the CEFR by integrating plus-level distinctions (e.g., A2+). It gives precedence to outcomes-based curriculum planning [11]. Through this FRELE-TH, studies highlight challenges across various aspects, such as teacher readiness, teachers' assessment literacy, and institutional conditions [13], [14]. It can be seen that CEFR became prevalent in frameworks; however, field-level implementation remained fragmented because the procedures were inadequate, whilst the guidance was only partially clear [14]. The goal of achieving clear alignment depends on multifaceted factors related to systematic curriculum analysis, transparent standards, and clear procedural explanations [2], [3]. In response to ongoing implementation gaps, there is a high demand for studies to build the body of knowledge needed to achieve the mission. Currently, previous studies on CEFR in Thailand have mainly focused on stakeholder perceptions, classroom practices, and assessment outcomes [17], [18]. With their integrity and contribution, these studies leave some room for future investigation [1], [14]. Especially in English course descriptions in the CEFR tiers, there is less attention paid to those offered in general education (GE).

To this end, the present study was intentionally conducted to analyze course descriptions, because they serve as the center of reference that provides a clear reflection of institutions' CEFR operationalization. These university official documents are a critical nexus that directly portray the curriculum mapping, placement decisions, and evaluation processes [2]. In this regard, current studies [15], [19] additionally emphasize that there is a recurring discrepancy between high-level policy aims and actual curriculum planning [14]. This, therefore, suggests that classroom reality and course descriptions may not fully align. It is of considerable importance that large-scale empirical analysis of how university course descriptions employ CEFR levels is exceptionally thin on the ground in Thailand. This research gap is still of considerable significance within research-intensive (group 1) universities. In both the social and academic spheres, this research university group is expected to provide high-quality English courses that bolster students in their quest for excellence. These findings are of significant value, as they inform stakeholders about the extent to which CEFR-related English language policy effectively translates into course descriptions. To address this gap, the present study conducts a systematic documentary analysis of GE English course descriptions representing Thailand's research-intensive group 1 universities. The analysis examines CEFR levels and skill distribution to determine whether CEFR is meaningfully integrated and blended into the course descriptions or merely used as policy language. Thus, the study is conducted to address the following research questions:

- Which CEFR proficiency levels occur in GE's English course descriptions across 14 universities? (RQ1)
- To what extent does the distribution of CEFR levels vary when they are adjusted for the number of English courses offered by each university? (RQ2)
- How are core language skills, including reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and integrated skills, distributed across CEFR proficiency levels in the 141 GE English course descriptions? (RQ3)
- To what extent does the number of skills combined within individual course descriptions (Skillcount) vary across CEFR proficiency levels, and which levels show higher or lower than expected breadth of skill integration? (RQ4)

2. METHOD

This study undertook a documentary research method to determine the CEFR proficiency levels and language skill orientations in GE English course descriptions. Data collection and analysis were performed and collected via multiple phases, including 2.1 to 2.6. They firstly started on September 1, 2025 and finished on January 10, 2026. The following subsections provide detailed procedures. Through systematic examination of these course descriptions, the study also aims to analyze the extent of alignment between institutional curriculum design and national language policy frameworks.

2.1. Research design

This study employed a documentary analysis design to examine officially published GE English course descriptions as institutional curricular artifacts. Documentary analysis is germane for investigating how policy frameworks are operationalized through official texts that mediate between policy intentions and educational practice. The analysis included only English courses of undergraduate GE or equivalent requirements at universities designated as Global and Frontier Research Group institutions by Thailand's Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI). A total of 16 institutions were selectively included within this sample group. The other two institutions were excluded because they offer graduate-level programs outside the scope of the current study. The final dataset, therefore, comprised 14 universities to provide a national overview of research-intensive universities, hereafter referred to as group 1 universities or research universities.

2.2. Data acquisition and corpus construction

Upon 14 research universities, the purposive sampling included all English-language courses explicitly listed as undergraduate GE requirements. At this stage, all actual course descriptions were manually collected from official university websites and publicly accessible GE course catalogs and websites. In the preliminary survey and the real compiling, a number of courses were found that they differed across institutions. This issue actually reflected differences in GE design and course availability. In total, there were then 141 English course descriptions and included in the datasets. These documents were treated as primary data sources that reflect the official pedagogical commitments and intents of the selected 14 institutions. This course description collection was regarded as the most current representative of English education across Thailand's research-intensive universities from 2025 to 2026.

2.3. CEFR coding procedure and interrater reliability

There were two researchers. They independently coded all 141 course descriptions for CEFR proficiency level (A1–C2). Their coding decisions were guided by the unabridged CEFR descriptors and proficiency scales from the CEFR and its companion volume [10], [20]. In order to gain the coding accuracy, the researchers used the full 2001 DIALANG scales [10] for the specific thematic descriptors and situational constraints. Supplementary to the previous scales, coders also used the 2020 companion volume to fully gain the formalized criteria for the 'Plus' levels (e.g., B1+, B2+). To illustrate the practical application of these criteria, sample coded excerpts and the qualitative rationales for decision-making are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample coded excerpts

Course information	Initial researcher coding	Final consensus	Decision rule and qualitative rationale
LAEN103: English Level 1 (Mahidol University) Focus: Daily contexts, integrated skills, sentence writing, listening for gist.	R1: A2 R2: A2	A2	The thematic floor rule: The primary decision rule was to identify the contextual scope. Since the description specifies "daily contexts" and "classroom communication," it aligns with A2 descriptors in DIALANG (2001, p. 231) and CEFR 2020 (p. 36). The focus on "sentence writing" (rather than paragraphs) creates a 'ceiling' that prevents a B1 classification.
0041009: English for Online Entrepreneurs (Mahasarakham University) Focus: Academic communication, comprehension in a specific field.	R1: B1 R2: B1+	B1+	The plus-level marker rule: This case required resolving a discrepancy between a standard level (B1) and a plus level (B1+). The decision rule utilized the "Specific Field" and "Mediation" criteria from the 2020 Companion Volume (pp. 261–264). Because the course targets "Online Entrepreneurs," it involves transactional mediation and specific field comprehension, triggering the B1+ upgrade.

R1 is researcher 1 who coded the course description; R2 is researcher 2 who coded the course description.

Before actual coding, a calibration was conducted on a pilot sample to adjust standards for interpreting proficiency markers and to establish a clear mutual understanding. For example, a positive level is added if the description goes beyond basic information exchange to include detailed or complex tasks, as defined in the 2020 revision. All full descriptions from the real page number of all references were assigned to the coders. Upon this step, both coders independently coded the same set of 141 course descriptions. After coding, interrater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). It yielded a moderate agreement (κ=.524, p<.001). In terms of this figure, it was because it attributed to the high granularity of the 11-level coding scale (A1 to C2, including their plus values, such as A1+ and B1+), which differentiated finer shades of meaning in pedagogical objectives. To achieve the analytical validity, a reconciliation followed. In cases of discrepancies in the CEFR coding and labeling, the two coders discussed and re-examined until all 141 course descriptions were agreed upon.

2.4. CEFR distribution analysis

The analysis of CEFR distributions was conducted by computing raw frequency counts and percentages to describe the overall distribution of CEFR levels throughout the full dataset of 141 courses. This step was designed to capture the observed national profile of CEFR-referenced course provision. To examine institutional variations, cross-tabulation procedures were used to determine the proportion of courses at each CEFR level across the 14 participating universities, thereby facilitating direct cross-institutional comparisons based on the empirical dataset.

2.5. Language skill coding and skill–CEFR associations

To examine how language skills were represented in course descriptions, the researchers identified seven skill categories: reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and integrated skills. They were coded as binary indicators (1=explicitly stated; 0=not explicitly stated). Coding was based strictly on explicit textual reference in course descriptions; implicit or inferred skill demands were not coded. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to summarize overall skill coverage within the entire corpus. Associations between CEFR levels and individual skills were examined using crosstabulation analyses in SPSS, with CEFR level specified as the row variable and each skill indicator as the column variable, utilizing the exact testing procedures. Standardized residuals were extracted to determine skill–CEFR combinations, which occur more or less frequently than expected.

2.6. Skill integration index and exploratory statistical testing

Because course descriptions had multiple skills, a composite variable (Skillcount) was computed as the sum of the seven binary skill indicators, ranging from 0 to 7 in SPSS. In addition, to examine patterning across proficiency levels, crosstabulation analyses were performed. Regarding the violation of Chi-square assumptions due to large contingency tables, generating multiple cells with expected frequencies less than 5, the Monte Carlo simulation method (based on 10,000 sampled tables with a 99% confidence interval) and the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test were employed. This approach is employed to gain the statistical robustness and could have exact p-values without the need for cell collapsing. All analyses were executed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29).

3. RESULTS

The results are shown in seven tables to answer the research questions. Table 2 delivers the distribution of English courses among the 14 universities. Tables 3 and 4 address RQ1 and RQ2 by presenting the raw and normalized distributions of CEFR proficiency levels by institutions. Tables 5–7 address RQ3 by examining how the seven core language skills and components are distributed throughout CEFR proficiency levels in GE English course descriptions. Table 8 addresses RQ4 by analyzing variation in relation to skill integration (Skillcount) and its association with CEFR proficiency levels.

3.1. Institutional distribution of GE English courses

Table 2 demonstrates the actual number and percentage of GE English course descriptions drawn from 14 group 1 universities (N=141). Course representation differs considerably across universities due to their real availability as mentioned in the method. This variation reflects the diverse curricular structures and institutional requirements found within the research university group.

Table 2 presents the distribution of 141 GE English courses across the 14 research-oriented universities. The data exhibit a high concentration of courses within a few institutions, because King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Kasetsart University, and Mahidol University collectively account for nearly half (46.8%) of the total dataset. This concentration reflects uneven degrees of institutional

focus on GE English provision. Contrarily, institutions such as Chiang Mai University, Khon Kaen University, Naresuan University, and Thammasat University contributed minimally, and each university accounts for a marginal 2.1% to 2.8% of the corpus. By and large, there is a substantial discrepancy in course offerings, which varies from a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 31 GE English courses per university. This gap stresses the apparent heterogeneity of GE English provision across the analyzed group 1 institutions.

Table 2. Percentage of English courses across universities

Universities	The number of English courses	Percentage (%)
1. Chiang Mai University (CMU)	4	2.8
2. Chulalongkorn University (CU)	15	10.6
3. Kasetsart University (KU)	19	13.5
4. Khon Kaen University (KKU)	4	2.8
5. King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT)	31	22
6. Mae Fah Luang University (MFU)	5	3.5
7. Mahasarakham University (MSU)	10	7.1
8. Mahidol University (MU)	16	11.3
9. Naresuan University (NU)	3	2.1
10. Prince of Songkla University (PSU)	5	3.5
11. Silpakorn University (SU)	10	7.1
12. Suranaree University of Technology (SUT)	5	3.5
13. Thammasat University (TU)	3	2.1
14. Walailak University (WU)	11	7.8
Total	*N*=141	100.0

3.2. CEFR profile of GE English course

Table 3 explains the cumulative CEFR profile based on 141 GE English course descriptions from 14 universities in the Thai research group university. Table 3 presents the proficiency profile across the 14 sampled universities, which provides a clear picture of the vast majority of courses targeting intermediate levels. Courses are most frequently classified as B2 (31.9%) and B1 (26.2%). The combined intermediate band spans from B1 to B2+; they account for 78.0% of all provisions, whereas the B1 and B2 alone constitute 58.1% of the dataset. For the advanced levels, they are limited. In particular, C1 represents only 7.8% of courses, and C2 has not been found. In contrast, the elementary A-levels (A1, A1+, A2) represent 13.4% of the total provision. Taking these distributions into account, it is observed that the limited presence of C2 and the low frequency of C1 point to the fact that a threshold is maintained within this research university group. As illustrated in Table 3, the central role of these data lies in the presence of a distinct curricular center.

Table 3. CEFR Profile of sampled 141 English courses from 14 universities

CEFR	Raw frequency
A1	3 (2.1%)
A1+	1 (0.7%)
A2	15 (10.6%)
B1	37 (26.2%)
B1+	18 (12.8%)
B2	45 (31.9%)
B2+	10 (7.1%)
C1	11 (7.8%)
C1+	1 (0.7%)
Total	141 (100%)

3.3. Institutional CEFR profiles based on normalized distributions

To complement the raw frequencies in Table 3, Table 4 further elaborates on the row-normalized distributions of CEFR proficiency levels across the 14 universities. Table 4 is organized to show that each university profile is displayed as a percentage. It is aimed to show a direct comparison of proficiency positioning regardless of varying numbers of course descriptions.

According to the clustered data distributions portrayed in Table 4, KMUTT exhibits the most diversified institutional profile because its courses range from A1+ to C1+. For large-scale distributions, they are observed at the B2 and B2+ levels, and a marked concentration is situated within the advanced C1 and C1+ tiers. This distribution further indicates that CEFR application varies across universities even though a clear emphasis on intermediate proficiency (B1, B1+, and B2) is consistently observed. This discrepancy in CEFR levels highlights significant institutional heterogeneity beneath the aggregated national profile. In this

aspect, the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test via Monte Carlo simulation confirms this institutional variation (value=124.512, Monte Carlo p<.001). As seen in Table 4, proficiency profiles of universities continue to be tightly bound and focus on lower-to-intermediate ranges. As opposed to a sequential developmental path toward advanced proficiency, this pattern suggests that GE English courses primarily serve as a space for consolidating functional communicative competence. Empirically, these findings indicate that the national architecture of GE English is principally oriented towards mid-level communicative thresholds. The statistically significant variation observed is chiefly determined by a small number of atypical institutions. Thus, this pattern exhibits a limited command of reflecting a wide institutional heterogeneity across Thailand.

Table 4. Normalized distribution of CEFR levels across the 14 universities

University	CEFR									Total
	A1	A1+	A2	B1	B1+	B2	B2+	C1	C1+	
CMU	0	0	0	0	3 (75.0%)	1 (25.0%)	0	0	0	4
CU	0	0	1(6.7%)	5(33.3%)	2(13.3%)	7(46.7%)	0	0	0	15
KKU	0	0	1(25.0%)	1(25.0%)	0	2(50.0%)	0	0	0	4
KMUTT	0	1(3.2%)	0	2(6.5%)	4(12.9%)	9(29.0%)	6(19.4%)	8(25.8%)	1(3.2%)	31
KU	0	0	0	9(47.4%)	0	7(36.8%)	2(10.5%)	1(5.3%)	0	19
MFU	0	0	1(20.0%)	4(80.0%)	0	0	0	0	0	5
MSU	1(10.0%)	0	2(20.0%)	4(40.0%)	3(30.0%)	0	0	0	0	10
MU	0	0	2(12.5%)	3(18.8%)	1(6.3%)	8(50.0%)	0	2(12.5%)	0	16
NU	0	0	1(33.3%)	1(33.3%)	1(33.3%)	0	0	0	0	3
PSU	1(20.0%)	0	1(20.0%)	1(20.0%)	0	2(40.0%)	0	0	0	5
SU	0	0	0	3(30.0%)	1(10.0%)	4(40.0%)	2(20.0%)	0	0	10
SUT	0	0	1(20.0%)	1(20.0%)	1(20.0%)	2(40.0%)	0	0	0	5
TU	1(33.3%)	0	1(33.3%)	1(33.3%)	0	0	0	0	0	3
WU	0	0	4(36.4%)	2(18.2%)	2(18.2%)	3(27.3%)	0	0	0	11
Total	3(2.1%)	1(0.7%)	15(10.6%)	37(26.2%)	18(12.8%)	45(31.9%)	10(7.1%)	11(7.8%)	1(0.7%)	141 (100.0%)

3.4. Skill-CEFR alignment across proficiency levels

Table 5 surveys the relationship between CEFR proficiency levels and the distribution of language skills in English course descriptions for GE. This table categorizes the specified skills into distinct categories to clearly illustrate the instructional priority scheme throughout the proficiency levels. These categorizations are intended to evidence how different language competencies are integrated into the course descriptions at differing degrees of proficiency.

Table 5 reports the association between core language skills and CEFR levels. The Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test via Monte Carlo simulation yields that reading (p=.736), speaking (p=.352), writing (p=.649), grammar (p=.053), and vocabulary (p=.125) have no significant difference across CEFR levels. The significant variation is found only in listening (p=.010) and integrated skills (p=.017). The results underscore that core skills, as seen in reading and writing, are consistently present across all proficiency levels. Conversely, listening and integrated skills are seen as the primary variables that differentiate course complexity across institutions. Table 5 also portrays that all skills and language components are prioritized almost identically. This lack of differentiation suggests that the curricular content tends to be repetitive from A2 to C1. The difficulty of these English courses does not increase to correspond with higher CEFR levels of higher courses. In this regard, it can be implied that the curriculum relies on a strict framework where differentiation is confined to listening and integrated skills. Core teaching modalities remain largely stable across the CEFR spectrum, which might not increase in complexity as proficiency targets increase.

Table 5. CEFR levels and language skills and components

Skills and language components	χ^2(df=7)	p-value	Significant	Interpretation
Reading	4.679	.736	No	Reading emphasis is similar across CEFR levels.
Listening	16.827	.010	Yes	Higher CEFR, which means more listening emphasis.
Speaking	7.764	.352	No	Speaking objectives do not depend on CEFR level.
Writing	5.353	.649	No	Writing emphasis is stable across CEFR bands.
Grammar	13.572	.053	No	Higher CEFR means slightly less grammar focus (near significance).
Vocabulary	11.006	.125	No	No relationship between CEFR level and vocabulary emphasis.
Integrated skills	15.935	.017	Yes	Lower CEFR means more integrated-skills courses.

Note: all p-values were determined using the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test computed via Monte Carlo simulation (10,000 samples) to account for expected cell counts less than 5.

3.5. Standardized residuals and localized skill tendencies across CEFR levels

To further explicate the associations which are identified in Table 5, standardized residuals were examined to identify localized patterns of over-representation and under-representation across CEFR levels. Values of ±2 or greater are treated as substantively meaningful deviations. Table 6 presents these residuals which highlight specific cells where the observed frequencies deviate from expected values. This statistical approach aims to pinpoint the precise areas of alignment or mismatch between language skills and proficiency tiers within the dataset.

To further examine local tendencies, Table 6 presents the standardized residuals. Most values remain within the ±2 threshold, the results; therefore, have a stable skill distribution. An exception is observed in grammar at the A2 level (+2.0). Grammar denotes a specific instructional concentration at the lower-intermediate stage. This is in line with the near-significant Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test result (p=.053). Moreover, integrated skills show a higher-than-expected representation at A2(+1.6), whereas a lower-than-expected representation at B2+(-1.6). This pattern shows that skill integration decreases as proficiency increases. This distribution further supports the significant association found in the exact test (p=.017). When viewed collectively, myriad meaningful trends occur from the distribution of the largest residuals. The obvious pattern is the concentration of positive deviations within the lower-to-intermediate proficiency bands as seen at the A2 level. At this tier, both grammar (+2.0) and integrated skills (+1.6) reveal their highest over-representation whilst vocabulary (+1.5) shows a strong positive tendency. In contrast, these same instructional dimensions exhibit a corresponding under-representation as the curriculum shifts toward advanced proficiency tiers, as illustrated by the negative residuals for grammar (-1.6) and integrated skills (-1.6) at the B2+ level. Within these institutions, this shift means that explicitly defined language components and integrated-skill models serve as a foundation at introductory levels instead of advanced architectural elements within higher-tier course design.

Table 6. Largest standardized residuals by language skill and component and CEFR

Skills and language components	CEFR level (over-expected)	Residual (+)	CEFR level (under-expected)	Residual (–)	Interpretation
Reading	B1+	+0.6	A1	–1.1	No meaningful deviations; all residuals < ±2
Listening	B2+, C1	+1.6, +1.5	A2, A1	–1.4, –1.2	Slight trends only; none reach ±2
Speaking	C1	+1.7	A2	–1.1	Relatively larger deviations than others, but still below ±2
Writing	B2+	+1.3	B2	–0.9	Minimal deviations
Grammar	A2	+2.0	B2+	–1.6	A borderline residual at A2 (+2.0) suggests relatively greater representation of grammar-related outcomes at this level, with lower representation at B2+.
Vocabulary	A2	+1.5	B1, A1	–0.9, –0.8	No major differences across levels
Integrated skills	A2	+1.6	B2+	–1.6	Integrated-skill configurations are more frequently represented at lower CEFR levels, with lower representation at higher levels.

Note: the standardized residuals > ±2 indicate the statistical significance; values approximating and bordering on this threshold (e.g., > ±1.5) are interpreted as noteworthy pedagogical tendencies within the dataset.

3.6. Overall skill coverage and curricular emphasis across courses

Table 7 summarizes the frequency with which language skills and components are referenced across the 141 GE English course descriptions. This compilation specifically measures how frequently individual communicative domains and language components appear within the national dataset. According to the frequency distribution which is presented in Table 7, productive competencies represent the primary focus across the sampled courses. Speaking is the most frequently integrated skill, because it appears in 98 courses and accounts for 69.5% of the total dataset. This is followed by writing, which explicitly incorporates into 90 course descriptions. It represents a proportion of 63.8%. Receptive skills display relatively lower but substantial frequencies, where reading occurs in 79 courses (56.0%), whereas listening is observed in 76 courses (53.9%). In contrast to these high percentages, specific language components receive much less explicit mention within the descriptions. Vocabulary instruction is limited to 40 courses (28.4%), and Grammar appears in only 34 courses, which represents the lowest individual proportion at 24.1%. Also, an integrated-skills approach is explicitly adopted in approximately one-third of the corpus, because integrated skills feature in 46 course descriptions (32.6%).

Table 7. Distribution of skills and language components across courses

Skills and language components	Number of courses (141 courses out of 14 universities)	Percentage (%)	Interpretation
Reading	79	56.0	Slightly more than half of courses include reading objectives.
Listening	76	53.9	Listening appears in about half of all courses.
Speaking	98	69.5	Speaking is one of the most emphasized skills nationally.
Writing	90	63.8	Writing is widely incorporated across courses.
Grammar	34	24.1	Grammar appears in fewer courses than other skills.
Vocabulary	40	28.4	Vocabulary instruction is limited to about one-fourth of courses.
Integrated skills	46	32.6	About one-third of courses adopt an integrated-skills approach.

A plurality of notable patterns emerges from this national baseline distribution. The most prominent feature is the substantial disparity between macro-language skills and discrete language components within the curriculum. While communicative skills such as speaking and writing are dominant across most course descriptions, foundational components like grammar and vocabulary remain heavily under-represented. Particularly, a course description is nearly three times as likely to explicitly mandate Speaking outcomes as to mention formal grammar instruction. Furthermore, the descriptive data show that less than one-third of the surveyed courses officially signal an integrated-skills approach. This distribution shows that although most universities prioritize active production, they primarily frame their course descriptions around isolated macro-skills rather than multidimensional or explicitly integrated pedagogical frameworks.

3.7. Curricular integration across CEFR levels (Skillcount analysis)

Table 8 reports the largest standardized residuals from the CEFR and Skillcount crosstabulation. These values identify local patterns of over-representation and under-representation within the curriculum. Skillcount serves as an index of curricular breadth, because it represents the number of distinct language skills and components which are explicitly stated in each description. Therefore, higher Skillcount values indicate broader integration, while lower values reflect more selective curricular configurations.

Table 8. Distribution of Skillcount across CEFR proficiency levels

CEFR level	Skillcount	Standardized residual	Direction	Interpretation
A1+	13	+5.1	Overrepresented	A1+ means there is a notably high occurrence at Skillcount 13 for A1+ courses. In light of the very small number of courses at this level (n=1), this result provides only limited insight. Researchers must therefore avoid over-interpreting this specific data point.
A2	14	+2.8	Overrepresented	A2 courses are overrepresented at the highest Skillcount level, indicating broader skill/component coverage than expected.
A2	10	+1.4	Moderately overrepresented	A2 courses display a moderate tendency toward mid–high Skillcount values.
A1	14	+1.6	Moderately overrepresented	A1 courses show a modest inclination toward higher Skillcount levels whilst having small overall presence.
C1	8	+3.6	Overrepresented	C1 courses associate more frequently with mid-range Skillcount values than expected.
B2+	12	–1.4	Moderately underrepresented	At higher Skillcount levels, B2+ courses occur less frequently than expected.
B2+	11	–1.0	Underrepresented	There is a slightly lower-than-expected representation of B2+ courses.
C1	3	–1.1	Underrepresented	At very low Skillcount values, C1 courses show lower-than-expected occurrence.

As seen in Table 8, the findings portray that the relationship between CEFR proficiency levels and the degree of skill integration is not statistically significant. For lower proficiency bands, as illustrated at the A2 level, it shows a tendency toward high structural complexity. More precisely, courses incorporating a wide range of components are markedly over-represented (residual=+2.8). This suggests that foundational courses try to cover multiple competencies in tandem. In juxtaposition to this, at the higher end (B2+), there is a pronounced under-representation of high-skill integration (residual=−1.4). This indicates that, contrary to expectations, the curriculum does not become more integrated as the level of proficiency increases. The combination of overall non-significant test results alongside these highly localized deviations highlights the distinctive characteristics of the curriculum. In this regard, while the A2 level curriculum is full of myriad skills, higher-level curricula are more selective. This point demonstrates that proficiency objectives may

directly influence curriculum design. Consequently, these core proficiency benchmarks suggest that the development of formally integrated skills is not systematic, but the curriculum continues to generate diversity in structural density, particularly as it transitions from basic competencies to upper-intermediate academic communication.

4. DISCUSSION

The implementation of the CEFR within Thai higher education represents a complex intersection between global standardization and local institutional realities. This study contends that English curricula in research-intensive universities exhibit a significant decoupling between policy rhetoric and actual pedagogical practice. The framework is visibly adopted in course descriptions; however, its application stays relatively symbolic. It is seen as a form of bureaucratic compliance that may hinder substantive linguistic advancement. This pattern is clearly observed in the great concentration of courses at the B1–B2+ levels, whereas C1+ proficiency remains almost non-existent at only 0.7%. This evidence strongly affirms the proficiency ceiling theory [8], [15], which points out that current curricula act more as administrative gatekeepers than as developmental frameworks. Instead of fostering the advanced competencies required for world-class research, the use of CEFR labels in this research group context can be interpreted as a form of performative marking [8], [13].

In comparison to the broader ASEAN context, this phenomenon of selective recontextualization [4], [21] reflects an institutional response to supranational pressures as opposed to a genuine commitment to language acquisition [13]. In the Thai research university group, the alignment with national mandates as stipulated in the Ministerial Regulations [22] happens to take precedence over pedagogical substance. This stagnation at the intermediate level perhaps creates a fundamental tension. In this aspect, it effectively hinders students from the opportunity to develop the C1–C2 competencies, which are of necessity for high-level international scholarship and academic discourse [13], [15], [20]. This stagnation issue is further hardened by a troubling lack of skill differentiation across CEFR levels. The observed lack of skill differentiation, hereafter referred to as repetitive consistency in this study, aligns with earlier critiques regarding the stagnation of curriculum development under global frameworks [8], [23]. An obvious paradox discovered in this study is the disproportionate emphasis on explicit grammar at the A2 level. The CEFR does not preclude formal linguistic instruction [10]; this reliance on isolated grammar suggests a departure from the action-oriented, practice-based framework intended by the Council of Europe [10], further reflecting the problematic nature of policy borrowing in regional contexts [23].

In addition, current course descriptions mostly ignore the critical dimension of Mediation addressed in the CEFR companion volume 2020 [20]. By continuing to focus on isolated traditional skills: reading, listening, writing, and speaking, universities partly notice the importance of the co-construction of knowledge. In a research-intensive environment, the ability to act as an intermediary in processing complex concepts is arguably more vital for student success than isolated general expertise [10], [24]. The findings regarding integrated skills further point to ad hoc institutional adaptations; statistical significance was found in skill integration (Table 5, p=.017), the standardized residuals reveal that this integration is predominantly concentrated at the lower A2 level (+1.6) and markedly dissipates as proficiency targets increase toward B2+ (−1.6). This suggests that localized efforts toward multidimensional language might not fully create a sustained ladder of advancement. It results in a structural flattening where higher-tier courses function as a stagnant plateau. This instrumentalist focus on immediate readiness creates a clear divergence from the pedagogical diversity and contextualized flexibility advocated by contemporary scholars [25], [26].

To rectify this decoupling, the strategic implementation of the CEFR must transcend documentary alignment and focus on a systemic restructuring of the pedagogical ecosystem. The first critical step toward authentic implementation is to well establish the CEFR literacy among faculty members to enlighten them to move beyond formal compliance [2], [17], [27]. Without a profound understanding of the framework's descriptors, educators are likely to continue traditional, grammar-heavy methods instead of embracing the action-oriented approach [10], [20]. Professional development programs should thus be targeted and contextualized. They should focus on the socio-political dimensions, the fairness agenda, and the resultant washback effects of assessment on students and teachers [28]–[30]. Furthermore, concrete implementation requires a shift toward an effect-driven curriculum design that prioritizes learner outcomes over administrative checkboxes [31]. This involves the integration of complex discourse and critical reading tasks [32] to develop mediation capabilities where students function as social agents [20], [24]. Ultimately, the transition from symbolic to substantive implementation depends on a strategic roadmap that replaces superficial policy borrowing with a commitment to long-term pedagogical growth and structural flexibility [8], [14], [33]. It is imperative that stakeholders, comprising both policymakers and practitioners, recognize the limitations of the CEFR as a non-absolute benchmark. A collaborative approach is required to navigate the tensions between mandatory policy compliance and the pedagogical necessities of the learners. By

reconciling standardized mandates with contextualized student demands, institutions could foster a more equitable learning environment that prioritizes substantive educational outcomes over formalistic alignment.

5. CONCLUSION

Correspondingly, this study documents the reality of CEFR implementation in GE English courses at Thailand's research-intensive universities. The evidence suggests that there has been a great focus on intermediate proficiency levels, whereas advanced levels are found to be rare or even absent. To align with the central policy of the Ministry, these institutions appear to adopt CEFR as an internal benchmark; most language skills persist in being predominantly uniform across levels. This point informs that there is a limited progression in complexity. The evidence also suggests that CEFR implementation in this Thai research university context might not be strategic as a form of symbolic alignment to promote language proficiency. To broaden the scope of a surface-level alignment, universities would be well-advised to deeply familiarize stakeholders with CEFR literacy through a series of rigorous professional workshops, including the implementation of structured training initiatives. These are a comprehensive overview of the CEFR in course descriptions. The current study's findings are, however, unable to be generalized to other educational contexts because the study analyzed only publicly available course descriptions from group 1 universities. Due to this limitation, it may not represent the entire Thai higher education system and other English as a foreign language (EFL) context, including teacher training or in-depth detail of universities. The data provides a mirror of document-based alignment as opposed to the reality of the classroom and the individual universities. There is some room for the future research in terms of depth and breadth to cover more dimensions of CEFR as in the materials, textbooks, teaching methods, stakeholders' perceptions on CEFR, including the washback of CEFR in the unseen angles. The future studies could employ qualitative analysis or classroom observations to examine this issue further, particularly in areas such as CEFR alignment with ESP teaching materials and national policy for marginalized groups of learners and students with disabilities.

In terms of the novelty of this current study, it could humbly state that it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a large-scale, systematic analysis of CEFR implementation across 141 GE English courses from all 14 research-intensive universities in Thailand. On the basis of using both the original CEFR and the updated CEFR companion volume 2020, this research furnishes a wealth of data regarding the discrepancy between national policy aspirations and the actual essence of CEFR in course descriptions in Thai research universities' undergraduate English courses. The research team takes great pride in this integrity and originality.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research project was financially supported by Mahasarakham University. The authors would like to express the deepest gratitude to Mahasarakham University for providing this support.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Chamnan Para	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chaiwat Kaewphanngam		✓				✓		✓		✓	✓			

C : **C**onceptualization
M : **M**ethodology
So : **So**ftware
Va : **Va**lidation
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis
I : **I**nvestigation
R : **R**esources
D : **D**ata Curation
O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
E : Writing - Review & **E**diting
Vi : **Vi**sualization
Su : **Su**pervision
P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

The study involved no human participants, and neither personal nor sensitive data were collected.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval was granted by the Mahasarakham University Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects under the Exempt Review category (Approval No. 538-583/2025). In this study, the data collection was obtained via publicly accessible General Education English course descriptions, which were retrieved from official university websites and their catalogues. All data were handled in accordance with institutional guidelines for responsible use of public information and transparent reporting.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [CP], upon reasonable request.

REFERENCES

[1] N. Kassim and H. Hashim, "Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): A Review on its Implementation in ESL/EFL Classrooms," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 12, pp. 2991–3016, Dec. 2023, doi: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i12/20149.

[2] N. Nagai, G. C. Birch, J. V. Bower, and M. G. Schmidt, *CEFR-informed Learning, Teaching and Assessment*. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020, doi: 10.1007/978-981-15-5894-8.

[3] A. Zhu, S. A. M. Mofreh, and S. Salem, "The Application of Language Proficiency Scales in Education Context: A Systematic Literature Review," *Sage Open*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 1–19, Jul. 2023, doi: 10.1177/21582440231199692.

[4] V. H. Nguyen and M. O. Hamid, "The CEFR as a national language policy in Vietnam: insights from a sociogenetic analysis," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 42, no. 7, pp. 650–662, Aug. 2021, doi: 10.1080/01434632.2020.1715416.

[5] K. Savski, "CEFR as Language Policy: Opportunities and Challenges for Local Agency in a Global Era," *The English Teacher*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 60–70, Aug. 2021, doi: 10.52696/AIDE2513.

[6] T. Musthofa, "CEFR-Based Policy in Arabic Language Teaching and Cultural Dimension in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education," *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 96–107, 2022, doi: 10.32601/ejal.911545.

[7] O. Nishimura-Sahi, "Policy borrowing of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) in Japan: an analysis of the interplay between global education trends and national policymaking," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 574–587, Jul. 2022, doi: 10.1080/02188791.2020.1844145.

[8] D. Little, "The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: A research agenda," *Language Teaching*, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 381–393, Jul. 2011, doi: 10.1017/S0261444811000097.

[9] D. Little, "The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Content, purpose, origin, reception and impact," *Language Teaching*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 167–190, Jul. 2006, doi: 10.1017/S0261444806003557.

[10] Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[11] K. Lekpetch and J. Foley, "A Synopsis of the Development of a Framework of Reference for English Language Education in Thailand (FRELE-TH)," *ABAC ODI Journal: Vision. Action. Outcome*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 1–12, 2022.

[12] J. Foley, "Issues on the initial impact of CEFR in Thailand and the region," *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 359–370, Oct. 2019, doi: 10.17509/ijal.v9i2.20233.

[13] K. Savski, "Local problems and a global solution: examining the recontextualization of CEFR in Thai and Malaysian language policies," *Language Policy*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 527–547, Nov. 2020, doi: 10.1007/s10993-019-09539-8.

[14] H. A. Hamid, W. F. W. Wan Fakhruddin, L. Ahmad Afip, and M. O. Hamid, "Navigating global standards in local contexts: A systematic review of CEFR-aligned English language curriculum in the ASEAN region," *Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS)*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 324–352, Feb. 2025, doi: 10.24200/jonus.vol10iss1pp324-352.

[15] J. Wudthayagorn, "Revisiting English-in-Education Policies in Thailand: Ambitious Goals, Contradictory Outcomes," *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 1–13, Jul. 2025, doi: 10.70730/WCSZ5574.

[16] W. Phoolaikao and A. Sukying, "Insights into CEFR and Its Implementation through the Lens of Preservice English Teachers in Thailand," *English Language Teaching*, vol. 14, no. 6, pp. 25–35, May 2021, doi: 10.5539/elt.v14n6p25.

[17] O. Sriwongsa, "Reflections on the CEFR in Thailand: Problems and needs of Thai EFL teachers," M.A. thesis, Mahasarakham University, Thailand, 2023. [Online]. Available: http://202.28.34.124/dspace/bitstream/123456789/2622/1/62010181020.pdf

[18] K. Charttrakul and A. Damnet, "Role of the CEFR and English Teaching in Thailand: A Case Study of Rajabhat Universities," *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 82–89, Apr. 2021, doi: 10.7575/aiac.alls.v.12n.2.p.82.

[19] S. Tangsakul and K. Poonpon, "Aligning Academic Reading Tests to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)," *REFLections*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 614–638, 2024, doi: 10.61508/refl.v31i2.275057.

[20] Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment: companion volume*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2020.

[21] L. A. Afip, M. O. Hamid, and P. Renshaw, "Common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR): insights into global policy borrowing in Malaysian higher education," *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 378–393, May 2019, doi: 10.1080/14767724.2019.1578195.

[22] Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, "Ministerial Regulation on the Classification of Higher Education Institutions, B.E. 2564 (2021)," (in Thai), Bangkok, 2021. [Online]. Available: https://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2564/A/021/T_0001.PDF

[23] V. H. Nguyen and M. O. Hamid, "Educational policy borrowing in a globalized world: A case study of Common European Framework of Reference for languages in a Vietnamese University," *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 60–74, May 2015, doi: 10.1108/ETPC-02-2015-0014.
[24] N. Jones and N. Saville, "European language policy: Assessment, learning, and the CEFR," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 29, pp. 51–63, Mar. 2009, doi: 10.1017/S0267190509090059.
[25] K. Savski and D. Prabjandee, "CEFR: A Global Framework for Global Englishes?" *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language Journal--TESL-EJ*, vol. 26, no. 3, Nov. 2022, doi: 10.55593/ej.26103a1.
[26] G. Fulcher, A. Panahi, and H. Mohebbi, "Glenn Fulcher's Thirty-Five Years of Contribution to Language Testing and Assessment: A Systematic Review," *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, vol. 29, pp. 20–56, Jul. 2022, doi: 10.32038/ltrq.2022.29.03.
[27] P. Eiadkaew, K. Sermsook, and R. Nakplad, "Enhancing Lecturers' English Proficiency according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for English Test," *KKU International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 46–81, 2025.
[28] N. Normand-Marconnet and J. Lo Bianco, "The Common European Framework of Reference down under: A survey of its use and non-use in Australian universities," *Language Learning in Higher Education*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 281–307, Jan. 2015, doi: 10.1515/cercles-2015-0014.
[29] G. Fulcher and L. Harding, *The Routledge Handbook of Language Testing*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2021.
[30] G. Fulcher, "Deluded by Artifices? The Common European Framework and Harmonization," *Language Assessment Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 253–266, 2004, doi: 10.1207/s15434311laq0104_4.
[31] F. Davidson and G. Fulcher, "The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the design of language tests: A matter of effect," *Language Teaching*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 231–241, Jul. 2007, doi: 10.1017/S0261444807004351.
[32] S. Kaowiwattanakul, "CEFR Based Learning Approach: Using Literature to Enhance EFL Students' Reading Skills and Critical Thinking Skills," *English Language Teaching*, vol. 14, no. 11, pp. 66–79, Oct. 2021, doi: 10.5539/elt.v14n11p66.
[33] D. Little, "The common European framework of reference for languages: Perspectives on the making of supranational language education policy," *Modern Language Journal*, vol. 91, no. 4, pp. 645–655, 2007, doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00627_2.x.

BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS



Chamnan Para is a university lecturer in English and Applied Linguistics in Thailand and holds graduate degrees in English, TESOL, and Applied Linguistics from Mahasarakham University and Mahidol University, Thailand. He pursued higher degrees in TESOL and Applied Linguistics at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and the University of Bristol. Currently, he is teaching at Mahasarakham University and doing business in Thailand, including being a court interpreter. His research interests focus on language testing and evaluation, translation, interpreting, business, and sciences. His current work extends across disciplinary boundaries, including collaborations with researchers in fisheries science, history, and psychology, with the aim of strengthening methodological rigor and generating research findings that are relevant to diverse academic and professional communities. He can be contacted at email: chamnan.p@msu.ac.th.



Chaiwat Kaewphanngam is an educational technology specialist, teacher educator, and international consultant with over 20 years of experience in language education, digital pedagogy, and teacher professional development. He is a faculty member at the Faculty of Education, Silpakorn University, Thailand, and has worked extensively with international organizations and international partners on ICT and AI competency frameworks, blended learning design, and large-scale capacity-building programs for teachers in Southeast and Central Asia. He holds a Master of Education in International Educational Development from Teachers College, Columbia University, USA, with a concentration in Comparative Education (Language, Literacy, and Technology), and a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics (International Program) from Mahidol University, Thailand. His research and professional interests include AI-enhanced teaching and learning, digital innovation in education, teacher competency frameworks, language education, and mindfulness-informed pedagogy. He can be contacted at email: kaewphanngam_c@su.ac.th.