

CEFR and English Proficiency Development of the Royal Thai Navy

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Introduction

English proficiency plays a critical role in many parts of today's global political, military, diplomatic, economic and social communities¹. English has developed into a lingua franca - a global means of inter-community communication². In addition, Eichhorst stated in her seminar paper that it seems almost impossible to escape the influence of the English language³. She also emphasized her stance on the role of English by concisely citing two other authors as follows:

“[. . .] [T]he majority of the world's population are [. . .] exposed to English every day - via American brand names, ads and commercials, through subtitled anglophone TV, film and DVD productions [. . .], lyrics and titles of all kinds” (cf. Gottlieb 2005:162). David Crystal even sees English as the most influential language ever when it comes to international relations (cf. Crystal 2000:70).³”

As the most popular language studied, there are an estimated 1.5 billion English language learners⁴ in 116 out of 194 countries worldwide⁵. English is by far a significant language for all kinds of professional and personal goals⁶. Having an excellent knowledge of English has become vital for success in any employee's career⁷. The Royal Thai Navy (RTN) is no exception. The importance of English for RTN personnel has been emphasized for many years. English proficiency is recognized as one of the indispensable competencies for each individual. Knowing how to communicate in English is essential for almost anyone seeking to succeed in the Royal Thai Navy - in all areas from administration to training/combat.

Over the years, a number of policies have been implemented to promote English proficiency development among RTN personnel. Most of these policies have emphasized education and training designed to increase scores on the American Language Course Placement Test (ALCPT). As a result of this exam-oriented objective, policy implementation



has not led to desired results. Great efforts have been put into training personnel to get better ALCPT scores rather than to develop real abilities to function in the English language⁸.

Recently, at the beginning of FY 2021, the Royal Thai Navy laid out a new policy on improvement of the English language proficiency of all personnel including nearly 3,000 students/cadets currently enrolled in naval education institutions dispersed across the country as well as approximately 41,000 active-duty commissioned and non-commissioned officers. The Naval Education Department is assigned to be the key responsible unit for implementation. In order to achieve improved results, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been adopted to provide guidelines in the English training and assessment system in the Royal Thai Navy. The expected outcomes of the policy include improved functional English language abilities of all RTN personnel and minimum assessed levels as follows⁹:

1. The English proficiency level of graduates from the Royal Thai Naval Academy and the RTN College of Nursing cannot be lower than B1 on CEFR levels.
2. The English proficiency level of graduates from the Royal Thai Naval Rating School cannot be lower than A1 on CEFR levels.
3. Non-commissioned officers should acquire the minimum English proficiency at the A1 CEFR level.
4. Officers of all ranks should acquire the minimum English proficiency at the A2 CEFR level.

CEFR standards and practices have been around for several decades, however ‘CEFR’ has emerged as an unfamiliar term for many in the Royal Thai Navy, particularly those whose jobs are not involved with language and education. Therefore, this article will briefly explain the overview of CEFR, the implementation of CEFR in the Thai education system, and the adoption of CEFR for English language proficiency development in the Royal Thai Navy.

What is CEFR?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, often referred to as CEFR, is an international standard for working out learners’ ability within a language. The CEFR has been developed from more than thirty years of work on language teaching, learning, and assessment by the Council of Europe. It defines levels of language



proficiency along three broad levels of language performance: Basic, Independent and Proficient. These broad bands are further broken down into six global levels of performance against which progress in language learning can be measured. Each global level can be further ‘branched’ into sublevels in order to suit local needs and yet still relate back to a common system¹⁰.

On their official website, Cambridge Assessment English described the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as:

“...an international standard for describing language ability. It describes language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. This makes it easy for anyone involved in language teaching and testing, such as teachers or learners, to see the level of different qualifications. It also means that employers and educational institutions can easily compare our qualifications to other exams in their country¹¹.”

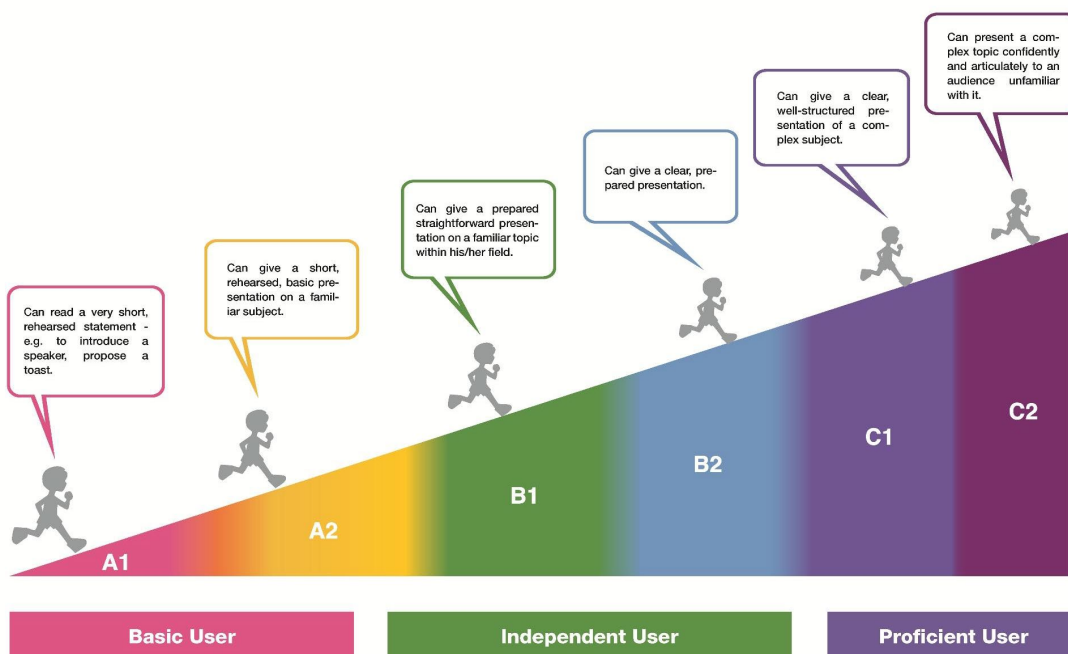
Figure 1. Common Reference Levels: Global Scale¹⁰ (p. 24)

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/ herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Uses of CEFR

The CEFR is implemented to provide a common basis for English proficiency development in terms of elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, among others. It explains in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop in order to be able to act effectively. The Framework also outlines levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis¹².

Figure 2. The CEFR provides a scale of 6 common reference levels for the organization of language learning and public recognition¹³



Adapting the Framework of Reference for English Language Education in Thailand

In April 2014, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has announced the use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as the standards to be adopted at all levels of education¹⁴. All aspects of English language curriculum reform were based on the CEFR Framework. Thus, a local version of Common European Framework of References for Languages - Thailand or so called “FRELE-TH” (2018) was published. Having two scale types to describe the English proficiency levels: a global scale

(overall descriptors) and illustrative scales, (communicative activities, communication strategies, and communicative language competence), this 10-level reference framework is used to describe the levels of English proficiency of typical Thai learners or users in communicating in English in Thailand's local and international context¹⁵.

Figure 3. CEFR and FRELE-TH Equivalency Table¹⁶

Standard Level	CEFR Proficiency Level	FRELE-TH Level
Basic user	A1	1
		2
	A2	3
		4
Independent user	B1	5
		6
	B2	7
		8
Proficient user	C1	9
	C2	10

CEFR for the Implementation of the RTN's English Proficiency Development Policy

The Naval Education Department, as the unit responsible for development of English proficiency among RTN personnel in accordance with the RTN Commander-in Chief's Policy FY 2021, has set the development guidelines comprising four steps as follows:

Step 1: Personnel language skills self-assessment

Step 2: Development of English language skills Phase 1

Step 3: Taking language proficiency tests to measure English language proficiency, and

Step 4: Development of English language skills Phase 2

In implementing all four steps above, a framework as well as action plans for all units involved were developed. The initial two phases are to be completed in FY 2021. Driven by a newly formed RTN English Proficiency Development Committee, the CEFR will be used throughout to provide fundamental domains in the development procedures

including the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency, language teaching and learning applications, as well as assessment purposes.¹⁷

Conclusion

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: teaching, learning and assessment, commonly known as CEFR was developed by the Council of Europe. It is meant to provide a common ground for the elaboration of the syllabus for languages, provide curriculum guidelines, textbooks, examination in countries around the world. Promoted primarily as a tool for planning, CEFR is used for planning curriculum and related context.

In 2014, Thailand's Ministry of Education has officially adopted CEFR for the reform of both learning and teaching of English across the country.

Since October 2020, the Royal Thai Navy has shifted its English skills development policy from the long-standing test-score improvement goals to a focus on improving functional communication, using CEFR as a framework in both training and assessment.

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