



# Improving Patient Care by Improving English Skills: The RTN Medical Department Implements English Proficiency Development Policy

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## Background

Globalization is the process by which ideas, knowledge, information, goods and services spread around the world<sup>1</sup>. This process brings about accelerated exchange of information, which in turn requires knowledge of *a common language for international communication*, particularly for special features and the use of terminology in many areas including the medical professions. That *common language for international communication* is none other than English. This is confirmed by what Dr Lid King stated in ‘Cambridge Assessment English Perspectives’ that English serves as “the lingua franca for education, trade and employment, and is an essential skill for anyone wanting to succeed professionally or academically in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is deemed necessary for personnel to acquire skills and a good understanding of the English language in order to achieve progress and excellence in the field of healthcare.

The same concepts of progress and excellence apply to the Naval Medical Department. As an organic unit that provides healthcare readiness capability to its parent unit - the Royal Thai Navy (RTN)<sup>3</sup>, the Royal Thai Navy Medical Department (RTNMD) has continuously worked to ensure compliance with the Royal Thai Navy’s policies with respect to English proficiency development. In the past, English language instruction was delivered as part of the curriculum only at the RTN College of Nursing (RTNCN) and the Naval Operational Medicine School (NOMS) - a school to train medical corps naval rating cadets – both of which are education units under the supervision of the RTNMD.

In 2011, the RTN’s first English development policy was specifically implemented with a focus on improving scores on the American Language Course Placement Test (ALCPT) especially among students and cadets in RTN education institutions including the two aforementioned units. At that time, special funding was set aside for projects to offer



extra classes to students and cadets as well as English Communication courses to RTNMD personnel who were voluntarily interested in improving their English skills.<sup>4</sup>

Later in the same year, the RTNMD went through an organizational restructuring and established a new unit, the Academic Affairs Center (AAC) to direct the overall education and training effort within the Medical Department. Apart from the RTNCN and the NOMS, the AAC oversees a new sub-unit called the Academic Affairs Division (AAD) which is responsible for planning and conducting all academic training particularly for professional development in the RTNMD.

### ≡≡≡ English Proficiency Development Projects in the RTNMD ≡≡≡

The Academic Affairs Division (AAD) has consistently worked to reinforce the roles of training and professional development in the RTNMD. English skills development is one of the critical components of this professional development. Therefore, soon after being founded, the AAD embedded English into the curricula of the two main professional development courses, one for medical corps Officers and the other for Non-commissioned Officers (Chief Petty Officer First Class). The one-credit instruction (eight 3-hour sessions) is included in the 15-credit course with an emphasis on improving communication skills of English for medical corps officers and Non-commissioned Officers. These two courses are offered once a year on a regular basis to a group of 30 - 60 participants per session. Besides this routine instruction, each year the AAD organizes additional English development programs as part of a preparation for joint training within the ASEAN Community. Two significant courses which were previously offered to the RTNMD personnel at all levels on an as needed basis include: 1) **Military Exercise English Preparation Course** was designed to prepare trainees for their future military exercise participation by providing them with certain practices students were expected to encounter during the exercises including CARAT (Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training), Cobra Gold, AMNEX (ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise), etc.; and 2) **English for Communication** was an integrated language skills development course which attempted to support and increase students' active vocabulary development, conversational management abilities, level of language output, and accuracy of usage.<sup>5</sup>

Later in FY 2019, the RTN enacted a new policy to accentuate the required ALCPT scores, mainly to be achieved by the students and cadets in all RTN education institutions.<sup>6</sup> In response to the policy, the RTNCN and the NOMS had their students and cadets take additional tutoring classes mostly in their off-hours. Students and cadets were trained to take the test with the purpose of acquiring the target scores. Likewise, the AAD shifted their focus to replace the English for communication course with ALCPT Preparation Course which was developed with the aim of familiarizing trainees to the ALCPT. With extensive practice of vocabulary from the wordlists and glossary taken from ALC books, students were expected to grasp ALCPT concept and acquire skills as well as test-taking techniques to be applied to their performance when taking an ALCPT.

## Implementation of CEFR-based English Proficiency Development Policy

In FY 2021 the Royal Thai Navy laid out a new policy regarding improvement of the English language proficiency of all personnel based on the guidelines established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The expected outcomes of the policy are summarized as follows:<sup>7</sup>

Personnel	CEFR Level Requirement
Non-commissioned Officers	≥ A1
Officers	≥ A2
Graduates from Royal Thai Naval Academy & Royal Thai Navy College of Nursing	≥ B1
Graduates from Royal Thai Naval Rating School	≥ A1

The RTNMD's first step toward implementation of this new policy was forming a steering committee to direct and advise on the English Proficiency Development for the RTNMD personnel.<sup>8</sup> Then, to advance the goal, subcommittees were set up to be responsible for measures to carry out the plan accordingly. The working groups have made every effort to rapidly conform to the new development guidelines and adjusted the existing projects to be in alignment with the new implementation stage which involve activities in each step as follows.



### Step 1: Personnel language skills self- assessment

In December 2020, RTNMD personnel at all levels participated in self-assessment available online as recommended by the working group assigned by the RTN English Proficiency Development Committee.

### Step 2: Development of English language skills Phase 1

Based on the results that emerged in Step 1, students realized their individual proficiency level within the CEFR, then RTNMD personnel were encouraged to take part in English language training courses offered by the Royal Thai Navy Language Center, Naval Education Department on various platforms both onsite and online. The primary objective of this step is to help prepare them for Step 3.

In this regard, apart from having nursing students voluntarily participating in the online instruction mentioned above, the RTNCN also organized a project for all 258 nursing students to take additional 42-hour tutorial sessions every other Saturday from 7 November 2020 to 22 May 2021. The project aimed to familiarize nursing students with functional English rather than the current exam-oriented training. In the end, the training was expected to help them achieve the required level of English on the CEFR scale as stated in the RTN policy.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, the NOMS has been running a project to improve English language proficiency by offering 2-hour online instruction to 62 sophomore cadets (18.00 - 20.00) on Mondays and Tuesdays from 7 June to 6 September 2021.<sup>10</sup>

### Step 3: Taking the Royal Thai Navy English Proficiency Test (NEPT) to measure English language proficiency

In July 2021, military personnel in all RTN departments, RTNMD included, were required to take English Proficiency Test (NEPT) developed by the RTN Language Center in compliance with the English Proficiency Development Policy.<sup>11</sup> The CEFR levels assigned to each test taker based on their scores will be recorded in the human resources management system of the Royal Thai Navy for assessments concerning future assignments and promotions. To say the least, the CEFR level of each individual can be effectively used to motivate personnel in the proficiency-based professional development in the Naval Medical Department.

#### Step 4: Development of English language skills Phase 2

According to the NEPT results obtained, the Academic Affairs Division organized a pilot project to offer a 60-hour English Proficiency Development Course to 40 RTNMD personnel from several RTNMD units dispersed in several naval installations both in Bangkok and Sattahip, Chonburi. The course,



offered concurrently online three afternoons a week from 21 July-31 August 2021, is divided into two groups based on participants' proficiency.<sup>12</sup> The aims of this course are to improve learners' communication skills at work, especially speaking, and their English language knowledge based on CEFR. Instructions of this course are delivered online to help limit the spread of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) in the country. Participants are strongly encouraged to maximize their interaction while participating. The online class is structured to improve and strengthen students' communication skills. To achieve this broad goal, instructors will use technologies available, coupled with appropriate instructional strategies during their classes on top of carefully selecting various forms of assignments to effectively evaluate students' progress.

### ===== Future Plans =====

The RTNMD is ready to make continued efforts to bring about the outcomes as expected in the policy. CEFR based proficiency development connects well to the need for healthcare providers to have better English proficiency, not only for their professional development but for their daily patient care as well. Regardless of occupation, whether a person is a doctor, nurse, specialist, healthcare or paramedical staff, if they have good command of English, they will be considered a valuable asset in any healthcare institute.<sup>13</sup>

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