Thai EFL University Lecturers' Viewpoints towards Impacts of the CEFR on their English Language Curricula and Teaching Practice

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Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR) provides a basis for foreign language education, policies and practices. The CEFR influences English language teaching in Europe and beyond. In Thailand, since 2014, the CEFR has been applied to its English curriculum for all levels of education. However, little research has investigated teachers' understandings of the CEFR and their viewpoints towards its use. This qualitative interview study aimed to investigate university instructors' viewpoints of the CEFR and their applications of this framework in their English language classrooms. Thirty-three Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university lecturers (20 females and 13 males) participated in this research project, using semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that Thai EFL university lecturers had a reasonably good understanding of the CEFR, particularly the domains of assessment, the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency and language teaching and learning applications. However, Thai EFL lecturers have little insight into the approach underlying the CEFR, an action-oriented approach. The use of the CEFR in Thai EFL classrooms appeared to be associated with their understanding. Lecturers' perceptions towards the influences of the CEFR on English education in Thailand were found to be the combination of the positive evaluations and concerns. The current study further suggests that CEFR-related training programs to bring more practical impact on classroom teaching are required for Thai EFL lecturers and school teachers in general.

Keywords: Common European Framework of References (CEFR), CEFR Descriptors, Common European Levels of Language Proficiency, CEFR in Thailand

Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) is a standardized language learning and teaching document, developed by the Council of Europe (CoE) in 2001. The CEFR

provides practical guidelines and serves as a reference for users and practitioners to reflect on their pedagogical practices. The CEFR contains guidelines for language curriculum design, course syllabus development, language testing and assessment, teaching material development and other areas of language education (MoE, 2014).

The growing influence of the CEFR extends beyond the boundaries of Europe and the framework has been adopted by a number of countries. A number of empirical studies have been found in non-English and English-speaking countries (i.e., Hung, 2013; Minh Ngo, 2017; Valax, 2011; Van Huy & Hamid, 2015) and it has been argued that the framework contains high levels of abstractness (Figueras, North, Takala, Verhelst, & Van Avermaet, 2005). Some (i.e., Byrnes, 2007; Green, 2012) even consider the CEFR an elusive document and its abstractness makes it difficult for practitioners to interpret its descriptors of each level, resulting in an unwillingness to adopt the framework into classroom teaching and other pedagogical practices.

In Thailand, the government believes the implementation of the CEFR has increased the standard of all dimensions of English language learning and teaching. According to the Minister of Education (2014), the framework has also been employed to guide English language education in Thailand, involving curriculum design, language assessment and testing, pedagogic implications, educational material development and communicative language teaching practice. However, in practice, little is empirically known regarding Thai EFL university lecturers' overall understandings of the CEFR, the use of the CEFR in Thai EFL classrooms, and viewpoints on CEFR's influence in their instruction and context.

Literature Review

Overview: Common European Framework of Reference

The CEFR was established by the CoE as a common reference document for language learning, teaching and assessment of European languages (Ahn, 2015; University of Cambridge, 2001). During the 1960s, the CoE developed the language educational policy to focus on language learning for communicative purposes and the exchange of knowledge (Little, 2007).

The CEFR is underpinned by several key concepts: the promotion of coherence and transparency, communicative language use, plurilingualism and partial competences (North, 2014). To promote coherence and transparency in pedagogical practice, a metalanguage (or standardized pedagogical reference)

was developed to establish a mutual understanding of the CEFR for all language professionals across Europe (CoE, 2001). The development of this metalanguage predominantly involved the recognition of learning objectives, which were based on the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency and the specification of contents in relation to the communicative authentic use of language proposed by the CEFR (North, 2014).

Another important concept was the communicative language use or use of "language for a social purpose" (North, 2014, p. 10). Indeed, the CEFR views individuals as social agents who perform language actions to accomplish social purposes (CoE, 2001). North (2014) responded to this concept with "language learning is not perceived as an intellectual pursuit to train minds, but as a practical skill to communicate with others" (p. 15). Hence, the CEFR does not only encourage individuals to master linguistic knowledge of language, but rather fosters individuals to perform language actions. Another salient concept is plurilingualism. The CoE (2001) refers to the concept of plurilingualism as ones' ability to use all linguistic resources or repertoires to convey meanings in a conversation within a specific context, constraint, condition or culture. Significantly, this concept also challenges teaching methods that rely on the native speaker norms of language teaching to embrace the linguistic diversity (CoE, 2001).

The final significant concept is the notion of partial competences. This concept was described as a language that users process in a separate and unequal proficiency level (CoE, 2001). That is, language users generally have uneven competences. Hulstijin (2007) also proposes three language profiles that the CEFR refers to as partial competences. The first profile is those who have a high linguistic knowledge and can effectively engage in communicative language activities. The second profile is users who have limited linguistic knowledge but are able to perform in a wide range of communicative language activities. The last profile is users who have high linguistic knowledge but a limited ability to perform in communicative language activities. Hence, the notion of partial competences recognizes that the levels of proficiency are uneven among language users.

The CEFR provides four fundamental domains for its use. The first domain is the approach underlying the CEFR, known as an "action-oriented approach." The approach focuses on an ability of individuals in using a target language, rather than mastering linguistics features of a target language. The second domain is the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency. The CEFR classifies second language (L2) proficiency into six reference levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. Each of six reference levels has its own descriptors justifying an ability of individuals in performing in a certain language. For example, "Can understand

and use familiar everyday expression" is the descriptor of A1 users (CoE, 2001). Another domain is Language Teaching and Learning Applications, which refers to the use of the Common Reference Levels to teaching applications. The final domain of CEFR use is an assessment, which is the use of the CEFR for assessment purposes.

Criticisms of the CEFR

The first criticism of the CEFR is that the development of the descriptors addressed in each stage of the Common Reference Levels lack theoretical soundness (Fulcher, 2004; Little, 2007; North, 2007, 2014). That is, the CEFR descriptors are not derived from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory. More specifically, in the process of developing the descriptors, language teachers in Europe were asked to select which descriptors best justified proficiency in each level. Hence, the descriptors are "scaled teacher descriptors" (North, 2014, p. 23), rather than theory-driven.

Another criticism is directed at the nature of the descriptors in relation to readability. Byrnes (2007) and Green (2012) state that the CEFR is a complicated, abstract and multifaceted document and this might cause misinterpretation and misuse from people outside Europe. In addition, O'Sullivan and Weir (2011) are also critical of the descriptors and question how the broad descriptors could potentially account for a complex, dynamic process when individuals engage in an interactive conversation. Additionally, it has been suggested that the descriptors are not user-friendly (Figueras, 2012; Komorowska, 2004; North, 2009).

The illustrative descriptors may also be problematic in assessments (North, 2014). Assessing students' performance using can-do statements and the descriptors lends the assessment to more subjectivity, resulting in the ineffectiveness of the CEFR implementation for assessment. Additionally, the CEFR has exerted a political influence since it was adopted by a number of governments across the world. Some argue that the CEFR conveys a political agenda of language education, rather than being a language reference document (Fulcher, 2010). More extreme criticism is that the CEFR is a tool of power, "dominating language education at all levels in Europe" (Fulcher, 2010; McNamara & Roever, 2006; McNamara, 2011).

CEFR Studies in Asia

As aforementioned, the influence of the CEFR has expanded across Europe and a number of Asian countries have adapted the framework as a guideline to uplift their language education system. In Japan, during 2008-2011, a team of language researchers and linguists developed the English language framework to best suit

the context of Japan, specifically Japanese learners of English. With the involvement of language learners and instructors, the project resulted in the immergence of the CEFR-J (Negishi & Tono, 2014). The CEFR-J comprises 12 sublevels: Pre-A1, A1.1, A1.2, A1.3, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1, B2.1, B2.2, C1, and C2. The framework was also based on the action-oriented approach and the can-do statements.

In China, there was also an initiative in developing the language framework, labeled as a "Common Chinese Framework of Reference for Languages - CCFR" with the concentration on English instruction (Jin, Wu, Anderson, & Song, 2014). The ultimate purpose of the CCFR development was to promote coherence and efficiency of its language education system as there, in fact, are seven national curricula of English in each level of education (Jin et al., 2014). The CCFR has, therefore, been believed to provide opportunity in examining fundamental aspects concerning English language learning and teaching; however, there has been challenges in administration and stakeholders' acceptance.

In Vietnam, some attempts have been made to establish the language framework called CEFR-V, with V standing for Vietnam (Hung, 2013). Before the development of the CEFR-V, the Ministry of Education and Training utilized the CEFR as a benchmark to gauge English language ability of language teachers nationwide. The exam results revealed that approximately 83 percent of primary level teachers, more than 90 percent of upper secondary level teachers, and 45 percent of tertiary English language lecturers had their English abilities below the required number (Hung, 2013). Hence, the government of Vietnam has employed the CEFR in order to move toward solving problems pertaining to English language teaching and learning.

A number of studies have been conducted to expand the CEFR body of literature. Valax (2011) conducted a survey to investigate teachers' perceptions of the CEFR in Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the UK, and France. The findings suggested that just 20 percent of participants had read the CEFR themselves. Valax argued that "there is little interest in, or enthusiasm for the CEFR among those frontline professionals who will ultimately determine whether it has any real impact on the teaching and learning of languages" (p. 1). However, this study could not ascertain whether those participants had an understanding of the CEFR and whether it had an impact on their teaching practice.

Van Huy and Hamid (2015) conducted a qualitative case study aiming to understand how the stakeholders received, interpreted and responded to the processes of adopting the CEFR within the context of Vietnam. The research revealed, on the one hand, that implementing the CEFR in the context of Vietnam

was perceived as a tool to enhance the quality of English language education. On the other hand, the adoption of the CEFR seemed to be viewed as "a macro political move" rather than addressing critical English teaching problems at the micro level. The study concluded that "the adoption of the CEFR is mainly for accountability and administrative purposes rather than an effective remedial solution to the current language problem" (p. 71). Similarly, Minh Ngo (2017) conducted a study to investigate Vietnamese teachers' perceptions on the use of the CEFR in their language classrooms and their needs. The study found that language teachers in Vietnam had positive attitudes towards the impacts of the CEFR and adopted the framework at various levels. However, Vietnamese teachers required more practical guidance of applying the CEFR to their pedagogical practice. The study proposed that all stakeholders should take actions to sustain the influence of the CEFR.

CEFR in Thailand

The Thai Ministry of Education (MoE) introduced the CEFR in 2014 in accordance with the focus on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The objective of the enactment of the latest English language education policy was to enhance the standard of English education across the nation at all levels (MoE, 2014) and to establish the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). English is a working language within this community and the economic competitiveness of the AEC requires a high proficiency level of English from Thai labourers.

In the same year, the MoE announced an "English Language Teaching Reform Policy" to enhance the capacity of teaching and learning English across the nation. This was also to provide a nexus between the CEFR and a teaching approach of CLT (MoE, 2014). Within this reform, the CEFR is believed to be a significant conceptual framework for English language education in Thailand, involving all parameters; curriculum design, language teaching development, testing, assessment development, teacher development programs and establishing learning objectives (English Language Institute, 2015). The CEFR levels (A1-C2) are employed as an anticipated achievement of students' performance. That is, the A1 level is targeted for an ultimate achievement for primary school students, A2 is for junior high school students and B1 is set for high school and vocational students. The processes of implementing the CEFR in the context of Thailand were assisted by the British Council in Thailand (British Council Thailand, 2016). The objective of the collaboration was to deliver the teacher training programs, called *Boost Camp*, with a practical emphasis on CLT to enhance the quality of English language teaching across the nation. In addition, this CLT-oriented training program was established for English language teachers and presented as a solution to the English language problem in Thailand (Mala, 2016).

At the tertiary education level, the Office of Higher Education Committee (OHEC) has enacted language education policies to standardize English language teaching and learning. That is, universities in Thailand are required to develop their own language policies or framework to align with the CEFR, as proposed by the government. The universities also need to deconstruct and improve their English language courses with the outcomes associated with the CEFR levels. It is also suggested that other workshops, professional development projects, and extra curriculum activities, which encourage students to use English language, should be established by an educational institution. University students are required to have a placement test or proficiency test, developed by a university, or equivalent standard examinations (IELTS, TOFL) to improve students' English language proficiency (OHEC, 2016).

A group of academics in ELT also developed the ten-level framework of English language, the so-called "FRELE-TH" to be employed in Thai language education system (Hiranburana et al., 2017). Based on the CEFR, the development processes involved: (1) analyzing the CEFR adaptation and related literature in various contexts; (2) developing the levels of FRELE-TH; (3) having stakeholders from the academics (*N=112*) and professionals (*N=100*) refine the developed framework; (4) performing the public hearing stage involving the experts (*N= 150*) from all sectors over the country; and (5) carrying out the completed FRELE-TH. The purposes of the framework development were to: (1) solve the problem of the low proficiency level of English language users or learners as evident in the EF Proficiency Index 2015; (2) establish the coherence across all types of assessments and raise the standards in learning and goals; and (3) be used by the government in describing the levels of English abilities in Thailand's local and international contexts.

To date, there has been few studies shedding light on the CEFR in Thailand. Franz and Teo (2017) conducted a study to investigate perceptions of state secondary school teachers of English towards English language education reform policy. The findings revealed that the CEFR is only perceived as an English test for language teachers and the framework has no further implementation in classroom and assessment. In terms of teachers' understanding and appreciation of the policy, the study suggests that teachers express "indifference and ignorance of the policy" (Franz & Teo, 2017, p. 1).

Akuli and Poonpon (2018) conducted another mixed-methods study to explore the effects of the tasks that were based on the CEFR in enhancing grade-eight students' speaking ability. The tests were administered prior to and after the treatment to a total of 40 students. The study also investigated the students' attitudes towards the use of the CEFR-based speaking tasks, using a questionnaire. Then, 13 students were randomly selected to participate in a semi-

structured interview. The Paired Sample *t*-Test was performed to compare the scores of the pre-test and post-test. The findings revealed that the use of the CEFR-based speaking tasks could enhance students' speaking ability while the qualitative data disclosed that students had positive feelings towards the implemented instruction.

Objectives of the Current Study

Despite the growing influence of the CEFR across nations, we still do not fully know the use, impact and perceptions of the CEFR. First, CoE (2005), Martiynink and Noijions (2007) and Broek and Ende (2013) attempted to capture perceptions in the boarder perspective towards the use of the CEFR, but did not reference the teaching practices of the teachers and the in-depth understanding of the framework. Additionally, the studies conducted by Figueras et al. (2005) and Eckes et al. (2005) limited their focus to the teachers' attitudes on the impact of the CEFR on their instructional practice. Insights into the CEFR from those participants may have therefore been underrepresented.

Regarding the studies in Asia, Valax (2011) used a survey to investigate the perceptions of the use of the CEFR from six different countries, but failed to address the understanding of the CEFR and viewpoints on how the CEFR impacted pedagogical practice. The other two studies in Vietnam (Minh Ngo, 2017; Van Huy & Humid, 2015) involved key stakeholders and did not examine participants' in-depth understandings of the CEFR or their perceptions on the impacts of the CEFR. Finally, the study in Thailand limited its scope to public school teachers only. The current study therefore focused on a Thai context and examined the overall understanding of Thai EFL university lecturers of the CEFR, classroom practice or application and their viewpoints towards the impact of the CEFR on their English language curricula and teaching practice. Three research questions were formulated as follows:

1) To what extent do Thai EFL university lecturers understand the concept of the CEFR?
2) To what extent do Thai university lecturers apply the CEFR in their English language classrooms?
3) What are Thai university lecturers' viewpoints towards the CEFR impacts on English language instruction in Thailand?

Methodology

Participants and Setting

The participants were 33 Thai university lecturers (20 females and 13 males) from two faculties relevant to English language education, *Humanities and Social Sciences* and *Education*, in Thai universities. Participation in the project was voluntary. The criteria to identify potential participants was that the lecturers needed to have applied the CEFR in their classroom teaching and at least one year of teaching experience to ensure that participants had a sufficient understanding of their teaching context and the context of Thailand in general. Participants' demographics are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Qualification	Position	Teaching Exp. (year)
Participant 1	F	PhD in ELT and Applied Linguistics	Lecturer	17
Participant 2	F	M.Ed. in Language and Culture for Communication	Lecturer	14
Participant 3	F	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics	Lecturer	5
Participant 4	F	M.Ed. in TEFL	Lecturer	15
Participant 5	F	M.Ed. in English	Lecturer	10
Participant 6	M	M.Ed. in ELT	Lecturer	2
Participant 7	F	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics (Continuing)	Lecturer	10
Participant 8	M	Ph.D. in English Language and Applied Linguistics	Lecturer	18
Participant 9	F	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics	Lecturer	13
Participant 10	M	Ph.D. in Literature Studies	Lecturer	8
Participant 11	M	M.A. in English	Lecturer	5
Participant 12	M	M.Ed. in TESOL	Lecturer	2
Participant 13	M	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics	Lecturer	6
Participant 14	M	Ph.D. in Linguistics	Lecturer	8
Participant 15	M	Ph.D. in TESOL	Lecturer	12
Participant 16	F	Ph.D. in Language Education	Lecturer	21
Participant 17	F	Ph.D. in Language and Communication	Lecturer	15
Participant 18	F	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics	Lecturer	6
Participant 19	M	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics	Lecturer	8
Participant 20	F	Ph.D. in English for International Communication	Lecturer	5
Participant 21	F	M.A. in English	Lecturer	14
Participant 22	F	M.A. in Communication	Lecturer	7
Participant 23	M	M.A. in English	Lecturer	6
Participant 24	F	M.A. in English	Lecturer	4

Participant 25	M	Ph.D. in Literature Studies	Lecturer	18
Participant 26	M	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics (Continuing)	Lecturer	4
Participant 27	F	Ph.D. in French Education	Lecturer	18
Participant 28	F	M.A. in Translation	Lecturer	22
Participant 29	F	M.A. in Translation	Lecturer	20
Participant 30	F	M.A. in ELT	Lecturer	4
Participant 31	M	M.A. in TEFL	Lecturer	6
Participant 32	F	M.A. in TEFL	Lecturer	1
Participant 33	F	Ph.D. in Education	Lecturer	16

Research Instruments

The current study is a qualitative study that employed data from two sources to examine the overall insights of the CEFR of Thai EFL university lecturers, their viewpoints on the influence of the CEFR, and how the framework impacts their English language instructional practice. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect in-depth data from the participants. The interview format and questions were adopted from the studies of the CoE (2005) and Martiyniuk and Noijions (2007) as they both investigated the perceptions of the overall use of the CEFR across different nations. The interview took place two times – at the beginning and the end of the semester. Moreover, classroom observation was also used to view the CEFR-oriented application in the classroom scenario. Participants' instruction was observed three times over the semester. That is, the observations were in week 5, week 10 and week 15, respectively. Each university lecturer had been asked for permission prior to the actual classroom observation. Twenty participants gave permission to have their English language instruction observed. The researcher acted as an observer throughout the class and did not interfere.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to the interviews, participants were contacted by email to confirm a preferred time and date. Interviews then proceeded individually, based on participant's schedules. Interviews were audio-recorded. Each interview took approximately 30-40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in their native language to gain more insights from the participants and avoid uncomfortable feelings during interview. After the interview, the data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis procedures suggested by Creswell (2009). The procedures involve: 1) organizing data for analysis; 2) reading through data obtained; 3) coding the data; 4) establishing themes or descriptions; 5) interpreting themes; and 6) interpreting the meanings of themes. Classroom observation was conducted after the interviews to examine the CEFR-oriented instructional practice.

The current study used a "member-checking" strategy, suggested by Creswell (2014) to ensure the trustworthiness of the transcription process. This was done by returning the transcriptions to the individual participants in order for them to assess whether the transcripts were accurate. The current study enhanced the dependability of the research by providing detailed accounts of research methodology, data collection procedures and analysis. As suggested by Phakiti and Paltridge (2015) and Denscombe (2010), the qualitative dependability can be enhanced by such an explicit justifications of the research method, showing others how the conclusions of the study are drawn.

Findings

Overall Insights towards the CEFR

The qualitative data analysis reveals that the Thai EFL university lecturers appear to have similar conceptualizations of the overall purpose of the CEFR. Specifically, the CEFR was perceived as being a guideline for language testing and assessment that incorporates the six-level scale of language proficiency. Most participants understood the role and purpose of the six level scales – the Common Reference Levels (A1-C2) – that are used to classify individuals' language proficiency levels.

> *The CEFR is regarded as a useful criterion for assessing students' language abilities. The CEFR offers a global scale. It is basically known as A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 and it is fundamentally used to measure the proficiency level of students. (Participant 4)*

However, none of the lecturers elaborated on their understanding of the CEFR in terms of the possible uses of the framework or demonstrated in-depth knowledge of the CEFR in relation to assessment. For example, lecturers did not comment on the functions of the six-level framework in setting up assessment objectives, developing tests' content specification and comparing among tests in different systems.

Thai EFL lecturers also tended to associate the CEFR with English language teaching and learning, with five out of 11 participants reporting that the CEFR is a guideline for English language teaching. This is illustrated in the following example:

> *CEFR is a systematic scheme of English language teaching approach in European pedagogical context (Kong). It is an international standard used to describe language ability on a six-*

point scale – A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2, with C2 indicating someone's' mastery of English. (Participant 2)

These lecturers appear to be aware that the CEFR is a framework for English language teaching, but not that the framework is also applied to other languages. For example, Kong perceived the CEFR as an ELT approach and Ann stated that the six-level scale justified language proficiency of English of individuals. This is likely because these lecturers teach English.

The lecturers also appear to know the function of the CEFR in establishing learning objectives for language courses. Some lecturers viewed the CEFR as a guideline for establishing learning objectives for their teaching. The Thai EFL university lecturers had very little to say about the approach underlying the CEFR. Only one lecturer stated that the CEFR provides an action-oriented pedagogical approach.

CEFR-oriented applications in classroom

Classroom observation revealed that the Thai EFL university lecturers seemed unaware of the action-oriented approach, which is the underlying approach of the CEFR. Instead, most of the lecturers carried out their instructions only concerning the content matter of each course. Due to the specificity of the university courses, the university lecturers raised that "it seems impossible to implement the CEFR into instructional practice because it is somewhat difficult for me to do so." Some further addressed that "the CEFR seems to act as a level of language competence students are required to reach at the end of the programme." This suggests that instructional practices have not been designed or developed in the line with the CEFR or other related features of the CEFR, namely Can-Do statements and portfolios.

The interviews further demonstrated that the majority of the lecturers appear to have applied the CEFR to in-house assessments. The assessments involved formative assessment and high-stakes examinations, such as an entrance or exit examination. This is illustrated in the following examples:

> *I have used the CEFR for creating examinations to be in line with the CEFR standard. I have created a language examination based on the suggested vocabulary lists on the B2 level, which is required by the policy. (Participant 18)*

> *Yes, I have applied the CEFR. Recently I was involved in a project that required me to develop CEFR-based English tests, which will later be used as an exit exam for undergraduate students at my university. (Participant 20)*

The applications of the CEFR in Thai EFL classrooms appear to be strongly associated with the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency. The data analysis suggests that the six levels of language proficiency were used as a reference in developing and designing teaching materials, including language courses and curricula, and textbook selection. The last aspect of the CEFR applications is the approach underlying the CEFR. As described, only one lecturer discussed applying an action-oriented approach. The lecturer stated that he used a pedagogical approach, which focuses on developing student's actual use of a target language, rather than encouraging learners to only master linguistic knowledge.

Influence of CEFR on English Language Teaching

Regarding the perceptions of Thai EFL university lecturers on the extent to which the CEFR influences Thai EFL classrooms, all the Thai lecturers expressed the view that the CEFR has some degree of influence in the teaching and learning of English language in Thai EFL contexts. Specifically, the CEFR is considered as a useful standardized document for English language learning and teaching. However, some instructors find that the content of the framework contains some abstract and elusive elements.

The majority of the lecturers were of the opinion that the CEFR is a useful document for language education. Thirty participants said that the framework provided useful guidelines for setting up learning objectives, using the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency. Additionally, the CEFR was perceived by most of the participants as a framework that facilitated language course and curriculum design.

> *Instructors know the strengths and weaknesses of their students and find appropriate ways in helping them improve their abilities. Secondly, instructors can adopt the CEFR in writing course development to suit the level of students. Instructors can define clear objectives in each subject. (Participant 28)*

Some of the Thai EFL lecturers believed that the CEFR had little impact on classroom teaching. Korn stated that while the CEFR is evident in the language education policy, it has not been applied to classroom teaching. Korn further believed that the CEFR has less impact on language classrooms. Instead, the CEFR has been mostly used as a guiding document to align their tests with the CEFR.

> *In my context, the CEFR has not been a big influence yet, but it has started to have some influence. I have seen just only at*

> *the policy level. We used it to show that our tests are in line*
> *with the CEFR levels. I don't think we apply into classroom*
> *teaching. (Participant 32)*

All Thai EFL university lecturers stated that the CEFR is relatively difficult and abstract. More precisely, the participants raised concerns that the descriptors of the six-level framework were too abstract and difficult to make interpretations, resulting in the inability to differentiate learners' performance at each level. Ann, one of the participants, mentioned that "*its descriptors are somehow difficult. Oftentimes, I cannot tell the difference among the levels.*" Ann also highlighted that the descriptors of the CEFR global scale (A1-C2) were difficult to differentiate language performance at each level of proficiency. Further, Ann frequently had to double-check her work against the CEFR website. Interestingly, instead of using the CEFR book, Ann consulted the website for the relevant information confirming her decisions of applying the CEFR. Ann admitted that although she had the CEFR handbook, the book was also written using a policy level language which she considered "abstract and difficult to digest".

Another salient aspect raised by Thai EFL university lecturers is that the CEFR would not play a facilitative role in the Thai context. This is because the characteristics of Thai EFL classrooms, such as very large classroom sizes and a variation of English language levels, seems to undermine the success of the CEFR implementation. The awareness of Thai EFL students' achievements was not associated with the use of language for communication, but rather passing examinations.

> *The CEFR will be used in Thailand but the classroom size, the*
> *wide range of difference in language proficiency of the learners*
> *in the class and the awareness of the achievement in terms of*
> *performance, all these factors will undermine the effectiveness*
> *of CEFR. (Participant 26)*

Another issue that was raised is that Thai students might have insufficient language exposure during learning. As stated by one of the participants "*I do not think the intentions of the CEFR to be achieved here in Thailand. Look at the environment we live in. There is very few chance to engage in interactive communication. I mean talking in English with the authentic language use*" (Phong). Encouraging students to use the target language, an intention of the CEFR, may be difficult to achieve as the local environment does not provide a great deal of language exposure in terms of being involved in an interactive communication and acquiring authentic use of language.

A low proficiency level and lack of CEFR knowledge among instructors are also important issues evident in the qualitative data. Tachit shared his concerns about

the low level of English proficiency among Thai English language teachers. He also stated that Thai teachers in general lacked understanding of the CEFR, which they were required to follow according to the English language education policy. Tachit raised these points to question the effectiveness of the CEFR's implementation in Thailand.

> *Many English teachers themselves do not know what the CEFR is and their English language ability is not at a satisfactory level. So, how can they actually teach their students to reach a certain CEFR levels. (Participant 18)*

Tachit shared his concerns about the issue of a low level of English proficiency among Thai English language teachers. He also stated that Thai teachers in general lacked the understandings of the CEFR, which they were required to follow according to the English language education policy. Tachit raised these points to question the effectiveness of the CEFR implementation in Thailand.

Discussion

The findings indicated that Thai EFL university lecturers in this study have a reasonably good understanding of the CEFR in the domains of assessment, the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency, and language teaching and learning applications. The only domain where lecturers have little understanding is the approach underlying the CEFR. This finding is in contrast with a previous study in Thailand that suggested Thai English teachers lacked knowledge of the CEFR and that the CEFR was perceived only as a testing system for teachers, which they were required to take by the MoE (Franz & Teo, 2017). These contrasting results could be accounted for by two factors. First, the participants of the two studies were drawn from different education levels. Franz and Teo's (2017) study involved teachers of English in secondary schools, while the current study drew the participants from a tertiary education level. Hence, the different educational contexts may explain the discrepancy between the two studies. Second, the participants of the two studies have experienced different exposures to the CEFR. As noted by Franz and Teo (2017), the CEFR was introduced to the secondary school teachers through the CEFR-referenced examination, as they were required to sit the test. In contrast, the participants of the current study have been exposed to the CEFR through the training program organized by their university, conferences and self-education. This means that the type of exposure to the CEFR potentially affects the level of understanding of the CEFR in language lecturers and teachers.

Thai EFL university lecturers' understanding of the CEFR appears to align with the aspects of the framework that they apply to their teaching practice. More precisely, the CEFR applications are associated with the use for assessment and the use of the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency. These two aspects of the CEFR applications correspond to the knowledge of the Thai EFL lecturers. Previous studies in Europe (Broke & Ende, 2013; CoE, 2005; Martiyniuk & Noijions, 2007) have also suggested that the CEFR has mostly been applied in these two areas.

The CEFR aims to introduce self-directed learning for foreign language education, particularly by developing learners' awareness of their present language proficiency, encouraging them to set their learning goals and providing self-assessments (CoE, 2001). The self-assessment projects, such as DIALANG, the English Language Portfolio (ELP) and the ALTE can-do project, are proposed and developed within the CEFR framework. Little (2007) states that the ELP provides effective practices for classroom settings. Moreover, the ALTE can-do projects and the DAILANG self-assessment scales also provide important outcomes for self-directed learning for L2 education (Little, 2011). However, the current findings suggest that these frameworks are not well known or used among the Thai EFL lecturers in the current study.

It was also found that Thai EFL lecturers generally do not apply the approach underlying the CEFR, an action-oriented approach, to classroom teaching. The pedagogical function of the action-oriented approach is to prepare students to be able to use the target language for their communicative purposes, rather than only master linguistic knowledge (CoE, 2001). This finding is in conflict with a previous study in Europe, suggesting that public schools in Europe had applied the action-oriented approach to enhance students' ability of productive skills (Broke & Ende, 2013). In contrast, this type of teaching pedagogy had not been applied in the current context, and may not be applied in other contexts in Thailand. As stated by one lecturer in the current study, people in Europe used English for "communicative purposes, not for taking an exam" and their environment encouraged people to use English.

Finally, the Thai EFL university lecturers agreed that aligning their pedagogical practices in accordance with the CEFR guideline provides, at least to some extent, benefits for English language education in Thai EFL contexts. That is, the CEFR provides guidelines in planning language curricula, selecting textbooks, developing language assessment and tests, and designing course syllabi and materials. Hence, having one standard guideline for English language teaching is beneficial for the lecturers to reflect on their pedagogical practice.

The current study illustrates that the main factor affecting CEFR implementation in Thailand appears to be the classroom context. Thai classrooms are normally large and full of varying language abilities and teaching time allowance of each subject is limited – approximately 45 minutes. The current findings also support the claim that there are limited opportunities for language exposure and oral practice (Frederickson, 2002; Sanpatchayapong, 2017). Hence, this might be a tremendous challenge for the MoE to ensure that the CEFR is consistently adopted in Thai contexts.

The CEFR embraces the concept of CLT and believes that learning involves using the target language through interactive communication. Surprisingly, the lecturers do not seem to be aware that the concept of the CLT relates to the CEFR. Previous studies have shown that the CLT has not been widely used in classrooms across Thailand due to many factors (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Kulsiri, 2006; Nonthaisong, 2015; Thongsri, 2005). One of the key factors is the use of a grammar-translation teaching method, which has been the favored method of English language teaching in Thailand. Another factor is discrepancy between teaching and assessment. That is, the Thai education system is exam-oriented and focuses on the ability to pass a test, rather than practice of productive use of language. Hence, the unsuccessful implementation of CLT and this discrepancy between teaching and assessment must be resolved before embracing the CEFR as a means to increase the standard of English language teaching and learning in Thailand.

Another concern expressed by the Thai EFL university lecturers is that the CEFR has little practical impact on English language classrooms. The current analysis suggests that some participants believed that the CEFR has a great deal of impact on assessment and language policy accountability, rather than classroom teaching. This phenomenon has also been evident in other studies, suggesting that the CEFR may have been primarily employed for political and administrative purposes (Broke & Ende 2013; Franz & Teo, 2017; Read, 2019; Valax, 2011; Van Huy & Hamid, 2015). Furthermore, the findings of the current study support the criticism that the CEFR conveys the political agenda of Europe, since it was primarily developed as a metalanguage to be used within Europe (Fulcher, 2010; McNamara & Roever, 2006; McNamara, 2011). In the case of Thailand, the adoption of the CEFR perhaps contributes more to the accountability of the standardization of the national English language education, rather than providing practical usage for language teachers to apply in their teaching contexts. There appears to have been relatively little impact on Thai classroom teaching (Franz & Teo, 2017).

The current results indicate that the CEFR seems to be abstract and perplexing for some Thai EFL lecturers. The CEFR is regarded as a theoretical framework,

which contains detailed descriptions and is relatively difficult to understand. The abstractness of the CEFR, especially its descriptors, has also been commented on in a number of other studies (Byrnes, 2007; Figueras et al., 2005; Figueras, 2012; Green, 2012; Komorowska, 2004; Martiyniuk & Noijions, 2007; North, 2009; O'Sullivan & Weir, 2011). Thus, to promote transparency and coherence in language education, this issue needs to be taken into consideration by policy makers.

Finally, lecturers in the current study raised the point that the English language proficiency of some Thai English language teachers may be quite low, and this undermines the success of the CEFR implementation in Thai classrooms. As demonstrated in the results of the CEFR-referenced examination, administered by the MoE in 2015, 94 percent of Thai English language teachers were assessed to be at the B1 level or A1 and A2 levels. The critical question to be raised here is how teachers of English could potentially prepare students to be able to reach a certain level, required by the national policy – A1 for primary school students, A2 for secondary grade 3 and B1 for secondary grade 6 – if they do not have this level of proficiency themselves. In Franz and Teo's (2017) study, 99 percent of Thai English teachers agreed that language ability of teachers should be higher than B1 in order to teach students. However, Tsang (2017), suggests that "having a native-like or a high proficiency does not equate to successful teaching" (p. 112). Nevertheless, whether Thai teachers of English have low or high English proficiency, the issue of the minimum English proficiency level for teachers requires further study.

Pedagogical and Policy Recommendations

The current study indicates that the Thai EFL university lecturers may benefit from a CEFR training program to provide CEFR knowledge and practical classroom applications. Suggested areas for training include language teaching and learning applications and the approach underlying the CEFR. Some of the lecturers stated that they need more "practical and concrete examples" for classroom applications. Other areas, such as assessment development, syllabus design, language learning need analysis may also benefit from further training. CEFR-related training programs could bring a clearer picture of CEFR implementation in all domains.

Another recommendation is to establish a peer support network for teachers of English to exchange their knowledge and discuss any potential issues with the CEFR and its classroom applications. As suggested by Van den Branden (2009), peer support provides room for teachers to discuss their pedagogical practices in relation to theories, experiences and lessons. Minh Ngo (2017)also argued that it

would help teachers to view the linkage between the framework and applications into classrooms. Peer support could be adopted into Thai EFL contexts, as informal discussion could enhance understanding and awareness, which would assist lecturers to successfully integrate the CEFR into their pedagogical practices.

The disparity between the CEFR and the examination-oriented nature of English language education of Thailand is an issue that needs to be considered. The MoE believes that the shift from a traditional teacher-centred method to CLT has increased the quality of English teaching; however, the end product of the English language education system is to prepare students to sit a multiple choice examination. This critical issue, which is deeply embedded in English language education in Thailand, needs to be taken into consideration by administrators and policy makers to transform language education to be more aligned with the communicative use of the language.

Future Research

To increase the generalizability of the current research, similar studies should be conducted with different stakeholders such as language teachers, administrators, policy makers and students; and in different contexts such as universities, primary and secondary schools. This would provide a broader understanding of the perceptions of the CEFR and issues related to its implementation. Further research might also employ data triangulation to bring more multidimensional results. For instance, qualitative data could be collected from different sources, including document analysis, classroom observation and student interviews. A questionnaire might be of importance in collecting qualitative data from a great number of participants. These data could then be triangulated to form a coherent overall picture (Creswell, 2014). Such an analysis would increase the validity of the current results. Another important area for further research is a pre-service teacher training program and development. That is, following CEFR training, what are the roles of the institutions in ensuring that pre-service teachers successfully implement the CEFR in their classrooms? As stated by one lecturer, the CEFR has been influential in tertiary education, but at the primary and secondary level it has not yet been brought into focus.

Conclusion

The current qualitative interview study was conducted with the objective to investigate Thai EFL lecturers' overall understanding of the CEFR and the

influence of the CEFR on English language education in Thailand. The findings indicate that Thai EFL university lecturers have a reasonably good understanding of the CEFR for the aspects of assessment, the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency, and language teaching and learning applications. However, the Thai EFL lecturers appeared to have little understanding of the approach underlying the CEFR. The attitudes of the Thai EFL lecturers towards the CEFR were also mixed. The context of Thai classrooms was viewed as being one of the main factors undermining the CEFR implementation. Other aspects, such as less focus on CLT, abstractness of the CEFR descriptors and the low language abilities of Thai English teachers were also reported as being issues undermining the implementation of the CEFR in Thailand. Although the CEFR is the comprehensive guideline for language teaching and learning, the participants in this study view its influence in Thailand as being restricted to policy and assessment. The CEFR may therefore be a guideline for policy makers, rather than for practitioner-teachers. Ultimately, rather than adopting a new language education policy such as the CEFR to increase the standard of English language education, the most practical solution is perhaps to first resolve critical ongoing problems that are deeply rooted in the English language education system, particularly within Thailand.

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