

Insights into English proficiency: The analysis of test results among undergraduates in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Despite Thailand's 2014 educational reform, which introduced the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to enhance English proficiency, achievement levels among university students remain relatively low. Data-driven evidence is therefore essential for identifying learners' specific weaknesses and informing curriculum and instructional design in higher education. This study examines areas for improvement in English skills among three groups of undergraduate students based on CEFR levels: Group 1 (Starter and Pre-A1), Group 2 (A1 and A1+), and Group 3 (A2 and A2+). The data consist of English proficiency test results from 6,618 undergraduates who took the UP-STEP, an adaptive standardized test of English proficiency assessment, during the 2022 academic year. The analysis employed thematic analysis to identify recurring problem areas, followed by frequency analysis to determine their prevalence. Three key domains emerged: listening, vocabulary, and grammar. The findings reveal that Group 1 struggled with basic wh-questions, verb meanings (e.g., live, like), and possessive constructions using have. Group 2 showed weaknesses in listening to clock time, vocabulary related to weather and daily activities, and expressing duration. Group 3 experienced difficulties with tag questions, vocabulary describing change, and perfect continuous tenses. These results offer empirical insights to support proficiency-level-specific curriculum development in Thai higher education.

Keywords: CEFR; English proficiency test; english skills; undergraduate students

Received:
25 September 2025

Revised:
20 December 2025

Accepted:
5 January 2026

Published:
30 January 2026

How to cite (in APA style):

Sriwichai, C., Duangfai, C., Paicharoen, N., & Yuensak, S. (n.d.). Insights into English proficiency: The analysis of test results among undergraduates in Thailand. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(3), 630-644. <https://doi.org/10.17509/hv44am08>

INTRODUCTION

The teaching and learning of English in Thailand have long been a critical issue. Policymakers, educators, content developers, and academic publishers have expressed concern about Thai students' performance, as their English test results consistently fall short of expected standards. National assessments, such as the O-NET (Ordinary National Education Test) in English, reveal unsatisfactory scores nationwide (Mala, 2016). Similarly, university students' English proficiency levels are categorized as basic users (A1 and A2) according to the CEFR framework, which corresponds to the abilities typically seen in primary and lower secondary school students within the Thai education system (Waluyo, 2019). As a result, a new

policy on English language teaching and learning was introduced in 2016. Intending to improve students' English proficiency at all levels, the Thai Ministry of Education adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a guideline for curriculum design and instructional management.

In 2019, the University of Phayao established a policy aligned with the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation's directive to enhance students' English proficiency. University executives anticipate that, following the implementation of this policy, students will be equipped to utilize English for academic pursuits and access global knowledge. Furthermore, upon

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graduation, these students should be proficient in English, enabling them to excel in their careers and contribute to the nation's economic growth within the context of international competition. To operationalize this policy, the University of Phayao issued an announcement in May 2019 requiring undergraduate students to achieve CEFR B1 proficiency in English.

According to the document "Using the CEFR: Principles of Good Practice" (2011), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a standard developed by the Council of Europe that describes language learners' abilities in speaking, reading, listening, and writing across six reference levels. These levels are divided into three main categories: basic user (A1 and A2), intermediate user (B1 and B2), and proficient user (C1 and C2). Consequently, the CEFR B1 level specified in the policies of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, and the University of Phayao, implies that students are expected to possess sufficient general English knowledge for their future careers or further education.

The handbook "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment" (Council of Europe, 2001) provides a concise definition of CEFR B1. It is stated that the person who achieves CEFR B1 level should be "able to understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. That person can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst traveling in an area where the language is spoken and should also be able to produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Lastly, they should be able to describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions, and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans" (24).

To ensure that all graduating students meet this criterion, the university requires students to present an English proficiency test result at or above the B1 level. Acceptable tests include IELTS, TOEFL IBT, TOEFL ITP, or the University of Phayao Standard Test of English Proficiency (UP-STEP), an adaptive computer-based test developed with reference to the CEFR. After taking the UP-STEP, students receive a certification indicating their proficiency level, along with feedback on their strengths and areas for improvement. This feedback is crucial for students' effective language development and helps the university and instructors design courses and activities tailored to students' needs. However, students' strengths and areas for improvement have not been systematically analyzed.

Therefore, this research aims to analyze these valuable academic records. The findings will provide university and ministry policymakers, as well as English teachers, with data-driven insights to

enhance learning outcomes, design appropriate English courses, and create more effective learning activities for L2 university students in the Thai context.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

To address the failure of language formation, the CEFR framework was implemented. North (2007) explains that the Council of Europe developed the CEFR between 1993 and 1996. During the symposium, the council primarily sought to assess the feasibility of aligning language courses and assessments across Europe through a common framework. This is because they found that the examination certificates issued by schools and institutions are not very transparent or coherent. North states that CEFR is developed with three main aims. The first is to establish a metalanguage common across educational sectors, national and linguistic boundaries, that can be used to discuss the 5 objectives and language levels. It is believed that if this objective is achieved, practitioners can easily help learners develop their language skills. The second aim relates to practitioners' current practice, particularly in relation to learners' practical language-learning needs, the setting of suitable objectives, and the tracking of learner progress. Lastly, the council aims to reach an agreement on common reference points based on the work on objectives carried out in the Council of Europe's Modern Languages projects since the 1970s.

Apart from the background and objectives of the CEFR symposium, North (2007) also discusses a descriptive scheme, which is considered the core of the CEFR and explains that the CEFR is a descriptive scheme that defines relevant language activities and qualities, as well as a set of common reference levels that describe learners' proficiency at six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. Westhoff (2007) believes that CEFR can solve problems occurring in traditional English classrooms—the classrooms which focus mostly on grammar and fail in stimulating the students' 6 language formation process. He backs up his point by showing how CEFR descriptors focus more on "what learners at a certain level can do" (676). The way CEFR scales emphasize "the expansion of the lexical repertoire, counterbalanced by decreasing tolerance of deviations from grammatical norms" (676) makes the criterion fit well with insights from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and cognitive psychology research.

Figueras (2012) also points out the advantages of the CEFR in two main areas. Firstly, the advantage of using reference-level labels is that they are very useful, as they can serve as a language criterion for governments, policymakers, and testing institutions. Secondly, CEFR reference descriptors are used to draft objectives, targets, and outcomes

for language learning programs across different contexts and for various uses and purposes. Figueras believes that, with the new version of objectives, targets, and outcomes for language courses, the traditional ways of teaching and assessment must be discarded. Teachers need to teach students using an action-oriented approach that aligns with the “can do” descriptors.

In 2018, the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment: Companion Volume with New Descriptors” was published in both English and French to update the 2001 CEFR version. This version introduced the pre-A1 level, a descriptor for individuals whose proficiency lies midway between A1 and A2. Pre-A1 descriptors are mainly related to receptive skills, both reading and listening. Reception of words is expected with visual stimuli, aids, gestures, and/or body language that help understanding. This is aligned with teaching and learning theories for young learners. For productive skills, it is expected to utter or use individual words and simple formulaic expressions such as ‘Excuse me’, ‘Sorry’, ‘Thanks’, and ‘No, thank you’. At this level, learners may use common techniques, such as a dictionary, a picture dictionary, or body language, to ensure they are understood (Alexiou & Stathopoulou, 2021).

Additionally, descriptors across levels A1 to C2 were revised. These revisions primarily focused on eliminating references to outdated technology, including sign language, and updating descriptors referring to native speakers. The CEFR has gained substantial importance in Europe, primarily due to its adoption by the European Council as the Linguistic Competence Indicator (Savski, 2020). This policy encourages all EU citizens to acquire proficiency in two foreign languages in addition to their native language (European Council, 2002).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the Thai Context

Beyond its influence in Europe, the CEFR has also had a global impact. Savski (2020) attributes this to the practices of major English language teaching (ELT) textbook publishers and testing organizations, such as Cambridge English and the British Council, which utilize the CEFR to define the difficulty levels of their exams and instructional materials. The adoption of the CEFR by these global institutions is described as a form of “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson, 2013) or part of the broader “ELT industry” (Block et al., 2012). The connection between the CEFR and the reinforcement of English is evident in countries like Thailand, where locally developed materials have been supplanted by CEFR-aligned international textbooks, and assessments have shifted to a CEFR-based framework.

In addition to English language teaching organizations, the Ministry of Education plays a pivotal role in this initiative. In 2014, Thailand underwent an educational reform, during which the Ministry of Education introduced a policy to implement the CEFR across language curricula, learning objectives, testing, assessment, and English teaching. The goal of this policy is to raise students’ academic proficiency to higher CEFR levels.

However, Savski (2020) argues that implementing the CEFR in Thailand poses greater challenges than in European countries or other Asian nations due to two key factors. The first factor pertains to the presence of regional languages on the periphery. Thailand is home to numerous indigenous and immigrant languages, which coexist alongside Thai, a language that itself exhibits significant variation from the standardized Central accent. The second factor concerns the nation’s historical context. Savski notes that, as a country that has maintained political independence throughout its history and was never colonized by the British, French, or Dutch, Thailand has been built around a single national language, leaving little room for English to assume an official role.

Foley (2019) suggests that, beyond issues related to language ecology, the challenges may also stem from Thai learners’ low English proficiency. He cites the 2017 Education First Standard English Test, which ranked Thailand 53rd out of 80 non-native English-speaking countries, with a score of 49.78. Pollack (2018) concurs with Foley but emphasizes Thai teachers’ low English proficiency. According to Pollack, Thai teachers, like their counterparts in other countries, also display limited English skills. Out of 40,000 teachers who took the Cambridge English Standard Test administered by the Thai Ministry of Education, only six scored at the C level, 350 at the B level, with the majority at the advanced beginner level.

Dhanasobhon (2006) contends that in the Thai context, limited English proficiency among students and teachers is not the only obstacle. For successful educational reform, policymakers must also focus on enhancing teachers’ language training, improving students’ motivation, and expanding opportunities for English use beyond the classroom. Piamsai (2023) concurs with Dhanasobhon, particularly regarding the final point. She emphasizes that Thai English learners have limited opportunities to practice productive skills outside the classroom, in contrast to the more frequent exposure to receptive skills through various forms of media in daily life. This lack of practice likely undermines students’ confidence when required to produce language, both in spoken and written forms.

Kanchai (2019), however, suggests that challenges may arise from teachers’ understanding and perspectives on the CEFR, as well as their classroom implementation of this framework. His

research revealed that Thai secondary school English teachers often lack sufficient knowledge of the CEFR and view it primarily as a testing system mandated by the Ministry of Education. In contrast, the understanding among university lecturers is somewhat different. Kanchai (2019) found that Thai EFL university lecturers have a relatively strong grasp of the CEFR in the areas of assessment, language teaching, and language learning. Nevertheless, they express concerns about the impact of the CEFR on English education in Thailand, particularly in large, typically crowded classroom settings with students of varying language abilities and limited opportunities for language exposure and oral practice.

English Proficiency Test of the University of Phayao

According to the University of Phayao's announcement, beginning with the 2022 academic year, all undergraduate students must pass an English proficiency test based on the CEFR, attaining at least a B1 level, to qualify for graduation. The designated test is the UP-STEP (University of Phayao Standard Test of English Proficiency), an adaptive, computer-based test developed by DynEd International, Inc. This test adjusts its items based on the student's performance; students demonstrating strong skills progress more quickly to higher-level tasks, while those at lower proficiency levels encounter items at a slower pace. The test concludes when a student misses a significant number of items or requires further development in areas necessary for higher language proficiency within the learning sequence. The Placement Test provides a quick assessment of various language skills, focusing primarily on listening comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar, and is aligned with the CEFR. Upon completion, students receive their test results and a certificate with a detailed report highlighting strengths and areas for improvement across three core skills.

The Results of the English Proficiency Test and Students' English Skill Improvement

Jimenez et al. (2017) suggested that the results of English standardized tests could be an opportunity to improve the English program and enhance students' skills. They conducted a case study to investigate the relationship between students' scores on national standardized English tests and the effects of those scores on language program improvement. The standardized test in the previous study was administered to 440 Industrial Engineering students using the national standardized English test. The test scores showed that most students (88.8%) were at the pre-A1 to A1 level of the CEFR. This finding raised the university's concern about students' English language skills and

launched the initial plans to help students learn English better.

Mafu and Sappapan (2023) conducted a study to investigate the CEFR level and identify problems encountered by 30 Thai undergraduate students taking the proficiency test at a school of Management Technology at a private university in Nakhon Ratchasima. The research instruments were the Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT), participants' demographic information, and interview questions. The results revealed that most participants reached the A2 level of the CEFR, followed by B1 and A1. None of the participants achieved C1 and C2 levels. Regarding participants' problems during the proficiency test, especially in the Listening part, they had difficulty with unclear and fast accents, understanding conversations, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Moreover, they struggled with vocabulary and grammar structure in the Use of English part.

Another study investigating the English proficiency of Thai undergraduate students based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the differences and similarities of problems found in the online placement test between good- and poor-English-grade students was Phong-a-ran et al. (2019). The participants in this study were 100 students at a private university in Khon Kaen, Thailand. The research instruments were the Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT) and an interview. The findings indicated that the majority of participants were at the A1 level (42%), followed by A2 (38%), B1 (9%), A0 (7%), and B2 (4%). No participants achieved the C1 and C2 levels. In the interview on problems during the online placement test, the students stated that most of the problems they encountered were caused by linguistic factors, such as lexical, phonological, and orthographic factors, followed by affective factors, such as motivation to read and anxiety.

METHOD

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' English proficiency. Content analysis was employed to systematically identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses in students' English skills, as reflected in their UP-STEP certificates, enabling in-depth interpretation of skill-specific problem areas. Subsequently, descriptive statistics, specifically frequency analysis, were used to quantify the prevalence of identified weaknesses across proficiency groups. This combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques enabled both detailed categorization of language difficulties and objective comparison of their distribution, thereby enhancing the validity and practical relevance of the

findings for curriculum development and instructional planning.

Respondents

The subjects of this study were data from the UP-STEP certificates of students from the 2022 academic year, focusing on their English proficiency levels and areas for improvement. A total of 6,618 datasets, representing the complete population of test-takers from the 2022 academic year, were analyzed. Each dataset comprises six to eight entries describing weaknesses at three proficiency levels: Starter – Pre-A1 (2561 data sets), A1-A1+ (3382 data sets), and A2-A2+ (675 data sets), due to the importance of improving their proficiency to meet the university's graduation benchmark of CEFR B1 level.

Procedure of data collection

The data were sourced from the UP-STEP certificates of students during the 2022 academic year. At the onset of the research project, the researchers obtained permission from the Language Center, School of Liberal Arts, University of Phayao, to access the database containing these certificates. Simultaneously, the research team sought ethical approval. To maintain the confidentiality and privacy of participants' data, the database custodian removed all identifying information before researchers' access. Subsequently, the anonymized data were extracted from the database and securely recorded as electronic data on a password-protected computer.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data of students' weak areas of English skills from the database were examined using content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). The individual test report scores of students were categorized into three proficiency levels: starter, pre-A1, A1-A1+, and A2-A2+. The principal themes of students' weaknesses at each level, as determined from the test reports, were delineated and classified into listening, vocabulary, and grammar. Three raters coded a subtheme of the data to evaluate the coding schemes (see *the code for the subtheme, the lists of subthemes, and detailed descriptions and examples of each in Appendix A: Thematic Analysis Patterns*). Following this evaluation, the entire dataset was coded according to the established schemes. Finally, the coders conducted a thorough review of the coding consistency to confirm reliability. After the content analysis, the data were quantitatively analysed using descriptive statistics. The data in each category were counted to figure out the frequency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to examine areas for improvement in English learning among Thai undergraduate

students across different proficiency levels (i.e., Starter–Pre A1, A1–A1+, and A2–A2+), as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The research targets three primary areas of development—listening, vocabulary, and grammar—based on the feedback from the University of Phayao Standard Test of English Proficiency (UP-STEP) certificates.

Areas of Improvement of the Students with Starter – Pre-A1 Proficiency

Areas of Improvement in the Listening

Figure 1 shows that the students with starter – pre-A1 proficiency had top five areas of improvement in listening to basic wh-questions such as where, why, what, and how (3562 entries or 39.36% of all entries), basic questions about family (1,114 entries or 12.31%), description of basic actions (896 entries or 9.90%), cause and effect communication (868 entries or 9.60%), and questions and description about languages that are/are not spoken (864 entries or 9.54%). According to the figure, students with starter and pre-A1 proficiency levels might not be familiar with listening to Wh-question words used in the tests, which were all types of Wh-words: what, when, where, why, and how, in unfamiliar topics. Another factor driving the most frequent weakness in listening with Wh-words is students' low listening ability (Jaya et al. 2021).

Areas of Improvement in the Vocabulary

In terms of vocabulary, Figure 2 shows that the lists were half as long as those for listening skills, and there were only four important areas of improvement with more than 200 entries. Those were the meanings of the verb 'live' and 'like' (1771 entries or 64.12%), basic numbers from one to twenty (460 entries or 16.65%), the basic greeting (303 entries or 10.97%), and simple requests for help (216 entries or 7.82%). Figure 2 indicates a notable correlation between vocabulary errors and listening skills. For instance, the most common errors appear to result from students confusing similar sounds. This suggests that such mistakes may stem from a combination of limited listening ability and unfamiliarity with vocabulary.

Areas of Improvement in Grammar

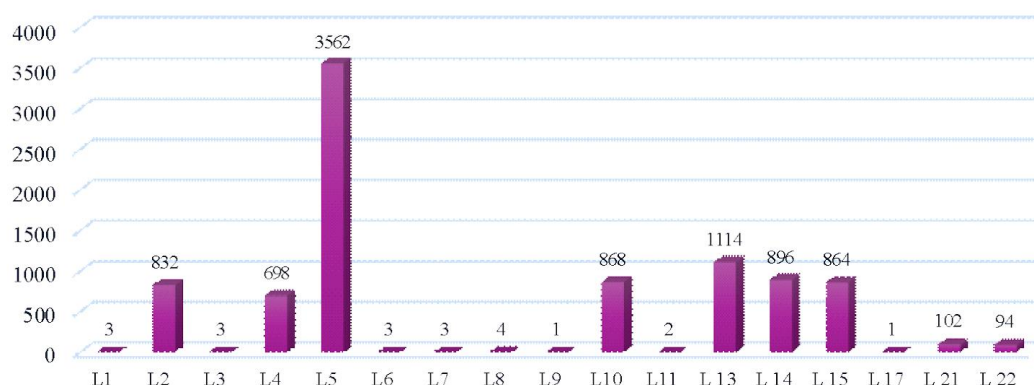
The students with starter–pre-A proficiency had 11 subthemes of areas for improvement in grammar knowledge (see Figure 3). Of 11 subthemes, six showed high frequency, whereas five showed low frequency. The highest frequency was found in G 9—verb 'have' for showing possession or ownership (1,743 entries or 24.87%). The other subthemes which were also founded with high frequency were the use of the verb 'be' (1,393 entries or 19.87%), basic present-tense verb forms (1,143 entries or 16.31%), the grammar used in

questions asking about language ability (1,123 entries or 16.02%), using personal pronouns (870

entries or 12.41%), and prepositions including prepositions (713 entries or 10.17%).

Figure 1

Areas of Improvement in the Listening of the Students with Starter – Pre-A1 Proficiency



Note

L 1 - Times of the day

L 2 - What people can and can't do

L 3 - Times people do daily activities

L 4 - Clock times

L 5 - Basic wh-questions

L 6 - Frequencies of activities

L 7 - Questions about transportation methods

L 8 - Wh-questions about a sequence of actions

L 9 - Sequence adverbs and sequence of events with 'before' and 'after.'

L 10 - Cause and effect communication

L 11 - The location of businesses in a city

L 13 - Basic questions about family

L 14 - Descriptions of basic actions and answering questions

L 15 - Questions and description about languages that are/are not spoken

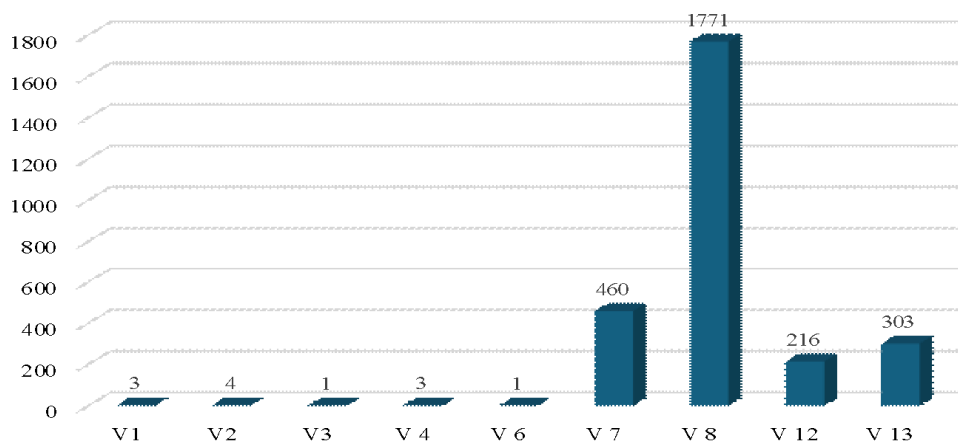
L 17 - Paraphrasing sentences

L 21 - Describing someone's living situation

L 22 - Sentences about favorite school subjects

Figure 2

Areas of Improvement in the Vocabulary of the Students with Starter - Pre-A 1 Proficiency



Note

V1 - The location of geometrical shapes

V2 - The vocabulary related to the weather and daily activities

V3 - Common business expressions

V4 - Questions about businesses in a city and their functions

V6 - Answering questions about the seasons of the year

V7 - Basic numbers from one to twenty

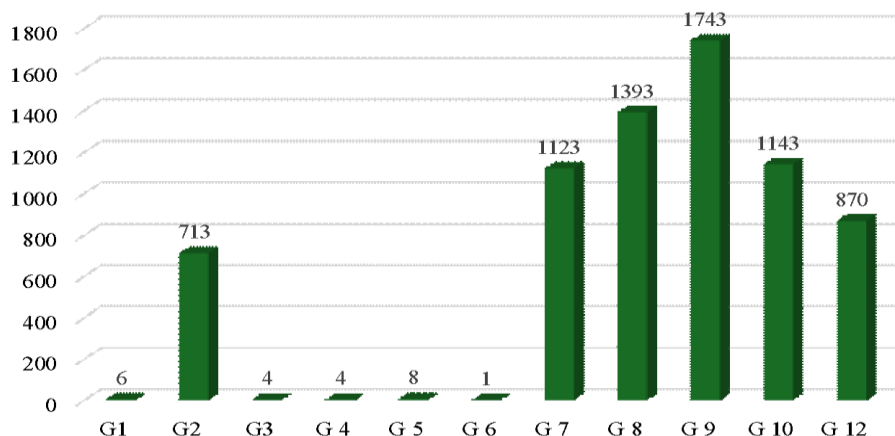
V8 - The meaning of the verbs 'live' and 'like'

V12 - Simple requests for help

V13 - The basic greeting

Figure 3

Areas of Improvement in Grammar of the Students with Starter – Pre-A1 Proficiency



Note

- | | |
|---|---|
| G 1 - Gerunds and infinitives to join verbs | G 7 - The grammar used in questions asking about language ability |
| G 2 - Preposition | G 8 - The use of the verb be |
| G 3 - Grammar for expressing duration | G 9 - Verb 'have' for showing possession or ownership |
| G 4 - Superlative adjectives | G 10 - Basic present-tense verb forms |
| G 5 - Describing past events/ actions | G 12 - Personal pronouns in sentences |
| G 6 - The future from 'going to.' | |

As the top three most frequently found entries concern verb forms, this suggests that verb forms could be a major challenge for students at the CEFR starter level. It was in line with the previous studies suggesting that using verbs 'have' and 'modal verbs' appeared problematic for low English proficiency (Ahmed, 2021; Karrim et al., 2015). Based on the findings, a clear overarching pattern emerges: students at the Starter–Pre-A1 CEFR level struggle mainly with fundamental language comprehension and the construction of meaning, rather than with individual language skills in isolation. Across listening, vocabulary, and grammar, students struggle to interpret basic communicative functions such as asking questions, expressing possession, describing actions, and identifying cause–and–effect relationships. These findings suggest that learners have a limited ability to integrate linguistic forms with their communicative purposes, which is essential for early-stage language development.

A strong interrelationship between listening and vocabulary weaknesses is evident. The most frequent listening difficulties involve comprehension of basic Wh-questions and familiar daily-life topics, while vocabulary errors are concentrated on high-frequency verbs and basic lexical items. Many of these vocabulary errors appear to stem from phonological confusion, indicating that limited listening discrimination contributes directly to lexical misunderstanding. This overlap suggests that deficiencies in listening skills significantly constrain vocabulary development at this proficiency level.

In grammar, the dominant trend centers on difficulties with verb-related structures, particularly the use of be, have, and basic present-tense forms. These grammatical challenges frequently occur in functional contexts such as expressing ownership, asking about language ability, and forming simple questions. When considered alongside listening and vocabulary findings, verb-related errors emerge as a systemic issue, reflecting learners' limited control over both the form and function of verbs in communicative use.

Overall, the integrated findings suggest that the key challenge for Starter–Pre-A1 learners lies in their limited ability to construct meaning from language input across skills. Difficulties in listening impede accurate vocabulary recognition, which, in turn, affects grammatical accuracy, especially verb usage. These interrelated weaknesses highlight the need for instructional approaches that emphasize integrated, meaning-focused learning rather than treating listening, vocabulary, and grammar as separate skill areas.

Areas of Improvement of the Students with A1 – A1+ Proficiency

Areas of Improvement in Listening

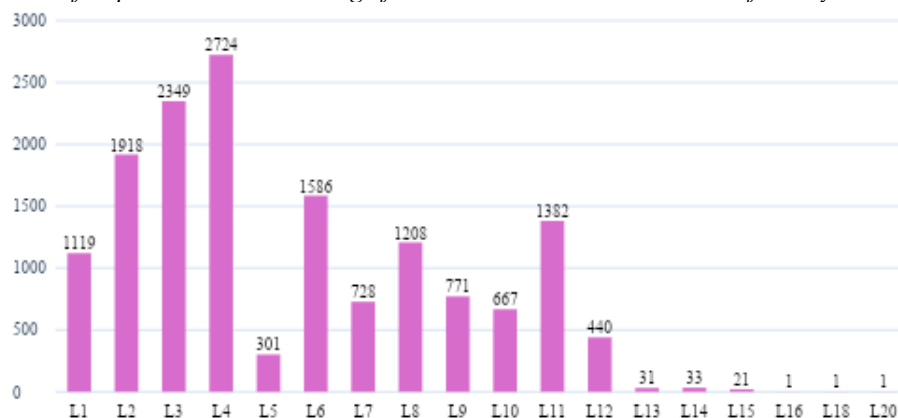
In Figure 4, the students with A1–A1+ proficiency had 18 subthemes of areas for improvement in listening skills. Overall, 12 subthemes had high frequency, ranging from 301 to 2,724 entries, while six subthemes had low frequency, ranging from 1 to 33 entries. Among the 12 subthemes with high frequency, seven had more than 1,000 entries. Those included clock times (2724 entries or 17.83%),

times people do daily activities (2349 entries or 15.37%), what people can and cannot do (1918 entries or 12.55%), frequencies of activities (1586 entries or 10.38%), the location of businesses in a

city (1382 entries or 9.04%), wh-questions about a sequence of action (1208 entries or 7.90%), and, lastly, times of the day (1116 entries or 7.30%).

Figure 4

Areas of Improvement in Listening of the Students with A1 – A1+ Proficiency



Note

- L 1 - Times of the day
- L 2 - What people can and can't do
- L 3 - Times people do daily activities
- L 4 - Clock times
- L 5 - Basic wh-questions
- L 6 - Frequencies of activities
- L 7 - Questions about transportation methods
- L 8 - Wh-questions about a sequence of actions
- L 9 - Sequence adverbs and sequence of events with 'before' and 'after.'
- L 10 - Cause and effect are communicated
- L 11 - The location of businesses in a city
- L 12 - Duration of an activity
- L 13 - Basic questions about family
- L 14 - Descriptions of basic actions and answering questions
- L 15 - Questions and description about languages that are/are not spoken
- L 16 - Sentences with tag questions
- L 18 - Wh-questions describing actions
- L 20 - Listening to self-introductions

Listening to English time expressions, which are most frequently used, proved challenging for beginner-level students due to structural differences between English and Thai time-telling systems, compounded by their limited proficiency in English. This observation is corroborated by a previous study that found that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners frequently make errors in expressing time in English, primarily due to confusion about the word order in English time expressions and insufficient familiarity with the target language (Fanani et al., 2023).

Areas of Improvement in the Vocabulary

Figure 5 indicates the high areas of vocabulary improvement observed among A1-A1+ level students, exceeding 200 entries, encompassed terms associated with daily activities in diverse weather conditions (1,448 entries or 37.33%), geometric shapes (1,199 entries or 30.91%), standard business expressions (576 entries or 14.85%), inquiries regarding urban business operations (279 entries or 7.19%), and sentences concerning weather and seasons (236 entries or 6.08%) respectively.

Interestingly, the findings depicted in this figure contrast with those presented in Figure 2. Specifically, the entries identified as problematic for

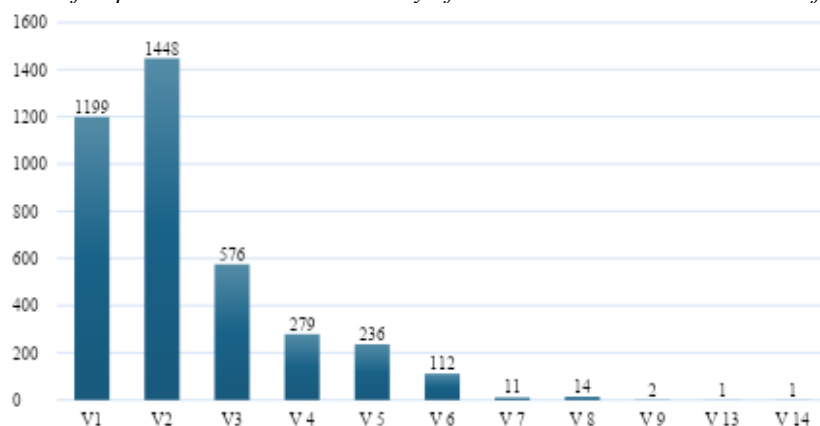
A1 and A1+ level students were predominantly low-frequency subthemes, which pertained to learners at the starter to pre-A1 proficiency levels. This could be attributed to the administration of an adaptive test, in which both the number of questions and the difficulty level are adjusted based on the candidates' demonstrated abilities. Candidates who answered correctly were presented with more complex questions. For learners at the starter to pre-A1 proficiency levels, their number of questions might not have been as extensive compared to those at A1 and A1+ levels, and their question sets likely focused mainly on basic vocabulary, offering limited exposure to items involving specialized or technical terminology, such as entries related to geometric, scientific, and business terms (V1-V6), which the initial group of testers infrequently encountered.

Areas of Improvement in Grammar

Figure 6 illustrates the 17 subthemes that emerged regarding improvements in students' grammar at A1-A1+ proficiency. Generally, there were three subthemes with high frequency (ranging above 1,000 entries), whereas ten subthemes showed low frequency (ranging from 1 to 55 entries).

Figure 5

Areas of Improvement in the Vocabulary of the Students with A1 – A1+ Proficiency

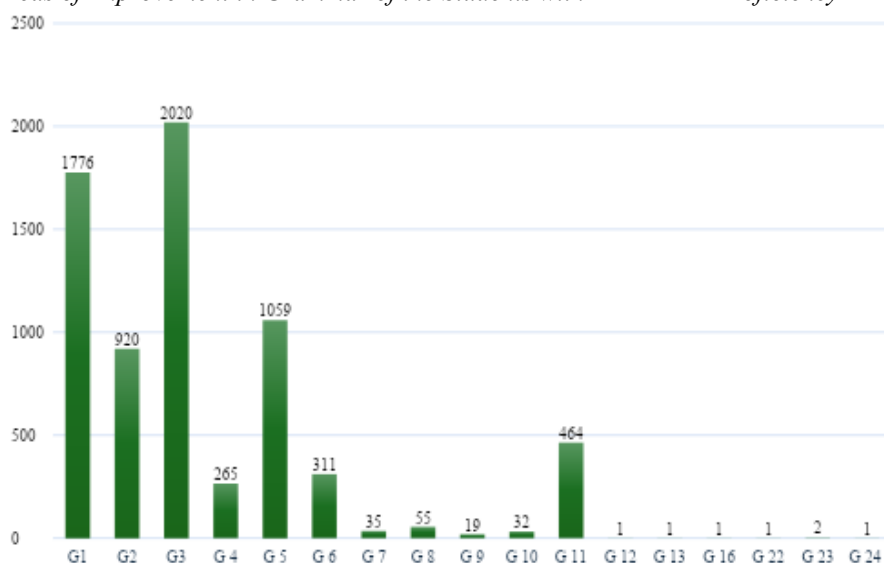


Note

- | | |
|--|---|
| V 1 - The location of geometrical shapes | V 7 - Basic numbers from one to twenty |
| V 2 - The vocabulary related to the weather and daily activities | V 8 - The meaning of the verbs 'live' and 'like' |
| V 3 - Common business expressions | V 9 - Large numbers |
| V 4 - Questions about businesses in a city and their functions | V 13 - The basic greeting |
| V 5 - Sentences about the weather and season | V 14 - The word 'approach' for presenting options |
| V 6 - Answering questions about the seasons of the year | |

Figure 6

Areas of Improvement in Grammar of the Students with A1 – A1+ Proficiency



Note

- | | |
|---|---|
| G 1 - Gerunds and infinitives to join verbs | G 10 - Basic present-tense verb forms |
| G 2 - Preposition | G 11 - Using irregular verb forms in past actions |
| G 3 - Grammar for expressing duration | G 12 - Personal pronouns in sentences |
| G 4 - Superlative adjectives | G 13 - Verbs for cognitive processes |
| G 5 - Describing past events/ actions | G 16 - Using present perfect continuous to describe actions that began in the past and are continuing |
| G 6 - The future from 'going to' | G 22 - Present perfect passive verbs |
| G 7 - The grammar used in questions asking about language ability | G 23 - A sequence of events using past perfect and past simple |
| G 8 - The use of the verb be | G 24 - Conditional sentences (If clause type 3) |
| G 9 - Verb 'have' for showing possession or ownership | |

For grammar points, the top three areas of improvement for A1-A1+ students were the meaning of grammar for telling the duration of time (2,020 entries or 29.01%), using gerunds and

infinitives to join verbs (1,776 entries or 25.51%), and describing past events (1,059 entries or 15.21%). The analysis of grammar areas for improvement confirmed the result of listening skill

weaknesses, reflecting that A1-A1+ students made common errors in using time in daily activities. Another weak point was the use of gerunds and infinitives. Previous studies reaffirmed that, even though Thai learners have learned to use infinitives and gerunds with various common verbs, they remain confused about their use (Keawchaum & Pongpairoj, 2017), and EFL learners cannot distinguish between the constructions of gerunds and infinitives (Abdullah & Hameed, 2019).

Overall, the results indicate that learners at the A1-A1+ levels are progressing beyond basic language recognition and beginning to develop functional and context-based language use, especially for expressing time, everyday activities, and real-life communicative situations. Across listening, vocabulary, and grammar, difficulties are no longer limited to isolated language forms but instead emerge when learners are required to process sequenced information, temporal relationships, and situational meaning. This suggests that learners at this level are developing foundational competence but face challenges in integrating linguistic elements into coherent communicative understanding.

In listening, the dominant trend centres on difficulties with time-related expressions and routine-based communication. These results indicate that, while learners are exposed to everyday topics, they struggle to decode spoken input that involves structural complexity, information ordering, and abstract temporal concepts. In particular, the challenge of interpreting English time expressions reflects cross-linguistic interference between Thai and English structures, compounded by limited automaticity in listening comprehension. These findings reinforce the view that listening difficulties at the A1-A1+ level stem from processing demands rather than unfamiliar topics alone.

Vocabulary-related trends show a clear shift toward difficulties with expanded lexical domains required at this proficiency level. Students demonstrated notable weaknesses in vocabulary related to daily activities under varying conditions, geometric concepts, business-related expressions, and weather-related descriptions. Unlike lower-proficiency learners, A1-A1+ students encounter problems with low-frequency but conceptually demanding vocabulary, which aligns with the assessment's adaptive nature. As learners progress, they are exposed to more specialized and functional lexical items, revealing gaps in semantic precision and contextual usage rather than basic word recognition.

In grammar, the overarching pattern highlights persistent challenges with temporal and structural complexity. The most frequent areas of improvement involved expressing duration, using gerunds and infinitives, and describing past events. These grammatical difficulties align closely with

listening weaknesses related to time and sequencing, suggesting that learners struggle to coordinate grammatical form with meaning in communicative contexts. The confusion surrounding gerunds and infinitives further indicates that although learners may have been introduced to these forms, they have trouble applying them accurately in extended or meaningful language use.

Taken together, the integrated findings suggest that A1-A1+ learners' primary challenge lies in meaning integration across skills, particularly when language involves time reference, sequencing, and functional application. Listening difficulties constrain vocabulary comprehension, while grammatical uncertainty—especially in verb-related constructions—limits learners' ability to express meaning accurately. These trends underscore the need for instructional approaches that emphasize integrated skill development, contextualized language use, and explicit support for temporal and functional language, rather than isolated practice of individual language components.

Areas of Improvement of the Students with A2 – A2+ Proficiency

Areas of Improvement in Listening

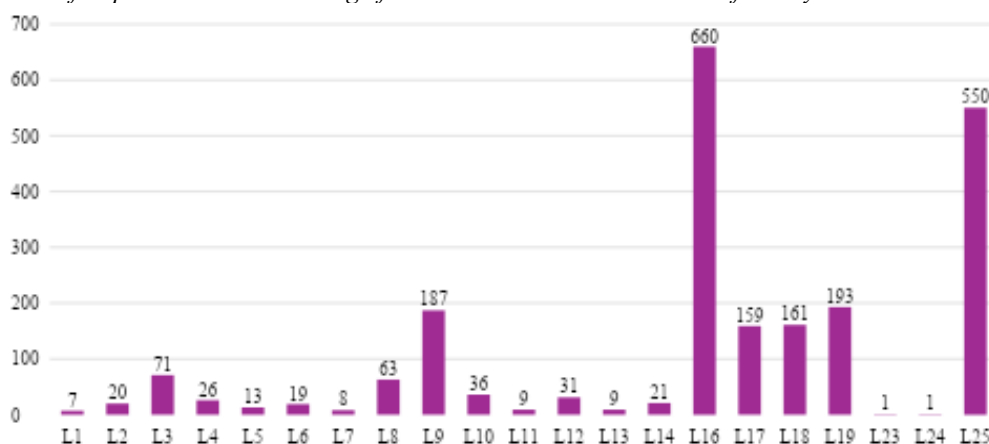
For A2-A2+ English proficiency students, the most common areas in which examinees should improve in listening were tag questions and descriptions of scientific and factual information. As shown in Figure 7, the listening skill on tag questions had the largest increase among the 25 subthemes, with 660 entries (29.40%), followed by the area concerning descriptions of scientific and factual information, with 550 entries (24.50%). This could be because of the complex rules of tag questions, such as the use of auxiliary verbs, subject-verb agreement, and different sentence structures. Also, tag questions present different social or pragmatic functions, such as polite requests for information, and information confirmation that could be difficult for EFL learners at the A2-A2+ pre-intermediate level of CEFR. Alotaibi and Alotaibi (2015) explained that EFL learners could overgeneralize the formation rule, partially apply the formation rule, lack subject-agreement knowledge, use the wrong verb forms, and misconstrue the polarity rule when using tag questions. Silvia and Patria (2018) also found that English learners had difficulty engaging in dialogue, as they had problems with using auxiliary verbs and with putting tag questions in affirmative and negative sentences.

Areas of Improvement in Vocabulary

The most common areas of the vocabulary of A2-A2+ examinees that had to be improved, as shown in Figure 8, were related to information about a trend of increasing and decreasing (195 entries or 36.79%), and large numbers (178 entries or 33.58%).

Figure 7

Areas of Improvement in Listening of the Students with A2 – A2+ Proficiency

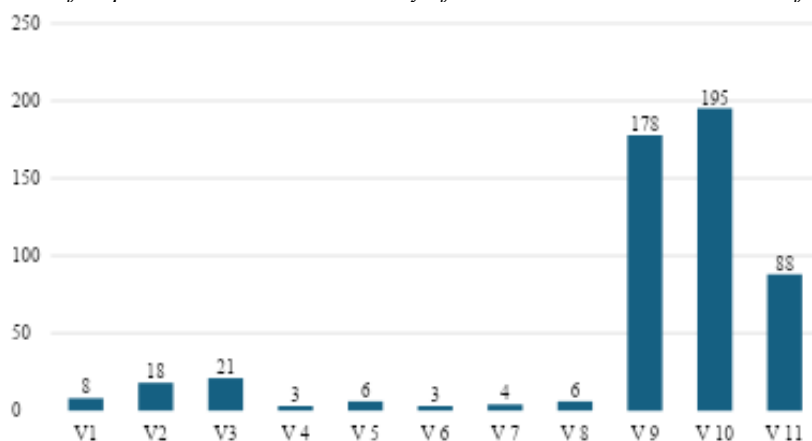


Note

- | | |
|---|--|
| L 1 - Times of the day | L 12 - Duration of an activity |
| L 2 - What people can and can't do | L 13 - Basic questions about family |
| L 3 - Times people do daily activities | L 14 - Descriptions of basic actions and answering questions |
| L 4 - Clock times | L 16 - Sentences with tag questions |
| L 5 - Basic wh-question | L 17 - Paraphrasing sentences |
| L 6 - Frequencies of activities | L 18 - Wh-questions describing actions |
| L 7 - Questions about transportation methods | L 19 - Listening for a reason of action |
| L 8 - Wh-questions about a sequence of actions | L 23 - Descriptions of problems |
| L 9 - Sequence adverbs and sequence of events with 'before' and 'after' | L 24 - Description of Products |
| L 10 - Cause and effect are communicated | L 25 - Listening to scientific and factual information |
| L 11 - The location of businesses in a city | |

Figure 8

Areas of Improvement in the Vocabulary of the Students with A2 – A2+ Proficiency



Note

- | | |
|--|---|
| V 1 - The location of geometrical shapes | V 6 - Answering questions about the seasons of the year |
| V 2 - The vocabulary related to the weather and daily activities | V 7 - Basic numbers from one to twenty |
| V 3 - Common business expressions | V 8 - The meaning of the verbs 'live' and 'like' |
| V 4 - Questions about businesses in a city and their functions | V 9 - Large numbers |
| V 5 - Sentences about the weather and season | V 10 - Information about increases and decreases |
| | V 11 - Verb phrases and verb forms in common business expressions |

Students likely encountered challenges when addressing concepts such as describing trends of growth and decline and discussing large numerical figures, which were probably not regularly encountered in their daily lives. Consequently, they

may have found these terms unfamiliar, which led to difficulties in addressing the corresponding test items effectively. In contrast, topics more closely tied to everyday experiences, such as weather patterns, daily routines, the seasons, and basic

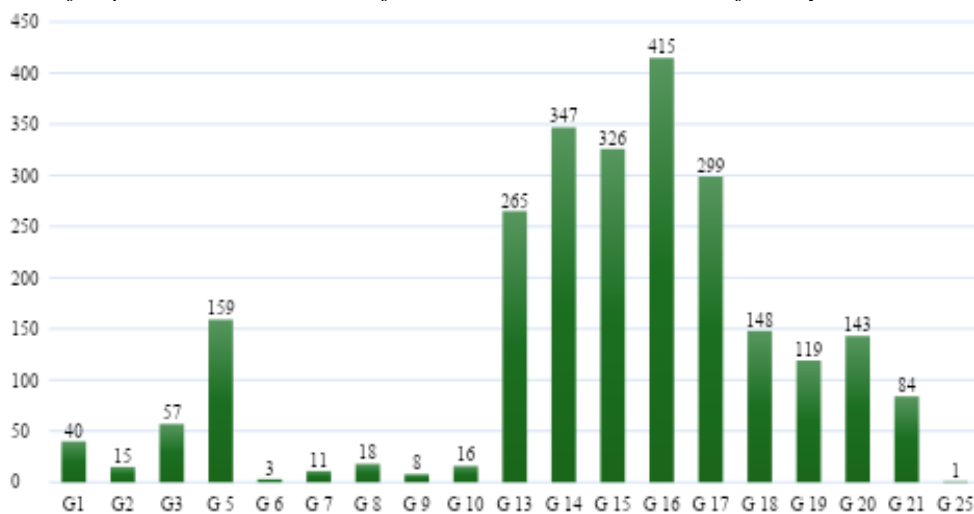
numerical concepts from one to twenty, were more familiar to test takers. Therefore, they performed more proficiently on these test items. This agreed with Ovilia (2019) and Maming et al. (2023). Ovilia (2019) argued that familiarity with the topic correlated with listening comprehension. Students gained higher listening comprehension scores when they listened to more familiar topics. Maming and his team (2023) reaffirmed that using familiar topics could positively promote students' speaking and writing skills.

Areas of Improvement in Grammar

In the grammar area, as depicted in Figure 9, A2–A2+ students showed lower proficiency in the present perfect continuous tense (415 entries) and the negative form of the present perfect tense (299 entries). Other points for improvement were similar to those found in the results of the test takers with A1 and A1+ level—gerund and infinitives (347 entries), followed by proper modals to express meaning to the verb in a sentence (326 entries).

Figure 9

Areas of Improvement in Grammar of the Students with A2 – A2+ Proficiency



Note

- G 1 - Gerunds and infinitives to join verbs
- G 2 - Preposition
- G 3 - Grammar for expressing duration
- G 5 - Describing past events/ actions
- G 6 - The future from 'going to'
- G 7 - The grammar used in questions asking about language ability
- G 8 - The use of the verb be
- G 9 - Verb 'have' for showing possession or ownership
- G 10 - Basic present-tense verb forms
- G 13 - Verbs for cognitive processes
- G 14 - The difference between gerunds and infinitives
- G 15 - Using modals of probability
- G 16 - Using present perfect continuous to describe actions began in the past and are still continuing
- G 17 - Negative form of present perfect
- G 18 - Present passive verbs
- G 19 - Past passive verbs
- G 20 - Adding information with adverb clauses with the word, 'that'
- G 21 - Sentences that describe the duration of an action or event
- G 25 - Sentences about business that have adjective phrases with past participles

The present perfect tense poses challenges for Thai EFL learners at basic levels due to their limited prior knowledge of English, with differences observed in syntactic components and functions between English and their native language. Empirical studies, such as Jubran & Khrais (2023), suggest that EFL students find the present perfect tense more difficult than the simple past tense, possibly due to the grammatical structures of their native language. Moreover, learners frequently misunderstand the functions of the present perfect tense, leading to inaccuracies in its use. This issue stems from their limited acquaintance with English sentence structures (Faeq, 2023).

The findings for students at the A2–A2+ proficiency levels reveal an overarching trend in which areas of improvement are associated with increased linguistic complexity, abstraction, and functional use of language, rather than with everyday communicative content. Across listening, vocabulary, and grammar, learners demonstrate difficulty when language requires them to integrate grammatical form, semantic meaning, and pragmatic function simultaneously, indicating that their interlanguage development is still in transition toward more advanced, pre-intermediate competence.

In listening, the most prominent weaknesses involve tag questions and scientific or factual

descriptions, both of which demand sensitivity to structural rules and pragmatic intent. Difficulties with tag questions reflect learners' limited control over auxiliary verbs, subject-verb agreement, polarity, and sentence structure, as well as challenges in interpreting their social functions, such as confirmation or polite inquiry. Similarly, problems with listening to scientific and information suggest that learners struggle when spoken input is dense, abstract, and less supported by everyday context, requiring higher-level processing beyond surface comprehension.

Vocabulary-related trends further emphasize the role of conceptual unfamiliarity in shaping learners' performance. A2-A2+ students showed notable weaknesses in vocabulary for describing trends of increase and decrease and for large numerical values, which are less frequently encountered in daily communication. In contrast, vocabulary associated with familiar topics, such as weather, routines, and basic numbers, posed fewer difficulties. This pattern underscores the importance of topic familiarity in comprehension and productive language use, suggesting that learners' lexical development at this level is constrained by limited exposure to abstract and academic concepts.

In grammar, the dominant areas of improvement involve tense-aspect distinctions, particularly the present perfect continuous and the negative forms of the present perfect tense, alongside continued difficulties with gerunds, infinitives, and modal verbs. These challenges reflect cross-linguistic differences between English and Thai and indicate that learners have not yet fully internalized the functional meanings associated with complex verb forms. Overall, the integrated findings suggest that A2-A2+ learners' primary challenge lies in applying grammatical knowledge and vocabulary accurately in contexts that require abstract reasoning and pragmatic interpretation, highlighting the need for instruction that emphasizes contextualized grammar, concept-based vocabulary, and meaningful communicative practice.

CONCLUSION

The study examined areas for improvement in English skills of undergraduate students with different levels of English proficiency: Starter (Pre-A1), A1-A1+, and A2- A2+. The results were based on the adaptive computer-based proficiency test, UP-STEP. The emerging areas were divided into three skills: listening, vocabulary, and grammar skills.

At the Starter to pre-A1 level, deficiencies in listening primarily involve basic Wh-questions and family-related inquiries, exacerbated by unfamiliarity with English syntax and low listening aptitude (Jaya et al., 2021). Vocabulary gaps center on basic words like 'live' and 'like', often confused

due to their phonetic similarities, while grammar struggles are evident in verb form usage, particularly with 'have' and modal verbs (Ahmed, 2021; Karrim et al., 2015). Moving to A1-A1+ levels, difficulties persist in understanding time-related topics in listening and in mastering vocabulary related to daily activities and geometrical terms, due to limited vocabulary and comprehension (Fanani et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2017). Grammar challenges include conveying duration using gerunds and infinitives and using prepositions correctly in time and location contexts, underscoring ongoing struggles with English grammar structures (Abdullah & Hameed, 2019; Keawchaum & Pongpairroj, 2017). At A2-A2+ levels, learners face complexities in listening to tag questions and grasping vocabulary related to trends and large numbers, indicative of ongoing difficulties in processing complex linguistic information (Alotaibi & Alotaibi, 2015; Ovilia, 2019). Grammar issues persist with the present perfect continuous tense and negative forms of the present perfect tense, highlighting persistent challenges in mastering tense usage (Jubran & Khrais, 2023; Faeq, 2023).

Taken together, the three proficiency levels reveal a clear developmental continuum in learners' English language challenges, progressing from foundational meaning construction to functional integration and, ultimately, to abstract and pragmatic language use. Across all levels, difficulties are not isolated within single skills but instead reflect learners' evolving ability to integrate form, meaning, and use across listening, vocabulary, and grammar.

Across all three levels, a consistent pattern emerges: as proficiency increases, areas of improvement shift from meaning construction to functional integration and finally to abstract and pragmatic language use. Listening plays a central mediating role at each stage, shaping vocabulary comprehension and grammatical application. These findings collectively underscore the need for integrated, meaning-focused instruction that evolves alongside learners' cognitive and linguistic development, rather than treating listening, vocabulary, and grammar as isolated components.

Based on the cross-level synthesis, the findings have important implications for education policy, teacher training, language assessment, and future research. At the policy level, the results highlight the need for CEFR-aligned curricula that prioritize integrated, meaning-focused language development rather than isolated instruction in grammar or vocabulary, with particular emphasis on listening as a foundational skill that supports overall communicative competence. For teacher training, the findings underscore the importance of preparing teachers to recognize cross-skill interdependence and to implement instructional strategies that

scaffold learners' progression from basic meaning construction to functional and abstract language use, especially in relation to time, sequencing, and pragmatic meaning. In terms of assessment, the results suggest that language tests should move beyond discrete-item measurement and incorporate contextualized tasks that reflect both linguistic and cognitive processing demands across proficiency levels, thereby enhancing diagnostic value and construct validity. Finally, the observed developmental patterns point to the need for further research on longitudinal language development, listening processing mechanisms, and the effectiveness of integrated instructional approaches, as well as comparative studies examining cross-linguistic influences on learners' use of complex and abstract language.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research team would like to express deep gratitude to the School of Liberal Arts at the University of Phayao for the research grant. In addition, we are thankful to the Language Center of the School of Liberal Arts for permission to access the database of examinees' certificates for the University of Phayao Standard Test of English Proficiency (UP-STEP) processed by the adaptive test program.

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