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Exploring English Language Proficiency, English Language Problems, and English Needs Among First Year Undergraduate Students

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Abstract. English is used widely worldwide and is recognized as the most important language for communication. This research focused on the needs, problems, and proficiency levels in the English language for first-year students majoring in English for Business Management. A questionnaire, an Intensive English test, and a semi-structured interview were used to conduct this research with 40 undergraduate students. Participants achieved low scores in every area of the Intensive English test and expressed their problems and needs in studying the English language. The participants had the desire to learn speaking, reading, writing, and listening language skills, and native English-speaking teachers as well as Thai teachers took turns teaching as requested. The challenges faced when learning English included students' inability to listen and speak the language. Moreover, students need to improve their English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The research shows the importance of English at higher education levels and understanding the needs of students with different levels of English proficiency in order to prepare them to be ready to use the language for education and work in the future. Students who want to study English for Business Management must have a good foundation in English to further expand their knowledge in the curriculum, which has an emphasis on using English skills in various areas, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Furthermore, one of the project objectives is to prepare students for the first semester of their university life.

Keywords: English language needs; English language proficiency; English language problems; first-year undergraduate students; Thailand

1. Introduction

English is an international language widely used across the globe and is the primary language in terms of communication (Rose et al., 2021). English is used in different fields due to its importance for communication in academics, politics,

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economics, and social situations and is also vital for graduates' readiness to enter the workplace (Chan, 2021; Lekpetch & Foley, 2022). Hence, English is very prominent and accessible. Using English fluently has become a factor that has made the new generation successful and that keeps people constantly updated in everyday situations. Therefore, as English has become influential to Thai people, those studying English and using English proficiently have better opportunities than others who cannot communicate in English. The necessity of English has caused the learning system to be changed to make it more suitable and consistent with modern technology.

According to Lekpetch and Foley (2022), English has been broadly used in many international associations in Thailand in information technology and as a working language of international organizations. In addition, it has been manipulated in the media within Thai society. For this reason, it is reflected in employment, as Thai companies look for employees and employers who speak English well. As such, this will unavoidably affect students' association with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) community. Therefore, all institutions at higher education levels must develop and help improve students to conform to the challenging changes by not only learning but by adjusting themselves to get along with society and the ASEAN culture and also developing their language skills for communication within the ASEAN community. ASEAN's working language is English, meaning that people from the ten ASEAN countries will increase the use of English apart from their native or local languages. Consequently, if people in these countries start using English skills or practicing the English language, their potential to find a good job in their respective countries will increase accordingly. By becoming involved in ASEAN, many people think that only the staff who work for each country's government, businessmen, or investors who have to communicate between countries will use English to communicate or conduct business. However, in time, all people within ASEAN will have to travel and get to know each other. Therefore, English is a crucial tool for communication in this competitive world with no boundaries (Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], 2020).

Presently, ASEAN has released a rule base of professions for standard education in the country, from which a graduate can move to professions in ASEAN. Therefore, it is necessary to quickly prepare students to attain high English proficiency to work in ASEAN countries. The crucial skills needed in workplaces are speaking and listening (Thepseenu, 2020). English is important and necessary in each country, including Thailand. Moreover, English plays an important role in almost every occupational field, including positions in the academic field as well as business, information technology (IT), and science. The Ministry of Education (Thailand. MOE, 2017) announced that the only foreign language that can be taught to Thai students starting from primary school is English. University students or college students should have at least 12 years of experience in English learning. In reality, most Thai students cannot use English as well as they would like to, even though they have passed through many aspects of the learning process, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary.

English is classified as a foreign language implemented in textbooks, articles, and mass media, and is thus important to be studied at graduate level. As per the government gazette of Higher Education Standards Guidelines in 2017 (Office of the Education Council, 2017), undergraduate students should realize and understand how important the English language has become. In addition, students need to have the required level of English proficiency in accordance with university requirements. The requirements of and problems with English are important issues that teachers and those involved in education should pay attention to in order to improve teaching efficiency to meet the needs of the learners and to keep learners interested, motivated, and having a good attitude towards learning English. Sasum and Weeks (2018) stated that English teaching in Thailand has not been as successful as it should have been. Most students lack English skills and the knowledge and ability to use English for communication. Several factors affect students' potential when using English. For instance, English is a foreign language in Thailand, so it is difficult to find the opportunity to use English to interact with others and in everyday normal-life situations. Moreover, students lack language experiences, such as grammatical capabilities or insufficient vocabulary for communication, knowledge of understanding the culture of native speakers, and lack of attitude and motivation to learn English. All of the aforementioned are contributing factors for students not having English skills that meet the educational standard at university level. Therefore, the emphasis of this research study is on studying first-year undergraduate students' English language proficiency, problems, and needs to improve teaching and learning in English.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English Proficiency in Thailand

Proficiency in English has played a crucial role globally, and its importance is growing consistently nowadays. It influences many schools, universities, other educational institutions, and workplaces to adapt themselves to international integration (Rao, 2016). The National Scheme of Education (2017) emphasizes that English proficiency is essential for Thai learners in globalization (Office of the Education Council, 2017). Learners should know and understand English to be qualified citizens of the world community. As per one of the standards in the Basic Education Core Curriculum in 2017, English proficiency is the ability to use English to communicate, for further study, and at work (Thailand. MOE, 2017). Furthermore, the latest development plan for Thailand concerning economic and social development in 2021 emphasizes that human resources in every age group should be equipped with English proficiency at an international level in order to compete in ASEAN countries and throughout the world.

In Thailand, English is taught in various educational institutions. However, even though English is taught at every level, from kindergarten to university, the overall results have been disappointing. Compared to other countries around the world, the English skills of Thai learners are among the lowest in global rankings. Thai learners with poor English language proficiency might reflect the true picture of the education system, which has been claimed to be one of the

weaknesses preventing the country from developing in many aspects, such as education and economy (Phothongsunan, 2015).

2.2 English Language Problems

A major problem in English language teaching is that the teacher and those associated with the field of education should focus more on and improve their teaching effectiveness to meet learners' needs and keep them interested while strengthening their attitude and motivation. It is well known that teaching English in Thailand is not as successful as it should be. For several reasons, most students lack knowledge and cannot use English for communication purposes. Most people who need to use English at work communicate through various media channels, such as the internet. They lack sufficient experience in using English, such as with grammar or terminology, to communicate adequately. Additionally, not knowing and understanding native cultures as well as attitude and lack of motivation to learn English are other contributing factors as to why Thailand is ranked 97th in English ability of 111 countries globally (Education First, 2022).

All areas of English need to be focused on and are important when developing communication skills. The ability to use English skills in an integrated manner and any related problems that may arise have been studied. Hutchinson (2019) studied the opinions of students who use English as a second language. Students found speaking and listening skills the hardest to improve, and students lacked confidence in speaking, even though there were group activities in class and direct contact with teachers.

According to the MOE (Thailand, 2017), English must be learned starting from the primary school level at six years of age. However, the English proficiency of Thais is lower than that of people in other countries within ASEAN (Education First, 2022). Up until today, Thai people have not been suitably prepared for the developing world in terms of teaching and learning English within Thailand. Therefore, their advancement in business will be hindered around the world, as well as in education, IT, and science, if no improvement is made. Panthito (2018) explained that Thai students have difficulty learning English due to the complexities of pronunciation and grammar and also due to Thais being passive learners and having few opportunities to use English in daily situations.

In general education, Thai students have fewer opportunities to use their English skills after class, and as such listen to and speak English less. Students would only interact with teachers when being asked a question. In addition, learning English in Thai classrooms may only teach students to memorize new vocabulary and write sentences on worksheets, and not encourage students to speak the language. Moreover, some Thai students who study in international programs also encounter some academic issues and challenges, for example, with taking notes, listening to lectures, and performing activities in the classroom. Nevertheless, Waelateh and Paramal (2014) expressed that even though some students have passed the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exams, they still face difficulties in communication.

Studies have also shown that company workers do not have the required skills to use English in many situations and for various purposes (Rao, 2019). There is much weight in being able to obtain a business contact through effective communication. It conveys a positive and good impression to clients and investors as well as foreign and local partners. However, many Thai employees struggle to express themselves in English and have pronunciation issues that prevent them from being understood. They also make mistakes in grammar usage and are unable to use appropriate words. In addition, English for specific purposes (ESP) courses are not offered at the university selected for this study. These students must have the required skills in English to secure a suitable job after graduation. It will be helpful for students to attend an ESP course in English focusing on their respective disciplines. Hence, the objective of this study was to look at the problems with English encountered by students, particularly those focusing on business management, so that a syllabus can be proposed that includes the required skills in English that will be needed in the workplace.

2.3 Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is critical in assisting the course design and content that meets learners' needs and expectations. This is because needs analysis is a systematic process to determine the necessities, lacks, and needs of learners. Eshtehardi (2017) explained that needs analysis is required in the process of course design and curriculum development. Apolonio (2021) highlighted that needs analysis is necessary to evaluate the objectives and needs of the learners, including the activities related to the language they are learning. According to Woodrow (2017), needs analysis is a necessary approach to determine aspects of the course or curriculum and examining whether or not it is effective.

According to McCawley (2009), needs analysis in education is very significant and beneficial for teachers, course developers, and educators, because it can provide much useful information on the following points:

- Impact: Making a positive and good impression on the students and identifying what they need.
- Approaches: Choosing the most efficient teaching methods that are most beneficial.
- Awareness: Seeing the gap between the courses offered.
- Outcomes: Using the updated situation for documentation purposes.
- Demand: Being aware of potential needs for students and courses.
- Credibility: Guaranteeing whether or not courses can serve the target group of learners.

According to Cowling (2007) and Long's (2005) recommendations, the reliability and validity of a needs analysis study are certified by triangulating various procedures of collecting data in different ways to increase the credibility of the collected-data interpretation. Long (2005) mentioned various data collection methods, including questionnaires, interviews, surveys, observations, logs (records of events), and testing. The information collected from using different data collection methods can be considered valuable and credible data for teachers, researchers, and course developers. Furthermore, using different sources of

information, such as documentation, language learners, people working or studying in some programs, and related research studies, is also essential to gain a considerable amount of information (Woodrow, 2017). To illustrate, Thepseenu (2020) used a questionnaire to study the needs of 85 third year civil engineering students using English for specific situations. It was found that 76.5% of students used English for communicating with colleagues, 50.5% for applying for jobs, and 45.9% for communicating with foreign friends. In sum, it could be expressed that the needs analysis for using English is mainly for communication and job-related reasons.

2.4 Related Studies

Several studies have mentioned students' needs in English language programs. Research has shown that college students have deliberated over English as a vital communication tool. For instance, Moiiinvaziri (2014) found that Iranian university students mostly disliked English grammar due to a lack of knowledge, whereas vocabulary knowledge was the aspect that needed the most practice. Additionally, reading was the most crucial skill, and speaking and listening were the most difficult.

Al-Malki et al. (2022) discussed the needs and concerns of workers at workplaces in tourism and hospitality fields. The demand for developing ESP-based courses is greater than ever, given the booming worldwide tourism industry. Analysis of the problems and needs of students has become indispensable to achieving this goal. The findings showed that speaking and listening, followed by reading and writing, are the most crucial language skills. General chat, responding to inquiries, resolving issues, work-related activities, and finally, rendering services were the most crucial tasks. In addition to these issues, students also had difficulty using proper syntax while writing and speaking due to a lack of vocabulary. (Thepseenu, 2020).

Koktaisong et al. (2020) studied the needs and concerns of international relations officers in using English at work. The findings illustrated that English listening skills are most wanted, followed by writing, speaking, and reading. The most needed listening skill was for general conversation and the most needed speaking skill was for giving information, while for reading, it was reading E-mails and social media. Finally, for writing, it was replying to emails and social media posts.

From previous studies, it is possible to conclude that students must learn English. The skills they require, however, vary depending on the circumstances or conditions. Busse (2017) also advocated for a greater focus on fostering favorable attitudes towards language variety. In addition to making specific reference to the local context, the study's implications and recommendations for pedagogical changes are also presented concerning the larger educational field, where business communication has increasingly taken center stage in language learning curricula (Lam et al., 2014).

Additionally, Saragih (2014) undertook a needs analysis, which resulted in tasks that the learners would need to perform in the "real world" after class, rather than

starting the design process with lists of grammatical, functional-notional, and other elements. Moreover, Poedjiastutie et al. (2018) stated that the level of English proficiency of Indonesian learners is regarded as low and poor. The three main problems with the Indonesian curriculum are the top-down approach, the absence of needs analysis studies, and no curriculum evaluation. All the points mentioned above help explain why analysis is needed, particularly in ESP, as an essential part of curriculum development.

We realized the significance of English at higher education levels and understood the needs of students with different levels and abilities to use English and prepare them to be ready to use the language for education and work in the future. Thus, students who want to study English for Business Management must have a good foundation in English to further expand their knowledge in the curriculum, which emphasizes using English skills in all aspects. Therefore, according to the project objectives, students are prepared for the first semester of their university life. The department of English also runs an Intensive English Course that will help adjust the basics and prepare new students with the English language skills they need.

The above-mentioned literature led to the research conducted in this study on English language proficiency, English language problems, and English needs among first year undergraduate students. We used a questionnaire and Intensive English test to study students' fluency and ability in English as well as their problems and needs. This analysis was done to improve teaching and learning English and create an Intensive English Course to develop English skills and create a good attitude towards English language learning.

This research first aimed to explore the English proficiency of Thai first year students majoring in English for Business Management and also to survey their English language learning problems. Finally, it attempted to explore their English language learning needs. Research questions were formed accordingly:

1. What is the level of English proficiency of Thai first year undergraduate students?
2. What are the English language learning problems of Thai first year students majoring in English for Business Management?
3. What are the English language learning needs of Thai first-year students majoring in English for Business Management?

3. Methodology

This research used a mixed methods research design, which included quantitative and qualitative methods, to draw on the strengths of the findings, which were their breadth and depth. Mixing methods helps to generate a better comprehensive answer or complete picture of a problem and solution in practice (Creswell, 2014).

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 40 first-year undergraduate students majoring in English for Business Management at a public university in the northeast of Thailand. Participants were required to take an Intensive English test, complete a

questionnaire, and participate in an interview. Five participants were selected for an interview through purposive sampling. The research emphasized the problems and needs of English and the English language learning skills improvement of students studying English for Business Management.

3.2 Instruments

Based on the research objectives and questions, we employed a mixed data collection method for the investigation. Specifically, we decided to use an Intensive English test, questionnaire, and semi-structured interview as data collection instruments to collect data about the participants' problems with English as well as their needs for English language learning, respectively.

The purpose of the test was to determine the participants' proficiency in and ability to use English. The English proficiency test was constructed into four parts (according to the Khon Kaen University English Proficiency Test [KEPT]). The Intensive English test included a conversation part (20 items), a vocabulary part (20 items), a grammar or structure part (20 items), and a reading comprehension part (20 items).

The 80 items were based on KEPT as a standard university test. We developed the four parts of the 80-item test, and the validity of the test's content was checked and then adjusted by experts according to their suggestions. The test's reliability was determined using the method of Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The test was conducted on five participants, who were asked to volunteer and then complete the test within approximately two hours.

The reliability coefficient value calculated for the test was .78 (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The content was validated by five experts (all items > .5) (Lynn, 1986). All items had a moderate rating in a range of .3 to .7 in the item difficulty and discrimination analysis (Hopkins & Antes, 1990).

Additionally, we used the questionnaire as tool to collect data from the participating first year English for Business Management students regarding general background information, English language learning problems, and needs. The questionnaire collected data from the participants and items were adapted (Mansakorn, 2005; Panpreuk & Mahapoonthong, 2007; Poonsakvorasan, 2017) to measure the information. The questionnaire was derived from a documentary review on English language proficiency and problems and needs analysis and associated research pertaining to needs analysis.

The experts checked and revised the questionnaire as to whether it was appropriate for the participants in terms of content, time allocation, and duration, to determine if the questions were easy to understand and precise in meaning and whether the wording was suitable. The questionnaire was administered after the Intensive English test and separated into four main parts, presented as follows:

- Part 1: Personal data of the participants (5 items).
- Part 2: English language learning problems (52 items).
- Part 3: English language learning needs (51 items).

- Part 4: Opinions and suggestions on both problems and needs in learning English (1 item).

A five-point Likert scale was utilized to determine the levels of English language learning problems and learning needs of the participants; a specific scale was allocated for each criterion, as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Five-point Likert scale criteria for questionnaire

Scale	Criterion	Range (\bar{x})
1	Very low	1.00 – 1.80
2	Low	1.81 – 2.60
3	Moderate	2.61 – 3.40
4	High	3.41 – 4.20
5	Very high	4.21 – 5.00

The semi-structured interview was carried out to explore the problems and needs for English language skills, the challenges students experience, and their developmental needs. Similar to the questionnaire items, three experts also checked the question items for interviewing before validating their contents. Any of the questions were revised at the suggestion of the experts. The volunteering participants were encouraged to speak about any challenges they had faced. This procedure of requiring information assists the researcher in obtaining in-depth data to improve understanding certain problems. The semi-structured interview questions were amassed into two areas, as follows:

- Area 1: Problems of English language learning (3 items)
- Area 2: Needs for English language learning (3 items)

3.3 Data Collection

The Intensive English test and questionnaire were completed in the first semester of 2020 and took approximately one month. The test was conducted first and the questionnaires and interviews a week later.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data related to participants' personal information, opinions on their previous knowledge of English, how they practiced their English daily, and beneficial in-class English activities were converted into percentages and frequencies. The questions on the problems and needs of English skills were examined to determine the mean and standard deviation scores. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to establish how reliable the data provided were for the items. We used the content analysis technique based on Neuendorf (2016) to analyze all the information obtained from the interview regarding the problems and needs of English learning skills.

4. Results

4.1 English Language Proficiency

Participants' English language proficiency in English skills was analyzed from the Intensive English test (80 points). Their proficiency was evaluated in four skills (conversation, vocabulary, grammar, and reading). The test findings revealed that

only a few participants passed the test with a score of 50%, which means that the participants had low proficiency in English language skills (35.69% of the total score). The participants' scores in each part are demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the participants on the Intensive English test in four parts

Test part	Mean	SD	Percentage (%)
Conversation	9.75	3.68	6
Vocabulary	6.62	2.87	1.6
Grammar	5.77	2.50	2
Reading	6.17	3.26	2.4

The results revealed that only a few participants passed the test with a score of 50%. Most participants passed the conversation part, followed by the reading, grammar, and vocabulary parts. It can be assumed that the participants had low proficiency in English skills.

4.2 English Language Problems

The participants were encouraged to scale the problems they had with their English language skills when faced with a variety of different circumstances. The problems in English skills were separated into five levels, as per Table 1. These were divided based on problems caused by participants themselves, problems caused by the teachers or lecturers, problems caused by the subjects and curriculum, and problems with English skills.

The descriptive statistics showed that the participants had a moderate level of problems caused by themselves ($M = 2.80$; $SD = 0.61$), low level of problems caused by the teachers or lecturers ($M = 1.84$; $SD = 0.14$), and low level of problems caused by the subject and curriculum ($M = 2.25$; $SD = 0.16$). Furthermore, related to English skills, participants had a high level of problems with listening ($M = 3.56$; $SD = 0.93$), high level of problems with speaking ($M = 3.43$; $SD = 1.05$), moderate level of problems with reading ($M = 3.11$; $SD = 0.95$), and moderate level of problems with writing ($M = 3.26$; $SD = 0.94$).

The participants rated their problems with English language skills as the ability to use English at a moderate level, and they had the most challenges with listening, followed by speaking. Writing was the next most problematic skill, followed by reading. Next were problems caused by the participants themselves and problems caused by the subjects and curriculum, respectively. Problems caused by the teachers or lectures were the least problematic.

4.3 English Language Needs

The participants rated the need for their English language skills in different circumstances. The needs were separated into five levels, as per Table 1. These were divided based on participants' need to concentrate on English language learning skills, their need for learning hours, need for an English teacher of a certain nationality, need for English usage in class, need for learning content, and need for all parts of the English language. Mean and standard deviation scores were calculated.

In terms of English needs, the statistical data revealed that the participants' need to concentrate on English skills was at a very high level ($M = 4.55$; $SD = 0.82$); their need for learning hours to study English per week, moderate ($M = 2.97$; $SD = 1.20$), and their need for the teacher's nationality, moderate ($M = 3.31$; $SD = 1.02$). Furthermore, the need for both Thai and foreign teachers to take turns teaching was at a very high level ($M = 4.23$; $SD = 1.00$). In addition, participants' need for English usage in class was at a moderate level ($M = 2.98$; $SD = 1.14$), while their need for learning content was at a high level ($M = 4.12$; $SD = 0.83$).

Furthermore, participants' need for English listening skills were very high ($M = 4.27$; $SD = 0.80$); for English speaking skills, very high ($M = 4.21$; $SD = 0.89$); for English reading skills, high ($M = 4.15$; $SD = 0.93$); and for English writing skills, high ($M = 3.72$; $SD = 0.99$).

In conclusion, participants scored their needs for English language skills at a high level ($M = 3.80$; $SD = 0.96$), the highest being their need to concentrate on learning skills, followed by listening skills. Speaking skills were ranked third, followed by their need for English reading skills and learning content, respectively. This was followed by their need for English writing skills, with their need for the English teacher's nationality ranked the lowest.

4.4 Findings From the Semi-Structured Interview

This research also used a semi-structured interview to collect data. The participants were encouraged to report on the challenges that they encountered with English as well as their needs. Five of the overall 40 participants were asked to volunteer to do interviews, and each participant was selected using the purposive sampling technique.

The participants were asked questions to briefly determine their history in English language learning. All the participants studied English for Business Management; some had traveled to study abroad. Therefore, the participants were distinguished in their ability to be familiar with English usage in various situations. The participants aired their opinions on the importance of learning English and elaborated on their experiences, where they mainly used English for their studies and daily life. However, they still encountered some difficulties dealing with circumstances when their anxiety, pressure, or tension increased. The following excerpt is from Participant 1's interview:

"I think that learning English is incredibly important and necessary for my studies and work. As long as I can speak good English, I will get a good job, since English speaking is required when working in many organizations nowadays. Therefore, I have to get well prepared for that."

The participants further explained the problems that they faced with learning English. They were encouraged to indicate the skills that they found the most challenging and to provide examples of situations in which they encountered such difficulties. Additionally, they also expressed how they planned to deal with such problems. The majority of participants stated that emotions and other factors caused problems and may have an impact on their English language learning, rather than the skills themselves. These included differences in accents, the

pressure they faced in situations where they had to speak English, and prior knowledge of specific problems. This problem was elaborated by Participant 2:

“I have found that vocabulary and pronunciation are my obstacles to learn English. This is because a word always has more than one meaning or definition, and I sometimes don’t know how to use the word when speaking in a real situation. Pronunciation is quite hard for me when trying to speak words correctly, since many English words are pronounced so similarly, and I cannot really catch what other people are trying to say when they speak.”

With regard to the necessity of English language learning, the participants were encouraged to establish the skills that were required and provide some examples of when English language skills were needed. The five participants determined that being able to comprehend and communicate well was a top need for English usage. This is illustrated by an excerpt from Participant 3:

“Speaking and listening are what I urgently need to improve. In my daily life, I don’t speak English to communicate with people surrounding me. I sometimes forget what I have studied in class, and I would like to put what I have learned into practice in real situations.”

5. Discussion

The research investigated the English language proficiency of first year Thai students majoring in English for Business Management, as well as investigated any problems with their English language acquisition. Participants had poor performance in the Intensive English test in all areas, and they also discussed their problems with and their need to learn the language.

Nevertheless, the study’s findings appeared to show similar results to other studies, where students lacked language skills and had low proficiency (Hutchinson, 2019; Sasum & Weeks, 2018; Sek et al., 2021). The teaching and learning of English in Thailand are not as successful as it should have been (Sasum & Weeks, 2018). Although Thai university students should have 12 years of experience learning English, most of them would like to use English more proficiently. Additionally, contributing factors, such as a lack of knowledge of being able to understand native speakers’ cultures and not having the right attitude and motivation, prevent students from reaching the required university standard. The English skills of Thai students are among the lowest in global rankings, and it has been claimed that the poor English language proficiency of Thai students prevents the country from developing in the educational and economic fields (Phothongsunan, 2015). Also, in other Asian countries, for example, China, it was found that students often excel at reading and listening but struggle with speaking and writing because they are not given many opportunities to use the language for communication. They are reluctant to speak in English during class, and their writing assignments are rife with grammatical and structural errors (Huang, 2016).

In a world ranking among countries by Education First (2022) for English usage, Thailand was ranked 97th among 111 non-native English-speaking countries due to limited access to quality resources and teachers. Furthermore, a study by the

Sweden-based Education First (2018) of approximately 260,000 secondary school and university students from across 26 countries showed that Thai learners' English proficiency was at a very low level for 2011–2015 and low level for 2017–2018. Those who have a very low English language proficiency can only talk about basic topics in English. Furthermore, in 2022, Thai learners were ranked 21st among the 24 countries in Asia for English proficiency (Education First, 2022).

In the business sector, there is much weight in the ability to gain a business contact by effectively communicating in English. However, recent studies have shown that company workers in the hospitality and travel industry lacked the necessary skills to use English for various purposes (Putri et al., 2018; Rao, 2019). Consequently, in 2017, a new policy was announced by the MOE in Thailand to transform the English teaching and learning system. This policy used the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) as a standard that teachers and learners should attain (Anantapol, Keeratikorntanayod & Chobphon, 2018). Figueras (2012) mentioned that the CEFR model is so successful partly because it can monitor and assess progress at each step of learning the language. CEFR levels range from a basic user (A1), who can comprehend and use well-known and basic phrases, to a proficient user (C2), who can easily comprehend nearly everything that is heard or read.

Several hurdles had to be overcome to ensure that any CEFR model introduced in Thailand would succeed. Instructors firstly needed to be more effective in their teaching methods to meet learners' needs and keep them interested. Moreover, most Thai students, who lacked confidence in speaking, were unable to use English for communication purposes, as opportunities to use English in real-life situations were few and far between. Panthito (2018) added that students had difficulties due to the complexities of pronunciation and grammar and being passive learners.

The interview results showed that some of the participants had difficulties in vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening and speaking skills, similar to results of studies by Leong and Ahmandi (2017), Qrquez and Rashid (2017), and Panthito (2018). From the aforementioned studies, problems were identified in each facet of English language learning, such as understanding idiomatic expressions and accents and the speaker's speed when listening. Khamprated (2012) added that the problem of listening comprehension is primarily about restricted vocabulary skills. Leong and Ahmandi (2017) stated that little emphasis has been made on improving speaking skills. Additionally, making mistakes while speaking is a deep concern. A lack of general vocabulary causes issues in reading. Sek et al. (2021) argued that Thailand's teaching system does not allow students to improve their literacy skills. According to Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014), the most difficult aspects of writing are deciding how to begin a paragraph, combining small pieces of information coherently, and choosing appropriate vocabulary to express ideas. Qrquez and Rashid (2017) stated that a limited vocabulary was the main problem that most English as a foreign language (EFL) students had concerning reading.

Needs analysis is a systematic process and an essential factor in meeting learners' needs and expectations. Woodrow (2017) mentioned that needs analysis is required as a first step in the course design process and is essential for the course or curriculum development. Needs analysis is a complex approach related to the interpretation of information in large amounts. According to McCawley (2009), six stages are required: writing the purposes of the needs analysis, choosing the target participants, sampling the participants, selecting research tools to collect data, analyzing the data, and evaluating needs.

6. Conclusion

English is deemed to be the most widely used language for communication purposes worldwide both in and out of the workplace, including in academics, politics, economics, and social situations (Lekpetch & Foley, 2022; Rose et al., 2021). In Thailand, the importance of being able to communicate in English has steadily increased over many years, and it has become clear that all institutions, especially at higher education levels, have to develop their students to get along and communicate effectively within the local and ASEAN communities. In addition, Thai people who speak English proficiently will have better chances and opportunities globally.

This research study focused on three main areas: the level of English language proficiency, English language learning problems, and needs of first year students. The English proficiency test, which comprised 80 items, was divided into four parts: conversation, vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. Very few participants passed the test, suggesting an overall low proficiency level in English. The highest marks were obtained in conversation, followed by reading, grammar, and vocabulary. Finally, participants rated their English ability. The results showed that 72.5% of participants indicated their proficiency in English as good, 17.5% as fair, and 10% as poor (as presented in Figure 1).

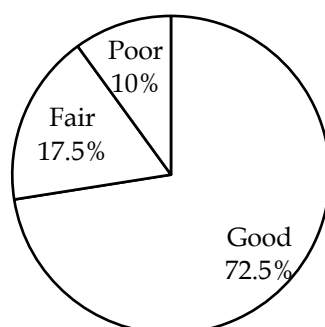


Figure 1: Self-rated English language proficiency of participants

7. Suggestions

Many participants reported that they had problems with the English language, including problems with pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and writing. According to most participants, being able to communicate appeared to be the most important requirement for performing in-class activities. The majority of participants indicated that the skills themselves were not the problem; instead,

emotions and other factors may have an impact on their English language learning. Included here are differences in accent, the pressure they face in situations where they have to speak English, and prior knowledge of the specific problems.

The Intensive English Course is a program designed to prepare students with the English skills required to assist them in improving their general English proficiency. Starting from a basic level, it aims to broaden students' vocabulary, improve their understanding of spoken and written English, increase their knowledge of grammar, improve their ability to write sentences and paragraphs, and encourage them to become independent learners. The course is one of the learning processes that aims to improve teachers' English proficiency before starting teaching and training. Course and educator assessments are continuously carried out at the conclusion of each course to upgrade both teaching and learning. In a few classes, instructors investigate students' needs at the start of the course. An efficient strategy such as a needs analysis is required to guarantee that the English language needs of students are met. Furthermore, having knowledge of the needs of learners not only helps the preparation of the Intensive English Course but also leads to accomplishing quality teaching and learning.

8. Ethics Committee Approval

The ethics committee approval of the study was issued according to the research integrity rules on 29 September 2020 from Khon Kaen University, Thailand (Record No. 4.3.02:17/2020).

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