

ENGLISH AS A CATALYST FOR THAILAND'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THREE HURDLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT PATHWAY

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ABSTRACT

English has consolidated its status as a critical catalyst for sustainable development in the 21st century across various domains, including education. Recognizing this strategic role, Thailand has implemented sustained reforms to improve national English proficiency. Despite these efforts, empirical evidence consistently indicates that Thai learners' English proficiency remains unsatisfactory. This article examines Thailand's English language education landscape during the past decade by focusing on three major turning points that have shaped the trajectory of English education in Thailand: the nationwide adoption of the CEFR in 2016, the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rapid emergence of generative AI use in education. Analyzing these developments as interconnected "hurdles," the article argues that they have simultaneously constrained and reshaped the capacity of English to operate as a catalyst for Thailand's sustainable development. The CEFR reform sought to align national standards with international benchmarks but revealed persistent gaps in teacher preparedness, assessment practices, and contextual adaptation. The pandemic forced a rapid shift to online and hybrid learning, exposing digital inequities and learning losses affecting English development. More recently, generative AI has expanded opportunities for personalized learning while raising concerns regarding accuracy, ethics, academic integrity, and technological access. Drawing on policy documents and empirical research, the article identifies key lessons and proposes policy orientations, including strengthening teacher capacity, enhancing AI literacy, investing in inclusive digital infrastructure, and establishing responsible governance of educational technologies. Addressing these issues is essential if English is to function as a sustainable and equitable force in national development.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, English is recognized as a form of valuable linguistic capital with substantial economic and social value, rather than merely a foreign language taught in schools. Proficiency in English is strongly associated with advancement in fields such as science, technology, trade, tourism, and diplomacy. In the global arena, nations with high levels of English proficiency frequently have educational and economic advantages. Examples from the region include Singapore and Malaysia, where high levels of English proficiency have promoted international academic cooperation, tourism growth, and foreign investment (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Accordingly, enhancing national English proficiency constitutes not simply an educational trend, but a strategic imperative for regional competitiveness and sustainable development.

In this article, sustainable development is interpreted in a broader socio-economic sense rather than solely in environmental terms. It refers to the long-term strengthening of human capital, knowledge systems, and inclusive participation in global economic and intellectual networks. Within this perspective, English proficiency functions as a key enabling resource because it facilitates access to international education, scientific knowledge, technological innovation, and cross-border professional collaboration. Consequently, improving national English proficiency can contribute to sustainable national development by enhancing the country's capacity to participate competitively in regional and global knowledge economies.

Despite recognizing the strategic significance of English, Thailand nevertheless faces major structural and proficiency-related obstacles. Thai learners' English proficiency remains unsatisfactory, according to national and international examinations (Kanoksilapatham, 2014; Kanoksilapatham & Pariwatananont, 2024; Than, 2025). For example, Thailand

has been in the “very low proficiency” category for more than a decade according to international measures such as the EF English Proficiency Index (Education First [EF], 2025) and standardized national exams like O-NET. This ranking is particularly concerning when compared with ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, which have seen significant development.

To understand why English has not yet functioned optimally as a catalyst for national advancement, it is essential to examine the transformative developments that have shaped Thailand’s English language education landscape during the past decade. A review of relevant documents (Holmes & Miao, 2023; Keeley, 2021; Prasongporn, 2016; UNICEF, 2022) identifies several pivotal policy and contextual milestones:

- 2015: Thailand’s entry into the ASEAN Economic Community
- 2016: Adoption of the CEFR framework by the Ministry of Education
- 2019: Outbreak of COVID-19
- 2020: Transition to online and hybrid education
- 2022: Emergence of ChatGPT and Generative AI tools

Among these developments, three stand out as particularly transformative:

1. The integration of the CEFR (2016)
2. The COVID-19 pandemic (beginning in 2019)
3. The generative AI revolution (from 2022 onward)

This article examines the three turning points. The article also identifies lessons learned and suggests future policy orientations. By analyzing these developments as interconnected “hurdles,” the article argues that they have simultaneously constrained and reshaped the role of English to operate as a catalyst for Thailand’s sustainable development.

THE INTEGRATION OF THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES (CEFR)

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) across four key dimensions: (1) its historical background and conceptual development; (2) its implementation in Thailand; (3) the impacts and challenges arising from its policy adoption; and (4) lessons learned, together with future-oriented recommendations for enhancing the English proficiency of the Thai population.

Background and Development

The CEFR is an international framework developed by the Council of Europe over several decades and formally introduced in 2001 (Council of Europe, 2001). Its goal is to provide a “common standard” for language instruction and evaluation that enables cross-national and cross-system comparison.

Before the development of the CEFR, different proficiency frameworks were used across European countries, resulting in discrepancies and limited comparability. That is, European countries relied on their own national benchmarks to assess English language proficiency. Because these systems were developed independently, the criteria used to describe competence varied considerably across contexts. Consequently, labels such as “good” or “advanced” proficiency were often ambiguous and lacked cross-national equivalence. A learner regarded as having a strong command of English in one country might not meet the expectations associated with a similar descriptor in another. This absence of a shared evaluative scale made language qualifications difficult to interpret across borders and hindered reliable comparisons of learners’ abilities.

By establishing a cohesive framework based on multicultural awareness and communication skills, the CEFR addressed this fragmentation. Rather than focusing solely on grammatical correctness, the CEFR adopts an action-oriented approach, highlighting what students can do with language. Each of the six proficiency levels (A1–C2) is accompanied by detailed descriptors of communicative ability. Since its introduction, the CEFR has become well-known around the world and has been widely embraced outside of Europe.

Thai Context

English has been taught in Thailand for many decades, but in 2008 it was legally established as a fundamental part of the country's educational system (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2008). The goal of later initiatives was to raise the level of national proficiency. The CEFR was formally approved as a national benchmark in 2016 after the Ministry of Education began implementing plans to do so in 2014 (Anantapol et al., 2018; Charttrakul & Damnet, 2021; Prasongporn, 2016). The framework provides internationally comparable standards, well-defined learning objectives, enhanced curriculum-assessment alignment, and recommendations for teacher development.

Thailand's membership in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which was formed in December 2015 with 10 member states, was directly related to this change in policy. English has become the working language of the AEC, which encourages the free flow of skilled labor, investment, commodities, and services. As a result, improving English proficiency became a national goal for competitiveness in the region. The academic and policy communities actively supported ASEAN integration between 2015 and 2016. Although there were few quantifiable gains in English competence in spite of the increased focus, studies have consistently demonstrated that the competence of Thai learners was inadequate to satisfy the needs of the job market and the standards for regional involvement (Kanoksilapatham, 2025; Than, 2025).

Recognizing the strategic significance of English as a key driver of national development, and the urgent need to ameliorate Thai citizens' English proficiency, Thailand adopted the CEFR as part of broader efforts to strengthen English proficiency and human capital development, which are widely regarded as important components of sustainable national development. Consequently, the CEFR was designated as the principal framework for curricular reform, assessment alignment, and teacher preparation. Educational institutions revised their curricula to strengthen graduates' communicative competence, while nationwide English language teaching projects and strategic initiatives were implemented to support this reform agenda.

Impacts and Challenges

Thailand's English education policy and practice have undergone major changes since the establishment of the CEFR. Its adoption has exposed both positive and negative structural and pedagogical issues, even as it has brought about clearer standards and benchmarking procedures.

Positive Impacts

The creation of a consistent benchmark for language competency throughout Thai education has been one of the biggest advantages of CEFR integration. The CEFR levels (A1–C2) have helped to match learning outcomes with globally accepted competency descriptors by bringing clarity to curricula, assessment criteria, and learning objectives. This has made it possible for educators and institutions to more logically scaffold English learning across grade levels by supporting more systematic benchmarking of student achievement and curriculum goals. It has been shown that properly designed CEFR-linked interventions can produce positive learning outcomes. For instance, research on CEFR-based instructional programs, such as gamification-integrated CEFR alignment, shows potential for increasing both engagement and skill improvement in targeted proficiency bands of (A2–B1) (Khanyot et al., 2024).

The implementation of the CEFR has also encouraged learner autonomy and self-assessment; learners who comprehend the CEFR descriptors are better able to evaluate their own learning objectives, strengths, and shortcomings. According to studies conducted in Thai higher education settings, students believe that the CEFR is helpful in directing their self-directed skill development, particularly when instructors offer more precise methods for converting CEFR levels into real-world learning assignments (Ngonkum & Deerajviset, 2024).

Negative Impacts and Repercussions

The influence of the CEFR, however, has been limited by a number of structural issues. First, there has been fragmentation in implementation. The complexity of language acquisition is not adequately reflected in the framework's assumption of

linear proficiency development. Studies reveal, for example, that a large number of Thai English instructors in training exhibit competence at the A2 level (Franz & Teo, 2017). This finding underscores a discrepancy between policy expectations and classroom realities, as teachers at this level may not yet possess sufficient linguistic competence to serve as effective language models in the classroom.

Second, the theoretical underpinnings of the CEFR have not been entirely reflected in teacher professional development. Although most teachers are familiar with the CEFR proficiency levels (A1–C2), their understanding often remains superficial and limited to labeling proficiency bands rather than applying the framework’s pedagogical principles. In particular, the CEFR’s action-oriented approach, which emphasizes communicative tasks and real-life language use, is not always fully understood or implemented in classroom practice (Phoolaikao, 2021; Supunya, 2022).

For example, several studies have reported that many Thai teachers tend to interpret the CEFR primarily as a benchmark for testing or exit examinations, rather than as a framework for designing communicative learning activities and task-based instruction (Franz & Teo, 2017). As a result, CEFR levels are often used merely to set score targets or vocabulary lists for tests, without corresponding changes in pedagogy or classroom interaction (Savski, 2020; Sriwongsa & Sukying, 2024).

Furthermore, research on preservice English teachers in Thailand indicates that many educators are unfamiliar with the action-oriented and plurilingual principles of the CEFR, and only a small proportion report using CEFR descriptors to design learning objectives or communicative classroom tasks (Ngonkum & Deerajviset, 2024). For instance, teachers may state that they “align” their courses with the CEFR simply by indicating that students should reach a particular level (e.g., B1 or B2) at the end of the program, while continuing to rely on traditional grammar-translation instruction and teacher-centered explanations (Foley, 2019).

These examples suggest that although awareness of the CEFR framework has increased, deeper pedagogical understanding—particularly regarding task-based learning, communicative interaction, and the use of “can-do” descriptors for lesson planning—remains limited. Consequently, teacher professional development programs must go beyond introducing CEFR levels and focus more explicitly on translating the framework’s theoretical principles into practical classroom pedagogy (Savski, 2020).

Third, the proficiency outcomes of Thai learners remain limited. According to national and institutional data, a significant proportion of Thai students and graduates fall within lower proficiency bands (A1–B1), with only a small percentage achieving advanced levels such as C2 (Wudthayagorn, 2022, 2025). The limited number of learners reaching C2 proficiency has implications for fields such as translation, international communication, and international professional interactions, which typically require near-native command of English, including high levels of lexical precision and discourse competence. Consequently, many graduates may face constraints when pursuing academic or professional opportunities in international contexts.

Fourth, many Thai universities develop their own CEFR-based competency examinations with varying forms, norms, rigor, quality assurance, and quality control because there is no universal benchmarking or single, nationally recognized test aligned with the CEFR (e.g., Balleras et al., 2025; Jeh-Do et al., 2024; Nakanitanon, 2021; Waluyo, 2019; Waluyo et al., 2024). The operationalization and interpretation of CEFR levels are becoming fragmented as a result of this so-called pattern—decentralized university-level CEFR evaluation design. Clearly, one of the initial objectives of the CEFR—a visible, shared proficiency reference—is being undermined by this fragmentation.

It should be noted that not all Asian countries follow the same pattern of CEFR adoption (e.g., Foley, 2022; Savski, 2020). Some countries have developed nationally standardized English proficiency tests aligned with the CEFR. For example, Vietnam and Taiwan administer national examinations—VSTEP and GEPT, respectively, corresponding to a six-level proficiency framework mapped onto the CEFR. However, the implementation differs somewhat between the two contexts. In contrast, other countries such as Thailand, South Korea, Malaysia, and Turkey do not rely on a single unified national English proficiency examination. A hybrid model can be observed in Japan. While Japan has developed CEFR-J descriptors tailored to Japanese learners, there is no single mandatory CEFR-based university entrance examination. Instead, universities may use a combination of measures, including IELTS scores, institutional examinations, or CEFR-referenced criteria.

Lessons Learned and Future Directions

The adoption of the CEFR was intended to raise the standards of language policy in Thailand. However, several structural challenges continue to constrain its effective implementation. These include limited teacher preparation, uneven levels of teacher proficiency, the persistence of grammar-translation pedagogies, and the misalignment between CEFR descriptors and conventional assessment practices. In addition, while a number of commercially produced English textbooks claim alignment with the CEFR, many of these materials are designed for global markets rather than for the specific linguistic and sociocultural context of Thai learners. As a result, teachers often lack locally contextualized CEFR-oriented resources and assessment tools that could support more effective classroom implementation (Foley, 2019; Nonthaisong, 2015).

Important takeaways emphasize the necessity of a long-term, comprehensive national English development strategy, particularly one that incorporates a systematic roadmap for teacher preparation. A useful point of comparison is Vietnam's 20-year strategic plan (Nguyen, 2017), which demonstrates the value of sustained and coordinated policy implementation. Within this broader framework, particular attention should be paid to the "double burden" faced by language learners, referring to the dual challenge of simultaneously acquiring the target language while also interpreting instructional content rooted in unfamiliar cultural contexts, often derived from native-speaker materials. This additional cognitive load can impede learning, as students must divide their attention between linguistic processing and cultural comprehension. To address this issue, Thailand should prioritize the development of contextually appropriate instructional materials that integrate Thai cultural identity (Kanoksilapatham & Suranakkharin, 2021). When learning materials are culturally familiar, students can draw on existing background knowledge, thereby reducing unnecessary cognitive demands and allowing them to focus more effectively on language acquisition. In this sense, embedding Thai cultural identity into English language teaching is not merely a matter of cultural representation but a pedagogically sound strategy to enhance learning efficiency and outcomes. Moreover, assessment for learning should take precedence over test-driven approaches, with assessment practices closely aligned with classroom instruction. Finally, the incorporation of the CEFR invites a re-examination of a fundamental pedagogical question—whether assessment should precede or follow instruction—an issue that remains central to ongoing educational reform and merits continued critical reflection.

All things considered, the integration of the CEFR represents a significant yet incomplete structural reform. While it has elevated policy discourse and aligned Thailand with international benchmarks, decentralized assessment systems, uneven implementation, and limited strategic coordination continue to constrain its effectiveness. Without stronger institutional alignment, sustained teacher capacity building, and coherent national benchmarking mechanisms, the CEFR cannot fully realize its intended role in strengthening English as a driver of national development.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in late 2019 and quickly expanded throughout the world, drastically changed the educational scene in Thailand. More than 13 million students in Thailand were directly impacted when educational institutions at all levels—from schools to universities—were forced to stop in-person classroom instruction and switch to online systems within a specific timetable (UNICEF, 2022). As a result, the educational system was compelled to implement emergency responses, including DLTV (Distance Learning Television) broadcasts, online platforms, and device distribution initiatives. This unprecedented disruption exposed systemic fragilities in infrastructure, accessibility, instructional design, and student well-being.

Innovations and Emerging Practices

From another perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic was a major driving force and catalyst for many educational innovations, especially in the area of English language learning, despite the fact that it caused a terrible loss of human life, abrupt disruptions to daily life almost overnight, and incalculable economic damage. The use of hybrid learning, which combines synchronous and asynchronous activities for increased flexibility, the combined use of DLTV and online platforms to prevent learning disruption, and the robust emergence of online teacher communities of practice, which allowed instructors to share instructional resources and innovative approaches, are all clear examples (Trust & Whalen, 2020).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic brought attention to the need for learning recovery strategies (Kuhfeld et al., 2022), including diagnostic testing and remedial courses for students who lack certain skills, particularly in English, an essential language for global communication. In conclusion, the COVID-19 epidemic served as both a “challenge” and an “opportunity,” forcing educators and students to adjust to digital technology and resulting in the long-term use of blended learning strategies.

Negative Impacts

Negative effects were inevitable, even though adaptation during the COVID-19 crisis resulted in new advances in education. Several significant problems that Thai society encountered during this time are reflected in a large number of research papers and policy reports.

First, learning loss emerged as a major concern. Long-term school closures denied many students access to chances for ongoing education, especially in the area of English, which necessitates in-person communication and real-world language practice in the classroom. Furthermore, it was not possible to completely develop conversational abilities that incorporate nonverbal communication, including body language, gestures, and tone of voice. Consequently, there was a noticeable impact on speaking and listening abilities (Kanoksilapatham, 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

Psychosocial effects constitute another important consequence. Because screen-based learning could not fully replace peer interaction and collaborative learning experiences, many students reported heightened stress, loneliness, reduced motivation, and difficulties with self-regulated learning (Kanoksilapatham, 2023). Similar patterns have been documented in numerous studies during the COVID-19 period, which found that university students frequently experienced increased loneliness, psychological stress, and reduced learning motivation during extended periods of online learning (Rutkowska et al., 2022; Sauer et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the lack of direct social interaction in remote learning environments may adversely affect students’ psychological well-being and learning engagement.

The third is the digital gap, which has become especially noticeable between students in urban and rural areas. Many rural students were unable to fully engage in online classrooms because urban students had better access to the internet and the required digital gadgets than rural students (UNICEF, 2022). Systemic disparities were further reinforced by survey research conducted in several countries, which revealed a range of learner views and actions about online learning (Lythreitis et al., 2022; Van Dijk, 2006).

Lastly, the strain on educators should also be acknowledged. Many teachers lacked the technological resources, pedagogical strategies, and digital competencies needed to deliver engaging and interactive online classes when institutions abruptly shifted to remote learning. Studies have shown that insufficient technological support and limited familiarity with online teaching platforms created substantial barriers to effective instruction during this transition (Noor et al., 2022). Moreover, the sudden move to online teaching significantly increased teachers’ workload, as instructors had to redesign course materials, manage new digital tools, and provide additional support to students in virtual environments. These demands contributed to heightened stress and burnout among educators (Alqahtani et al., 2023). Consequently, the combined pressures of increased workload, technological challenges, and reduced interaction with students negatively affected teaching effectiveness and the overall well-being of both instructors and students.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic-related concerns covered above, Thailand has had to modify its approaches and capitalize on new developments in order to share resources and methods and improve educators’ ability to instruct students in a way that meets the demands of the digital age.

Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Society has started to acknowledge and accept that COVID-19 is now an inevitable component of the global health system that we must coexist with as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the crisis has left Thailand’s educational system with a significant “legacy,” especially in the area of teaching and studying English, which may be distilled into a few crucial lessons.

The first lesson is that strategies for learning continuity must be established to address future crises. Education should not be interrupted even when schools are unable to operate normally. The pandemic also underscored the importance of investing in sustainable digital infrastructure to reduce access disparities and promote educational equity. Learning recovery policies should prioritize the development of targeted remedial programs that address the needs of diverse learner groups, along with diagnostic assessments to identify learning gaps.

At the same time, teachers need to strengthen both their digital and pedagogical competencies in order to deliver high-quality online instruction that fosters genuine engagement. This is particularly important for English language courses, which require authentic interaction and communicative practice. In addition, the crisis has highlighted the importance of teacher resilience—the ability to adapt to rapidly changing teaching environments while managing increased workloads and uncertainty. Lessons learned from the pandemic further emphasize the need to support students' psychosocial well-being alongside their academic development (UNESCO, 2021), since positive mental health is a crucial foundation for effective learning.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 epidemic functioned both as a crisis and as a catalyst. While it intensified inequalities and learning loss, it also accelerated digital transformation and pedagogical innovation. The pandemic thus revealed that resilience, equity, and adaptability are indispensable conditions if English education is to contribute meaningfully to sustainable national progress.

THE GENERATIVE AI TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

The world of education has seen a profound change as a result of the generative AI revolution, which was shown by OpenAI's introduction of ChatGPT in late 2022, the quick construction of large language models (LLMs), and the ongoing creation of new generations of generative AI. This change has sped up the transition to new digital learning facets and made generative AI tools widely available to the public, notably in Thailand (Holmes & Miao, 2023). Beyond just creating texts or dialogues, generative AI can also be used to create tests, lessons, translations, exercise design, and instant feedback on students' written work. Because of AI's many functions, it is often said that instead of asking what AI can do, which would be an infinite response, one should ask what AI cannot do.

Ultimately, generative AI presents a dual-edged transformation. It offers unprecedented support for individualized learning and teacher productivity, yet it simultaneously raises ethical, epistemological, and equity-related concerns. Whether AI strengthens or weakens English education in Thailand depends on governance, literacy, and equitable access.

Thai Context

Guidelines and policy recommendations regarding the use of artificial intelligence in education are increasingly being developed and disseminated by Thai educational authorities. For example, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has promoted AI-supported teaching and learning through the National Digital Learning Platform. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) has launched initiatives to strengthen AI competencies and digital learning ecosystems. In addition, the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology (IPST), in collaboration with the Electronic Transactions Development Agency (ETDA), has begun developing training and ethical guidelines to support educators in the responsible use of AI in teaching.

Simultaneously, a number of academic institutions have started conducting experimental studies on the application of AI technologies to enhance English language instruction. Research increasingly shows that artificial intelligence can enhance language learning by increasing student motivation, providing immediate feedback, and allowing learners to practice at their own pace. Studies have reported that AI-assisted learning environments support personalized instruction and improve learner engagement in language classrooms (Holmes et al., 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). In addition, AI-powered tools can reduce practice time by automating feedback and providing adaptive learning support. Consistent with these findings, Kanoksilapatham and Takrudkaew (2025) found that AI significantly improves student motivation, reduces practice time, and offers immediate feedback in English language learning contexts. However, worries about an over-reliance on AI, the veracity of knowledge produced by AI, and possible problems with academic integrity still exist.

International Directions and Concerns

Guidelines for integrating generative AI in education have been released by international organizations like UNESCO. These guidelines urge nations to create national policy frameworks to regulate the appropriate use of AI in teaching, learning, and research contexts. They highlight important values such as fairness, transparency, ethics, and data protection (Holmes & Miao, 2023).

Impacts, Dimensions, and Opportunities for Teaching

Many beneficial teaching and learning opportunities have been made possible by generative AI (Holmes et al., 2019). First, it facilitates individualized learning by producing exercises that correspond to students' CEFR levels and helping teachers create tasks that are specific to each student's needs—as long as the prompts are well-crafted (Kanoksilapatham & Takrudkaew, 2025). Additionally, AI can provide automatic, real-time feedback, especially in speaking and writing abilities, greatly lowering the effort of teachers while expanding practice chances for students. By quickly creating lesson plans, exercises, sample dialogues, and preliminary test items, as well as effectively creating supplemental learning resources like reading passages and practice exams, it also reduces administrative burdens (Holmes & Miao, 2023; Songsiengchai, 2025).

Risks and Precautions

Despite numerous positive impacts described above, hazards associated with using generative AI in the classroom should not be overlooked. The accuracy of knowledge is one of the main issues, especially in light of the phenomena of AI “hallucination,” which has the potential to skew educational materials. Thus, educators still have a vital role to play in ensuring that AI-generated content is reliable before it is used.

Furthermore, there is still digital inequality since certain students—particularly those from low-income families or those living in rural areas—may not have access to the gadgets or internet connectivity they need, putting them at danger of falling behind.

Some students may employ AI to do tasks on their behalf, raising ethical and academic integrity problems as well as the possibility of unfair evaluation and misrepresentation of true abilities. The possibility of plagiarism emphasizes even more how urgently clear, equitable, and morally sound AI usage guidelines in education are needed (Holmes & Miao, 2023; Meskó, 2023; Salimi, 2024).

Last but not least, it is crucial to develop students' critical thinking abilities so they can recognize, assess, and validate information correctly, guaranteeing that human dignity is not subjugated, weakened, or lost in the face of developing technology.

SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION: FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

The integration of the CEFR, the disruption caused by COVID-19, and the rise of generative AI collectively represent three structural hurdles that have reshaped Thailand's English language development trajectory. Each development has generated opportunities while simultaneously exposing systemic weaknesses. Taken together, they illustrate that policy ambition alone is insufficient; coherent implementation, sustained investment, and strategic coordination are indispensable. Research in language education policy has long emphasized that large-scale reforms often encounter a gap between policy design and classroom implementation, particularly when teacher preparation, resources, and institutional capacity are uneven (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003; Wedell, 2009).

Thailand continues to face structural constraints related to investment limitations, policy management challenges, and uneven teacher development. These constraints become more visible when compared with neighboring countries such as Singapore, which has institutionalized English as an official language and the primary medium of education, and Vietnam, which has implemented systematic national programs to strengthen English teacher capacity and professional development

(Nguyen, 2017). Comparative education research consistently shows that successful language policy implementation depends not only on policy goals but also on sustained investment in teacher development, curriculum alignment, and educational infrastructure (Fullan, 2016; Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). Without these supporting mechanisms, policy reforms may remain largely aspirational rather than transformative.

In this context, English can function as a genuine “mechanism driving national development” only when educational infrastructure, human resources, and policy direction are consistently and cohesively aligned. This alignment requires long-term commitment to teacher development, institutional capacity building, and evidence-based policy coordination.

Coordinated National Policy Proposals and Practical Directions

The following is a summary of some important recommendations derived from the examination of several papers. First and foremost, a comprehensive national strategy is necessary. The three main components of Thailand’s long-term national English policy should be the integration of AI in education, post-COVID learning recovery, and the use of the CEFR. For instance, consistent investment in human resources and aligned assessment systems are essential for the successful implementation of the CEFR, which goes beyond policy declarations (Council of Europe, 2001; UNESCO, 2021). This was made especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid advancement of technology.

Second, it is critical to develop teacher ability. To improve English proficiency, convert the CEFR into useful lesson planning, create blended learning, and advance AI literacy, Thailand should put in place ongoing professional development programs, such as in-service training and micro-credential projects (Gershon, 2025). The key to enhancing student outcomes is ensuring that teachers possess strong competence in language, pedagogy, and technology.

Third, it is necessary to create adaptable evaluation mechanisms. Thailand requires a variety of evaluation methods that include formative and diagnostic tests in line with the CEFR and make use of data to efficiently tailor teaching (Council of Europe, 2001).

Fourth, digital equity needs to be given top priority. To lessen inequalities in internet and device access, especially in rural and disadvantaged populations, Thailand should make significant investments in digital infrastructure (UNICEF, 2022). Rapid technological innovation and lessons learned from COVID-19 show that technology has both potential and threats, and that if proper safeguards are not taken, it might exacerbate rather than lessen digital inequalities (Matsumoto, 2025).

Fifth, frameworks for appropriate AI use in educational institutions are required. The values of openness, privacy, and accountability should serve as the foundation for Thailand’s ethically sound AI usage regulations, which will encourage positive learning while discouraging academic dishonesty and plagiarism (Holmes & Miao, 2023).

Sixth, it is important to encourage innovation in English language instruction. Thailand should support pilot projects in several provinces to investigate viable and successful AI-enhanced English learning models, as well as experiments with AI-integrated instructional innovations such as project-based learning and adaptive digital platforms.

Lastly, in order to scale successful programs nationwide and share resources and experience, cooperation between the public and business sectors as well as foreign partners should be improved.

Limitations of the Article and Directions for Future Research

A variety of materials, including scholarly literature, governmental papers, and a few chosen research findings, are synthesized in this article. As a result, it lacks thorough empirical field data from every province and area in Thailand, each of which has unique resources and settings. To provide policy suggestions that are more contextually relevant, additional evidence-based research at the school, province, and regional levels is required.

Future research should look at how AI affects English speaking and listening skills in Thai classrooms through experimental studies; how AI affects teachers and students in-depth through mixed-methods research; how AI affects

critical thinking and creativity in English learning through longitudinal studies; and how teacher preparation and students' communicative achievement relate to one another.

It is also important to recognize that AI rules and technology are changing quickly. It is advised to continuously review updated rules and procedures since current information may change after this article is published.

CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, English is still a critical resource for Thailand's sustainable development. However, this article has demonstrated that three major hurdles—the integration of the CEFR, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the generative AI revolution—have constrained the extent to which English can fully function as a catalyst for national advancement.

Revisiting the central premise of this article—English as a Catalyst for Thailand's Sustainable Development—it becomes evident that the catalytic potential of English is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Rather, it depends on systemic alignment between policy, pedagogy, infrastructure, technology, and equity-oriented investment. As highlighted in this article, overcoming these hurdles requires coordinated policy responses, strengthened teacher capacity, inclusive digital infrastructure, responsible AI governance, and sustained long-term commitment.

Therefore, English should not be conceptualized merely as a curricular subject, but as a strategic national asset whose transformative power can only be realized through coherent and sustainable reform. If Thailand succeeds in addressing these structural hurdles with vision and consistency, English can indeed evolve from a policy aspiration into a genuine catalyst for equitable and sustainable national development.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT 5.0 in order to assist with improving the readability and language of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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