Aligning English Grammar in the Thai University Exam with the Common European Framework of References (CEFR)

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the common error types in the General Attitude Test (GAT) and the congruence of the English grammar tests used for Thai university admission with the CEFR. The sample population consisted of the General Aptitude Test (GAT) from the academic years 2015-2019. The thirty items were examined by focusing on the error identification parts, which was the primary analysis in the current study. The research instruments were the criteria for test-item analysis of error types and the checklist for experts to validate the table of an analysis of error types. The results showed that more than half of the error types (56.67%, $n = 17$) were errors associated with *agreement*. It was also found that about 13% ($n = 4$) of the error types were *form of the verb*, and 10% ($n = 3$) were related to *derivation of conjunction*. The results also indicated that *part of speech* was most frequently used as a subcategory of *agreement*, followed by *tenses*, *participle*, and *subject and verb agreement*. In terms of *form of verb*, the "*-ing form*" was the most found in the test items, and the subcategory of *a derivation of conjunction* were the phrase *such as* and *prepositions*. In addition, 29 out of 30 (96.67%) items of the English grammar parts in GAT were congruent with the CEFR at the B2 level. Only one item did not match with the CEFR at the B2 level as it was considered relatively complex regarding the structure and grammar of the sentence, which may match at the C1 level instead.

Keywords: English grammar, university exam, error types, CEFR

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การเทียบเคียงไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษในข้อสอบเข้ามหาวิทยาลัยของไทย
กับกรอบอ้างอิงความสามารถทางภาษาของสหภาพยุโรป (CEFR)

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อตรวจสอบประเภทของข้อผิดพลาด (error types) ที่พบบ่อยในข้อสอบวิชาความถนัดทั่วไป (General Attitude Test: GAT) ซึ่งใช้เป็นข้อสอบเข้ามหาวิทยาลัยของไทย และหาความสอดคล้องของข้อสอบไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษ กับกรอบอ้างอิงความสามารถทางภาษาของสหภาพยุโรป (CEFR) กลุ่มตัวอย่างคือ ข้อสอบวิชาความถนัดทั่วไป ปีการศึกษา 2558-2562 จำนวน 30 ข้อ โดยทำการวิเคราะห์เฉพาะหัวข้อ Error Identification เครื่องมือในงานวิจัยประกอบด้วย เกณฑ์การวิเคราะห์รายการทดสอบประเภทข้อผิดพลาด และรายการตรวจสอบสำหรับผู้เชี่ยวชาญในการตรวจสอบตารางการวิเคราะห์ประเภทข้อผิดพลาด ผลการศึกษาพบว่า เกินกว่าครึ่งหนึ่งของประเภทของข้อผิดพลาด (56.67%) ตรงกับหัวข้อ agreement รองลงมาคือ forms of the verbs และ a derivation of conjunction ตามลำดับ ทั้งนี้ หัวข้อย่อยที่พบมากที่สุดใน agreement คือ ประเภทของคำ (part of speech) ตามมาด้วย tenses participle และ subject and verb agreement ในหัวข้อ forms of the verbs หัวข้อย่อยที่พบมากที่สุดคือ -ing form และในหัวข้อ a derivation of conjunction หัวข้อย่อยที่พบบ่อยที่สุดคือ คำว่า such as และคำคุณศัพท์ (preposition) นอกจากนี้ข้อสอบจำนวน 29 จาก 30 ข้อ (96.67%) ของข้อสอบไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษในหัวข้อ Error Identification สอดคล้องกับกรอบอ้างอิงความสามารถทางภาษาของสหภาพยุโรป (CEFR) ที่ระดับ B2 มีเพียงข้อเดียวที่ไม่สอดคล้องกับกรอบอ้างอิงความสามารถทางภาษาของสหภาพยุโรปที่ระดับ B2 เนื่องจากค่อนข้างซับซ้อนเกี่ยวกับโครงสร้างและไวยากรณ์ของรูปประโยค ซึ่งอาจตรงกับที่ระดับ C1 แทน

คำสำคัญ   ไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษ, ข้อสอบเข้ามหาวิทยาลัยของไทย, ประเภทของข้อผิดพลาด, กรอบอ้างอิงความสามารถทางภาษาของสหภาพยุโรป

Introduction

In Thailand, it is undeniable that students in every grade must take examinations for their assessment. They can be of many different types, such as diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments. Moreover, for Mathayom Suksa 6 students, university examinations are used as the tools for the summative evaluation. Furthermore, English is still one of the core subjects taught at every level of education, from elementary to upper secondary levels. However, the scores of English language university examinations of many Thai learners still have not met with the expectations. According to the Association of the Council of University Presidents of Thailand or CUPT (2022), the average scores of the English subject on the General Attitude Test (GAT) in Mathayom Suksa 6 students are low, demonstrating 43.643 out of 150. Similarly, Sasum and Weeks (2018) stated that Thai learners could not speak English fluently due to their limited vocabulary and lack of speaking opportunities. In addition, the teaching of English by Thai teachers, using mainly Thai language in the classroom, applying inappropriate materials and textbooks, and using fewer activities for students to practice English skills are considered to be the main challenges facing many schools and at every level of education across the country.

The introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was initially announced in 2014 by the Basic Education Commission, stating that English learning, teaching, and assessment would be based on the CEFR framework. In addition, the CEFR is also utilized as achievement criteria for Thai learners, as claimed in the National Scheme of Education B.E. 2560-2579 (2017-2036), indicating that educational institutions would evaluate their students' English language competency based on the CEFR or other comparable standards (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2016). It stated that Mathayom Suksa 1 students should achieve an English proficiency level of at least A1, Mathayom Suksa 3 of A2, and Mathayom Suksa 6 and vocational college students of B1.

Consequently, one of the frequently asked questions is, "Does the General Aptitude Test (GAT) align with the CEFR?" Since the CEFR has been used in many standardized tests such as the TOEIC, the TOEFL iBT, the IELTS, or even tests of English language proficiency available in many Thai higher education institutions, questions revolving around the congruence of the English language with the CEFR framework have arisen among researchers. Grammatical aspects in Thai national tests have been focused on and have been changed over the past ten years. Therefore, this study has shed much light on the grammatical content

found in the General Aptitude Test (GAT). The results of this study may yield benefits for teachers of English and students when preparing teaching materials or for examinations.

Since the CEFR has played an essential role in the Thai educational system, the results of this study will help teachers to design their grammar teaching to match the CEFR and will help students to practice English tests before taking university admission examinations. Moreover, because common grammar topics usually appear in the examinations, the results will also be their guidelines for Thai university examinations and admissions.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To identify the common error types found in the General Aptitude Test (GAT).

2. To align the General Aptitude Test (GAT) with the CEFR.

Research Questions

Based on the objectives, the research questions were as follows:

1. What are the common error types found in the General Aptitude Test (GAT)?

2. Are items in the English grammar parts in the General Aptitude Test (GAT) congruent with the CEFR?

Literature Review

The General Aptitude Test (GAT)

In 2009, the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (Public Organization) or NIETS designed new tests named the General Aptitude Test (GAT) and the Professional and Academic Aptitude Test (PAT). Moreover, there were seven kinds of PAT, such as mathematics tests, science tests, engineering tests, and foreign language tests. The English GAT has two main parts: firstly, the ability to read, the ability to write, critical thinking and problem-solving, and, secondly, communicate in English. Each part scores 150 points, and the total is 300 points. The English communication test consists of four main parts: expressions, vocabulary, reading, and structure, and writing. There are sixty items for ninety minutes, and the total score is 150 points. The expressions part consists of five conversations for fifteen items. There are fifteen items in the vocabulary part, composed of text completions and synonyms. There are three reading passages for fifteen items in the reading part. The structure and writing part consists of fifteen items divided into five for error identification, five for a cloze test, and the remaining five for writing skills.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is a well-known guideline or framework of language ability. It is divided into six primary levels ranging from beginner to advanced, which are A1 (Breakthrough), A2 (Waystage), B1 (Threshold), B2 (Vantage), C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency), and C2 (Mastery).

The CEFR was envisioned as a planning tool that might offer a "common language" for articulating language teaching objectives, methods, and assessments as it is used in various situations for various languages. Its purpose was to make creating curricula, tests, textbooks, and teacher-training programs easier to encourage reflection and discussion.

Coste (2007) noted that in curriculum development, language education, and, notably, evaluation, the six reference levels have been significant and have sparked much discussion.

The six-level Global Scale (A1 to C2) and the Illustrative Descriptors, which apply to the teaching and learning of any language, are used to characterize the levels. The Global Scale descriptors for the six primary CEFR levels are presented in Table 1, demonstrating the CEFR level and general description.

Table 1: The CEFR level and general description

Level			General description
Proficient user	C2	Mastery	Highly proficient – can use English very fluently, precisely, and sensitively in most contexts
	C1	Effective Operational Proficiency	Able to use English fluently and flexibly in a wide range of contexts
Independent user	B2	Vantage	Can use English effectively, with some fluency, in a range of contexts
	B1	Threshold	Can communicate essential points and ideas in familiar contexts
Basic user	A2	Waystage	Can communicate in English within a limited range of contexts
	A1	Breakthrough	Can communicate in basic English with help from the listener

Grammatical Criterial Features

The University of Cambridge (2011) summarized grammatical features that distinguish each level of the CEFR. Descriptions and some key features are shown as follows:

A2 level: Certain language features emerge as critical, distinct characteristics when the learners are at this level. The average length of utterance is 7.9 words. In other words, an A2 level of English is characterized by using basic and relatively simple structures.

Key features: simple sentences, sentences with clauses joined by *that*, descriptive phrases introduced by a past participle, simple direct *wh-* questions, simple sentences using infinitives, other infinitives, and some modals

B1 level: The learners continue to write steadily longer sentences. The average length of a B1 utterance is 10.8 words. The learners can also deal with more complex sentences.

Key features: *-ing* clauses, *whose* relative clauses, indirect questions, clauses with *what* as subject/object, verb + object + infinitive, *easy* + infinitive, some complex auxiliaries, additional modal uses

B2 level: The mean length of a B2 user's utterance is 14.2 words. The learners increasingly use complex sentences and attempt to produce an adverbial clause.

Key features: -ing clause before the main clause, *it* + verb +infinitive phrase, *wh*-clause as a subject of the main clause, reported speech, lexically specific verbs/adjective + infinitive

C1 level: At this level, the average utterance length increases to 17.3 words. Learners use structures with a much wider range of vocabulary and in more accurate ways.

Key features: lexically specific verb + object + infinitive, *might* for permission, fewer grammatical errors with agreement, countability, or word formation

C2 level: Learners have great grammatical accuracy and a wider lexical range than C1 users. The mean length of a C1 user's utterance is 19 words.

Key features: some new lexically specific verbs + object + infinitive, longer utterances with greater accuracy

Error Types Categorized by the CEFR

Hawkins and Buttery (2009, 2010) and Hawkins and Filipović (2011) categorized incorrect properties or errors that occur at a certain level or levels and with a characteristic frequency. The details of the relationships between structures and CEFR level have been determined by a thorough analysis of the Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC), English Profile Grammar researchers' most significant data source.

Examples of error types that significantly improve between adjacent levels

Each error type is categorized into each CEFR level. For instance, error types that improve significantly between A2 to B1 levels explain the main error topic, the definitions, and example sentences. The examples are demonstrated as follows (University of Cambridge, 2011):

*Note: The wrong words were in **bold**, and the correct ones were in (parentheses).*

Error type: Agreement

Definition: When the word is correct, and the form of the word is valid but wrong in the context because it does not agree grammatically with its coordinates, it is an Agreement error.

Example sentence: I know that **this kind** of jobs are well paid… (these kinds)

Error type: Form of Verb

Definition: When either base, -ing, and to + infinitive forms of the verbs have been used where another form is required, it is a Form of Verb error.

Example sentence: If you have any more questions, don't hesitate **asking** me! (to ask)

Error type: Derivation of Conjunction

Definition: Where a conjugation/link word resembles or includes the stem of a valid word but has been incorrectly derived, usually because it has been given an incorrect affix, it is a Derivation of Conjunction error.

Example sentence: …you are able to take books anywhere you want to, **even** the book is too heavy. (unless)

Error type: Argument Structure

Definition: Where a sentence or phrase's structure contravenes grammar and word order rules, it is an Argument Structure error.

Example sentence: Therefore, I think you should **pay some more money back for me**. (pay me some money back)

Error type: Inflection of Quantifier

Definition: Where the learner has created a feasible but non-valid inflected form of the quantifier, this is an Inflection of Quantifier error.

Example sentence: ...I made **severals** phone calls... (several)

Error type: Inflection of Verb

Definition: Where the learner has made a false assumption about whether a verb is regular or irregular and inflected it accordingly. Most commonly, the error is caused by putting regular inflections on irregular verbs.

Example sentence: After the film, we had dinner and we **chated** about the film... (chatted)

Error type: Form of Quantifier

Definition: When a valid form of the quantifier (singular or plural) has been used but is the wrong form in the context, it is a Form of Quantifier error.

Example sentence: ...in **more of the cases**... (in most cases)

Error type: Form of Adjective

Definition: When a valid form of the adjective (positive, comparative, or superlative) has been used but is the wrong form in the context, it is a Form of Adjective error.

Example sentence: Well, in my opinion, my third choice is the **better**. (best)

Error type: Derivation of Anaphor

Definition: Where an anaphor resembles or includes the stem of a valid word but has been incorrectly derived, usually because it has been given an incorrect affix, it is a Derivation of Anaphor error.

Example sentence: It was very kind of **yours** to invite us to your home. (you)

MacDonald (2016) investigated errors in compositions in English made by Spanish university students using an error coding system. The error types were from the CEFR levels ranging from A1 to C2. The results showed that the most frequent grammar error was noun phrase and was at A2 level.

Amnuai (2020) found that the most frequent error Thai undergraduate students made in their writing was word level. The wrong word choice usage was caused by mother tongue interference, which was the main factor affecting student writing errors.

To summarize, error types made by students vary, and the congruence with the CEFR matches the low level. Therefore, this study will explore the common error types found in the General Aptitude Test (GAT) and attempt to ensure that items in the English grammar parts in the General Aptitude Test (GAT) are congruent with the CEFR.

Methodology

Population and Samples

The population used in the study was the General Attitude Test (GAT) from the academic years 2009-2021. However, the study samples were the General Aptitude Test (GAT) from the academic years 2015-2019. The sampling method of the study was purposive sampling. The examples were selected according to the significant changes in the test used in the academic year 2014. The test items were selected from a commercial book entitled "NEW AX 30 ABSOLUTE EXAM KIT," sold at a well-known bookstore in Bangkok. The book collected the actual General Aptitude Test (GAT) tests. There were five items in the error identification part in each academic year except for academic year 2015, which had ten items. The thirty items were examined by focusing on the error identification part, which was the primary analysis in the current study.

Research Instruments

In the study, there were two research instruments which were:

1. The criteria for test-item analysis of error types.
2. The checklist for experts to validate the table of an analysis of error types.

The criteria for test-item analysis of error types

A five-point Linkert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree 1) to Strongly Disagree 5), was applied to the instrument to find the intercorrelation between the two experts before designing another tool. The design was based on a book entitled "English Profile: Introducing

the CEFR for English", and all the examples of error types were taken from it. The error types and example sentences were obtained from the A2 to B2 levels.

Table 2: Example of the criteria for test-item analysis of error types

Item	Error Type	Examples (B2 level)	Rating Scale					Comments and/or Suggestions
			5	4	3	2	1	
1	Agreement	...you can try the clothes you choose on and be sure that **it fits** you. *(they fit)*						

The checklist for experts to validate the table of an analysis of error types

The instrument was created based on the six steps of error analysis (Gass et al., 2013). The first step was collecting data from the thirty items of actual General Aptitude Test (GAT) tests. Then, identifying, classifying, quantifying errors, analyzing sources and remediating respectively were conducted. This instrument validated the error types and subcategories and aligned the General Aptitude Test (GAT) with the CEFR. The index of item-objective congruence (IOC) was used for validating the data by five experts. The instrument had questions, answers, error types and subcategories, and the CEFR level.

Table 3: Example of the checklist for experts to validate the table of an analysis of error types

Item	Question	Answer	Error Type	CEFR Level	IOC			Comments and/or Suggestions
					+1	0	-1	
1	(1) <u>As of</u> Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) last year, Facebook, the most (2) <u>dominant</u> social network, (3) <u>has</u> 2.2 (4) <u>billion</u> monthly (5) <u>active</u> users.	(3) has → had	Agreement (Tense)	B2				

Data Collection

The first instrument, the criteria for test-item analysis of error types, was validated by two experts to find the intercorrelation. The experts were asked to validate the criteria for test-item analysis of error types and the content contained in the error types that significantly improved between adjacent levels. Each criterion consisted of error types and example sentences of A2 to B2 level.

The second instrument, the checklist for experts to validate the table of an analysis of error types, was confirmed by five experts. The experts were asked to validate the table of an analysis of error types and to map each error type with the CEFR level. The table consisted of thirty items of the General Aptitude Test (GAT) focusing on the error identification part. It also provided the answers for each question, error types and subcategories, and the CEFR level.

Data Analysis

This study analyzed the collected data using quantitative approaches to analyze the two research instruments.

Data Analysis for Research Instrument 1

To examine the error types and example sentences and to find the intercorrelation between two raters, SPSS was used to analyze the quantitative data. The five-score level of the Linkert Scale was applied to find the intercorrelation, measuring the perspectives of the experts for each error type.

After the data were analyzed, the results showed that the intercorrelation value was 0.996, which indicated that the instrument in this present study had a strong positive linear correlation of the two raters. The two experts had relatively the same perspectives for each error type.

Data Analysis for Research Instrument 2

To validate and confirm error types and to investigate the congruence of the English grammar parts in the General Aptitude Test (GAT) with the CEFR, the items from the GAT were analyzed by five experts. The CEFR level in the checklist for experts to validate the congruence was at the B2 level.

Results

Part 1: The Common Error Types

The first research question was, "What are the common error types found in the General Aptitude Test (GAT)?"

From the quantitative data analysis of the common error types found in the thirty items, more than half of the error types (56.67%, *n* = 17) were *agreement,* as presented in Table 2.

It was also found that about 13% (*n* = 4) of the error types were *form of the verb*, and 10% (*n* = 3) were about *derivation of conjunction*. The results also indicated that *part of speech* was most frequently used as a subcategory of *agreement*, followed by *tenses*, *participle*, and *subject and verb agreement*. In terms of *form of verb*, the *-ing form* was most found in the test items, and the subcategory of *derivation of conjunction* the phrase *such as* and *preposition*.

Table 4: Numbers of Error Types in the GAT

Error Types	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Rank
Agreement	17	56.67	1
Form of Verb	4	13.33	2
Derivation of Conjunction	3	10.00	3
Argument Structure	1	3.33	4
Inflection of Quantifier	1	3.33	4
Inflection of Verb	1	3.33	4
Form of Quantifier	1	3.33	4
Form of Adjective	1	3.33	4
Derivation of Anaphor	1	3.33	4

Part 2: The congruence of the GAT with the CEFR

The second research question was, "Are items in the English grammar parts in the General Aptitude Test (GAT) congruent with the CEFR?"

The test-item analyses showed that 29 out of 30 (96.67%) items of the English grammar parts in GAT were congruent with the CEFR at the B2 level. There was only one item (Item 20) that did not match with the CEFR at the B2 level as it was considered relatively complex

regarding the structure and grammar of the sentence. This item may match at the C1 level instead.

Discussion

The Common Error Types and Subcategories

According to the quantitative data analysis of the common error types found in the GAT, the results showed that more than half were *agreement*, and the most frequently found subcategory was *part of speech*. As the error identification part could be assessed for writing skill, it measures how well the test takers know how to write grammatically in a limited time. The results of the present study matched the previous study concerning writing. Amnuai (2020) explored writing errors in English research project abstracts written by Thai undergraduate students. The results showed that word choice or part of speech was the most frequent error type. The cause of ineffective writing in these results was L1 interference. The Thai language does not have a verbal form. Hence, students are influenced by their mother tongue and make errors.

The Alignment of the GAT with the CEFR

The findings from the quantitative data analysis indicated that the General Aptitude Test (GAT) aligned with the CEFR at the B2 level (96.67%). It is consistent with what Papageorgiou et al. (2015) described, that B2 is sometimes set as the minimum level required for university admission.

The National Scheme of Education B.E. 2560-2579 (2017-2036) indicates that students graduating from Mathayom Suksa 6 (Grade 12) and vocational college should have achieved level B1. This statement may imply that the GAT may need to be more congruent with the national curriculum. However, false results can occur. According to Livingston and Zieky (1982), it is acknowledged that no test can achieve absolute perfection in measuring its intended construct. Therefore, for most tests, it is not feasible to establish cut-off scores entirely devoid of judgment errors. Each expert had different perspectives on the CEFR levels according to the limitations of explaining the error types and subcategories. For instance, Expert 1 may identify the Agreement (Relative pronouns) as a B1, or Expert 2 may determine the Form of Verb (have trouble + -ing form) as a C1. As a result, clear explanations of the error types and subcategories should be provided for further research, including helpful comments and suggestions from the experts.

However, in many Thai schools, the commercial textbooks for teaching Grade 12 students are only at level B1. Consequently, most Thai upper-secondary school students choose tutoring schools since they have the opinion that the tutors have higher English language proficiency skills than their mainstream school teachers (Chan & Mongkolhutthi, 2017). The students also wanted their instructors to teach them techniques and strategies for taking university admission examinations.

Conclusion

This study aimed to answer two research questions: (1) What common error types are in the General Aptitude Test (GAT)? and (2) Are items in the English grammar parts in the General Aptitude Test (GAT) congruent with the CEFR? It examined thirty items of the General Aptitude Test (GAT) from the academic years 2015-2019, focusing on the error identification part.

The results of the present study show that more than half of the error types were *agreement*. For the Congruence of the GAT with the CEFR, the test-item analyses showed that 29 out of 30 items of the English grammar parts in the GAT were congruent with the CEFR at the B2 level.

For pedagogical implication, this study could be a guideline for English language teachers preparing to teach or tutor students. In 2021, the GAT was changed to the Thai General Aptitude Test or TGAT. The TGAT comprises English communication, critical and logical thinking, and future workplace competencies. Although the error identification part in the TGAT was eliminated, it is undeniable that grammar is found in every section of the English tests, especially for university admission. For example, the Chulalongkorn University Test of English Proficiency (CU-TEP), Thammasat University General English Test (TU-GET), and SAT are the standardized tests used for university admission. There is an error identification section in each of these tests.

Consequently, the teachers know the most common error types in the tests and can plan the lessons effectively. Besides, for upper-secondary school students, recognizing the results of the present study would be a recommendation for them to study hard. As the GAT was congruent with the CEFR at B2, students must prepare and pay attention to university admission. However, the frequency of error types and the subcategories indicated what topics they should emphasize. Therefore, they will save time for university examination preparation, give them time to read other subjects, and improve their scores.

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