

Where Does the First Year Students' Level of English Language Skills Stand in CEFR A Study from Early Childhood Teacher Education Department

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ABSTRACT. This study aims to reveal the proficiency level of English language skills among first-year students in the Early Childhood Education department at Universitas Negeri Medan. The skills assessed in this study include grammar, reading comprehension, writing proficiency, listening comprehension, and oral communication. This study employed a quantitative research methodology, focusing on first-year students who are enrolled in English language courses. Throughout the research process, the researchers refrained from administering any interventions to the samples. The acquired data from the samples undergoes analysis using descriptive statistics. The analysis indicates that 70% of the students demonstrated proficiency at the A2 level, which corresponds to basic English usage according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This level corresponds to the English language proficiency of elementary kids. Based on this study, it is necessary to enhance the English language curriculum utilized in the Department of Early Childhood Education to align with the students' English language competence level.

Keywords: Language assessment, CEFR levels, English proficiency, first-year student, EFL learner

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is not considered a second language, unlike in Malaysia or other countries. English is considered a foreign language that Indonesian students are expected to acquire from a young age, starting from elementary school and continuing through formal education at the university level (Hery, 2017). Given that English is classified as a foreign language in Indonesia, it is necessary to rely on the speech of native speakers as a reference for pronunciation and as a standard for understanding communications in many contexts, such as academic and social interactions (Cahyono & Widiati, 2015). Within the Early Childhood Education department, proficiency in the English language is a prerequisite for all first-year students. The aim of this English language course is to enhance students' proficiency in English, enabling them to effectively engage in communication with various educational stakeholders. Moreover, this will assist students in expanding their prospects for competing with other prospective educators once entering their professional field following graduation.

English fluency refers to the ability of an individual to effectively communicate with others using the English language for various purposes (Renandya et al., 2018). The assessment of English competency involves evaluating various skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Rahman et al., 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2021). In addition to these four

components, other characteristics that must be considered when assessing an individual's language competency include accuracy, fluency, complexity, appropriacy, and capacity (Robertson et al., 2016). Accuracy refers to the learner's proficiency in using language appropriately, including pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Fluency indicator refers to an individual's capacity to articulate thoughts and ideas seamlessly in order to prevent disruptions in communication. Complexity pertains to the learner's capacity to employ intricate terminology and syntax in their communication. Appropriacy pertains to the linguistic choices made by the learner in a certain context and situation. The final measure of language proficiency is capacity, which pertains to the learner's aptitude in utilizing the language to elucidate or convey specific concepts. For example, in a classroom environment, students can provide an elucidation of leaves or describe phenomena from books using diverse illustrations and tables (Robertson et al., 2016).

English language competency is categorized into three tiers based on skills. The tiers are referred to as basic user (elementary level), independent user (medium level), and proficient user (advanced level). The categories are popularly known as the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Language), which was created by the Council of Europe. The CEFR is intended to provide a shared basis for creating language teaching and learning materials and assessments. This includes the development of textbooks, syllabi, curriculum guidelines, and tests, among other things. Its purpose extends beyond political and educational settings (Waluyo, 2019). The framework delineates the breadth of information, abilities, and competencies that a language learner must acquire in order to proficiently utilize a language for efficient communication in all its manifestations. CEFR is particularly valuable since it offers a precise delineation of proficiency levels, enabling the application of progress tracking assessments at every phase of language acquisition (Miqawati et al., 2023). On a global basis, competence levels are categorized into three groups: Proficient User, Independent User, and Basic User. These categories are further divided into six levels, referred to as C2, C1, B2, B1, A2, and A1 (Arifudin & Maryo, 2021). Each level is accompanied by distinct descriptions that outline the learner's language knowledge, skills, and competences they are capable of demonstrating (Foley, 2019). These levels are designed to provide a common framework that allows for flexibility in language teaching and learning goals. The table shown below provides a comprehensive breakdown of each competency level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Uri & Aziz, 2020).

Table 1. CEFR levels in global scale

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments, and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of proficient meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors, and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantage and independent disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate basic need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Previous research suggests that the ability of individuals to acquire a language can be influenced by several internal and external factors (Wulandari & Widyastuti Surtikanti, 2020). Internal characteristics encompass the learner's age, gender, interest, and motivation in language acquisition, as well as their affective and cognitive style (Renandya et al., 2018). Many researches have specifically recognized the learner's socio-economic level, cultural and home background, the environment, and the ambiance of where language acquisition takes place as external influences (Madrid, 1995; Mirhadizadeh, 2016). In addition, stakeholders such as curriculum developers, English educators, school principals, and policy makers have a significant impact on the development of students' English language abilities (López et al., 2021). English lecturers at the university level should recognize the need of assessing students' English competency in order to effectively design the teaching and learning curriculum (Miqawati et al., 2023). A curriculum is a structured plan of lessons that is typically utilized for one semester. It serves as a tool to guide learners in achieving the objectives of a particular subject (Lê & Polikoff, 2021). Thus, by assessing the proficiency level in English language, instructors can effectively design the English language curriculum by selecting appropriate

learning materials, determining suitable classroom teaching methods and strategies, and choosing appropriate assessment tools to evaluate students' language acquisition (Rahmawati et al., 2021b). However, current research on the English proficiency of students at the University level, particularly in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Universitas Negeri Medan, has been scarce (Renandya et al., 2018). The researchers are motivated to determine the extent of students' English competence by utilizing a designed test and using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as a benchmark for evaluating their proficiency level. The objective of this study is to assess the English language ability of students in the Department of Early Childhood Education.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research approach to investigate the outcomes of students' English language proficiency tests in the areas of grammar, reading, listening, writing, and speaking (Leavy & Patricia, 2017). The test was created by a team of English Language professors from the department of Early Childhood Education. This assessment is a standardized examination designed to gauge the proficiency of individuals who are new to the department in the English language. The Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) is mostly used as the framework to assess the English language proficiency of newcomers.

Table 2. The test format – Fetching English Test

Test Format	Total Question	Duration (Minutes)
1. Grammar	50	50
Part 1: Subject, noun, verb, adverb, and to be	10	
Part 2: Tenses	15	
Part 3: Relative Pronoun	5	
Part 4: Active-Passive Voice	5	
Part 5: Modals and Gerund	10	
Part 6: Preposition	5	
2. Reading	25	30
Part 7: Sentence Completion	10	
Part 8: Short story conclusion	5	
Part 9: Reading comprehension	10	
3. Listening	25	20
Part 10: Statement and pictures	7	
Part 11: Statement and responses	10	
Part 12: Conversation	8	
4. Writing	1	30
Topic prompt essay (150 words)		
5. Speaking		5
A discussion with a lecturer (examiner) involving self-introduction, speaking about topic, and questions and answers		

Table 3. English Language Categories on CEFR

Categories	Level	Scores
Proficient User	C2	23,00-27,50
	C1	18,40-22,99
Independent User	B2	13,80-18,39
	B1	9,20-13,79
Basic User	A2	4,60-9,19
	A1	0-4,59

The participants in this study consisted of 161 first-year students from the Early Childhood Education Department at Universitas Negeri Medan. Out of the total number of students included in this study, only 5 (3.10%) are male, while the remaining students are defined as female (96.89%). At the time of this study, the participants had initiated their English language acquisition at the university level. The data obtained from this investigation were examined using descriptive statistics. The study procedure commenced with administrative preparations, encompassing the organization of schedules, allocation of exam rooms, selection of proctors, and appointment of examiners. The study was done in September 2022, spanning a duration of around two weeks for both examination and grading operations. The individuals responsible for overseeing the exams, conducting the speaking test, and evaluating the essays as part of the writing test were a team of English Lecturers from the Department of Early Childhood Education at the Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Medan. Upon the conclusion of the assessment process, the students' results were gathered and scrutinized utilizing MS Excel and Google Spreadsheet. Subsequently, the outcomes are showcased in the subsequent section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Students' Categories of English Language Level on CEFR

Initially, the research was specifically centered on the aggregate scores of students in order to chart their level of proficiency in the English Language based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The descriptive data (N=161) indicated that the average total scores of students' English proficiencies, as measured across the five English skills, were 8.63. This indicates that, on average, the students' English language competence level was at A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The minimum score achieved was 4.21, corresponding to level A1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and the maximum score obtained was 14.55, equivalent to level B2 on the CEFR. In addition, the frequencies indicated that the majority of the students' scores fell within the A2 level, which corresponds to a basic user

proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (112/70%). This was followed by the B1 level, which represents an independent user proficiency (28/17%). The B2 level, also indicating an independent user proficiency, accounted for 12/7.4% of the scores. Lastly, the A1 level accounted for 9/5.6% of the scores. No students with C1 or C2 proficiency level in CEFR were found in the categories.

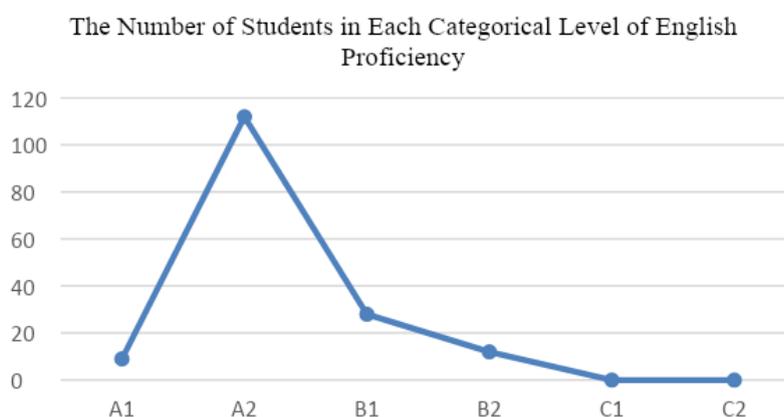


Chart 1. The distribution of the total number of students in each category of English Proficiency

2. English Proficiency Levels in each English Skill

Subsequently, the analysis proceeded to examine the students' competency levels in each English skill, including Grammar, Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking. The findings indicated that the majority of the students demonstrated a competency level of A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in all the skills assessed in this study, namely Grammar (101/62.7%), reading (99/61.5%), listening (86/53.4%), writing (79/49.1%), and speaking (77/47.8%). However, the majority of the students have an A2 competency level in writing, while two students were found to have a C2 proficiency level, which represents 2.1% of the CEFR proficiency levels. Not only did numerous students achieve a C2 level, but they also attained a C1 level in all aspects of English skills, including grammar (4/2.5%), reading (2/1.2%), listening (2/1.2%), writing (3/1.9%), and speaking (4/2.5%). The following chart, labeled as Chart 2, displays the distribution of students' English proficiency levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in percentage form. Table 4 presents the specific figures indicating the students' level of expertise in each category.

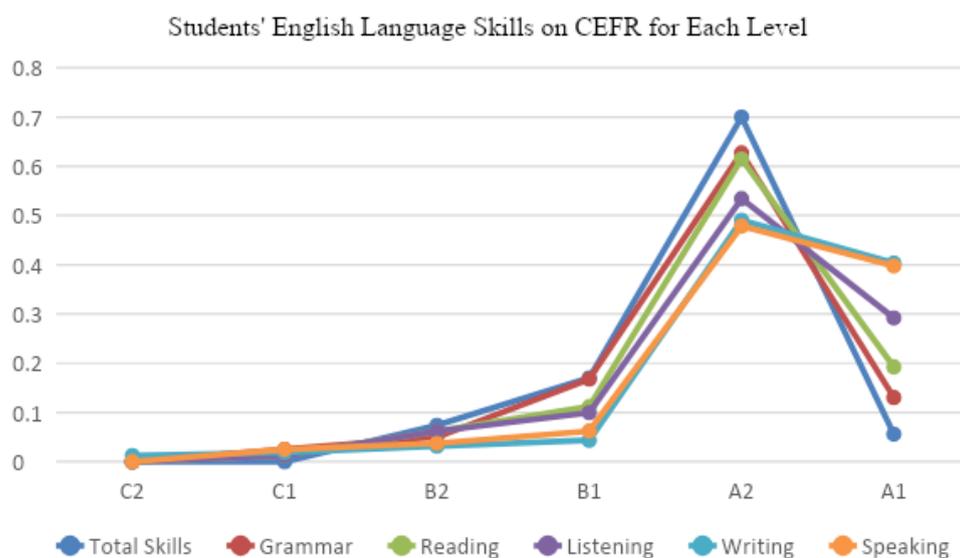


Chart 2. The distribution of students' English proficiency on CEFR levels

Table 4. Students' proficiency levels

CEFR Levels	Total Skills	English Language Skills				
		Grammar	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking
C2	0	0	0	0	1,2%	0
C1	0	2,5%	1,2%	1,2%	1,9%	2,5%
B2	7,40%	5,0%	6,2%	6,2%	3,1%	3,7%
B1	17%	16,8%	11,2%	9,9%	4,3%	6,2%
A2	70%	62,7%	61,5%	53,4%	49,1%	47,8%
A1	5,60%	13,0%	19,3%	29,2%	40,4%	39,8%

Researchers in Asia, particularly in Indonesia, have consistently shown interest in studying English language proficiency (López et al., 2021; Mudra, 2018; Rachmawati et al., 2020; Wok Zaki & Darmi, 2021). An important determinant of this problem is the low English language proficiency of Indonesian students, despite having studied English from elementary to senior high school (Robertson et al., 2016). Indonesian students often study the English language for a duration of approximately 12 years or longer. In addition to this matter, the English language is widely recognized as a mandatory course at the university level. At the Early Childhood Education department at Universitas Negeri Medan, pupils are required to study English in their first year of school. According to the findings of this study, first-year students in the Early Childhood Education Department have a proficiency level of A2, which classifies them as basic users. This demonstrates that the first-year students, who are new to the department, possess the same level of English proficiency as elementary pupils according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Given their extensive 12-year exposure to English language instruction in school, they should not be classified as novice users. They should be recognized as autonomous users or proficient at the B2 level. Only 12

out of 161 first-year students, or 7.4%, are capable of being independent users. There are numerous factors exerting influence on this situation. The primary obstacle is a scarcity of time and chances to engage in practical exercises related to English language subjects (Lengkanawati, 2017). The majority of English language disciplines taught in schools prioritize content-based learning, resulting in pupils mostly engaging in theoretical learning rather than practical application of their knowledge (Ayu, 2020). Given that proficiency in English is a well-established skill, it is imperative that students are motivated to engage in extensive practice rather than simply relying on worksheets or other activities. This approach would encourage individuals to actively apply their existing knowledge and make a meaningful contribution to enhancing their English language proficiency, particularly in the areas of speaking, reading, listening, and writing, which are essential for effective communication (Rahman et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is uncommon to come across a secure environment where English learners can engage in English language practice. Instances of bullying are prevalent in schools, particularly among students who are enthusiastic about English and seek opportunities to practice the language with their peers. Unfortunately, these students do not receive the necessary support and are instead labeled as individuals who prioritize English over their native language, Bahasa Indonesia (Rahmawati et al., 2021b). Although it may sound cliché, occurrences like these actually took place in the school. Regrettably, a significant number of them are located in the rural regions of Indonesia (Mirhadizadeh, 2016; Zuhriyah, 2017). The most prevalent form of bullying related to English language proficiency is known as the "grammar police." This involves others closely scrutinizing one's grammar usage and promptly correcting any errors made by the speaker (Zuhriyah, 2017). For certain individuals, this matter is inconsequential. However, for an individual with a lower level of complexity and a strong desire to learn English and actively engage in practice with others, receiving public corrections would be quite surprising. This encounter will not only cause individuals distress, but also suppress their desire to engage in public English language practice.

The most recent disputes pertain to the outcomes of this research, specifically on grammar, which is one of the competencies assessed in the test. Grammar achieved the highest score (62.7%) compared to the other skills. This occurrence may have occurred due to the fact that students are only taught grammar from the very beginning of their introduction to the English language (Mudra, 2018). Nevertheless, their proficiency in grammar is at the A2 level, which is considered basic. This outcome should serve as both a stimulus and a prompt for English educators in Indonesia to contemplate their curriculum and teaching methods. The reason for this is that grammar is considered to be the primary foundation for enhancing English

language competency (Yacob & Yunus, 2019). If children do not effectively acquire a solid understanding of grammar, their ability to speak the language accurately may be compromised. The research findings indicate that 40.4% of students with speaking skills and 39.8% of students with writing skills obtained the lowest results in level A1. This discovery serves as a cautionary message for English educators, highlighting the significant areas that require enhancement in the field of English language instruction, spanning from primary school to university.

CONCLUSION

This study presents empirical evidence regarding the English proficiency levels of first-year students in the Early Childhood Education Department at Universitas Negeri Medan. The majority of new arrivals, specifically 70% of first-year students, are assessed to have a proficiency level of basic user (A2). This implies that the English language skills of the children are at the same level as those of elementary school students. English lecturers in the Early Childhood Education Department can strategically construct the curriculum and learning model for the English topic by assessing the students' proficiency level and incorporating it into their teaching approach. In addition, English instructors should create a secure setting for learners to engage in English practice and inspire them by emphasizing the significance of the English language both as a topic and for their whole future. Additionally, this study seeks to completely investigate the reasons and factors that influence students' English language proficiency, and establish a relationship between these factors and the amount of time spent studying the language.

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