
What is the student's level? Analyzing Students' English Proficiency Levels in High Education Level

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Abstract

English has become an essential language for many purposes, including educational needs. However, English learning still has various obstacles, such as the lack of adequate environment and facilities for learning English, including Sintang, a border area. The environment and facilities greatly influence students' English learning. It raises the question of how good the English skills are there. However, the researchers' concern in this study is students at the university level. Universities were chosen as relevant subjects because they are at the highest level of English learning in formal schools. To achieve this goal, researchers use qualitative methods and conduct English language proficiency tests guided by CEFR on university students in Sintang. There were 149 results obtained by researchers after conducting the test, but only 139 can be taken as data for this study. This study's results indicate that most students are basic users.

Keywords: CEFR; English; Higher Students; Students' level

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1. Introduction

Mastering English is necessary to support various communication needs around the world. English is used to communicate with people from different backgrounds, and it is now spoken in almost all aspects of human life, such as education, business, science and technology, and politics (Kaharuddin, 2019). Crystal, in 1997, even stated that the number of English international speakers is steadily rising (Gunantar, 2016). As a lingua franca, it is also a language of instruction in various settings. In Indonesia, English has also become increasingly popular. Some Indonesians also speak English at home, even though English is regulated as a foreign language nowadays. This means the need for English is not only for international but also for local communication needs.

English is a language that is studied in various schools in Indonesia. Historically, the regulations for learning English have different implementation rules in several curricula. Over time, Indonesia has implemented various curricula tailored to meet the era's challenges. The implemented curriculum that involves English since the elementary school level is KBK, KTSP 2006, and the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Alfarisy, 2021; Syarifah & Nurhidayat, 2024). This means that English is not an exclusive subject that is only applied to specific schools or regions. It is thought in all of Indonesia's regions, including border areas such as Sintang West Kalimantan.

Sintang is a border area. It is one of the regencies in the Province of West Kalimantan, which borders Malaysia. This geographical condition requires English language skills to communicate across borders. However, there are many challenges in learning in the border areas, such as students' lack of interest in learning and learning facilities and infrastructure (Ahmad, 2018; Lumbantobing & Sadewo, 2022). With the existing problems, it is possible to contribute to the lack of students' English language skills in Indonesia. This is following a study that shows many students in Indonesia still have not mastered English (Lubis et al., 2024). Teachers also complain about their challenges in teaching English, such as different student ability levels, limited time, availability of teaching resources, and the perception of English as a foreign language (Rifiyanti et al., 2024).

Because of this, researchers are interested in conducting research in Sintang. However, this study aims to analyze university-level students' English language skills. University students are chosen because they are in the highest phase of formal education. They have studied English longer than high or junior high school students. Thus, they should have mature experience in learning English.

Researchers use a benchmark as a reference to measure students' English skills. It is CEFR, which stands for Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It is a common standard for measuring an individual's English level. This tool measures a person's language skills, including English. This means that it is appropriate to measure higher student levels.

Even previous studies have been conducted (Damayanti & Gafur, 2020; Yu et al., 2022), but it was in a different place and used a different test type. No research has measured university students' English skills following CEFR benchmarking in Sintang. Thus, the present study brings great novelty. The result can also be used to understand student's needs and design appropriate learning strategies at a specific level.

1.2. CEFR

CEFR, or Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, is a guideline for foreign language assessment (Wang et al., 2012), which was introduced in 2001 (Husain et al., 2024). Now, it is used in 40 languages worldwide (Azurawati et al., 2021), including English. There are no age limitations on using CEFR; all students can use it to level themselves (Azurawati et al., 2021). Educational institutions commonly use it to measure their new entry students to manage their classes. This kind of test is also widely used to measure language proficiency and as a reference to make a language test.

Standard language leveling is necessary for many needs. It is used to maintain different language-leveling perceptions. For example, someone with confidence in English thinks that he/she is proficient, but his/her college thinks his/her English is at the basic level. Thus, using CEFR as a standard test leads them objectively to an actual language level. With the rapid advancement of technology, CEFR tests no longer need to be conducted offline at testing institutions. Test-takers can now access the tests online and independently assess their proficiency levels. CEFR is a reliable reference to level someone's English language skills. It has also been proven that previous studies have used CEFR as a reference in student leveling (Lemos & Hartati, 2021; Yu et al., 2022). This framework is also universal, measurable, and relevant to the real world, making it easier for assessment to be accepted worldwide.

CEFR contains guidelines on learner language leveling. It is divided into basic, independent, and proficient user fields (Kassim & Hashim, 2023). The basic level contains A1 and A2, the independent level consists of B1 and B2, then C1 and C2 are for proficient users. Table 1 shows the details of the CEFR level.

Table 1. Common Reference Levels-Global Scale (Kassim & Hashim, 2023).

Proficient User	C2	Can understand virtually everything they hear or read with ease. 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 meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts and recognize implicit meanings. 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 advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1 Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, and others. 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 that 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 need.
	A1 Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases to satisfy a concrete type's needs. Can introduce himself/herself and others and ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows, and things he/she has. Users can interact simply, provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

CEFR is not just a language-level guideline; it is becoming commonly recommended in language teaching references (Cambridge, 2013). It is now becoming an approach in Europe's most foreign language learning programs. Teachers can use the results to reflect their learning and teaching programs. In teaching English, we know that teachers come from various backgrounds. This CEFR can be a reference for aligning teachers' perceptions in teaching English (Yu et al., 2022). In addition, one of the main aims of the CEFR is to offer institutions a description of language proficiency to develop language education policies.

However, CEFR is a guideline, and teachers need an instrument test to group students into certain levels. In language tests, multiple-choice is one type that is often used. This test consists of several choices, but only one is correct. This format allows for broad content coverage and efficiently evaluates a large amount of material (Hassan & Alnoori, 2024).

Multiple-choice questions are beneficial for assessing basic knowledge and fact recall. This assessment format can cover a wide range of topics and ensure that students understand the material being taught.

Multiple choice tests can be used as a tool to measure language proficiency. Research has shown that certain test-taking strategies can affect the level of language proficiency. For example, a study of the pattern of test-taking strategies by Iranian EFL learners showed a positive relationship between the application of multiple-choice strategies and the level of general English proficiency (Ghafournia, 2013). More proficient test takers differ from less proficient ones in using certain test-taking strategies. Therefore, strategy-based instruction should be used in foreign language teaching programs to substantially enhance language learning.

2. Method

This research was conducted to analyze the students' English proficiency level at the university level in Sintang, west Kalimantan. The researchers employed a quantitative descriptive study and analyzed 149 university students from three colleges in Sintang. The criteria used in this research were students who graduated from high schools in Sintang. This criterion is appointed because the researchers analyzed how the learning outcomes of those who are in border districts.

The study was conducted in a month, since September 2024. The data was collected using spreading multiple-choice questions sourced from British Council English, from <https://englishonline.britishcouncil.org/free-english-level-test-cefr-2/> as one of the trusted English learning platforms. Then, the questions were validated using construct validity.

There are six aspects that contribute to construct validity; content, substantive, structural, generalizability, external, and consequential aspects of construct validity (Messick, 1995). First, the content aspect of construct validity examines the relevance, representativeness, and technical quality of the assessment. Second, the substantive aspect refers to the theoretical basis for observing consistency in assessment responses. Third, the structural aspect relates to the fidelity of the assessment procedure and the assessment process during the assessment. Fourth, the generalisability aspect examines how the nature and interpretation of scores can be generalized to and across population groups, settings, and tasks. Fifth, the external aspect refers to the relationship between scores obtained on an assessment and scores obtained on other assessments used to measure the same construct. Sixth, the consequential aspect relates to the consequences of the assessment for the person being assessed, including both intended

Time Time remaining: 29:27

< Previous Next >

Question 1 of 30

A: Choose the best word or phrase to complete the sentence. **QUESTION**

The big book is _____.

mine

for my

me

B: How sure are you about the answer you have given?

CHOICE BELIEFS

Figure 1. The Test

 **English**

Your English level test

Thanks for taking the time and checking your English level. Based on your results we recommend:

• **Upper Intermediate (B2)**

Figure 2. Test Result

In collecting the data, the researchers instructed respondents to open the website using mobile phones. Then, the researchers explained to students how to fill out the test. After all the students understood the instructions, they fill the test. After the students finish their tests, they will see their English proficiency level results. The level consisted by A1, A2, B1, B2,

C1, and C2. The data obtained from the test were analyzed using SPSS to determine the distribution of CEFR levels among students. This analysis is presented in the form of frequency distribution.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Finding

The researcher found several invalid data based on the data obtained. Ten out of 149 respondents' data was classified as invalid because they did not meet the research criteria or follow the instructions. Thus, the researcher used 139 valid data, which revealed that most of the students were at the level of A1. This claim is detailed in Table 1 and Figure 3.

Table 1. CEFR Level

CEFR LEVEL					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	A1	108	77.7	77.7	77.7
	A2	19	13.7	13.7	91.4
	B1	5	3.6	3.6	95.0
	B2	7	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	139	100.0	100.0	

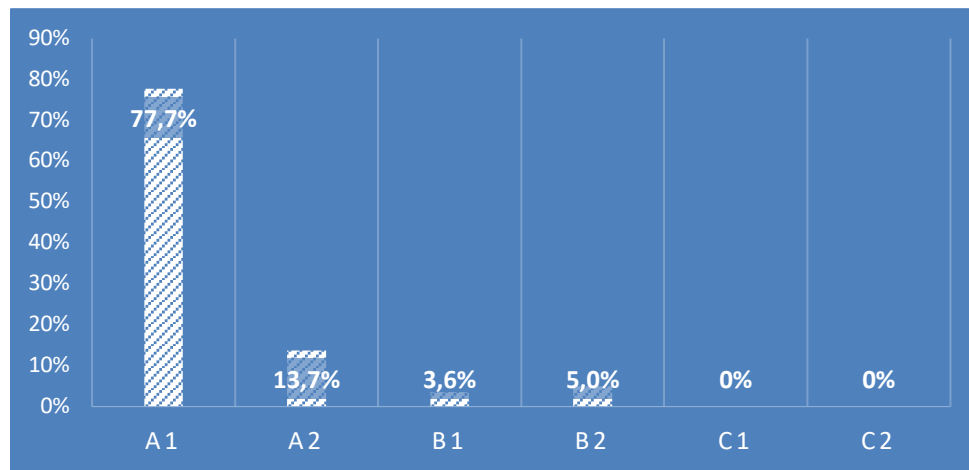


Figure 3. Students level

The data mentioned in Figure 3 generalized that most university students in Sintang are at the beginner level. This image shows that 77,7% or 108 respondents belong to the A1 level. This means that students' English proficiency is maintained until (1) they understand and employ common everyday expressions and simple phrases to satisfy concrete needs. (2) Students can ask and respond to inquiries concerning personal information, like where they

live, who they know, and what they own, as well as introduce themselves and others. (3) Students can communicate simply as long as the other person is willing to assist and speaks clearly and slowly.

Then, it is followed by level A2 with 13,7% or 19 students. Students are proficient in (1) understanding fundamental personal and family information, local geography, employment, and shopping at this level. (2) Students can communicate simply on familiar and routine tasks. (3) Students can simply describe their background, environment, and matter.

Next is B1, with 3,6% or five students belonging to that level. The students in this level (1) can understand the main points of familiar language in school, work, traveling, and others. (2) Students can also make a simple, connected, familiar, or interesting topic sentence. (3) Students can describe dreams, events, experiences, and hopes and also give simple reasons and explanations.

The last is B2, which is the higher level the researcher has. At this level, students can understand the main points of complex language. (2) They can interact spontaneously with native speakers. Students can also produce detailed and precise language on a broad subject range.

This means that, in the data in Table 1 and Figure 3, most of the students are at the level of basic users. The total of basic users is 127, or 91.4% of 139 respondents. Then, the proficiency users are 12 or 8.6%. Below are the data.

Table 2. Classification Level

CLASSIFICATION					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Basic User	127	91.4	91.4	91.4
	Proficient User	12	8.6	8.6	100.0
	Total	139	100.0	100.0	

This result is in line with the study, which also claims that many university students' English level is at the beginner level (Damayanti & Gafur, 2020; Rofik et al., 2020), which focuses on mastering general vocabulary and is not at the advanced communication level (Damayanti & Gafur, 2020). In the present research, the obstacles students face are dominated by their understanding of grammar and vocabulary. This answer was gained from the additional data researchers obtained in the field.

Table 3. Students' obstacle

No	Criteria	Percentage
1	Grammar	33,33%
2	Vocabulary	25,45%
3	Unfamiliar test	19,39%

4	Nervous	13,33%
5	Less of time	8,48%

Most Indonesians do not include English proficiency leveling in the pre-and post-tests for the students. When students enter the initial stages of learning, they are often taught only the basics and never know their English proficiency level.

3.2. Discussion

English proficiency levels, such as the CEFR test, must be implemented in every education level. It is a standardized test adopted in many Southeast and East Asia countries, such as Thailand, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and China (Husain et al., 2024). In addition to educational needs, this implementation is used to improve the Index of English Proficiency regarding the need for economic development (Foley, 2022). Theoretically, it positively impacts the student's learning process (Sahib & Stapa, 2021).

Nowadays, many people emphasize that “mastering English is important,” but they often fail to define what “mastery” truly means. Mastery varies for each individual, depending on their proficiency level. A structured leveling system would not only clarify learning objectives but also provide learners with a more tailored and meaningful learning experience.

Building upon the findings of previous researchers and recent studies, which indicate that the English proficiency levels of university students largely remain at the beginner stage, it is evident that action must be taken to address this issue. One viable step is to begin mapping students' language proficiency levels from an early stage. This initiative would enable educators to provide tailored interventions and learning strategies that align with each student's needs.

Implementing such measures is crucial, particularly in light of the broader goal of equipping younger generations to compete globally. As a lingua franca, English has been widely adopted and plays a critical role in international communication and collaboration. By systematically assessing and addressing proficiency levels, institutions can lay a strong foundation for students to enhance their language skills effectively.

Moreover, such efforts will have a long-term impact on higher education. When students reach the university level, they will be better prepared to implement and improve their English skills more meaningfully and comprehensively. This preparation not only supports academic success but also positions students to excel in professional and international contexts, contributing to the nation's competitiveness on the global stage.

CEFR is a systematic leveling system that can be implemented in various educational levels; an example is Vietnam. This country has begun implementing CEFR in 2018 (Foley, 2022). They expected their university graduates (not majoring in languages) to have a B1 English level. With this need, they make A2 and B1 their leaving standard for primary, junior,

and secondary high. However, this felt too ambitious, and the institution lowered the requirement to A2 because of teachers' poor English (Foley, 2022).

The need to implement CEFR based on the goal setting in English instruction often does not align with students' proficiency levels. Moreover, classes are not divided based on proficiency, and all students are given the same material. This challenges advanced students, who must patiently repeat material they already understand, and struggling students, who may feel left behind. These challenges also extend to the instructor, who must work hard to adjust their teaching to accommodate the wide range of abilities in the classroom.

4. Conclusion

From 139 valid data, most students are at the basic level, and only 8.6% are at the proficient level. This result is not very different from previous research, which also found that student's English level is at the basic level. Thus, this result can be a concern for stakeholders considering the importance of mastering English at the higher student level. However, this study has limitations, as it was only conducted in Sintang. According to the result, the government could think twice when redesigning curricula. However, it is an open space for teachers to implement the test in their students, making the learning process easier.

In addition, since this research is only conducted in Sintang, the next researcher could explore the rural areas in Indonesia. Thus, further research needs to analyze students on a broader scope to draw a concrete picture of the student's English level in Indonesia. Future researchers need to update this study by using a test that can analyze four English skills.

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