Unpacking CEFR A1 Interactional Competence: Interview-based Assessment with Thai Sixth Graders

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Abstract

This study investigated the interactional competence of Thai EFL sixth-grade students who had previously achieved CEFR A1 level on the Cambridge English Young Learners Test (A1 Movers). Although the students demonstrated strong performance on the standardized test, particularly in the speaking component, their actual ability to engage in real-time spoken interaction was not clearly portrayed. Drawing on secondary data from the 2018 cohort (n = 108) and using an interview-based speaking task designed for A1 learners, this study examined how young learners managed interaction beyond scripted responses. Two weeks after the administration of the standardized test, all students participated in interview-based assessment. Their performances were rated and can be further categorized into sub three levels: A1-, A1, and A1+. A total of twenty-one interview recordings (seven from each level) were randomly selected for transcription and qualitative analysis using Galaczi and Taylor's (2018) framework of interactional competence. Findings revealed that while most students could respond to familiar questions as specified for the A1 level, many showed limited ability to initiate, maintain, or extend conversation. The A1+ group showed clearer turn-taking, clarification strategies, and topic development. The study highlights the value of using interview-based assessment to elicit young learners' interactional competence. It proposes that interactional competence can be used as a diagnostic criterion to identify students' strengths and inform teaching practices. Implications are discussed for both pedagogy and assessment, with a call to prioritize interactional skills in early English language instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether young learners can acquire a second language effectively has long been debated (Donato et al., 2000; Igarashi et al., 2002; Lee & Kim, 2025; Simon, 2010). As stated by Nunan (2010), one of the key challenges in young learners' language learning concerns their cognitive development, which can affect their language use and acquisition. Cameron (2001) reported that young learners commonly face two key challenges: limited lexical and grammatical knowledge and a lack of awareness of the listener's understanding.

Despite these challenges, young learners possess significant potential to acquire a second language. According to Johnstone (2009), young learners' language acquisition is fostered by several factors, including the natural processes of language acquisition, especially in the sound system, lower anxiety levels and no time constraints for language proficiency development. The areas of language in which they outperform other age groups are pronunciation and morphosyntax (Ozfidan & Burlbaw, 2019). Although educators hold different opinions regarding the appropriate age to begin second or foreign language learning, many countries, including Thailand, have adopted policies implementing English instruction in the early years. This poses great concern on how to teach English to young learners and appropriately assess their language learning achievement.

Wolf and Butler (2017) define young learners as children aged 5 to 13, while Cameron (2001) classifies them into two groups: younger learners aged 7–8 and older learners aged 12–14. The age range varies depending on the criteria used. Like adult learners, they differ in background knowledge, schooling, and language exposure. In both EFL and ESL contexts, research shows that young learners often develop receptive skills, especially listening, faster than productive skills (Cameron, 2001; Molloy, 2015). Their early language development focuses on foundational skills such as phonological awareness and decoding, using simple vocabulary and structures. In line with their cognitive and linguistic development, they gradually acquire more complex syntax and vocabulary (Bialystok, 2001). Grammar remains challenging because it requires abstract thinking that may not yet be fully developed (Piat & Ivanović, 2022). In such cases, scaffolding from adults or more proficient peers is essential (Igarashi et al., 2002).

Empirical studies (Gu & Hsieh, 2019; Igarashi et al., 2002; McKay, 2010; Szpotowicz, 2012; Wolf et al., 2017) have identified distinctive features of young learners' language. They often rely on memorized chunks and formulaic expressions to construct meaning and can recognize patterns and apply them without fully understanding the rules (Piat & Ivanović, 2022). Gheitasi and Enever (2022) found that young learners use formulaic sequences to maintain fluency and hold their turn while processing the rest of their utterance. Curtain and Dahlberg (2010) reported that young learners' sentences are shorter and less complex than adults', with frequent rephrasing and repetition. Their output is often word-bound and may require L1 clarification. They process input slowly, have limited working memory, and may lose focus when taking a test. This explains why grammatical errors such as lexical misuse, syntactic omissions, unclear references, and poor cohesion can be found in their utterances (Bailey et al., 2014).

While linguistic knowledge is a fundamental part of communicative competence, it is not the only one. Other essential components include sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). Building on this framework, Young (2011) introduced the concept of interactional competence (IC). It shifts the focus from individual knowledge to the interactional practices which are jointly achieved by participants in the context. While communication competence refers to the underlying knowledge speakers bring to interaction, interactional competence concerns how participants co-construct meaning, manage turns, and orient to one another in communication. Thus, to gain a better

understanding of young learners' speaking ability, particularly in interaction, interactional competence needs to be taken into consideration.

In the Asian context, early language learning policies have been adopted based on the belief that "the younger, the better" (Zein & Butler, 2023). Socio-cultural and educational factors affect young learners' language learning. Differences in students' proficiency levels depend on school location, curriculum, and access to English exposure. In Thailand, students in urban or private schools often outperform those in rural or under-resourced settings. These disparities present challenges for teachers in managing differentiation and meeting diverse learners' needs (Copland et al., 2014). The 2018 English curriculum reform emphasized communicative competence over grammar-based learning (Darasawang & Singhasiri, 2023). However, enhancing communicative competence remains challenging. A study in Southern Thailand found that students' low motivation, discipline issues, and weak speaking and writing skills were key obstacles for pre-service teachers (Prihatin et al., 2021). Culturally, Thai students may appear shy or reluctant to speak due to social norms of seniority and respect (Mackenzie, 2002; Weawong & Singhasiri, 2009). These factors continue to influence how Thai young learners engage in language classrooms.

The educational reform raises the question of which information we should obtain to provide support to young learners' teaching pedagogy and assessment. Dai (2024) emphasizes that language tests should capture learners' interactive use of language, which reflects what they are expected to do in the real world. Although previous research studies have documented young learners' linguistic, cognitive, and interactional development, less attention has been given to how interactional competence is examined in assessment contexts, especially in under-researched EFL settings like Thailand. While existing research studies address young learners' interactional abilities, few focus on interview-based face-to-face real time tasks. This helps reveal essential elements like turn-taking, topic management, and repair strategies, particularly for learners at the lower CEFR levels. To be specific, in Thai EFL contexts, where classroom interaction is shaped by curricular, contextual, and cultural constraints, We still need analyses that focus on interactional competence in young learners' performance, which is critical for understanding early proficiency levels.

Interestingly, Barth-Weingarten and Freitag-Hild (2023) noted that for young learners, CEFR mainly supports interactional competence indirectly. It is achieved through action-oriented, play- and task-based communicative teaching which is aligned with CEFR Pre-A1/A1 descriptors. They further elaborated that explicit IC rubrics and analytic tools exist mostly for older learners. However, principles such as interaction scales and sociolinguistic appropriateness can be adapted to young learners. As such, empirical CEFR-linked IC assessment among young learners, especially in Thai EFL contexts, appears to be a clear research gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interactional Competence (IC)

IC, the term introduced by Kramsch (1986), refers to the ability of all participants involved to co-construct interaction. He and Young's (1998) definition of IC is based on rhetorical, lexical, and syntactic pattern knowledge specific to particular practices, as well as knowledge of turn-taking management, topical organization, and ways of signaling boundaries between different practices and transitions within individual practices. According to Dai (2024), IC is redefined as the ability that speakers show when they acknowledge and respond to each other's prior statements, provide contextually suitable replies, and collaboratively build social interactions. In these situations, sociocultural and pragmatic knowledge plays an important role (Nakatsuhara et al., 2018). Young (2011) also emphasizes the importance of pragmatics in interaction, referring to the relationship between the forms of talk participants choose and the social contexts in which they engage.

According to Galaczi and Taylor (2018), IC is supported by learners' linguistic abilities and other resources or core IC skills that are topic management, turn management, interactive listening, breakdown repair, and non-verbal behaviors. Galaczi and Taylor's conceptualization of IC is presented in the form of a tree. The roots of the tree represent speech act, speech event and speech situation, which are the foundational aspects of a speaking context. The trunk represents the interactional partners (speakers and listeners) taking part in communication within a shared time and space. The main resources are the five large branches of the tree, which include the five resources mentioned above. The smaller branches represent micro features of each resource, for example, turn management includes starting, maintaining, ending and interrupting topics.

As mentioned above, focusing on communicative competence alone is less likely to capture all aspects of students' speaking ability, especially in interview tasks. As such, IC helps reveal how students respond to questions, manage turns, maintain topics, even when opportunities for initiation are limited. Nakatsuhara et al. (2018) noted that several speaking assessments include interactional features in the rating scales. In addition, the Council of Europe (2018) also incorporates interactional strategies such as cooperation and clarification. In this study, the CEFR descriptors are employed as reference points, rather than directly mapped criteria, as interactional features must be interpreted in relation to the interview format and participants' roles (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018).

Interview-based assessment

Both indirect and direct forms of assessment can be used to assess students' oral communication ability. An interview-based task, which is one of the direct forms, is widely employed because it allows examiners to observe oral performance in interaction (Kawamura & Takeuchi, 2023; Sandlund et al., 2016). The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview is a good example of a real-life assessment, supported by several validation studies (ACTFL, n.d.). Other examples include IELTS and Cambridge Young Learners English tests, where students interact with an examiner

and their answers are rated (Sundqvist & Sandlund, 2024). Kawamura and Takeuchi (2023) confirm that such interview-based tasks can elicit interactional competence. The Council of Europe (2020) also suggested that for young learners, interview content must be level- and age-appropriate, focusing on familiar here-and-now topics, as can be seen in the CEFR descriptors for early proficiency levels.

Onal (2022) noted that interview-based tasks require students to engage in interactional practices. These practices align with essential elements of interactional competence, such as turn and topic management and repair, as pointed out by Galaczi and Taylor (2018). Thus, from this perspective, the value of such assessment lies not in replicating everyday conversation but in its ability to elicit observable interactional behaviors in a controlled setting. For young learners in EFL contexts such as Thailand, where opportunities to interact in English are limited, interview tasks offer an authentic and contextually appropriate way to investigate how students manage interaction in real time, supporting their use of interactional competence in the assessment context.

Taken together, this literature motivates the use of interview tasks and an interactional competence framework in the present study to examine how Thai Grade 6 learners manage real-time interaction at the CEFR A1 level, in line with national proficiency targets (Charttrakul & Damnet, 2021). Performance-based studies have shown that Thai learners rely on interactional resources such as pauses, gestures, fillers, and repair strategies to manage difficulty during interviews and peer interaction (Gu & Hsieh, 2019; Sinwongsuwat, 2012; Wolf et al., 2017). These findings suggest that spoken performance cannot be fully understood through linguistic accuracy alone.

English curricula and speaking challenges in Thai EFL contexts

Early English curricula in many EFL contexts prioritize oral communication and communicative competence over written skills, with language use largely limited to familiar, classroom-based or school-based interactions (Copland et al., 2014; Szpotowicz, 2012). However, interview-based face-to-face real-time tasks are often scarce. Also, students' opportunities to engage in extended spoken interactions are constrained by curricular and classroom conditions, limiting the development of both spoken proficiency and awareness of interactional norms among young EFL learners. In the Thai EFL context, speaking remains challenging due to cognitive demands, L1 and L2 differences, and limited exposure to English (Bergmann et al., 2015; Tantiwicha & Sinwongsuwat, 2021). To help young learners reach the target level and progress beyond it, further investigation into IC is needed to gain more in-depth information about their competence.

Research questions

1. What are the key characteristics of Thai Grade 6 students' speaking performance in an interview-based assessment task?
2. How do Thai Grade 6 students demonstrate interactional competence during the interview?

METHODOLOGY

Context of the study

This study was conducted at a public elementary school in Bangkok that has actively implemented the English language policies of the Ministry of Education introduced in 2014 and 2016. English instruction begins in Grade 1, with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) serving as the framework for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In early 2018, all Grade 6 students (N = 108) completed the Cambridge English: Young Learners A1 Movers Test, which measures Reading and Writing, Listening, and Speaking. The test is aligned with the CEFR and purposefully designed for children. The A1 Movers Test is age-appropriate in its use of themes, visuals, and task formats. This test was standardized and also accessible in Thailand at the time we conducted this research. Test results are reported using the shield system (one to five shields per skill area), which provides a general proficiency profile but does not capture learners' specific strengths, weaknesses, or interactional abilities.

To address this gap, the school invited the research team to conduct an additional oral proficiency assessment focusing on learners' spoken performance and interactional competence at the end of primary school.

Participants

The participants were 108 Grade 6 students who had studied English for at least six years, receiving approximately five hours of instruction per week. Some had additional exposure through extracurricular tutoring, while others were enrolled in the English Program (EP) track, where Mathematics and Science are taught in English. Two weeks after the Cambridge A1 Movers test, the entire cohort was invited to participate in individual interviews.

Based on interview performance, students were grouped according to the extent to which they demonstrated CEFR A1 aligned speaking behaviors, using systematic judgments by trained examiners guided by CEFR A1 descriptors rather than numerical scores.

The A1+ group showed readiness to progress toward A2, with confident, fluent, and largely accurate speech, minimal interviewer support, and consistent use of short, complete utterances, aligning with CEFR A1 descriptors for basic turn-taking and simple sentence production.

The A1 group broadly matched CEFR A1 descriptors, interacting in a simple way and responding to familiar questions, though they occasionally relied on interviewer support, indicating partial control of interaction strategies.

The A1- group demonstrated limited control of A1 interactional descriptors, with frequent repetition, long pauses, hesitation, and reliance on interviewer assistance, reflecting emerging but incomplete interactional ability.

The participants were divided into three groups according to their proficiency levels and to ensure representation of each proficiency level, seven interview transcriptions from each group were randomly chosen for the analysis.

Instruments

There were two instruments informed this study:

1. Cambridge English: Young Learners A1 Movers Test (administered prior to the study), which provided an externally benchmarked measure of general proficiency

The test was used because it is internationally recognized as a standardized test that is aligned with the CEFR framework and provides a test particularly designed for A1 learners. The A1 Movers Test consists of three parts: listening, reading/writing, and speaking. The listening part contains 25 items (25 minutes). The reading and writing part contains 35 items (30 minutes). The speaking part consists of 4 tasks (5−7 minutes). The tasks include describing the differences between two pictures, telling a story using provided pictures, identifying a different picture from others in the set and giving reasons, and answering personal questions about topics such as school, weekends, friends, and hobbies. From the results of the test, it can be concluded that all students achieved A1 level.

2. Interview-based assessment: Oral proficiency interview protocol designed by the researchers to elicit spontaneous spoken interaction

The protocol was created according to the guidelines proposed by the European Association for Quality Language Services (EAQUALS) (North et al.,2011) for A1 learners. The questions covered these main topics: family life, hobbies and pastimes, holidays, leisure activities and school subjects. There are 3−4 questions for each topic for the interviewers to choose from. The questions were reviewed by language assessment experts to ensure content validity. Each interview lasted approximately 5 minutes.

Procedure

Each participant completed a five-minute face-to-face interview with a trained interviewer. Interviewers were university lecturers with over five years of English-teaching experience and followed a shared interview protocol. Interview performances were first classified into A1-, A1, and A1+ using the CEFR-informed criteria as mentioned previously.

All interviews were video recorded and transcribed following Jefferson's (2004) classic transcription conventions (see Appendix for a full list of these conventions). The transcripts were then coded for interactional features, including turn management, topic management, repair, and response to prompts, using an IC-oriented coding scheme adapted from Galaczi and Taylor (2018). The authors coded a subset of the data, discussed discrepancies, and refined the coding categories. The analysis was qualitative and descriptive, focusing on patterns and illustrative instances of interactional behavior rather than frequency counts, as the study aimed

to examine how learners managed interaction rather than how often specific behaviors occurred.

Data analysis

A total of 21 interviews (seven per proficiency sub-group) were transcribed using Jefferson's (2004) transcription conventions (see Appendix).

For Research Question 1, thematic content analysis was used to identify patterns in fluency, accuracy, vocabulary use, and discourse organization in learners' speaking performance. The interviews were transcribed in detail to facilitate this analysis.

For Research Question 2, the transcripts were examined using a CA-informed micro-analytic approach, drawing on the interactional competence framework proposed by Galaczi and Taylor (2018) to analyze turn management, topic management, breakdown repair, non-verbal behavior, and interactive listening.

This combined analytic approach allowed the researchers to triangulate interview data with Cambridge A1 Movers results and to develop a detailed account of Thai Grade 6 learners' spoken performance and interactional competence at the CEFR A1 level. In addition, it is noted that the data analysis is qualitative in nature. In other words, interactional analysis does not aim for experimental replication.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What are the key characteristics of Thai Grade 6 students' speaking performance in an interview-based assessment task?

The interview data reveal differences in how learners at each sub-level demonstrated CEFR-aligned speaking and interactional behaviors. The transcription codes are listed in the Appendix.

A1+ group

A1+ speaking performance portrayed fluency, elaboration, engagement, confident body language and sufficient vocabulary knowledge. The data from the interview showed that the students were able to fluently talk about familiar topics in their daily life or things around them. The topics employed in the interviews were about their family, their birthdate, food, school, favorite subjects and hobbies. They showed their ability to talk about the topics fluently. The flow of the interviews was smooth and at a natural pace as can be seen in everyday conversations. There was also no communication breakdown. Moreover, the students at this level were able to elaborate more about the topics when they had an opportunity to do so. The following sample excerpt showed that the student was willing to elaborate more without being asked to give more explanation.

Interviewer	What is your favorite subject?
Nancy	=My favorite subject is social study [sic].
Interviewer	Social studies? Why social studies?
Nancy	=I like to learn about country [sic] an::d uh people. Yes, it's fun. And my teacher is very kind to me, so I like social study [sic] more because of [my teacher] too. ((smile))
Interviewer	[Umm Hmm]

The students at this level also showed their confidence. They maintained eye contact with the interviewer throughout the interviews. Their body language did not show anxiety when conversing with the interviewer. In addition, they were very engaged in the conversation; for example, they laughed or smiled, which reflected engagement in a natural conversation as seen in the excerpt below.

Interviewer	What is the most difficult subject for you?
Nancy	(.) Math. ((sigh)) ((smile)).
Interviewer	Math? Why is math the most diffi [cult?]
Nancy	[I don' t] like number. [sic] ((laugh))
Interviewer	Ok, you don't like numbers.

Moreover, they had sufficient vocabulary knowledge to enable them to communicate smoothly on simple topics such as those about their daily life and about things around them. When they did not know some vocabulary, which happened in very few cases, either because of their unfamiliarity with the interviewers' accents or their lack of vocabulary knowledge, they were able to figure it out after the interviewers gave them further explanation or reminded them of the target vocabulary as seen in the following excerpt.

Interviewer	What is your favorite food at school?
Noel	=Ah (0.5) Larb.
Interviewer	Larb. Ah. Why? Do you like spicy food?
Noel	=No. It's a bit spicy and uh (2.0) sweet and uh (8.0) ((thinking)). It's spicy and sweet.
Interviewer	Spicy and sweet and sour?
Louis	=Ah. Yes. And sour.

A1 group

The students' speaking abilities of this group showed less fluency, confidence and accuracy when compared to the A1+ group. The pace of their utterances was sometimes slower than that of the first group. In some cases, they needed a little more time to think of their answers, and they sometimes might have misunderstood some questions. However, there was no conversation breakdown as the students managed to ask for clarification, or to gain understanding after the interviewers' assistance.

It is worth noting that slower pace does not always mean no comprehension. The following excerpts show that the turn taking was a little slower as the students needed to think of their answers. In the first excerpt, the student needed more time to think as he did not remember what he had had for lunch. He was able to promptly answer the same question about breakfast, which suggests that he understood the question. The second excerpt also shows that the student understood the question but could not decide what to answer. The dataset shows that the students at this level of proficiency did not know what to say to maintain the conversation when they were still thinking about the answer. Silence, then, could be observed, which might be an indicator of communication breakdown for their interlocutors, and can finally lead to misinterpretation of their language abilities as seen in the excerpt below.

Interviewer	So let's switch over and talk about school. What did you have for lunch today?
Andy	=I have umm. (10.0)
Interviewer	Hmm?
Andy	(11.0)
Interviewer	For lunch?
Andy	(9.0)
Interviewer	Or what did you have for breakfast?
Andy	=I have [sic] fry [sic] chicken for breakfast.

Interviewer	What is your favorite subject?
Bob	((smile))((laugh)) (10.) I not [sic] sure because ((laugh)) (7.0) <u>science</u>. I like <u>science</u>.
Interviewer	Okay. Why do you like science?
Bob	(.) It's fun (0.5) to (0.5) do something. ((laugh))

Also, some mistakes were influenced by their mother tongue as shown in the following excerpts. Their answers were direct translations from Thai language, for example:

Interviewer	How do you come to school?
Andy	=My dad send [sic] me by car.

Interestingly, the A1 group was able to carry on with the conversation with assistance from the interviewers when they did not understand the questions.

Interviewer	Do you have any hobby?
Bob	(5.0) ((laugh))
Interviewer	What do you enjoy doing in your free time?
Bob	=I'm (0.5) like to play game [sic].

A1- group

The speaking performance of this group of students revealed major breakdowns, long pauses, unconfident body language, and lack of fluency and inaccuracy in both content and language.

A1- group students were not able to maintain the conversation until the end. There were breakdowns throughout the conversation and long pauses were often observed. This shows that they were not able to understand many of the questions. There was also limited engagement in the conversation with the interviewers. Assistance provided by the interviewers did not always help, or more assistance and explanation were required.

Interviewer	How are you today?
Todd	(4.0)
Interviewer	How do you feel today?
Todd	(0.5) Yes.
Interviewer	Ok. What's your name?
Todd	(.) My name is Todd.
Interviewer	What year were you born in?
Todd	(8.0) Eleven ((soft))
Interviewer	Ok. Right. This year is two thousand eighteen, right? So what year were you born in?
Todd	(8.5)
Interviewer	What year were you born in? Do you understand the meaning of the word "year"?
Todd	(7.0) Uh.
Interviewer	This year is two thousand eighteen, right? Two zero one eight.
Todd	(0.5) Two thousand. ((soft))
Interviewer	Yeah. So, you were born in what year?
Todd	(1.0) Two thousand (3.5) Two thousand (9.0) Two thousand nineteen.

Moreover, students at this level sometimes demonstrated difficulty understanding question types, leading to irrelevant responses.

Interviewer	How often do you watch cartoons?
Nora	(5.0) ((thinking))
Interviewer	How often?
Nora	Because it's fun. ((smile))
Interviewer	Okay.

The students at this level also had difficulty in answering simple immediate relevant questions, for example:

Interviewer	Where do you live?
Kylie	(3.0) Uh. I love (3.0)
Interviewer	Where do you live? Your house?
Kylie	(4.0) I love my mom.
Interviewer	No. Where do you live? Do you live in Bangkok?
Kylie	=Yes. ((nod))

Their body language showed their anxiety and lack of confidence. This included rolling eyes, looking at the ceiling, turning away from the interviewers, and smiling when they were unable to answer the questions, for example

Interviewer	What do you want to be in the future?
Kate	(7.0) Umm ((look around)) (3.0)
Interviewer	You want to be … a doctor? A teacher? A nurse? Or What?
Kate	(.) Uh. I (10.0) ((cover her head)) Teacher. ((smile))
Interviewer	Teacher. Okay.

In addition, although their answers were relevant, they were simple and short, for example:

Interviewer	How old are you?
Kate	(5.0)
Interviewer	How old are you?
Kate	(3.0) Eleven ((soft))
Interviewer	Eleven years old.
Kate	((Nod))

The interviews revealed clear variation within the CEFR A1 level, with students clustering into A1+, A1, and A1- sub-groups. This confirms earlier observations that A1 is not homogeneous (De Wilde et al., 2021) and that learners differ significantly in fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, confidence, and interactional competence. Such diversity complicates curriculum design and assessment, underscoring the need for differentiated teaching.

A1+ Learners: Confident and Elaborative

A1+ learners demonstrated fluency, elaboration, and strong engagement. They maintained natural pace, built on answers without heavy prompting, and displayed confident body language. Occasional lexical gaps were resolved through scaffolding, indicating effective repair strategies. These learners appear to be operating within Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, ready to progress toward A2 with minimal support. Their ability to elaborate aligns with Cameron's (2001) findings that sufficient lexical and pragmatic resources enable young learners to sound natural on familiar topics.

A1 Learners: Hesitant but Responsive

A1 learners showed emerging competence but needed longer wait time and occasional rephrasing to sustain exchanges. Errors often reflected L1 transfer ("My dad send me by car"), yet meaning was usually preserved. Their reliance on scaffolding supports Vygotsky's (1978) view that guided interaction facilitates development. Importantly, pauses should not be misread as lack of comprehension; as Wasik and Hindman (2018) suggested, they reflect processing demands in learners' still-developing cognitive and linguistic resources.

A1- Learners: Limited Output and High Anxiety

A1- learners struggled with frequent breakdowns, irrelevant responses, and anxiety markers such as avoiding eye contact or smiling instead of answering. Their reliance on one-word replies and formulaic phrases mirrors Igarashi et al.'s (2002) description of novice learners. Formulaic sequences, however, proved useful for maintaining turns, supporting Gheitasi & Enever's (2022) and Wood's (2002) argument that they provide scaffolding for fluency. Vocabulary gaps were a major cause of breakdowns, consistent with Cameron's (2001) emphasis on words as central to meaning-making for young learners.

Research Question 2: How do Thai Grade 6 students demonstrate interactional competence during the interview?

Differences in their spoken interactional competence can be observed in the three proficiency levels: A1+, A1 and A1-. The spoken interactional competence can be investigated in five areas based on Galaczi and Taylor's study (2018), covering turn management, topic management, non-verbal behavior, breakdown repair, and interactive listening.

Turn management

Both the A1+ and A1 groups were able to sustain interaction with the interviewer by responding to questions and attempting to maintain interview topics. However, for all groups, opportunities to initiate, close, or interrupt were limited because of the nature of the interview-led question tasks. Within these constraints, the flow of interaction was smoother for the A1+ and A1 groups. These groups were able to respond to prompts and sustain short turns. The following A1+ excerpt demonstrates interactional competence, as seen within a particular interviewer-test taker format, rather than reflecting students' global interactional ability.

The excerpt taken from the A1+ group is shown below.

Interviewer	Good afternoon. How are you today?
Tanya	=I'm fine thank you.
Interviewer	Excellent. Can you tell me what your name is?
Tanya	=My name is Tanya.
Interviewer	Ok. Can you spell that for me?
Tanya	=T-A-N-Y-A
Interviewer	Ok. Excellent. Thank you so much. And do you know what year you were born in?
Tanya	(.)Third May.
Interviewer	Third May. Ok. And what year was it?
Tanya	=2006.
Interviewer	Ah. Ok. Excellent. And do you know what day of the week you were born?
Tanya	=Uh. (.)Wednesday.
Interviewer	Wednesday. So how old are you?
Tanya	=Eleven years old.
Interviewer	Excellent thank you. So, umm let's talk about your family.
Tanya	=Ok.

Topic management

Regarding topic management, due to the structured nature of interview tasks, the topics were largely controlled by the interviewers. As a result, the students of all A1 levels had limited opportunities to initiate and shift topics during the interview. Therefore, there was not sufficient data to identify their abilities in these areas. However, in terms of extending and closing conversations, A1+ students demonstrated the ability in the areas as illustrated in the excerpt below.

Interviewer	What game do you play?
Kiwi	=I play Roblox.
Interviewer	What is that?
Kiwi	=Roblox.
Interviewer	=Roblox. How do you spell it?
Kiwi	=R-O-B-L-O-X.
Interviewer	Ok. I don't know that game. I know only ROV and Minecraft.
Kiwi	(.) Uh. Minecraft needs to pay [sic] and ROV has a lot of memory [sic].
Interviewer	Ah. I see. So how often do you play games.
Kiwi	(.) It only when (.) I usually play very often but only when I'm done with my homework.

Interviewer	What is your favorite subject?
Kiwi	=I think it's English or math.
Interviewer	Why do you like them?
Kiwi	=Because it's fun and (2.0) It's fun and sometimes they give like creative activities because English and math are subjects that are easy to make fun activities, so the activities are more creative than others.

Interviewer	What does your nickname mean?
Mary	=I don't know because my mom just thinking [sic] this word and my dad he say [sic] it's mean [sic] like I'm in the middle, not too much and not too low.
Interviewer	Good. In the middle.

In the following excerpts, the A1+ students were able to elaborate their answers and provide reasons when prompted although their elaboration might be different in complexity and linguistic detail. However, this trait was not observed among the A1- students.

Interviewer	Do you have a favorite Asian country?
Tanya	=Vietnam.
Interviewer	Vietnam! Why?
Tanya	=Because I love (.) girl [sic] dress.
Interviewer	Umm Hmm. The girl's dress [in Vietnam?]
Tanya	=[Yes.] I think it's very beautiful.
Interviewer	That's nice. Do you have one?
Tanya	=No. ((laugh))

Interviewer	Did you have lunch today?
Violet	((nod)) (.) I have a [sic] spaghetti.
Interviewer	Oh. Is that your favorite food here?
Violet	((shake her head)) (.) [No.] ((laugh))
Interviewer	[No?] Do you have a favorite food?
Violet	((nod))
Interviewer	Yes?
Violet	=Hamburger. ((smile))
Interviewer	Hamburger. Why do you like hamburger?
Violet	=Because I like a [sic] bread and cheese.

For the closing part, the A1+ students used simple language to end their conversation such as "thank you". Some A1 students ended the conversation in the same way while the A1- students did not say anything or used non-verbal language such as nodding to mark the ending.

Non-verbal behavior

Non-verbal behavior, including eye contact, facial expression, laughter and posture, is part of the criteria used to assess students' interactional competence. The A1+ students showed their engagement during the interview through consistent eye contact, confident posture, and appropriate laughter. There was no evidence of anxiety and obvious nervousness. The A1 students also maintained eye contact and generally showed no anxiety during the interview. The A1- students avoided eye contact. Their body language and posture explicitly reflected a lack of confidence.

Breakdown repair

The A1+ and A1 students were able to handle communication breakdowns, which rarely occurred in the A1+ group. When they occurred, students either asked for clarification, or the interviewers rephrased the questions. This helped them come up with appropriate responses. At times they did not explicitly ask for clarification, but it could be seen from their facial expressions, or verbal reactions such as "Excuse me?", "Huh?", "Hmm?", "Again?", etc. as shown in the excerpts below.

Interviewer	Do you have any hobbies?
Ken	=I'm [sic] like to play football.
Interviewer	Um. Okay. And are you an athlete as well?
Ken	(5.0) ((puzzled))
Interviewer	Do you join sports competitions?
Ken	=Yes, I am [sic].

Interviewer	Let me ask you a little bit about your hobbies?
Violet	((puzzled)) (.) Excuse me?
Interviewer	Hobbies are things you do for fun.
Violet	((nod)) Uh. (.) I like playing with my dog.

However, for A1- students, when they did not understand the questions, clarification, simplification and elaboration did not help them overcome the communication breakdown. In most cases, the interviewers moved on to the next question after the breakdown occurred.

Interviewer	Where do you live?
Aiden	(4.0)
Interviewer	Where is your house?
Aiden	(.) House? ((soft))
Interviewer	Umm Hmm
Aiden	Umm (4.0)
Interviewer	No? You don't know? Is it in Bangkok?
Aiden	(4.0) Six. Uh. (3.0) Yes. Six. Six o'clock.
Interviewer	Okay. That's the time you wake up. Umm. How do you get to school?

Interviewer	Where do you live?
Wendy	(4.5) Umm ((shake her head))
Interviewer	You don't know where you live [or]?
Wendy	[umm] ((shake her head)) ((smile))
Interviewer	No? Do you live near the school?
Wendy	(6.0) ((smile))
Interviewer	No? Okay, that's okay.

Interviewer	How many brothers and sisters do you have?
Kevin	(19.0) ((look around)) ((think)) Umm I don't know.
Interviewer	You don't know? Do you have a brother?
Kevin	(.) Uh. I am (10.0) ((sigh)) ((laugh))
Interviewer	It's okay. Don't worry.

Interactive listening

Across all groups, interactive listening was evident in learners' willingness to respond to the interviewer's questions. The absence of backchanneling, continuers, and explicit comprehension checks is likely attributable to the question–answer structure and asymmetrical roles of the interview task, rather than a lack of interactional ability. Within these constraints, learners often demonstrated understanding by attempting responses or repeating parts of the question as an implicit comprehension check.

Interviewer	Where do you live?
Noel	=Where what? ((leaning over to the interviewer))
Interviewer	Where do you live?
Noel	=Where I live?
Interviewer	Uh [Huh.]
Noel	=[I live] in Bangkok.

Interviewer	Okay. Let me ask you a little bit about school then.
Violet	(.) About school?
Interviewer	Umm Hmm. Is that okay?
Violet	((nod))

Interviewer	Where do you live?
Sam	(.) Again?
Interviewer	Where do you live?
Sam	(.) Where?
Interviewer	Umm Hmm
Sam	=Nakhon Pathom

It is noted that these qualitative observations are supported by descriptive patterns found in the data. On average, A1- learners produced a higher proportion of one-word responses and experienced more interactional breakdown than A1 and A1+ learners, while A1+ sustained longer interviews with fewer prompts. Likewise, the CEFR alignment informed the contextual interpretation of findings, not their quantification. Students' interactional behaviors are interpreted in light of what A1 users can do (e.g., initiate or respond in simple exchanges).

Awareness of differences among A1 young learners

The findings challenge the policy assumption that all Grade 6 learners classified at CEFR A1 represent a homogeneous proficiency group. Interview-based evidence from this study reveals substantial variation within A1, not only in linguistic accuracy and fluency but also in how learners manage interaction under assessment conditions. This extends existing research on variability among young learners (De Wilde et al., 2021) by showing that interactional differences are also shaped by social norms (e.g., teacher vs. student and older vs. younger sociolinguistic appropriateness) and classroom expectations in heterogeneous EFL contexts (Mackenzie, 2002; Weawong & Singhasiri, 2009). These findings have implications for assessment and placement decisions, suggesting that a single A1 label may obscure learners' differing levels of readiness for progression and instructional support, and that greater sensitivity to within-level variation is needed in curriculum planning and assessment policy.

Young learners' cognitive development: Implications for assistance and scaffolding

The findings show how assistance supports young learners during interview-based speaking tasks at the CEFR A1 level. A1+ learners generally communicated with little support, while A1 learners needed more help to process input and plan responses, reflecting developing cognitive abilities (Bialystok, 2001). This supports earlier research on the importance of scaffolding from adults or more proficient speakers in early language learning (Igarashi et al., 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

The study also shows that pauses in young learners' speech should not always be viewed as communication problems. In many cases, pauses appeared to provide planning time rather than signal misunderstanding, consistent with research on developing cognitive and linguistic

resources (Bialystok, 2001; Wasik & Hindman, 2018). Allowing sufficient wait time can therefore help make learners' interactional ability more visible in assessment contexts.

Young learners' language and how to support them

The findings show that learners in the A1- group demonstrated emerging A1 abilities, with limited capacity to sustain interaction, frequent breakdowns, and reliance on single-word responses, often accompanied by signs of anxiety such as reduced eye contact and hesitant posture. These characteristics are consistent with descriptions of novice or early-stage learners in previous studies, including reliance on one-word answers, repetition, and formulaic expressions (Igarashi et al., 2002), as well as fragmented and minimally elaborated speech (Gu & Hsieh, 2019). Rather than representing a distinct pre-A1 category, these learners can be understood as operating at the lower boundary of the A1 level under interview-based assessment conditions.

Formulaic expressions are very helpful for young learners. Novice language learners often use formulaic expressions and sequences (Gheitasi & Enever, 2022; Igarashi et al., 2002). Wood (2002) provides strong evidence that teaching formulaic sequences benefits young children. Early language acquisition is associated with learners' attention to these sequences and their storage in long-term memory. As cognitive development advances, they can analyze and segment them. Formulaic sequences also help learners maintain fluency and avoid pauses, enabling them to hold speaking turns and gain processing time (Gheitasi & Enever, 2022). These benefits suggest teachers should equip young learners with useful expressions and patterns to communicate confidently about familiar topics.

Vocabulary teaching should be emphasized, as the findings showed that a lack of sufficient vocabulary can be one factor causing communication breakdowns. The importance of words and interaction was also highlighted by Cameron (2001). It is noted that young learners focus on words and interaction when seeking meaning. Therefore, knowing more words enhances their capacity to communicate. Making students aware that communication breakdowns are possible, and introducing them to techniques for handling such breakdowns, should be very helpful, as these are commonly observed when young learners with A1 proficiency communicate. Learners at this age are still not able to acquire complex vocabulary and syntactic structures (Bialystok, 2001). Cameron (2001) also reported that limited lexical knowledge is a common challenge young learners face.

L1 influence

The findings revealed young learners' reliance on their L1, which can affect their fluency. Bergmann et al. (2015) pointed out that disfluency is not caused by L2 proficiency alone; L1 transfer also has an influence. Copland et al. (2014) found that one challenge teachers reported was that students translated from one language to another, and some used their L1. Excessive reliance on L1 can lead to both lexical and grammatical inaccuracies. However, Copland et al. argued that allowing students to use only L2 might not be an effective approach, as it does not reflect students' multilingual realities. They also suggested that L1 can be used in the

classroom with careful consideration. For young learners, the use of L1 can reduce anxiety, especially for the A1-level group.

Too much emphasis should not be placed on grammar either. Piat and Ivanović (2022) stated that grammar is a challenging aspect of early language learning because it involves understanding abstractions—an area of cognition that has not yet fully developed in young learners. The priority is to help students develop positive attitudes towards learning English and to communicate in English. Building their confidence in learning and using English is also important. The spoken form of a language is very important not only as one skill of language, but also as a medium to learn, practice, and understand the language (Cameron, 2001). This aligns with school policies that focus on developing oral communication skills in young learners.

Interview-based assessment as a speaking assessment tool for young learners

This study suggests that interviews can be used as assessment tasks for young learners, focusing on familiar topics and simple questions. As a form of direct speaking assessment, interviews allow more accurate interpretation of students' performance than indirect assessments often used in Thailand (Sinwongsuwat, 2012). Cameron (2001) recommended conversational exchanges for assessing young learners and noted that key language features should be specified. For A1 learners, providing assistance can make tasks more achievable, reduce anxiety, and promote positive attitudes. Choi et al. (2019) also found that scaffolding supports learners in assessing their oral skills in standardized settings.

Whether the interview tasks can be used to assess interactional competence (IC) requires careful consideration. Previous critiques have questioned its validity, reliability, and authenticity, noting that the interview tasks do not fully reflect natural conversation and that examiner dominance may constrain interaction (Onal, 2022; van Lier, 1989). The findings of this study support these concerns, as opportunities for topic initiation and backchanneling were limited in the interviewer-led format. At the same time, the interview-based assessment was effective in eliciting certain IC resources, particularly learners' ability to respond to turns, maintain topical continuity, use non-verbal cues, and repair breakdowns. These results suggest that the interview-based assessment captures a partial but meaningful range of interactional competence, shaped by the structure of the interview task rather than by learners' overall interactional ability.

Observation of IC in young learners' utterances

The observation of young learners' interactional competence (IC) revealed insights into their ability to converse and interact during interviews. The learners demonstrated various IC resources—turn management, topic management, non-verbal behavior, breakdown repair, and interactive listening—though the degree of use varied by proficiency level (A1+, A1, A1-). Due to their developing cognition and limitations of the interview-based assessment, only some IC subcomponents were evident. For example, smooth coordination of exchanges was the main aspect of turn management observed, while for topic management, extending and closing conversations were primarily noted.

Young (2013) explained that although topic management may not be clearly visible, it cannot be concluded that learners lack the ability to manage topics. This may be influenced by the status of the interviewer and the context in which both interlocutors were involved. Young (2013) also noted that topic management depends on preferences, which vary depending on who has the authority to introduce or change a topic. If interview tasks are used in class for students to practice their speaking skills and develop IC, arranging for them to work with peers might be beneficial, as peers share equal status.

Moreover, the investigation of young learners' IC revealed variation in language proficiency even within the A1 group. Their IC use aligns with characteristics of young learners' language reported in previous studies (Gu & Hsieh, 2019; Igarashi et al., 2002; McKay, 2010; Szpotowicz, 2012; Wolf et al., 2017). The A1- group did not benefit from interviewers' clarification or assistance and could not ask for clarification themselves. When checking understanding or requesting clarification—an aspect of interactive listening—the learners relied on word repetition rather than standard expressions. Curtain and Dahlberg (2010) similarly noted that young learners' language is short, simple, and marked by rephrasing and repetition.

IC in speaking rubrics

Several speaking tests, such as the Cambridge English General English tests, the Kanda English Proficiency Test (KEPT), the Test of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP), and Trinity's Integrated Skills of English (ISE) Speaking and Listening test, have been found to include interactional competence (IC) in their rubrics (Nakatsuhara et al., 2018). The CEFR speaking scales also integrate interaction as one aspect of measurement. For A1 students, according to the CEFR descriptor, they "can ask and answer questions about personal details, can interact in a simple way but communication is totally dependent on repetition, rephrasing and repair". This illustrates the important role of interaction in assessing speaking proficiency and in providing a well-rounded picture of learners' speaking ability (Dai, 2024; Young, 2011). Therefore, including IC in the criteria for assessing young learners' speaking performance is worth consideration. However, further investigation is needed into which components of IC should be used as evaluative criteria for young learners in each context. As suggested by Galaczi and Taylor (2018), fine-tuning the scales must be done in accordance with the stakeholders involved and the specific context.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

The study reveals valuable insights into young learners' communicative ability, including both their language use and interactional competence (IC). Although the young learners in the study were able to achieve A1 level, their IC varied significantly. To enhance their communicative ability in alignment with national education policy, it is recommended that teachers support learners, especially A1-level learners, with formulaic language and essential vocabulary, as these knowledge areas can help them communicate more efficiently and with greater confidence. For A1+ level learners, teachers can incorporate interactive speaking activities that promote real-time communication, such as interviews, role-plays, peer interviews, and

task-based dialogues, to help learners develop practical conversational skills beyond memorized responses.

In addition, this study highlights the importance of assessing IC as a distinct and essential component of young learners' speaking ability. Traditional test formats may overlook learners' capacity for real-time interaction. Despite some limitations, interview-based assessments that allow for spontaneous communication can be integrated into classroom assessment practices to more accurately reflect learners' communicative readiness. The limitations can be reduced by having them converse with their peers. Furthermore, IC contributes to the development of analytic rubrics, enabling teachers to more effectively identify learners' strengths and areas for growth in authentic communicative situations.

CONCLUSION

According to the study, Thai Grade 6 students can orally communicate at the A1 level, though performance varies within the band. This variation poses challenges for planning effective pedagogy and assessment. Teachers should recognize these proficiency differences and provide scaffolding to help learners thrive within their ZPD and reach their potential. Teaching and assessment should promote a positive classroom environment that fosters engagement and positive attitudes toward learning English. Criteria such as grammatical accuracy and fluency should be adjusted to align with the cognitive and language abilities of young learners. IC adds an important dimension to communicative competence, enriching young learners' speaking assessment. Integrating IC into speaking rubrics and using interview tasks with CEFR-appropriate questions can effectively elicit both communicative competence and IC use.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions, mainly following Jefferson (2004) as shown below.

[	Beginning of overlapping talk
]	End of overlapping talk
=	No break or gap between utterances
(.)	A brief interval (± a tenth of a second)
(0.5)	A pause of 0.5 second
(1.0)	A pause of 1 second
wo:rd	Lengthening of the preceding sounds; each colon represents a lengthening of one beat
((smile))	Transcriber's description, including non-verbal actions
____	stress via pitch and or amplitude
[sic]	Exact quotation as it stands in the original despite errors