

Unveiling Needs for Grammatical Competence Assessment in a CEFR-Based Curriculum: Empowering Student Involvement in Assessment for Learning in Thailand

NAGORN BUNYARIT*

SAMAH ALI MOHSEN MOFREH

School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

*Corresponding author email: nagorn.bu@kmitl.ac.th

Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 18 Dec 2025 Last revised: 26 Aug 2026 Accepted: 26 Aug 2026 Available online: 28 Aug 2026 Keywords: Assessment for learning Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Grammatical competence Communicative language teaching English as a foreign language Higher education	<i>This study investigated university freshmen's needs and expectations regarding the assessment of grammatical competence (GC) for communicative use within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)-aligned communicative language teaching (CLT) and assessment for learning (AfL) frameworks using a mixed methods needs analysis design. Data were collected from 950 first-year students enrolled in a recently implemented CEFR-based compulsory general education curriculum at a leading public university in Bangkok, Thailand. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, directional Likert-scale analysis, Friedman tests, correlational analyses, and thematic analysis of interview data. The findings indicated that students had moderate confidence in their GC and perceived it as a relative weakness that hindered their confidence in communication. Correlational analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between GC and overall communicative competence, underscoring the central role of GC in supporting communication within a CLT framework. Grammar-domain analysis further revealed uneven confidence across GC domains, with particularly low confidence in discourse-dependent structures (e.g., complex sentence relations and cohesive devices) compared with sentence-level forms (e.g., tense and aspect, subject-verb agreement, and basic clause structures). Students also expressed strong learning-oriented expectations for GC assessment. These findings reveal a gap in CLT implementation and provide diagnostic evidence to inform the development of AfL-oriented GC assessment in Thailand's English as a foreign language (EFL) context.</i>

INTRODUCTION

The ability to mobilise grammatical competence (GC) for communication has been widely recognised as a core component of communicative competence in communicative language teaching (CLT), encompassing not only knowledge of grammatical forms but also their use in meaningful interaction (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; North, 2022; Savignon, 2002). The 2020 Common European

Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Companion Volume further articulates linguistic competence, including GC, as foundational to communicative language use across modalities and contexts (Council of Europe, 2020). Despite these well-established policy directions, grammatical assessment practices in many English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts have been criticised for remaining largely decontextualised and form-focused and for offering limited diagnostic value for the development of communicative competence (Fahdly et al., 2025; Kord et al., 2025; Li & Xu, 2023; Qasserras, 2023).

In Asian EFL contexts such as Thailand, where national reforms and institutional policies have increasingly promoted CEFR-referenced benchmarks and communicative outcomes for graduates, research indicates that traditional grammar instruction and examination formats continue to coexist with CLT (Charttrakul & Damnet, 2021; Pong-ampai Kongcharoen et al., 2024). This persistence has resulted in sustained attention to discrete grammatical forms and accuracy rather than communicative use, thereby limiting the diagnostic insight that assessment can provide into learners' communicative competence (Wudthayagorn, 2025). Reviews of Thai English-in-education policy also highlight an ongoing push towards CEFR alignment alongside persistent concerns regarding learners' communicative proficiency and the feasibility of policy targets across educational sectors. This misalignment has important consequences because educational assessment plays a vital role in shaping learning behaviours, supporting learner monitoring, and fostering learner autonomy, which is a core principle underlying assessment for learning (AfL) and learning-oriented assessment (Wakid et al., 2024; Yin & Park, 2023).

Accordingly, this study investigated Thai university freshmen's perceptions of GC and their expectations for its assessment to identify gaps between learners' GC upon university entry and their desired instructional practices, assessment approaches, and learning outcomes. The study provides an empirical foundation for developing GC assessment and instructional practices that are diagnostically responsive and oriented towards meaningful language use within CLT and CEFR-aligned frameworks. By foregrounding learners' perspectives at the beginning of tertiary education, the findings may contribute to more effective use of English as a lingua franca among graduates in Thailand and in contexts with similar educational and sociolinguistic conditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

GC within communicative and CEFR-oriented frameworks

GC has long been recognised as a foundational component of communicative competence, although its conceptualisation has evolved substantially across theoretical traditions. Early linguistic theory emphasised grammatical knowledge as an abstract system of rules underlying language performance (Chomsky, 1965). Subsequent sociolinguistic perspectives challenged this view by foregrounding the functional and contextualised nature of language use, leading to the development of communicative competence as a multidimensional construct (Hymes, 1972). GC was subsequently reconceptualised as one of several interrelated components

enabling effective communication, alongside sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences (Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980).

In recent CLT and CEFR-oriented perspectives, GC is no longer viewed as isolated knowledge of rules but as a linguistic resource that supports meaning-making in real-world communication (Council of Europe, 2020). Larsen-Freeman (2020) and North (2022) have explicitly conceptualised GC as part of learners' linguistic resources in the CEFR, emphasising the ability to mobilise grammatical forms appropriately to perform communicative actions. From this perspective, grammar is inseparable from meaning and use, and communicative success depends not only on structural accuracy but also on contextual appropriateness and intelligibility (Ellis, 2017; O'Keeffe & Mark, 2022).

Contemporary research characterises GC as a dynamic construct encompassing cognitive processing capacities, accumulated linguistic knowledge, and the ability to deploy these resources flexibly in communication. A growing body of interactional and longitudinal research demonstrates that grammatical development is non-linear, usage-dependent, and context-sensitive, shaped by communicative demands and individual learning trajectories (Eskildsen & Cadierno, 2021; Lowie & Verspoor, 2021). Psycholinguistic evidence further indicates that GC involves the real-time interaction of cognitive resources and stored grammatical knowledge during comprehension and production. Similarly, McManus and Marsden (2020) demonstrate that GC entails the coordinated deployment of explicit and implicit knowledge under processing constraints, reinforcing the cognitively mediated and context-sensitive nature of grammar.

This view aligns with the CEFR's action-oriented approach, which foregrounds what learners can do using GC rather than which grammatical rules they can recall in an assessment. However, despite broad theoretical consensus on the communicative role of grammar, communicative GC remains distinct from knowledge of syntactic rules, and its pedagogical realisation remains contested in many EFL contexts.

Persistent tensions between GC and classroom practice

Despite the prominence of CLT and the CEFR in policy and curriculum documents, classroom practices have not consistently reflected their communicative principles, particularly with respect to grammar instruction. Across many EFL contexts, GC continues to be treated as equivalent to traditional grammar teaching associated with the Grammar Translation Method, with an emphasis on rule memorisation, discrete forms, and decontextualised accuracy (Ellis, 2017; Tichachart, 2020). This persistence of form-focused practice suggests that curricular endorsement of communicative approaches does not automatically translate into changes in instructional routines.

Evidence from Asian EFL settings, including Thailand, illustrates this tension clearly. Although CLT is frequently referenced in curricular documents and teachers' stated beliefs, classroom instruction often reverts to explicit explanation and controlled practice of grammatical forms. Franz and Teo (2018) show that Thai secondary school teachers invoke CEFR and CLT rhetorically, yet grammar instruction in practice remains largely explicit and accuracy-

driven. Similarly, Pitikornpuangpetch and Suwanarak (2021) report that Thai EFL teachers express support for CLT while continuing to rely on traditional grammar explanation and controlled practice. Classroom-based studies further demonstrate that grammar instruction is predominantly discrete and form-based, offering limited opportunities for learners to integrate form, meaning, and use (Kaosayapandhu, 2023; Raungsawat, 2025).

Such instructional patterns have important consequences for learners. Although students may acquire explicit knowledge of grammatical rules, they frequently report limited confidence or ability to apply these resources in communicative contexts. This mismatch has been described as a form–use gap, in which learners struggle to operationalise grammatical knowledge in real-time interaction despite prolonged exposure to formal instruction (Saengboon, 2022; Tantiwich & Sinwongsawat, 2021). When grammar is primarily taught and assessed as isolated accuracy rather than as a resource for interaction, opportunities for the development of communicative competence are correspondingly constrained.

GC and AfL in CEFR-based curricula

Assessment plays a critical role in shaping how GC is conceptualised, valued, and developed in instructional contexts. Although CEFR-informed curricular reforms promote communicative language use, GC assessment practices in many EFL contexts continue to prioritise discrete forms, rule recall, and summative accuracy. These practices reinforce narrow interpretations of GC as grammatical knowledge rather than as a resource for meaning-making in communication. In their mapping review of learning-oriented assessment, Wakid et al. (2024) show that although learning-supportive assessment is widely advocated, dominant assessment traditions remain insufficiently oriented towards capturing learners' ability to use grammatical resources communicatively. Similarly, in their synthesis of research on AfL in Asian EFL contexts, Yin and Park (2023) identify contextual and institutional constraints that prevent assessment practices from aligning with AfL principles, particularly for language constructs such as GC that require contextualised performance. This persistent misalignment calls for reconceptualisation because assessment exerts strong washback effects on learners' understanding of what GC entails and which aspects of grammar warrant instructional attention (Canlı & Çakır, 2022; Nguyen, 2020).

Within CEFR-oriented curricula, GC is embedded within communicative language competence and is expected to be assessed through learners' ability to select, adapt, and deploy grammatical forms appropriately in context, rather than through isolated displays of formal accuracy. Consequently, GC assessment is expected to support learning by providing interpretable and actionable feedback that reflects actual language use (Council of Europe, 2020; Fulcher, 2024). From an AfL perspective, assessment serves a formative function in diagnosing learners' grammatical strengths and weaknesses in use, supporting self-regulation, and informing instructional decisions that foster communicative development (Douglas, 2020). In this sense, AfL offers not an alternative to GC assessment but a framework for operationalising GC as a communicative construct, ensuring that assessment goes beyond level classification to support the development of grammatical ability in interaction. However, empirical evidence suggests that learners' experiences of grammar assessment

often fall short of these CEFR- and AfL-aligned ideals. Studies consistently report limited transparency, restricted access to diagnostic feedback on grammatical use, and a weak alignment between assessment tasks and communicative language use. For example, Rahman (2020) found that learners perceived grammar assessment as lacking authenticity and transparency, offering little guidance on how grammatical knowledge could be mobilised in communication. Similar concerns regarding the interpretability of grammar assessment outcomes and the absence of meaningful feedback have been reported in both EFL and higher education contexts (Chanwaiwit & Wiboonwachara, 2025; Gonsalves & Lin, 2024; Widiastuti, 2021). As a result, assessment practices may inadvertently constrain learners' opportunities to develop GC as a communicative resource, despite curricular commitments to CEFR principles.

The Thai higher education context and the need for learner-centred evidence

Thailand formally adopted the CEFR as a reference framework for English language education in basic education in 2014, and higher education institutions were expected to align curricula, instruction, and assessment with CEFR-based communicative outcomes from 2016 (Wudthayagorn, 2025). Thai universities have implemented CEFR-referenced English exit examinations and proficiency benchmarks as formal graduation requirements to support national goals of internationalisation and graduate employability (Balleras et al., 2025; Sae-Ong, 2025). Despite these policy initiatives, research has highlighted uneven CEFR implementation in Thailand and persistent gaps in stakeholders' understanding, especially regarding assessment alignment, training, and follow-up support (Foley, 2019; Phoolaikao, 2021). A growing body of empirical research has examined persistent challenges in English language education in Thailand and proposed pedagogical, assessment-related, and policy-oriented solutions. Much of this research, however, has focused on teachers' beliefs, instructional practices, and policy analysis (Narathakoon et al., 2020; Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak, 2021; Uthaiakun et al., 2024).

Learners' perceptions are central to AfL development because students' understanding of their competence, assessment expectations, and feedback directly shapes their engagement with learning. Carless and Boud (2018) emphasise the role of students' evaluative judgements and expectations in developing feedback literacy and self-regulated learning, while Nakata et al. (2025) demonstrate that learners' perceptions of feedback influence their engagement with self-regulated language learning. Similarly, Brandmo and Gamlem's (2025) systematic review highlights how students' experiences of feedback affect their use of assessment information for learning. Research on self-evaluation further shows that learners' self-assessments play a central role in regulating learning processes (Suzukida, 2024), a finding consistent with earlier empirical work linking formative assessment, feedback, and self-regulated learning (Pekrun, 2020). These findings underscore the importance of understanding learners' perceived competence and assessment needs for designing assessment practices aligned with CEFR and AfL principles.

Synthesis and research gap

The literature indicates broad theoretical consensus that GC is a communicative resource integral to overall communicative competence within CLT and CEFR-oriented frameworks. At the same time, persistent mismatches among policy intentions, classroom practices, and assessment traditions have limited the realisation of communicative GC in EFL contexts, including Thai higher education. Although assessment is widely recognised as a key mechanism for supporting learning, GC assessment often remains misunderstood, form-focused, or insufficiently aligned with CLT goals.

Notably, existing research has paid limited attention to learners' self-perceived communicative GC and their expectations regarding assessment, particularly at the point of entry to university. This gap is significant, as freshmen's perceptions reflect the cumulative impact of prior instruction and assessment and shape their engagement with learning in higher education. A systematic needs analysis that foregrounds students' perspectives can therefore provide critical empirical evidence to inform the development of CEFR-aligned, learning-oriented GC assessment. Thus, the present study addresses this gap by examining Thai university freshmen's self-perceived communicative GC and their assessment-related needs within an AfL framework.

Research questions

1. What is the level of Thai university freshmen's self-perceived communicative GC within a CEFR-based communicative curriculum?
2. Are there significant differences among Thai university freshmen's self-perceived communicative GC, speaking ability, writing ability, vocabulary use, and overall English proficiency?
3. What is the level of perceived accessibility to GC assessment among Thai university freshmen?
4. What are Thai university freshmen's needs and expectations regarding the assessment of communicative GC within an AfL framework?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative-dominant explanatory sequential needs analysis design. The primary phase consisted of a large-scale survey aimed at describing Thai university freshmen's self-perceived communicative GC, comparative perceptions across language domains, and perceived accessibility to grammar assessment. Analyses were descriptive and comparative in nature, consistent with the study's focus on identifying perceived needs and imbalances rather than testing causal relationships. A qualitative explanatory phase followed, involving semi-structured interviews with 20 participants purposively selected to represent variation in self-perceived GC and assessment experience. Interview questions were directly informed by the survey results and focused on clarifying areas of uncertainty, neutral responses, and perceived difficulties identified in the quantitative phase. Interview

data were analysed thematically to identify recurrent explanations for selected quantitative patterns. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, where qualitative findings were used selectively to contextualise and explain survey results. Qualitative data were not treated as an independent evidential strand but as a means of enhancing the interpretability and pedagogical relevance of the quantitative needs analysis.

Participants

Participants were drawn from a population of 1,232 undergraduate freshmen enrolled in compulsory English courses under the General Education Curriculum (2023 Revision) at a large public university in Bangkok. All freshmen registered in these courses were invited to participate; accordingly, the quantitative phase used a census invitation with voluntary response, an approach commonly used in institutionally bounded educational needs analyses (Ahmed, 2024; Andrade, 2021; Harmandaoğlu Baz, 2023; Nanjundeswaraswamy & Divakar, 2021). Participants were affiliated with the Schools of Engineering, Agriculture, Science, Information Technology, and Liberal Arts, and all studied English through a CLT approach.

From the 1,232 students invited, 950 returned valid questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 77.1%. Respondents were predominantly 18–20 years old and had received prior English instruction mainly through Thailand's formal education system. The sample therefore provided broad institutional representation of students' self-perceived communicative GC and assessment-related needs at university entry. For the qualitative explanatory phase, 20 students were purposively selected from the survey respondents to represent variation in (a) self-perceived communicative GC, (b) confidence across grammar topics, and (c) perceived accessibility to GC assessment. This sampling strategy was designed to explain and contextualise key quantitative patterns, such as learner uncertainty and variation in assessment experience, rather than to achieve statistical generalisation (Patton, 2015; Polit & Beck, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Younas & Durante, 2023). Participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and ethical approval was granted by the university's institutional review board.

Research instruments

Two research instruments were employed: a questionnaire as the primary data collection tool and semi-structured interviews as a supplementary instrument. This combination aligns with a quantitative-dominant explanatory sequential needs analysis design, in which large-scale survey data provide the core evidence of learners' perceived needs and qualitative data are used to explain and contextualise selected quantitative patterns (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters et al., 2013; Ivankova et al., 2006).

The questionnaire was developed to examine Thai university freshmen's needs related to the assessment of communicative GC within a CEFR-based communicative curriculum. Its development was informed by CLT, CEFR, and AfL frameworks, which conceptualise GC as a communicative resource and emphasise formative, transparent assessment (Council of Europe, 2020). The questionnaire comprised four sections: (1) demographic information;

(2) self-perceived communicative GC and competence across English language domains (RQ1 and RQ2); (3) perceived accessibility to GC assessment (RQ3); and (4) assessment-related needs, expectations, and confidence in using specific grammar topics (RQ4 and supplementary diagnostic analysis). All closed-ended questionnaire items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, which is widely used to capture learners' self-perceptions and attitudes in educational and language research (Boone & Boone, 2012; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants as part of the qualitative explanatory follow-up phase. The interviews aimed to clarify and contextualise selected survey findings, particularly patterns of learner uncertainty, perceived difficulty with specific grammar topics, and experiences of GC assessment. In line with the study's quantitative-dominant orientation, interview data were used to support interpretation of the survey results rather than to generate independent qualitative claims (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The questionnaire items and interview questions were reviewed by experts in language assessment using item-objective congruence analysis and were revised based on expert feedback until the index values met an acceptable criterion and expert agreement was satisfactory (Turner & Carlson, 2003).

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in alignment with the four research questions using a quantitative-dominant explanatory sequential approach. To address research question 1, students' self-perceived communicative GC was examined through descriptive statistics and directional Likert-scale analysis to distinguish negative, neutral, and positive self-perceptions, with neutral responses interpreted as indicating uncertainty rather than a definitive evaluative judgement (Chyung et al., 2017; Kankaraš & Capecchi, 2025). To address research question 2, differences among students' self-perceived communicative GC, speaking ability, writing ability, vocabulary use, and overall English proficiency were analysed using a Friedman test, followed by Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons where appropriate to identify relative perceived strengths and weaknesses (Field, 2018). To address research question 3, students' perceived accessibility to GC assessment was examined using descriptive statistics and directional analysis, consistent with needs analysis research that prioritises identifying perceived gaps and ambiguities rather than hypothesis testing (Brown, 2016; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). To address research question 4, students' needs and expectations regarding communicative GC assessment within an Afl framework were analysed using descriptive statistics and directional Likert-scale analysis to identify learning-oriented expectations related to feedback, diagnostic information, and progress monitoring. In addition, exploratory correlational analyses were conducted to examine associations among self-perceived communicative GC, overall communicative competence, and perceived assessment accessibility using Pearson's or Spearman's correlation coefficients as appropriate (Akoglu, 2018). Interview data were used selectively to contextualise quantitative findings, in keeping with the study's quantitative-dominant explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Self-perceived communicative GC

As shown in Table 1, directional analysis revealed a clear imbalance in Thai university freshmen's self-perceptions of communicative GC. Among the 950 respondents, 43.2% ($n = 410$) reported negative self-perceptions, whereas only 11.8% ($n = 112$) reported positive self-perceptions. A substantial proportion of students (45.1%, $n = 428$) selected the neutral midpoint, indicating uncertainty or ambivalence regarding their ability to use grammar effectively for communication. Theoretically, neutral midpoint selections are not directionally interpretable as positive or negative. They may reflect a respondent's genuine midpoint position but can also function as an escape or reduced-effort response for a subset of respondents depending on context and item sensitivity (Chyung et al., 2017; Kankaraš & Capecchi, 2025). Therefore, neutral responses were analysed as a distinct category and were not interpreted as either positive or negative evaluations. The predominance of negative over positive self-perceptions, once neutral responses are excluded, suggests that Thai university freshmen are more likely to perceive weaknesses than strengths in their communicative use of grammar at entry. This pattern identifies communicative GC as a salient area of perceived difficulty.

In addition, qualitative interview findings provided further insight into this distribution. Fourteen of the 20 interviewees reported difficulty applying grammatical knowledge in spontaneous communication, particularly during speaking, while 11 described hesitations in selecting appropriate grammatical forms in real-time interaction despite familiarity with grammatical rules. These accounts suggest that neutral and negative self-ratings are more closely related to limited confidence in grammar-in-use than to an absence of grammatical knowledge. Consistent with an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, the interview data were used to explain and contextualise the quantitative patterns, with priority given to the quantitative strand (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Overall, the findings point to a perceived gap between grammatical knowledge and communicative use at the point of university entry. Students appear to have difficulty mobilising grammatical resources confidently in communication, which has implications for both instruction and assessment in the early stages of higher education.

Table 1
Directional distribution of self-perceived communicative GC

Response orientation	Likert categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Negative endorsement	1–2	410	43.2
Neutral (indeterminate)	3	428	45.1
Positive endorsement	4–5	112	11.8
Total		950	100.0

Differences among self-perceived language skill domains

To examine differences among perceived language skill domains, a Friedman test was conducted. Results in Table 2 indicated statistically significant differences among students' self-perceived communicative GC, speaking ability, writing ability, vocabulary use, and overall English proficiency, $\chi^2(4) = 261.52, p < .001$. Descriptively, communicative GC received the lowest mean rating ($M = 2.62, SD = 0.86$), whereas overall English proficiency received the highest ($M = 2.95, SD = 0.82$). Speaking ($M = 2.84, SD = 0.84$), vocabulary use ($M = 2.83, SD = 0.84$), and writing ($M = 2.81, SD = 0.89$) were perceived at intermediate levels.

This differentiation suggests that students distinguish between general English proficiency and specific communicative subskills, with communicative GC perceived as a relative area of weakness. Such differentiation is pedagogically meaningful within a CEFR-oriented framework, which conceptualises grammar as a supporting resource for communication rather than a standalone skill (Council of Europe, 2020). Previous research indicates that learners often experience greater difficulty deploying grammatical resources during meaning-focused communication than in contexts allowing greater attentional control, particularly in spontaneous spoken tasks (Ellis, 2017; Roehr-Brackin, 2024). In addition, interview findings provided explanatory support for this pattern. Thirteen of the 20 interviewees (65%) reported that grammar posed greater difficulty during spontaneous speaking and extended writing than other skills, even when they felt reasonably confident in their overall English ability. This reinforces the interpretation that GC is experienced as more fragile when it must be deployed dynamically in communicative contexts.

Table 2
Differences among self-perceived English language competence domains

Skill domain	M	SD
Communicative GC	2.62	0.86
Writing ability	2.81	0.89
Vocabulary use	2.83	0.84
Speaking ability	2.84	0.84
Overall English proficiency	2.95	0.82

Friedman test: $\chi^2(4) = 261.52, p < .001$

Relationship between communicative GC and overall communicative competence

As shown in Table 3, students' self-perceived communicative GC was strongly and positively associated with their self-perceived overall communicative competence (Spearman's $\rho = .67, p < .001$). This result indicates an alignment between learners' perceived ability to use grammar for communication and their broader judgements of communicative ability. In practical terms, students who reported greater confidence in deploying grammar communicatively also tended to evaluate their overall communicative competence more positively.

From a needs analysis and self-assessment perspective, this finding suggests that GC constitutes a salient component of learners' communicative self-concept rather than a peripheral skill, given the centrality of communicative constructs to language assessment validity (Fulcher,

2024). Research on language self-perceptions indicates that learners' self-evaluations are multidimensional yet strongly interrelated, with skill-specific self-concepts aggregating into higher-order representations of overall proficiency (Arens et al., 2016). Evidence syntheses further show that language self-assessment is systematically associated with language performance, with the strength of these relationships moderated by task design and contextual factors (Li & Zhang, 2021). Taken together, the strength of the observed association supports the view that learners' perceptions of grammar-in-use meaningfully contribute to their overall communicative self-evaluations.

This relationship is consistent with a CEFR-oriented conceptualisation of GC, which views grammar as a linguistic resource for communicative action rather than isolated rule knowledge (Council of Europe, 2020). Accordingly, learners who feel more capable of mobilising grammatical resources for communication would be expected to report stronger overall communicative competence. However, the correlational nature of the analysis warrants caution, as no claims are made regarding causal direction.

Qualitative interview findings further contextualised this relationship. Several interviewees reported that difficulty using grammar in spontaneous communication negatively affected their confidence in speaking and interaction more broadly, helping to explain the observed alignment between perceived communicative grammar and overall communicative competence.

In summary, the strong correlation underscores the importance of addressing communicative GC in both instruction and assessment. Within a CEFR- and AfL-oriented framework, strengthening learners' ability to use grammar communicatively and making this ability visible through transparent, diagnostic assessment may support broader communicative development.

Table 3
Correlation between self-perceived GC and overall communicative competence

Variables	Communicative GC	Overall communicative competence
Communicative GC	1	.67 ($p < .001$)
Overall communicative competence	.67 ($p < .001$)	1

Level of accessibility to GC assessment

Students' perceptions of the accessibility of GC assessment were characterised by a mixed pattern. Approximately one-third of respondents (32.8%) viewed GC assessment as accessible, indicating that a meaningful proportion of students experienced assessment practices as understandable or approachable. However, the predominance of neutral responses (48.2%) suggests that uncertainty or limited awareness of how GC was assessed was more prevalent than either positive or negative evaluation. In contrast, a smaller proportion of students (19.0%) expressed negative perceptions, indicating that explicit dissatisfaction with GC assessment accessibility was present but not dominant.

Qualitative interview findings further contextualised this pattern. Twelve of the 20 interviewees (60%) reported uncertainty regarding how GC was assessed, explaining that most assessments were framed around the four communicative skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing without explicit reference to grammar-in-use. This uncertainty is consistent with learner-focused research on language assessment literacy, which has indicated that learners may not always have a clear or explicit understanding of assessment criteria and underlying constructs, even when they are familiar with assessment tasks (Vogt et al., 2020). More broadly, research on language assessment literacy suggests that learners' interpretations of assessment practices can be shaped by their understanding of assessment purposes, criteria, and underlying constructs (Kremmel & Harding, 2020).

Six participants (30%) perceived GC assessment as implicit or indirect, often embedded within communicative tasks, and evaluated this integration positively. The remaining two interviewees (10%) reported limited accessibility, noting that assessment practices prioritised the four skills while leaving the communicative use of grammar largely invisible. Similar patterns have been reported in learner-based studies indicating that implicit assessment practices may be interpreted differently by learners, depending on their assessment knowledge and expectations (Vogt et al., 2020).

In general, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that perceptions of GC assessment accessibility were characterised less by overt dissatisfaction than by ambiguity and partial construct visibility. While some learners interpreted the integration of grammar-in-use within communicative tasks as appropriate, the large proportion of neutral responses and interview-based uncertainty indicates that GC assessment was not consistently salient or explicitly articulated to learners. This interpretation aligns with recent scholarship on assessment transparency, which emphasises that limited clarity about assessment constructs can constrain learners' understanding and engagement, even when assessment practices are theoretically aligned with learning goals (Owen & Şenel, 2025).

Interview data further suggest that implicit assessment of GC through the four communicative skills was interpreted differently by learners. For some, this integration was viewed positively, reflecting an understanding of grammar as a communicative resource rather than isolated rule knowledge, an orientation consistent with CEFR-informed descriptions of GC as part of broader linguistic and communicative competence (Council of Europe, 2020). For others, however, the absence of explicit reference to grammar-in-use contributed to uncertainty about how grammatical performance was evaluated.

Overall, the findings point to a construct-visibility issue rather than a widespread perception of inaccessibility. GC assessment was neither strongly rejected nor clearly understood by many learners, suggesting that greater transparency, such as clearer descriptors, explicit exemplification of grammar-in-use, and formative feedback that directly references communicative grammatical performance, may enhance learners' perceptions of accessibility. From an AfL perspective, research on feedback literacy and language assessment literacy underscores the importance of making assessment purposes and criteria more visible to learners in order to support understanding and engagement, without necessitating

decontextualised grammar testing (Carless, 2020; Council of Europe, 2020; Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Vogt et al., 2020).

Table 4
Students' perceived accessibility to GC assessment

Response orientation	Likert categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Negative endorsement	1–2	180	19.0
Neutral (indeterminate)	3	458	48.2
Positive endorsement	4–5	312	32.8
Total		950	100.0

Needs and expectations for assessing GC within an AfL framework

Results related to RQ4 indicate strong learning-oriented needs and expectations regarding GC assessment. Across most questionnaire items, positive endorsements exceeded 50%, particularly for statements emphasising diagnostic feedback and support for learning. For example, 62.7% of students agreed that knowing their grammatical weaknesses would help develop their communication, 59.1% expressed a desire to know which grammatical skills they lacked, and 58.6% reported that knowing their grammatical level would support communicative development. Taken together, these responses suggest that many learners value GC assessment primarily for its potential to inform learning and guide improvement, rather than solely for summative judgement.

These patterns are consistent with research on AfL, which conceptualises assessment as a process that supports learning through feedback, clarification of learning goals, and the development of learner self-regulation (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Panadero et al., 2018). From this perspective, assessment practices are most effective when they help learners identify strengths and areas for development and when feedback is interpretable, actionable, and aligned with learning objectives. The contrast between these strong learning-oriented expectations and earlier findings indicating more limited perceptions of assessment accessibility points to a potential high-need–moderate-access gap, in which learners' expectations for informative GC feedback exceed their current experiences of assessment communication.

Interview data further reinforced this interpretation, while also revealing variation in learners' expectations. Fifteen of the twenty interviewees (75%) expressed interest in receiving clearer and more detailed diagnostic information about their GC, particularly in relation to specific grammatical features and their communicative use. In contrast, the remaining five participants (25%) did not articulate strong expectations for additional diagnostic feedback, either because they were uncertain about how GC could be assessed within communicative tasks or because they viewed grammar development as an implicit outcome of broader language use rather than an explicit assessment focus. Research on formative assessment and feedback indicates that learners' ability to benefit from assessment depends not only on the provision of feedback, but also on their understanding of assessment purposes, criteria, and how feedback relates to learning goals (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Panadero et al., 2018).

Overall, these findings indicate that GC assessment is widely valued by learners as a potential learning resource, but that its formative potential may not be fully realised without greater transparency. Designing GC assessment practices that are explicitly aligned with communicative goals, framed through CEFR-informed descriptors, and supported by feedback that directly references grammatical performance in use may help bridge this gap (Council of Europe, 2020; Fulcher, 2024). Such an approach is consistent with scholarship emphasising the importance of assessment designs that make criteria and expectations visible to learners while maintaining a focus on meaningful language use.

Table 5
Directional distribution of needs and expectations regarding GC assessment

Questionnaire item (exact wording)	Negative %	Neutral %	Positive %
I want to know my test results.	7.5	37.9	54.6
I want to know my progress each year.	7.1	34.4	58.5
Knowing my level of GC is useful.	9.4	35.7	54.9
Assessment of GC is useful for learning.	7.5	35.2	57.4
Knowing my level of GC helps develop my communication.	7.5	33.9	58.6
Knowing my weaknesses in GC helps develop my communication.	6.6	30.6	62.7
I want to know exactly what GC skills I lack.	8.4	32.5	59.1
I want to know which GC skills I already do well.	7.9	34.9	57.2

Self-perceived confidence in the communicative use of grammar topics

As shown in Table 6, students' self-perceived confidence in the communicative use of specific grammar topics was characterised by a high proportion of neutral or indeterminate responses across all topics, accounting for approximately 45–51% of responses. For example, neutral endorsements ranged from 45.8% for expressing probability and certainty to 50.6% for adjectives and adverbs. This pattern suggests widespread uncertainty or ambivalence rather than clear confidence or rejection regarding communicative grammar use. Such distributions are well documented in Likert-type self-assessment measures, where midpoint or neutral responses frequently reflect respondent uncertainty, insufficient experiential evidence, or reluctance to commit to an evaluative judgement when assessing complex or unfamiliar constructs (Chyung et al., 2017; Kankaraš & Capecchi, 2025). In the context of language learning, self-assessments of communicative ability are particularly susceptible to such indeterminacy, as learners may lack consistent diagnostic feedback or stable performance benchmarks on which to base their judgements (Pekrun, 2020).

Negative endorsements exceeded positive endorsements across most grammar topics, suggesting that students were more likely to perceive weaknesses than strengths in their communicative use of grammar. This imbalance was most pronounced for discourse-dependent and semantically complex structures. Specifically, 38.6% of students reported low confidence in expressing probability and certainty, 37.9% in phrasal verbs, and 36.8% in conditional sentences, while positive endorsements for these topics remained comparatively low (15.6–17.2%). Similar patterns were observed for reported speech (35.9% negative;

17.6% positive) and relative clauses (34.7% negative; 17.5% positive). These distributions point to persistent difficulty with grammatical structures whose successful communicative use requires the integration of formal accuracy, semantic interpretation, and pragmatic appropriateness under real-time processing constraints. Such challenges are widely documented in research on communicative grammar ability and second language processing, particularly for structures that demand flexible coordination of form, meaning, and use in discourse (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2016; Purpura, 2004).

However, comparatively higher levels of positive endorsement were observed for more form-salient and frequently practised grammar topics. For example, 27.2% of students reported positive confidence in using articles, 26.2% in question forms, and 22.0% in adjectives and adverbs. These grammatical features are typically introduced early and reinforced repeatedly across formal schooling, which aligns with research-based descriptions of English language education in Thailand that emphasise communicative language use alongside systematic exposure to core grammatical forms within a CEFR-informed policy framework (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017; Chartrakul & Damnet, 2021; Franz & Teo, 2018). Nevertheless, even for these relatively familiar topics, neutral responses remained high (47–51%), and positive endorsements did not exceed one-third of responses. This pattern suggests that formal familiarity with grammatical structures does not necessarily translate into confidence in their communicative deployment.

Findings from the qualitative explanatory phase provided contextual insight into these topic-level patterns. Among the 20 interviewees, 14 students (70%) reported particular difficulty using grammar topics that require real-time integration of form, meaning, and context, most notably conditional sentences, reported speech, and expressions of probability and certainty. These reported difficulties are consistent with contemporary second language acquisition research emphasising the distinction between explicit knowledge of grammatical rules and the implicit knowledge associated with fluent language use. While explicit instruction can support metalinguistic awareness, research has consistently shown that such knowledge does not necessarily translate into confident or efficient use of grammar during spontaneous communication, particularly when learners must make rapid form–meaning choices (Roehr-Brackin, 2024). Participants’ uncertainty when selecting grammatical forms during real-time communication further aligns with experimental evidence demonstrating that implicit and explicit training can have differential effects on fluency-oriented performance, helping to explain why learners may experience reduced confidence when grammar must be accessed operationally in interaction (Lichtman, 2021).

In addition, 12 interviewees (60%) reported that their prior grammar learning experiences were dominated by rule explanation and controlled written exercises, with limited opportunities for communicative practice in speaking or extended writing. This instructional profile closely corresponds with research on language testing and classroom assessment in Thailand, which shows a continued reliance on discrete-point and paper-and-pencil assessment formats, particularly in high-stakes contexts, thereby encouraging decontextualised language knowledge and controlled practice. Consequently, opportunities to assess and practise communicative application through performance-based tasks tend to be comparatively

limited or marginalised in many instructional settings (Narathakoon et al., 2020; Prapphal, 2008; Sritrakarn, 2021).

This background helps explain why grammar topics such as phrasal verbs and conditional sentences elicited particularly low confidence despite long-term exposure. Peer-reviewed research has shown that English phrasal verbs are widely perceived by EFL learners as difficult and ambiguous, with persistent gaps in awareness and confident use (Haugh & Takeuchi, 2024), and that learners in instructional contexts such as Thailand experience substantial difficulty and uncertainty with conditional sentence systems due to their formal and functional complexity (Suraprajit, 2022). Difficulties with reported speech are likewise consistent with recent classroom-based evidence indicating that even collaborative writing support may yield only limited learning gains for this structure in the absence of sustained, contextualised practice (Kos & Lara, 2026). For meanings involving probability and certainty, descriptive research on learners' use of epistemic modal verbs further points to ongoing challenges in expressing nuanced epistemic stance in EFL performance, particularly in extended discourse contexts (Hollmann, 2024).

By contrast, 8 interviewees (40%) reported relatively greater confidence with grammar topics such as articles and question forms, reflecting their comparatively higher positive endorsement rates. With respect to question forms, recent experimental research examining learners' implicit knowledge of English interrogative structures highlights both their developmental complexity and the possibility of more stable competence emerging over time under appropriate instructional and elicitation conditions (He & Oltra-Massuet, 2023). Nevertheless, even these learners noted that confidence was strongest in controlled contexts and weaker in extended discourse. This pattern is consistent with research demonstrating that instructional conditions and practice types play a critical role in determining which aspects of grammatical knowledge become usable in performance, and that explicit information and practice do not automatically result in fluent, spontaneous deployment in communicative use (Lucas, 2024; Michaud & Ammar, 2023).

In summary, the directional survey results and explanatory interview evidence point to a systematic form–use gap in students' perceived communicative GC. Theoretically, GC is conceptualised as a resource for accomplishing communicative actions rather than mastery of isolated forms (Council of Europe, 2020; North, 2022). More importantly, the consistently high proportions of neutral and negative endorsements across grammar topics highlight the need for topic-level diagnostic assessment that makes learners' strengths and weaknesses explicit and provides feedback focused on communicative use rather than rule accuracy alone.

Table 6
Students' self-perceived confidence in the communicative use of grammar topics

Grammar topic	Negative %	Neutral %	Positive %
Expressing probability and certainty	38.6	45.8	15.6
Phrasal verbs	37.9	46.2	15.9
Conjunctions	35.2	47.1	17.7
Conditional sentences	36.8	46.0	17.2

Grammar topic	Negative %	Neutral %	Positive %
Reported speech	35.9	46.5	17.6
Relative clauses	34.7	47.8	17.5
Noun clauses	33.9	48.2	17.9
Verb tense and aspect	32.8	47.6	19.6
Word order	31.6	48.9	19.5
Pronouns and possessives	28.1	49.3	22.6
Adjectives and adverbs	27.4	50.6	22.0
Question forms	26.8	47.0	26.2
Articles (a/an, the)	24.9	47.9	27.2

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past decade, Thai higher education policy has increasingly promoted CEFR-based standards and communicative competence as benchmarks for curriculum design, assessment, and graduate outcomes. Considering ongoing calls for CEFR-aligned and learning-oriented language assessment in Thai higher education and national policy goals emphasising graduates' communicative English proficiency for global engagement, this study adopted a needs analysis approach to examine Thai university freshmen's perceptions of communicative GC and their expectations regarding its assessment. By foregrounding learners' perspectives at the point of university entry, the study aimed to inform the development of a communicative GC assessment that is pedagogically meaningful and aligned with the principles of AfL.

In general, the findings in this study highlight a clear need for assessment practices that more effectively support the communicative use of grammar, a priority explicitly stated in national frameworks seeking to move English education beyond form-focused instruction towards functional language use. Students' self-perceptions revealed widespread uncertainty and relatively low confidence in deploying grammatical resources for communication, particularly for discourse-dependent and pragmatically complex structures. At the same time, learners expressed strong expectations for assessment to provide diagnostic information, identify specific strengths and weaknesses, and support ongoing development including all core functions of AfL. The contrast between these learning-oriented expectations and students' more limited perceptions of assessment accessibility suggests that current practices in Thai universities may not yet sufficiently foreground communicative grammar or make assessment purposes and benefits explicit to learners.

From a test-development perspective, these findings underscore the need for a CEFR-aligned GC assessment that moves beyond discrete, rule-based measurement towards tasks that elicit grammar-in-use within communicative contexts. Such an assessment should generate interpretable, topic-level diagnostic feedback that learners can use to guide improvement, particularly in grammatical areas identified as problematic. Moreover, to address the gap between students' expectations and their perceived access to assessment, GC assessment should be transparent, accessible, and clearly integrated into instruction, functioning not only as a measurement tool but also as a learning resource.

This study's systematic examination of learners' self-perceived communicative GC and their assessment-related expectations within the Thai higher education context contributes empirical evidence to ongoing national and international discussions on CEFR-based, learning-oriented assessment. The findings reinforce the importance of grounding GC assessment in learners' communicative realities and articulated needs rather than relying solely on traditional form-focused measures. Importantly, the study demonstrates that a well-designed communicative GC assessment has the potential to support Thailand's broader goal of producing graduates who can use English effectively for academic, professional, and intercultural communication. As such, the proposed assessment direction provides a principled foundation for future GC test development, classroom implementation, and validation research aimed at strengthening the role of grammar within communicative language education in the Thai context.

Recommendations for further studies

Building on the findings of this needs analysis, several directions for future research are recommended. First, further studies should focus on the design, piloting, and validation of CEFR-aligned communicative GC assessments that operationalise grammar as a resource for meaning-making rather than as isolated formal knowledge. Such research should examine the extent to which task-based or scenario-based assessment formats can more effectively elicit grammar-in-use and provide interpretable diagnostic information at the level of specific grammar topics.

Second, empirical validation studies are needed to investigate how diagnostic feedback derived from communicative GC assessments is interpreted and used by learners and teachers. Given students' strong learning-oriented expectations but limited perceptions of assessment accessibility, future research should examine the impact of transparent criteria, feedback literacy interventions, and AfL-informed feedback practices on learners' self-regulation, confidence, and subsequent communicative performance.

Third, longitudinal research is recommended to explore changes in students' communicative GC and assessment perceptions over time, particularly across key transition points in higher education. Tracking learners from university entry through later stages of study would provide insight into how communicative grammar development interacts with instructional practices, assessment exposure, and increasing academic and professional communication demands.

Fourth, future studies should investigate teachers' assessment beliefs, practices, and constraints related to communicative grammar assessment in Thai higher education. Examining alignment and potential mismatches between teachers' assessment practices and learners' expectations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how communicative GC assessment can be effectively implemented in institutional contexts.

Finally, comparative and cross-contextual studies both within Thailand and across other EFL settings would help determine the generalisability of the present findings and identify context-sensitive versus universal features of learning-oriented GC assessment. Such research

would further strengthen the evidence base for principled CEFR-aligned assessment design and support ongoing efforts to integrate grammar assessment more meaningfully into communicative language education.

THE AUTHORS

Nagorn Bunyarit is a PhD candidate in Educational Testing and Evaluation at the School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia. He is also a lecturer at the College of Industrial and Innovation Management, KMITL, Thailand. His research interests include language assessment, psychometrics, CEFR-based testing, Rasch measurement, and English language education.

nagorn.bu@kmitl.ac.th

Samah Ali Mohsen Mofreh is a lecturer at the School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia. She holds a PhD in Measurement and Evaluation in Education. Her research interests include TESOL, educational measurement and evaluation, psychometrics, and higher education, with particular emphasis on assessment development and validation in educational contexts.

samahmofreh@usm.my

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