



Decolonising CEFR: Resistance by University English Language Teachers in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

In Southeast Asia, English language education has been influenced by the import and integration of various curricula and frameworks originating from the west. In response to this, English language teachers at various educational levels have demonstrated how they have had to adapt these imported materials. To critical scholars, this may be viewed as a process of decolonisation. Against this backdrop, this study aimed to examine how university English language teachers responded to the integration of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) through an extent of resistance. To this end, three English language teachers from a Malaysian university and three others from a Thai university were interviewed. Specifically, they reflected on how they reconfigured the framework to be more contextually and locally meaningful. Through the examination of the participants' reflections, it was found that their resistance was shaped by both their individual perspectives and practices, as well as the context. The former was marked by enacting agency and a reluctance to accept external forces, while the latter was illustrated through structural mismatch and a cultural misalignment. Findings of this study ultimately contribute to our understanding of how western educational frameworks and English language education were decolonised. This study also illustrates how the classroom is a pivotal space for the displacement of dominant forces in education.

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Publication

Submission: 31 March 2025
Revised: 12 November 2025
Accepted: 15 May 2026
Online First: Published: 29 May 2026

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Practitioner Notes

1. Practitioners should adapt materials and activities to reflect students' actual proficiency levels and sociocultural context rather than applying CEFR wholesale.
2. Practitioners are encouraged to exercise professional judgement in balancing requirements expected in their immediate teaching context.
3. Practitioners should not assume that globally recognised frameworks automatically align with local learning needs and classroom realities.
4. Institutions are advised to involve teachers in curriculum design and implementation decisions to ensure contextual relevance and practical feasibility.
5. Teacher education programmes should prioritise reflective practice to help practitioners critically engage with external frameworks so that these may be adapted effectively.

Keywords

Teacher resistance, reflections, English language practitioners, global frameworks

Citation:

Loo, D. B., & Sairattanain, J. (2026). Decolonizing CEFR: Resistance by university English language teachers in Southeast Asia. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 23(8).

Introduction

In Southeast Asia, the teaching of English has been shaped by teaching strategies, curricula and educational frameworks imported from the west (Foley, 2022; Jalalian & Abdul Rahim, 2021). On top of these, assessments such as international English language testing system (IELTS) and TOEFL continue to have a significant impact on students' English language learning experience (Nguyen, 2023). The dominance of western frameworks is not unique to the Southeast Asian context; in fact, it is part of a broader trend due to their global status being leveraged as a benchmark to compare English language proficiency across different educational and sociolinguistic contexts. As such, many viewed this as an opportunity to compare students' English language proficiency and achievement to their global counterparts (Johnson & Tweedie, 2021). Among these frameworks, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) continues to expand, such as in Thailand and Malaysia (Savski, 2020), Vietnam (Nguyen & Hamid, 2021), and Myanmar (Hall & Gaynor, 2020). This framework has had an impact not just on materials, but also on teaching and learning strategies. However, for the latter, rather than adopting the framework wholesale, teachers and practitioners across the region have been making contextualised adjustments (Phongploenpis, 2023), illustrating a critical yet subtle resistance towards imported materials and frameworks.

That such contextualisation efforts are needed indicates the limitations of using frameworks that are not aligned with the local realities, despite their global appeal. This may be due to the focus of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) on communicative abilities, as illustrated in their can-do statements; nonetheless, this may not align with the multilingual environment of many Southeast Asian nations (Savski & Prabjandee, 2022). Moreover, English-language practitioners, especially at the universities, are not passive recipients of such frameworks, as they strive to find ways to reconfigure and adapt imported frameworks according to the needs of students and perspectives of the local environment (Loo, 2025). These efforts are done in spite of logistical and institutional constraints, such as large class sizes and the emphasis on tests (Foley, 2022). These adjustments reflect not only the subtle resistance and decolonial agency of practitioners, but they also demonstrate an active stance of being in a globalised world. To better capture these efforts, this study aims to explore the reflections of universities English lecturers from the Southeast Asian context in response to imported dominant language educational frameworks, namely CEFR. Specifically, this study will be guided by the following research question, "How do university English language practitioners enact resistance in their engagement with the framework?" Findings of this study would highlight the voices of local educators, which could spur an epistemic break – a notion championed by Kumaravadivelu (2016) where alternative, practical, and even local language teaching and learning approaches that are meaningful and effective are prioritised over the reliance on practices originating from or promoted in the west.

In the next section, a review of relevant literature on the implementation of the framework in Southeast Asia is presented. This is followed by the conceptualisation of teacher resistance as a decolonial practice. The study's methodology, including participants and context, as well as data collection and analysis is then presented. The subsequent discussion will present insights in comparison to existing literature.

Literature

This section begins with an examination of the status and impact of CEFR in Southeast Asia, with particular attention to the challenges arising from its application in diverse sociolinguistic contexts. It then reviews literature on teacher resistance as a form of agency, which aims to highlight how practitioners respond to tensions between policy expectations and classroom realities. This provides the conceptual grounding for understanding resistance as a situated and potentially decolonial practice.

The West in Southeast Asia: The Case of CEFR

The presence of CEFR in Southeast Asia has long been felt. In the early 2000s, several governments in the region announced the use of this framework to shape future English language learning policies (Savski, 2020; Foley, 2022). The global uptake of this framework may be seen through teaching and learning materials distributed by major international publishers. These materials were produced according to the framework and were purported to offer students progressive learning of the English language (Savski, 2020). The impact of this framework and its materials have been reported in different studies. For instance, in a study by Zaki and Darmi (2021) conducted in Malaysia, it was found that the framework had been viewed as a useful guide for teachers to offer students simple and practical English language lessons. In this study, the teachers also reported that they were able to get a sense of how their students did at a broader scale by comparing their students' performance with others from other countries. On the contrary, in Thailand, Franz and Teo's (2018) study on primary, secondary, and vocational schoolteachers found that many did not know what the framework was. Moreover, the participants were not actively engaged with the framework, even though the materials used in the classroom were CEFR-aligned. What they did was just to finish the textbook and workbook within the allotted time. The same was reported by Kaewkamnerd et al. (2023), who found that the Thai participants (teachers and students) were not sure how the framework was used, or how it affected the teaching and learning practices and processes in the English language classroom. For the teachers, principles from the framework such as the use of communicative and interactive approaches in teaching were found to be difficult to integrate. On the other hand, students were not sure of the relationship between the framework and their language learning goals.

What these studies indicate are the challenges faced in the use of CEFR in the Southeast Asian context. Other challenges reported by scholars include the ambiguity in how assessment should be carried out (Foley, 2019) and the dominance of the local languages that affect students' use of the English language beyond the school setting (Savski, 2020). Furthermore, the framework seemed to be viewed as a quick fix for curriculum reforms that were not successful. This issue may be viewed in Malaysia, where the English language curriculum had changed from the Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary School, to the Standard-Based Curriculum, and most recently to CEFR (Ahmad Afip et al., 2019). The same may be observed in Vietnam, where the use of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach had been unsuccessful, prompting the uptake of the framework as a replacement (Nguyen & Hamid, 2021). Furthermore, the framework was implemented in a top-down manner, which did not resonate well with English practitioners at the grassroots level (Franz & Teo, 2018; Sahib & Stapa, 2022). In sum, resistance towards CEFR may be due to a mismatch between the learning outcomes with the language realities of the immediate context. As a response to this, teachers may rely on

traditional and perhaps even form-focussed teaching practices, including the use of students' first language as the primary communication tool. This, however, should not be viewed as a lack of pedagogical competence on the part of the teacher; instead, it should be understood as the teacher's critical awareness of their students' language ability and learning needs in the English language classroom.

Teacher Resistance: A decolonial Endeavour

In English language teaching, teacher resistance has been widely examined. Studies have indicated that teachers enact resistance when there is a mismatch between curriculum expectations and classroom realities and even local sociocultural perspectives (Loo et al., 2017; Macalister & Phonekeo, 2024; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). In settings where English is not the dominant language and its value may be questioned, practitioners may resist by enacting teaching and learning practices that reflect its everyday use. This has been shown through curating English lessons focusing on the improvement of students' overall communication skills (Le et al., 2021; Loo & Sairattanain, 2024), or translanguaging to reflect how the English language intersects with the local languages (Lin & Leung, 2024). In this way, resistance may be viewed as a process of reframing one's perspectives and actions within the immediate context. This would involve the interpretation and subsequent adaptation of teaching and learning activities, as well as materials to be appropriate for the students' language learning needs or their sociocultural context (Ali & Hamid, 2018). Furthermore, resistance may be highly individual and situational – reflecting a situated form of teacher agency. Resistance may also be dynamic as it illustrates the continuous and complex negotiation that teachers undergo as they engage in lesson preparation, and student and colleague interaction (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). With the presence of conflict or struggle that instigates teacher resistance, other important factors include teacher's sense of self and their dedication to the teaching profession, all of which could spur resistance that would shape the teacher's sense of self as well as their pedagogical perspectives and practices.

In enacting resistance, English practitioners are contributing to decolonial efforts at large. According to Kumaravadivelu (2016), the decolonisation of English language teaching may be inspired from personal lived experiences that subsequently prompts a strategic plan for how the language classroom may be contextually enhanced. This also involves accepting that English teachers are capable educators without having to constantly prove that they can teach just as well (as their native-English speaking counterparts). Moreover, the decolonisation of English language teaching affords space for local practices and perspectives to shape teaching and learning. This allows a more proactive stance to see how the classroom may be made more meaningful to the students. To be able to decolonise the English language classroom takes more than just recognising the importance of the local context or the students' needs, it also accounts for the complex dynamics and power disparities between languages and educational perspectives (Kubota & Miller, 2017; Thongwicht & Ulla, 2024). Furthermore, to be reflexive in the teaching of English, especially in a context where it is a second or foreign language, teachers would need to take on an ethical stance to mediate the risk of displacing the perspectives and practices of the immediate community (Kubota, 2020; Rajendram, 2022; Canagarajah, 2022). This allows teachers to be pragmatic, and to be socio-culturally mindful of the impact from English language education, including the potential risks that come about due to the introduction of external perspectives and approaches.

Method

The aim of this study was to explore how resistance was enacted among university English practitioners towards CEFR. It takes on Thambinathan and Kinsella's (2021) decolonising and transformative paradigm that aims to deconstruct western perspectives and practices through alternative approaches that are rooted in local values and authority. Using this paradigm would give space to meaningful teaching and learning processes, as well as prompt a deeper reflexivity on the educational experience of both teachers and their students. To explore resistance through this lens, a qualitative approach was employed. This approach was deemed suitable given the individualised experiences and contextualised practices of teachers in enacting resistance (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). This approach also allows for a decolonial, open, and inclusive take on locally meaningful and legitimate teaching and learning practices and perspectives. Kumaravadivelu (2016) argues that such an approach is proactive and could highlight 'local exigencies' and 'original knowledge', which would recognise the expertise and professionalism of teachers from non-English speaking countries.

Participants and Context

Participants of this study were all university English practitioners, who had the agency to manage teaching and learning activities and course content (Miller & Gkonou, 2018). The participants were recruited through convenience sampling, as they were professional contacts of the researchers. This sampling approach was considered appropriate given the nature of this research, which would require an established working rapport between the researcher and the participant to ensure that honest and transparent data could be collected (Brewis, 2014). Prior to the study, the participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study, and consent was sought.

There were six participants: three from Malaysia and another three from Thailand. The participants had advanced degrees and were working at either a Malaysian or Thai public university (Table 1). These practitioners were involved not only in the teaching of English for academic purposes at the level, but they were also involved in conducting related research (Galloway & Rose, 2021). All of them managed and taught compulsory English courses at the undergraduate level. These courses were either academic in nature, where the focus may be on writing or on reading. The participants also taught academic communication courses that supported students' development of presentation and listening skills. Some of the participants were supervisors of doctoral students as well.

As the researchers were themselves from the context of this study, it was important to recognise and to consider their positionality. Both the researchers are English-language practitioners – Daron based in Malaysia and Jariya based in Thailand – who come with experience not just in English language education but also in the management and implementation of curriculum. Furthermore, the researchers have had to work with CEFR. Most recently, Daron was part of a team revamping marking rubrics to be aligned with the framework and Jariya was with a panel evaluating English teachers' readiness in implementing the framework at local Thai schools. These experiences provided them with the needed background not only to relate better with the participants, but also to empathise with concerns or challenges that the participants may have. Furthermore, their personal professional experience with the framework would have a bearing on

how data may be interpreted and presented. To mitigate overt influence, the researchers ensured that continuous reflexivity was maintained, in that they openly exchanged and discussed their views during the data collection and analysis stages (Czerniawski, 2023). This was important to surface assumptions that they may have, but more importantly, to interpret data in a manner that was grounded in the participants' accounts.

Table 1

Participant information

No	Participant (Pseudonym)	Academic Qualifications	Location
1	Amanda (Female)	PhD in Curriculum and Instruction	Malaysia
2	Vanessa (Female)	PhD in Curriculum and Instruction	Malaysia
3	Aaron (Male)	MA in Teaching English as a Second Language	Malaysia
4	Pornchai (Male)	PhD in Linguistics	Thailand
5	June (Female)	PhD in Applied Linguistics	Thailand
6	Inthira (Female)	MA in English for Communication	Thailand

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study comprised lecturers' reflections about CEFR in relation to their teaching practice, assessment or even classroom experience. Reflections were gleaned through a semi-structured interview that had three broad questions that asked about how the framework was integrated; the promotion of the framework within their context; and the efficacy of the framework in teaching English in their context. As mentioned, prior to the interview, the participants were briefed on the study and its purpose. They were informed that their identity would be kept anonymous and that any revealing information that may have been shared during the interview would be removed during the transcription process. The interview was arranged at a convenient time and place for the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, which was checked by the participants themselves. Participants from Malaysia were interviewed by the main researcher while those from Thailand were interviewed by the second researcher. The interviews were conducted until sufficient depth and understanding was achieved. This became apparent when participants began to repeat meanings, especially when revisiting an earlier point that was made, without offering any further elaboration (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This was considered a point of saturation for data collection.

This analysis of the reflections began with the identification of resistance according to two overarching themes, which were resistance by teachers as individuals, and resistance based on contextual needs and broader cultural perspectives (Sah & Fang, 2025). These broad themes were then further analysed to determine sub-themes, given the individual and contextual experiences of the participants. By doing this, the research would not risk glossing over distinct experiences or perspectives; in fact, this would highlight the extent of agency that English practitioners have in their reckoning with CEFR in their respective teaching and work environment. To ensure that the sub-themes had resonance, the researchers engaged with an expert to ensure that the analysis and interpretation were trustworthy, in that they captured the intended meaning of the reflections of the participants (Dennis, 2018). The processes of identifying themes and sub-

themes, and the engagement with an external expert helped to ensure that analytical depth had been achieved (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This multi-layered process also supported the researchers in accounting for possible perspectives that may shape how the themes were derived and defined.

Results

There were two overarching themes that emerged from the analysis of data. The first is resistance by teachers as individuals, which showed how the participants took agentic actions, reflected in their teaching practices, and how they were reluctant to fully accept an external framework that was imposed. The second theme is resistance from contextual needs and cultural perspectives, which showed how structural, institutional, and sociocultural factors shaped the participants' responses to the framework. Across these themes and their subsequent sub-themes, excerpts from the participants' interviews are presented verbatim.

Resistance by Teachers as Individuals

The first theme illustrates how resistance was enacted at the level of individual teachers, particularly through their pedagogical decisions and professional responses to the implementation of the framework. Rather than an outright rejection, participants demonstrated varying degrees of cautious engagement, reflecting their sense of agency within institutional constraints. This form of resistance was shaped by both their personal teaching beliefs and their experiences within their respective contexts. Two sub-themes emerged from the data: negotiating agency in pedagogical practice, and a reluctance to accept external forces.

Negotiating Agency in Pedagogical Practice

The first sub-theme reflected how teachers negotiated agency in organising their pedagogical practice in their respective classrooms. This indicated a spectrum of resistance towards the framework, which contributed to the shaping of agency among the participants. In other words, the presence of CEFR had compelled the teachers to realise that despite being a framework with a global following, it may not entirely be suitable for their classroom context. This may be observed through the reflections on the practical realities of teaching, where they had to rely on their own teaching beliefs, as well as their knowledge of the context and their students' needs.

Most of the participants in this study reflected that the framework was something that they had to work with; nonetheless, integrating it did not result in significant changes in their teaching practices. This was mentioned by Amanda, who noted that the framework had reduced the number of assignments and assessments in her course. She said, "Just because there are fewer assessments, doesn't mean that the teaching practice has changed. I think this is partially because I've been teaching this course for quite some time. The students' proficiency level is pretty much the same too". This showed Amanda's familiarity and knowledge with the local context, resulting in her decision on how she managed and taught her course. Amanda continued,

How I teach is basically, okay, there is a syllabus, I look at the syllabus, I kind of see what the lessons want to do, and then I make modifications here and there so that they are suited to the students' level. I think the most important thing is to ensure that students do have improvements in their English proficiency.

What was seen here is Amanda enacting agency based on her experience and knowledge of her students, and also the desire to see improvement. A similar perspective was seen in Aaron's reflections. In his interview, Aaron mentioned that the framework was 'simple' and 'straightforward', and that the framework allowed them to go into the classroom with a 'minimalist' approach. While the simplicity of the framework was appreciated, Aaron also took note of the framework's pedagogical limitations, one of which was how it was a constraint on teacher creativity. Aaron said,

With CEFR being the main thing we have to look at, we really need to reconsider our activities in the class, especially our assessments. We can't really do assessments that involve multiple language skills because CEFR wants us to focus only on one thing. This really stops me, and probably other teachers, from being creative or innovative.

Aaron's reflection here showed how the framework was a hindrance to teacher agency, as they had to revert to what was expected. However, to counter this, Aaron mentioned, "But of course, we get serious with the activities that are being assessed. You know, those that are being marked. For other activities that we do in class that are not marked, we still have our way with it."

Configuring the place of CEFR in the classroom also resulted in the negotiation of agency for Inthira, who mentioned that the levels proposed by the framework may not really work for the Thai context. Inthira noted that,

Students here in Thailand have different levels of English proficiency because of their background, you know, if they had a lot of English exposure before. Maybe outside school in their homes. Some of our students don't care about the language because nobody speaks it with them.

That the framework assumed that students come in at similar or comparable English language level further complicated the preparation of teaching materials and activities, even though a syllabus had already been assigned to Inthira's class. She said,

Even though there is a workbook, and this book also has a teacher guide, the activities don't work. I always have to make modifications to the activities here and there. Not only because many of the students aren't at the expected level, but because they have individual differences too. But you know, there are so many students in one class. At most, I can offer my students two or three varieties of a lesson, but not too many because this process takes long.

Inthira's reflection here showed agency enacted to ensure that the lesson was mostly appropriate for her class; nonetheless, she acknowledged that she did not have sufficient time to create differentiated activities for all her students based on their individual needs. Thus, in Inthira's case, the relevance and positive impact of the framework may be questioned as it seemed to not offer any assessment guidance as experienced by Aaron; however, Inthira's reflections did align with Amanda's experience, especially in terms of having to adjust materials to suit the students' language proficiency and experience. What these reflections indicated were how the participants' agency was mediated by their contexts. It was also influenced by the possibilities that the framework afforded or did not afford to them. In the experiences shared by the participants, it was

clear that independently enacted teaching and learning processes were meaningful to their own pedagogical landscapes.

Reluctance to Accept External Forces

The second sub-theme was a recurring reflection among the participants. This sub-theme did not refer to the complete rejection of CEFR; rather, there was a measured and cautious approach taken by the participants in their English classes. For many of the participants, the arrival of the framework was not really met with enthusiasm. This may be due to previous reform efforts that brought about mixed or negative results. This was seen in Amanda's reflections, where she mentioned,

Changes happen all the time, especially when there are changes at the ministry or the government. So all of these new things that we need to do are top-down instructions. They are always asking us to do things for them.

Here, we should note that the introduction of the framework in Malaysia was also a top-down mandate, and hence English language programmes and practitioners at the university had to make a concerted effort to integrate the framework into their existing curricula. Another sentiment that may be gleaned from Amanda's reflection was a sense of resignation as change is always bound to happen and that teachers would always need to reckon and respond to these changes. Furthermore, from Amanda's reflection, there was a clear distance and hierarchy between those on top – the policymakers – with those at the bottom – the teachers doing work at the ground level. This gives the impression that policymakers at the top may be removed from the realities of language use at the local and classroom level.

On a similar vein, Aaron's reflections indicated some frustration with the manner in which the framework was introduced. He said, "Unfortunately, we are the people below, we have to follow what is told to us. Also, since all the other public universities use this framework, we also have to follow." What Aaron shared here illustrated hierarchy and a sense of powerlessness as teachers at the ground level had to carry out what was instructed of them, within a constricted space for navigation. Besides Aaron, Vanessa also shared a similar frustration with the top-down imposition. She reflected,

Personally, I feel confused with the implementation plan of CEFR. This is mainly due to a delay in getting some of the prior work off the ground. It is also confusing because it is not clear why CEFR is being implemented, besides the fact that many Asian countries have adopted it.

Vanessa's reflection showed the disconnect between the rationale and the execution of the framework in the Southeast Asian context. Even though the framework has received global recognition, the reason for its adoption seemed to be vague and based on what was trendy, rather than what was needed. This subsequently instigated reluctance that gave way to resistance due to the lack of certainty and ownership over the framework.

Resistance from Contextual Needs and Cultural Perspectives

The second theme depicts resistance emanating from the context of the participants, specifically the structural, institutional and sociocultural factors that constrain the integration of CEFR. The sub-themes include structural mismatches due to top-down directives and cultural misalignment

and irrelevance. The sub-themes reflect how the participants negotiate between what is officially expected of them with local contextual realities they live in.

Structural mismatches and top-down implementation

The participants' reflections indicated that the framework was mandated through top-down policies, which offered limited space for the English practitioners to manoeuvre. This was seen earlier on in Aaron's reflections. It was also reflected in Vanessa's, where she questioned the way the framework was introduced and implemented, "A central committee is building a roadmap for the implementation of CEFR. This appears to be a top-down approach in shaping the teaching practices of the English language in Malaysia." This led her to feel uncomfortable with the rationale for taking up the framework. She added, "It is not very clear why CEFR is being implemented, besides the fact that many other Southeast Asian countries have integrated it into their English language curriculum". These remarks reflected a space being created at the ground level where there was passive resistance.

More than the uncertainty of the rationale for the framework, it was also unclear how it was supposed to support the understanding of the local culture. Amanda reflected on this by saying, "CEFR has lots of statements that talk about communication or language use in broad terms. But nothing is really said about how these should affect our classrooms within our context." What Amanda brought up has been a struggle for many, who stated that the integration of the framework was without any clear guidance from the authorities. As a result, many viewed the framework as being insignificant; in line with this, Amanda mentioned how the framework

Is just on paper, and it is not really linked with our practice or our situation. So, teachers here still have their own freedom in doing CEFR in their English classrooms. This means that sometimes they probably don't even carry out teaching and learning activities according to the framework.

Cultural misalignment and irrelevance

Besides the lack of clarity and certainty, another challenge was the cultural dissonance between the expectations of the framework and contextual circumstances. This had been alluded by Amanda, and may also be seen in the reflections of other participants. For instance, June, who taught English to pre-service English teachers, talked about the cultural mismatch seen in the materials, despite being CEFR-aligned. She said, "They talk about things like the red London double-decker bus, or the red phone booth, or doing summer camps in English-speaking countries, but these things are unfamiliar and even irrelevant to the Thai audience." To help the students understand the content, teachers would need to do extensive preparatory work. This would be time-consuming and may disrupt the progress of the students, especially if they were expected to complete the syllabus within a specific time frame. As such, teachers may not attempt to make all the materials contextually relevant to the students. On this note, June reflected,

Even if I was able to help students understand the cultural significance of a London bus and those that we see on Thai streets, how will this make them improve their English communication? Or more importantly, how will they appreciate the local culture better?

Challenges arising from mismatch and irrelevance may be more potent when it comes to students who are not studying English as their majors at the university. For these students, their motivation may lie in the mastery of English that would be useful to their study programme. One of the participants, Pornchai, reflected,

Some lessons in these CEFR materials may not work well with our university students, because they touch on very general communication situations in the English language. Students would be asking us why they need to learn about these things, because they are not relevant to what they are studying. What makes it worse is that our national exams that decide the admission of students into university is not aligned to CEFR

This illustrates an ongoing challenge that has been affecting English language education in Thailand, where national assessments have focused on form and grammar, which is contradictory given the government's official recognition of the framework as the basis for the English language curriculum. From the second theme and subthemes, it may be observed how contextual resistance stems from friction between a framework with global recognition and circumstances of the local context. Nonetheless, this resistance should not be seen as the participants' outright rejection of the framework; instead, it should be viewed as the enactment of agency to ensure that the teaching and learning activities of English were meaningful and relevant.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how English language practitioners at universities in Southeast Asia responded to CEFR within their classroom and institutional contexts. The study aimed to understand resistance that emerged from the participants' reflections. In particular, the study was interested in teasing out how resistance limited the adoption of imported frameworks and how English-language practitioners enacted agency through different strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and even rejection. This resistance may be grounded in a cautious response to foreign frameworks that may be misaligned with local sociocultural perspectives and practices. Nonetheless, as discussed by Foley (2022) and Savski and Prabjandee (2022), western-derived frameworks continue to dominate language education, and yet, there is increasing recognition that these frameworks may fall short when applied in culturally and pedagogically diverse settings.

Furthermore, this study was able to demonstrate how teacher resistance was not necessarily an outright rejection of imported frameworks; rather, it involved a deliberate negotiation that considered the experiences of individual teachers and the perspectives emergent from the context. To revisit some participants' reflections, we could see how they kept to their teaching practices but adapted their assessment according to the guidelines of the framework. Furthermore, even though the framework posed a challenge and appeared restrictive to teachers who wanted to implement creative measures to enhance the classroom atmosphere, such as that reflected by Aaron, there was still some compliance with top-down mandates. According to Ali and Hamid (2018), what experienced by Aaron and other participants in this study may be referred to as "situated agency", where teachers endeavoured to recalibrate their pedagogical practices to respond to the demands of a top-down policy, without giving up on their own professional judgement, especially on what was deemed necessary and suitable for their students (Min et al., 2022). This presented resistance that is rational and pedagogically driven, rather than

defiant. It also reflected an ethical stance, where there is recognition afforded by the participants towards the sociocultural and academic welfare of their students.

While the reflections of the participants indicated a largely positive form of resistance, feelings of disenfranchisement could still be traced. This stems from the participants' realisation that top-down policies were implemented not because of professional judgement of relevant stakeholders, but more a desire to be a part of global movements (Canagarajah, 2023). This results in the reluctant compliance of the participants, where conformity is enacted out of professional necessity rather than pedagogical beliefs. While this may not overtly indicate opposition from the grassroots level, it does call into question the legitimacy of top-down impositions and signals the need for educational reforms that are shaped by more inclusive and participatory approaches. In doing so, the complexity of an educational environment may be attended to. As seen in the findings of this study, the participants indicated a misalignment between the framework with the local realities. In recent times, such impositions had been challenged due to the irrelevance and the awareness towards linguistic capitalism driven by the English language education industry (Kubota & Miller, 2017; Rajendram, 2022; Imperial, 2025). This contradiction illustrates a critique in the literature on decolonisation in education, where frameworks originating from the centre or west often marginalise and exclude local epistemologies and practices.

It should be noted that resistance observed here is not a call to reject CEFR in its entirety; rather, what this study did was to highlight the professional agency of participants as a response to inadequacies of a framework often treated as universally applicable across diverse language contexts. These are the lived experiences of English language teachers, practitioners, and educators in the Southeast Asian region where multilingualism and multiculturalism abound (Imperial, 2025). That their complex contextual environment shapes their pedagogical decisions and practices indicate reflexivity, which represents the decolonial impulse of English language teaching within this region. Canagarajah (2023) talks about this in terms of teachers' ability to identify and respond to cracks and tension instigated by the dominant and often western-centric discourses about English language education, and the disembodied and disjointed teaching and learning materials that are imposed in classrooms around the world. This is aligned with Kumaravadivelu's (2016) view of non-native English-speaking teachers' ability to offer a proactive learning environment, where students are taught based on local pedagogical perspectives and practices.

Practical Implications

From a pedagogical standpoint, there are several implications worth considering. First, reflection should be an integral component in teacher education programmes. This is to ensure that future teachers know and understand that the process of reflection can be a powerful tool used to make sense of different expectations levelled at them. Actively reflecting on the teaching experience would also support personal professional growth as it helps teachers become sensitive to their pedagogical perspectives and practices. Second, English language curricula, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts, should be conceived in a flexible manner. Doing so would empower teachers to take on a more ethical stance in their teaching, and it would allow students to receive English language lessons that are relevant and appropriate to their immediate circumstances. Institutions should also actively engage teachers in curricular design and policy discussions, not just as implementers but as co-constructors of educational reform.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings of this study demonstrated how agency may be enacted among educators despite coming from a mostly collectivist society. Furthermore, the adjustments or even displacement of an external framework detailed by the participants may be considered a form of resistance. Rather than looking at this as oppositional, it illustrated situated and negotiated agency. As such, the current study extends current conceptualisations of resistance by showing how it operates as a contextual response that is ethically grounded. This also indicates how educators navigate the complex terrain of institutional expectations and sociocultural realities through everyday pedagogical decisions, which may contribute to an overall decolonial effort. This presents the view that such effort need not be carried out or achieved through big or drastic actions; rather, it may be an accumulation of contextualised efforts within a particular context, which may have an eventual ripple effect on broader structures of power and policy.

Limitations and Future Research

This study relied primarily on a small sample of six participants, all of whom were teaching in public universities in Malaysia and Thailand. While their insights were rich and situated, they may not represent the full range of experiences across the Southeast Asian region. Additionally, the data were based solely on reflective interviews, which, while effective in surfacing subjective experiences, may not capture how resistance manifests in classroom practice. Observational data or student perspectives could have enriched the analysis further. Hence, future research should consider expanding the geographic and institutional scope of the study to include private universities, rural institutions, and other Southeast Asian countries where CEFR is being integrated. There is also value in longitudinal studies that examine how teacher responses to the framework evolve over time, particularly in relation to shifting institutional priorities or student outcomes. There is also a need for collaborative, practitioner-led research that documents and theorises local innovations in English teaching, which is a vital step towards building a truly decolonial body of English language teaching knowledge in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the reflections of English practitioners in the Southeast Asian higher education context in relation to the implementation of CEFR. Through the analysis of the participants' reflections, varying forms of resistance were discussed. This provided distinct insights into their everyday experiences, which involved pedagogical negotiation and professional reconfiguration of their work setting. Through these reflections, voice was afforded to the participants, where their local realities were made visible. This was able to highlight the participants' critique of and creative response to an imported framework. Even though the participants' resistance was confined to their immediate work setting, we may view it as their quiet activism, where external forces could be disrupted and decentred in favour of local perspectives and practices (Holyoke & Fletcher, 2023). This demonstrates decolonial efforts at the ground level, where participants illustrated a critical awareness of their professional identity and position as an English practitioner, and their responsibility in reimagining an educational experience that was contextually grounded. This coincides with Kumaravadivelu's (2016) proposal to cease research focus on the struggle or difficulties that non-native English-speaking teachers face, as

this would only reinforce and exacerbate the perspectives that this group of teachers are less capable than their native-English-speaking counterparts. Moreover, this study provides valuable support for the belief that the professionalism of an English teacher may be evidenced through the impact of their lived realities on their pedagogical choices and practices.

Acknowledgements

The authors disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university. Agreement to participate in the research was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were provided with suitable information in advance and consent was obtained voluntarily. The first researcher had used ChatGPT Plus to check language and writing accuracy, as well as to ensure in-text citations were listed in the references. The authors list the following CRediT contributions: DBL: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing. JS: Methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

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