

# The Study of the English Preparation Course to Enhance Students' English Proficiency for the Standardized Test “Your Score is High; my Score is Low. How to Make it Higher?”

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## Abstract

“Your score is high; my score is low. How can I make it higher?” The author heard this in students' conversations after they received their pre-test scores in the TOEIC training course. This is the major reason the author decided to conduct this study. Using the TOEIC score as part of the graduation requirements, the university designed and provided an English preparation course, namely EG1001: English for Proficiency Preparation, for students before taking the test. This small-scale research aims to investigate the effectiveness of the test preparation course in enhancing students' English language proficiency and to explore which specific skills non-English major students need to improve for the TOEIC test. The study used pre-and post-tests to collect the language proficiency outputs of 57 higher education students in this course. Additionally, the study used their mini-test scores from each unit of the learning material to track their progress. The findings revealed that the post-test mean score (48.96) was higher than the pre-test mean score (40.58), indicating that after participating in this course, the participants improved their English proficiency. The results also suggested that students needed to practice more on the listening part of the TOEIC test.

**Keywords:** enhancing English proficiency, language skill to be improved, TOEIC preparation course

## 1. Introduction

Is the English language still at the top level as a medium of communication in the world? Many people agree that it is due to the expansion of business and technology, which has made the world smaller and connections among people from different nations more diverse. In many cases, these people do not share a common language, making English a necessary means of communication. Consequently, English has become a job requirement in some industries. Job seekers need to have a good command of English to secure their desired jobs or higher incomes. English has played an important role in various fields, necessitating a standard for its use to guarantee the performance of English users. Standardized English tests, therefore, became the solution to assess strong language skills. In the academic field, two popular English testing systems are IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), which those who wish to study abroad need to take. Similarly, in the professional field, a standardized test known as TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) assures employers of a job seeker's proficiency in English. Today, TOEIC scores are often required in job applications, supported by research validating their use. For example, Im & Chen (2019) stated that the primary purpose of the TOEIC test is to measure the everyday English skills of non-native speakers who need to work in an international environment. TOEIC is not only a language proficiency measurement but also a crucial factor in job opportunities. Supporting this, Oliveri & Tannenbaum (2017) studied the use of TOEIC scores in human resource management decisions, revealing that the test plays a role in hiring, promotion, and training decisions among new applicants and staff in the international workplace.

With various types of standardized tests available, some universities in Thailand, such as the author affiliation, have decided to use the TOEIC test as a requirement for their students' English proficiency. This decision was influenced by the test's cost and the students' proficiency in English. To encourage all students to acquire high skills and knowledge of the English language and to meet graduation policies, the university made the TOEIC test a graduation requirement. Recently, in Thailand, a high TOEIC score has become crucial for those seeking high-income jobs. Most students agree that English proficiency is a key requirement in job applications. Therefore, having TOEIC as a graduation requirement benefits students and enhances the academic curriculum, aligning with research on this practice in Taiwan. Hsieh (2017) investigated students' perceptions of using the TOEIC score in Taiwan to meet the English language graduation requirement. The findings revealed that students had positive views on this requirement and believed that the test score could positively impact their future employment prospects. However, in this university, most students are enrolled in Thai programs, with only a few majoring in English. As a result, a significant majority scored low on the TOEIC test, creating a graduation obstacle for many students. To address this issue, the university lowered the graduation score requirement. However, this solution addressed only the symptoms, not the root cause. The students' TOEIC scores continued to fall short of the required standard. To solve this problem, the university decided to organize and provide a preparation course for the TOEIC test. All students are now required to enroll in this course before taking the TOEIC test, aiming to improve their performance on this standardized test.

In preparing for standardized tests, there are many ways to improve scores. Some students rely on studying tricks and hints found in commercial textbooks and practicing with the sample tests provided. Others prefer to practice with collections of past examinations; however, this method requires a strong knowledge of English, which may not be suitable for the students at this college. This is the first time the author's institution has designed and provided a TOEIC preparation course for students before they take the test. It presents a great opportunity to investigate the course's effects and the students' improvement in English language proficiency. This was the primary reason for the author to study the effectiveness of the test preparation course, aiming to help students achieve their language proficiency goals. The research objectives were set accordingly.

### *1.1 Objectives*

- (1) To investigate the effectiveness of the test preparation course in enhancing students' English language proficiency
- (2) To explore which specific skill that the students need to improve for the TOEIC test

### *1.2 TOEIC Studies in Asia*

#### *1.2.1 A Part of Thailand*

The author found that TOEIC preparation courses are widely taught in many universities in Thailand, especially for final-year students who are about to graduate and enter the business world or other professional fields. Studying the importance and effectiveness of these courses, many researchers have conducted extensive studies both domestically and internationally. In 2018, Maliwan conducted a study on TOEIC preparation courses for students at an aviation personnel development institute. The aim was to explore the English language preparation methods and the effectiveness of the TOEIC course among 150 non-English major students. The results showed that the students achieved high scores on the test and had a positive attitude toward the course. Another study by Lertcharoenwanich (2022) focused on teaching methods for TOEIC courses. The author examined the effect of the communicative language teaching (CLT) method in the standardized test preparation course and explored students' attitudes toward CLT. The study involved 68 EFL Business English major students, divided into an experimental group and a control group. Using t-tests and content analysis, the results revealed that the test scores of the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the control group, indicating that CLT in the preparation course had a positive effect on students' improvement. On the other hand, Suvarnaphaet and Desgres (2017) focused on the effectiveness of a lesson plan combining the Direct Teaching Method (DM) and the Task-Based Learning Teaching (TBLT) approach in an intensive TOEIC course among Thai students at a public university. The study aimed to assess the enhanced TOEIC lesson plan utilizing DM and TBLT, examine its effectiveness, and evaluate student learning outcomes. This was done by comparing pre- and post-TOEIC test scores on day 1 and day 30 for 10 students. The results showed a high level of student satisfaction. Meanwhile, another study by Taladngoen et al. (2023) investigated the reasons why engineering students needed to take the TOEIC test and their English language preparation needs. The study involved 83 anonymous volunteers who completed a needs analysis questionnaire, with the data analyzed quantitatively. The results indicated that the volunteers preferred taking the TOEIC test to fulfill a requirement for obtaining an official teacher's license. Regarding English language preparation, participants expressed a high level of interest in being prepared in

English listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar, which are essential for achieving the expected TOEIC scores. The authors noted that the study's findings could serve as a foundation for designing and improving training courses to enhance the linguistic knowledge necessary for test-taking and communication. Beyond examining the effectiveness of preparation courses and students' needs, the limitations of students in the TOEIC test were also studied. Wangmanee and Vongtangswad (2022) investigated these limitations and analyzed the effectiveness of potential promoting strategies for the TOEIC test among 55 English major students at a Thai university. They used mock tests and the TOEIC test for data collection. The results revealed that students performed better on the listening test than on the reading test. Specifically, in listening skills, students had limitations in prediction, specific details, and main ideas. In reading skills, they had limitations in inference, vocabulary, and parts of speech. Regarding the effectiveness of potential promoting strategies, the average TOEIC score was 402 at the elementary proficiency level. Students had significantly higher posttest scores compared to pretest scores, with a statistically significant difference at the .05 level. In the career side, It-ngam, Saejew & Kunprayoonsawat (2023) investigated the English language proficiency of Thai employees within the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) and explores employer expectations. The research employed an English proficiency test, interviews, and surveys to gather data. Results indicated that employees in managerial roles were expected to have higher English proficiency compared to operational staff. Communication skills in reception and production generally ranged from A2 to B2 proficiency levels, while interaction and mediation skills tended to fall within the A1 to B1 range. The study underscores the expectation for new employees to possess a baseline proficiency in English, with an emphasis on subsequent learning of technical English relevant to their specific fields.

### 1.2.2 A Part of Asian Countries

Research on TOEIC preparation courses is not limited to Thailand; similar studies have been conducted in other countries where English is a foreign language. Harada (2016) investigated the effects of a TOEIC course at a junior college in Tokyo, examining its effectiveness from 2014 to 2016. The study used the TOEIC scores of 60 first-year students as data, analyzed through one-way ANOVAs and t-tests, and found that vocabulary tests contributed to improved TOEIC scores. In Japan, Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) studied the effect of direct test preparation on the TOEIC scores of Japanese university students, both English majors and non-English majors. The students were divided into three groups, each receiving different treatments: 1) TOEIC Preparation, 2) Business English, and 3) "General" (four-skills) English. The results indicated that the use of TOEIC preparatory materials led to a statistically significant gain in post-test scores for the non-majors' reading component only.

In South Korea, Thomson (2012) examined the washback effects in TOEIC classrooms and how studying for TOEIC impacted motivation to learn English and raised validity issues. The results showed that the focus on the listening and reading sections of the TOEIC in South Korean universities reduced students' motivation to learn English and lowered the validity of the TOEIC. In Taiwan, a college aimed to make their students competitive in the global career market by enhancing their English skills through the TOEIC test. Li and Haggard (2011) conducted a study to improve technical college students' English proficiency via a TOEIC training course, using two mock TOEIC tests as research instruments with 42 technical students. The study found that the TOEIC training course did not effectively increase the students' English proficiency as much as expected, although the participants did make some progress. Nonetheless, the researchers concluded that offering a similar training program could be beneficial in improving students' English skills. As many countries in Asia are part of the expanding circle of Kachru's (1997) World Englishes, another study was conducted in Vietnam. Phan et al. (2019) examined whether non-English major students' TOEIC scores improved after participating in a TOEIC preparation course and explored possible reasons affecting the scores. They used paired-samples t-tests and focus group discussions for their analysis. Unfortunately, the findings showed that the students' TOEIC scores did not improve. Various research studies have explored the effectiveness of standardized test preparation courses, with some focusing on students' language abilities and improvement. Kurniawan (2016) studied students' ability to understand listening question responses in the TOEIC test, assessing seventh-semester students of the Faculty of Teaching and Education English using 52 participants. The results showed that students' ability to understand listening responses to questions was categorized as low. A similar situation to that at the author's working place was observed in Indonesia. Saputra (2022) noted that the TOEIC test became a graduation requirement, yet only a few students met the requirement. To address this, Saputra decided to improve students' TOEIC scores through cooperative learning in the "Sekolah TOEIC" program using classroom action research with two cycles of treatment. The findings revealed that students' TOEIC scores increased significantly after the treatment. Nicholson (2015) evaluated the TOEIC in South Korea, identifying students' obstacles and finding that the greatest threat to the reliability of the TOEIC test lay in the extent to which score improvements could be

attributed to test familiarity. Two ways of increasing test familiarity were identified: taking test preparation courses and sitting for the test multiple times to develop test-taking strategies. To study the impact of English Language skills and TOEIC performance on career development, Prasetya (2023) explored how English language proficiency, assessed through TOEIC scores, influences career development and the transition to professionalism. It examines the specific challenges faced by individuals at different proficiency levels and their impact on career paths. Using a mixed methods approach, the research combines quantitative analysis of TOEIC scores and career development metrics with qualitative analysis of challenges encountered. The sample includes 75 participants from various professions, reflecting diverse levels of English proficiency, with an average TOEIC score of 720 indicating moderate proficiency. Qualitative findings identified language barriers, access to global resources, professional networking, and cross-cultural collaboration as critical themes influencing career trajectories.

As mentioned in the background of this study, this was at the author's working place for the first time creating a TOEIC preparation course as a requirement for students. Therefore, it is very important for the lecturers and researchers at this affiliation to study the effectiveness of this course and the development of the learners' language proficiency as a result of the course.

### *1.3 Conceptual Framework*

As Taladngoen et al. (2023) stated in their study on the need for English language preparation, participants preferred to be prepared in English listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar, which are essential for achieving high TOEIC scores. Therefore, the author adopted the results of this needs analysis as a framework for the preparation course to investigate students' development. A commercial textbook covering these four focused areas, as identified by Taladngoen et al. (2023), was selected. Additionally, the author adapted the framework of Phan et al. (2019) to examine the effectiveness of the course by using two mock tests as pre- and post-tests to measure the changes in students' scores.

## **2. Method**

As the author was assigned to teach this course to non-English major students, along with the given materials, teaching plan, and mark allocation, this study gathered the results of the students participating in the author's class. The study details are as follows:

### *2.1 Participants*

Participants were 57 first-year students at a private university in Thailand who enrolled in the course EG1001: English for Proficiency Preparation during the summer session, selected via random sampling. All participants were anonymous Thai students majoring in fields other than English.

### *2.2 Instruments*

#### *2.2.1 Pre- and Post-test*

To maintain the standard and difficulty level consistent with the actual test, the EG1001 course committee adapted an old TOEIC test to design both the pre-test and post-test for the EG1001: English for Proficiency Preparation course. This aimed at assessing students' development. As part of the teaching team, the author analyzed the results to evaluate students' language ability development in this study.

#### *2.2.2 Four Progress Tests*

During the semester, students were assigned four required mini tests at the end of each chapter in the course materials to assess their understanding of the taught content. Each mini test covered all TOEIC tasks related to the specific learning objectives of each lesson. The author also analyzed the scores of these four mini tests to investigate the mean, standard deviation, and students' improvement at each stage.

### *2.3 Data Collection and Procedures*

Data collection began with students taking the pre-test at the start of the course without prior knowledge of the TOEIC test format. As part of the treatment, following the pre-test session, students engaged in a 15-week course focusing on four key areas: listening, reading, grammar, and essential vocabulary necessary for the TOEIC. Throughout the treatment period, students received instruction on test-taking strategies, practiced listening and reading skills, and acquired essential vocabulary during 60 hours of classroom instruction over the semester. The four mini tests were administered in the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth weeks, corresponding to specific units taught from a commercial textbook during weekly four-hour classes. The course met 15 times throughout the semester. At the conclusion of the course, students completed the post-test, which was identical to the pre-test.

Table 1. Lessons and Activities Outline

Weeks	Lessons	Activities
1	Non	Pre-test
2 to 14	Unit 1-10	TOEIC Essential Vocabulary Grammar Listening & Reading Strategy
4, 7, 10 and 13	Lessons Review	Mini tests
15	Non	Post-test

### 2.4 Material and Treatments

As this was an urgently introduced course during a condensed semester, the committee opted to utilize a commercial TOEIC textbook as the primary teaching and learning material. This textbook encompassed TOEIC vocabulary, grammar, listening and reading strategies, along with mini tests for each unit. Following the pre-test, students were instructed on the structure of the TOEIC test, essential vocabulary, necessary grammar, and strategies for listening and reading. The teaching methods employed in the classroom included a combination of communicative language teaching and grammar-translation methods due to the students' varied backgrounds in English. Given the time constraints, the committee decided that using a commercial textbook was the most suitable approach for this semester. However, due to the urgency of the study, the textbook's name was kept anonymous to avoid potential legal issues.

### 2.5 Data Analysis

To analyze the improvement in students' English language proficiency quantitatively, data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0. The research objectives were achieved through quantitative analysis, specifically employing a Paired-samples t-test to determine frequencies, percentages, and means of the hypotheses. Additionally, scores from all mini tests were analyzed to calculate means and standard deviations, assessing whether there were statistically significant differences between test scores across the class.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Students Language Proficiency Improvement

The results from the pre-test and post-test, as depicted in Figure 1, indicated that the majority of participants achieved higher scores on the post-test. Initially, participants' scores on the pre-test ranged from 25 to 58 out of 80, whereas on the post-test, scores ranged from 23 to 60.

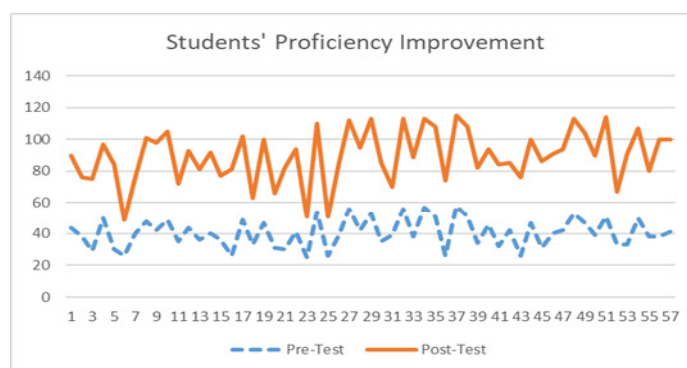


Figure 1. Participants' mean scores on the pre- and post-test

Meanwhile, Table 2 also shows that the participants' post-test mean score (40.58) was lower than their pre-test mean score (48.96). These findings indicated that after participating in the EG1001: English proficiency course, the participants' English ability improved.

Table 2. The participants' pre-test and post-test mean scores

English Proficiency Tests	Mean ( $\bar{X}$ )	SD.
Pre-test	40.58	9.159
Post-test	48.96	9.618

Additionally, the Paired Sample t-test was used to determine whether the difference in the participants' pre-test and post-test mean scores was statistically significant.

Table 3. Paired-Samples t-test of the pre-test and post-test mean scores

English Proficiency Tests	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	$\bar{X}$	SD.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
Pre-post-test	-8.386	8.732	-10.703	-6.069	-7.251	56	0.000

\*  $p \leq 0.05$

From Table 3, the t-value of -7.251 from the Paired-Samples t-test indicated that the participants' average post-test score in the English language proficiency test was statistically significantly higher than their average pre-test score ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations of Mini-Tests 1-4

Tests	Scores	
	Mean	SD.
Mini-Test 1	27.42	4.66
Mini-Test 2	27.09	3.85
Mini-Test 3	27.16	4.45
Mini-Test 4	27.19	4.18

To support the findings from the t-test, the author utilized the progress test scores as evidence of students' improvement in class. As presented in Table 4, the mean scores for Progress Test 1 to Progress Test 4 ranged from 27.09 to 27.42. Scores on the English mini tests showed a progressive increase from Progress Test 2 onwards. Although the mean score for Progress Test 4 (Mean = 27.19, SD = 4.18) was not the highest compared to the other tests, there was a significant increase in scores. Progress Test 2 had the lowest mean (Mean = 27.09, SD = 3.85). These results indicate a high level of improvement in students' English proficiency as a result of the TOEIC preparation course.

### 3.2 Skill Needed to be Improved for the Test

In response to the first research objective regarding the effect of the test preparation course on enhancing students' English language proficiency, descriptive statistics of the pre-test and post-test scores were presented, supplemented by the results from four progress tests to support the statistical findings. The means and standard deviations of students' pre-test and post-test scores were computed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26. A t-test was conducted to assess differences in scores between the pre-test and post-test. As shown in Table 4, the specific areas of the test indicated that participants' English listening ability had an average mean score of 20.95 with a standard deviation of 4.50 at the beginning of the course. Following the teaching and learning process, this mean score significantly increased to 23.82 (SD = 4.0) upon completion of the course. Similarly, in the reading test, the mean score was 19.63 (SD = 6.17) in the pre-test, which also significantly increased to 25.14 (SD = 6.18) in the post-test.

Table 5. Pre- and post-tests in specific areas of the standardized test

	Mean(X)	SD.
Pre-test listening	20.95	4.50
Post-test listening	23.82	4.40
Pre-test Reading	19.63	6.17
Post-test Reading	25.14	6.18

## 4. Discussion

This study demonstrates that students significantly improved their English test-taking ability after completing the EG1001 course: English for Proficiency Preparation. The average post-test score was 8.38 points higher than the average pre-test score, indicating substantial improvement in their overall test performance.

### 4.1 Test Familiarity and Introduction to Test Strategies

During the pre-test session, many students were taken aback by the format and structure of the TOEIC test, finding it challenging due to its complexities and unique requirements. Unlike basic English courses offered by the university, TOEIC demands rapid test-taking skills and proficiency in various specialized fields such as medicine, nursing, society, and engineering, which fall under English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Despite some students having a strong English background, especially those not majoring in English, many were unfamiliar with the specific format and demands of the test. Research suggests that proficiency in the English language alone may not suffice for achieving high scores on standardized tests; strategic test-taking plays a crucial role (Nicholson, 2015). Therefore, this course incorporated TOEIC-specific strategies and provided mini-TOEIC tests to familiarize students with the test format and enhance their test-taking strategies. The course curriculum was structured according to the framework focusing on identified needs adapted from Taladngoen et al. (2023), encompassing TOEIC listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar, along with direct test preparation strategies emphasized in commercial textbooks (see also Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999). Given that these were first-year students with varying levels of English proficiency, undertaking a test preparation course was seen as early. However, despite these challenges, the application of the t-test scores indicated a significant enhancement in overall English proficiency among the students, thereby fulfilling the first research objective.

### 4.2 Weaknesses Exploration

Upon analyzing the t-test results, it was evident that while the post-test scores for listening had increased significantly, they were still 1.32 points lower than the reading post-test scores. This discrepancy highlighted that the majority of learners faced challenges with the listening section, necessitating more focused attention and practice on improving listening skills (e.g., Kurniawan, 2016). The study identified these areas of difficulty and addressed them through targeted test strategies, in-class materials, and additional practice with mini-tests. As these first-year students prepare to take the TOEIC test in the coming years, continued practice and refinement of test strategies will be crucial.

### 4.3 Graduation Requirements

From the students' perspective, the TOEIC test has become a mandatory graduation requirement, with a minimum score of 450 for English majors and related fields such as medical technology, nursing, physical therapy, and pharmacy, and 400 for other disciplines. While some students expressed frustration with this policy, the majority acknowledged the benefits of the TOEIC test for future job applications. This policy served as a motivating factor for students to prioritize their participation in the TOEIC training course, a finding supported by Hsieh's (2017) study.

## 5. Conclusion

As a solution to address the challenges faced by Thai non-English major students at this private university with standardized English tests, the course EG1001: English for Proficiency Preparation was designed. Its aim was to reduce students' reliance on costly language institutes by implementing direct test preparation methods using standard commercial materials focused on TOEIC areas: listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar, supplemented with mini tests to reinforce lesson comprehension. The study findings indicated that students significantly improved their English language proficiency after completing the course. This improvement may be attributed to the effective integration of these instructional approaches, which provided enhanced language learning opportunities for the students. Based on these findings, it is recommended that language teachers prioritize addressing students' weaker skills by incorporating practice with old TOEIC tests or similar quality materials during classes. Additionally, administering pre- and post-tests each semester allows teachers to monitor students' progress systematically. These assessments serve two primary purposes: first, they help students enhance their language skills and become familiar with the TOEIC test format and structure; second, they alleviate language anxiety and boost students' confidence in their test-taking abilities, thereby increasing their willingness to actively participate in English courses focused on test preparation. Furthermore, this approach enables teachers to cater to diverse student needs, effectively managing challenges associated with large, mixed-ability classes. This study also advocates for the use of a commercial textbook covering the aforementioned four key areas as a self-study tool, as it promotes language learning in various ways. Moreover, it is strongly recommended that teachers assign students to practice with multiple old TOEIC test series as part of direct test preparation instruction, as this method proves essential in helping students achieve better outcomes. Despite yielding positive results, this study had several limitations as a small-scale research endeavor aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the EG1001 course in enhancing students' English language proficiency for TOEIC test-taking. Firstly, all participants were first-year students, yet the TOEIC scores required for graduation were not scheduled during this short study period, preventing a direct assessment of their true standardized test abilities. Secondly, the timing of the TOEIC training course was perceived as premature for these students, but this was beyond the researchers' control due to institutional study plans. Recognizing the limitations of this study, the author proposes several suggestions for further research. Firstly, it is crucial to compare the results of this study with students' actual TOEIC scores when they eventually take the test, in order to assess the effectiveness of the pre- and post-tests used in this study. Secondly, future research could involve conducting a larger-scale study using the TOEIC test as both a pre- and post-test to evaluate students' real English proficiency and the course's overall effectiveness. Thirdly, administering the TOEIC test would provide insight into the genuine limitations faced by learners in this course, offering an opportunity to explore solutions to enhance their proficiency. Additionally, there is a need for focused research on specific areas of the TOEIC test, particularly correlating with TOEIC scores, and further exploration of participants' perspectives and needs regarding this course. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, this study was conducted on a small scale to assess students' improvement within this particular course, making direct comparisons with other universities in Thailand challenging. However, conducting replications of this study at other universities would be beneficial for comparative analysis.

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