

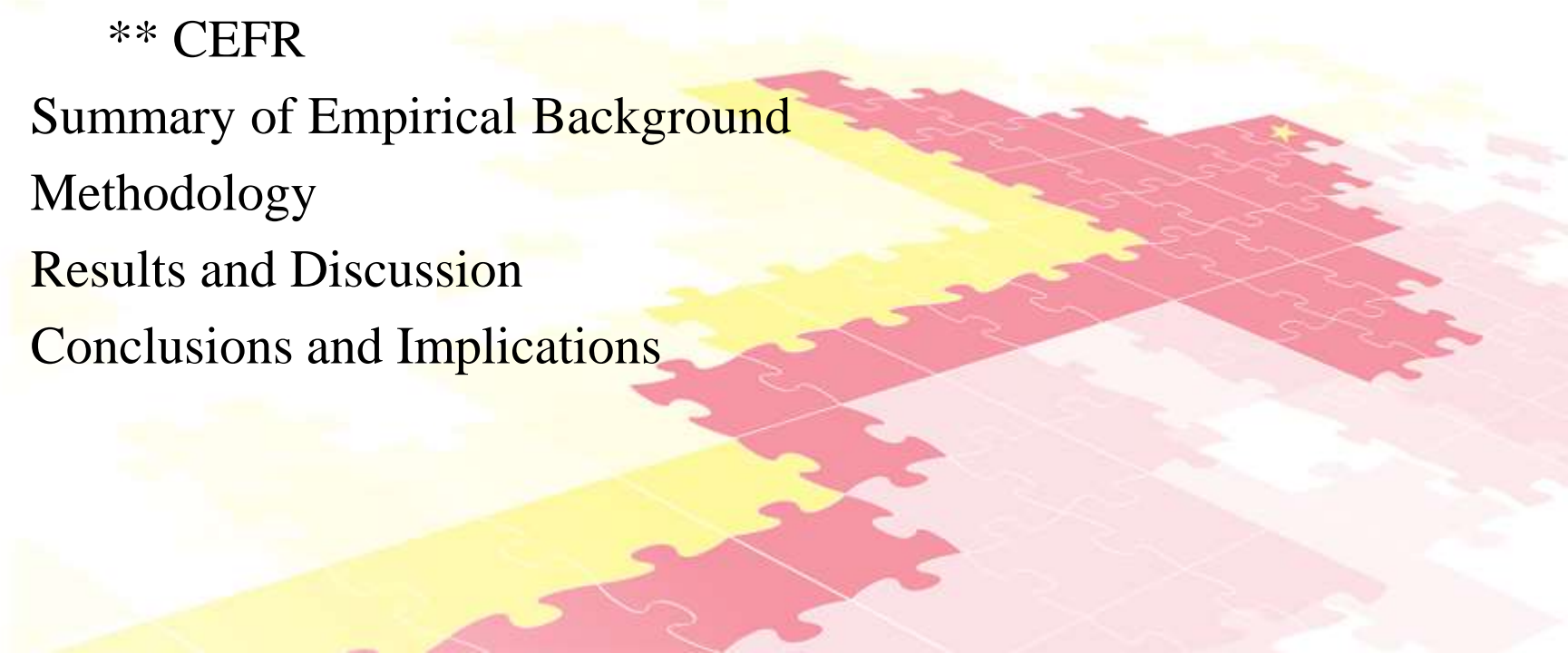
# Writing Skill Development in Relation to CEFR: A Vietnamese Case

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# Organization and Content

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- 

# Purpose of the Study

1. To examine the development of the writing skills of Vietnamese ESL learners in a four-year undergraduate program and find:
  - whether ELLs' writing skills improve following instructions
  - whether the improvement is observed across all macro and micro writing skills, or only on some of them
2. To compare the obtained results with the expected CEFR levels

# Theoretical Background



# The Construct of Writing

- Definitions vary in different authors.  
(e.g. Brown, 2007; Green, 2005; Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Storch, 2009; Storch & Hill, 2008)
- This study follows IELTS Academic Module Writing Task 2

## Macro Skills

Task Response

Coherence and Cohesion

## Micro Skills

Lexical Resources

Grammatical Range and  
Accuracy

# The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

- CEFR: in Vietnam (2008) and in the University of Foreign Language Studies (2014).
  - > national entry and exit requirements
  - > national curriculum and assessment
- CEFR includes 6 levels: A1 to C2. (also A2+, B1+ and B2+)
  - A1 and A2: Basic User
  - B1 and B2: Independent User
  - C1 and C2: Proficient User

# The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

**Table 1**

Comparison of CEFR levels and the various proficiency tests

A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
	Cambridge			
Cambridge	English	Cambridge	Cambridge	Cambridge
English	Preliminary	English	English	English
Key (KET)	(PET)	First (FCE)	Advanced (CAE)	Proficiency (CPE)
	<b>IELTS 4-4.5</b>	<b>IELTS 5-6.5</b>	<b>IELTS 7-8</b>	<b>IELTS 8.5-9</b>
	TOEFL iBT	TOEFL iBT	TOEFL iBT	
	57-86	87-109	110-120	

# Summary of Empirical Background

## Two Contradictory Trends

- Writing skills **improve** following instructions, even after only three months of training (e.g., Archibald, 2001; Hu, 2007; Sasaki, 2007, 2009)
- Writing skills **do not improve** after one year of study (Humphrey et al., 2012; Knoch et al., 2014; Storch, 2007, 2009), even after 18-36 months (Craven, 2012)

## Mixed findings

- Improvement was reported **only in initial lower scorers** (Brown, 1998; Elder & O’Loughlin, 2003; Green, 2005; O’Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009)
- **No improvement** was observed at **higher levels** of proficiency. (e.g. Knoch, Rouhshad, & Storch, 2014)



# Methodology



# Research Questions

1. Does the writing skill of English language learners in a Vietnamese undergraduate program **improve** in the course of their studies?
2. If improvement is observed, is it observed on **both** the macro level and the micro level?
3. How do the obtained scores for each proficiency level **correspond** to the CEFR- IELTS expected score ranges?

# Study Participants

- 250 participants
  - 1<sup>st</sup> year = B1 (entrance requirement)
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> year = B2
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> year = C1 (exit requirement)

-> 90 essays randomly chosen (30 essays/ level)
- Instruction: 8-12 hours/ week of English, out of which 2 hours of writing.

# Research Instruments

- Writing prompt

Education should be accessible to people of all economic backgrounds. All levels of education, from primary school to tertiary education, should be free. To what extent do you agree with this opinion? **Write at least 250 words.**

- Scoring rubric

The IELTS Writing Task 2 Band Descriptors (Public Version)

- Raters
  - Researcher and assistant researcher
- Scoring procedure
  - training with online IELTS Writing Task 2 model essays
  - 10 essays randomly chosen from each level -> 30 essays
  - the researcher scoring alone -> 60 essays

**Table 3**

Inter-rater Reliability

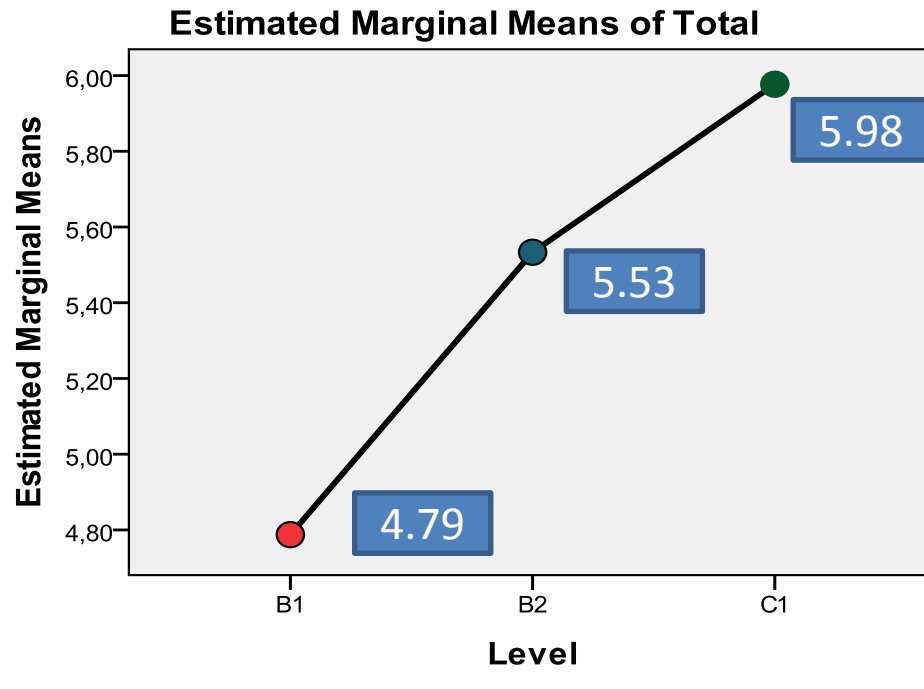
Level	Task	Coherence	Lexical	Grammatical
B1	<b>0.96</b>	<b>0.95</b>	<b>0.98</b>	<b>0.92</b>
B2	<b>0.90</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>0.98</b>	<b>0.97</b>
C1	<b>0.95</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>0.97</b>	<b>0.93</b>

# Results: Research Question One

**Does the writing skill of English language learners in a Vietnamese undergraduate program improve in the course of their studies?**

ANOVA and Tukey post hoc comparisons on:

Total band score = average of scores of the 4 sub-constructs  
(25% each)



- Total score:  $F(2,87) = 27.028, p < .001$ 
  - B1 and B2: **B2 significantly higher**,  $p < .001$ , MD = .7458
  - B1 and C1: **C1 significantly higher**,  $p < .001$ , MD = 1.1896
  - B2 and C1: **C1 significantly higher**,  $p = .022$ , MD = .4438

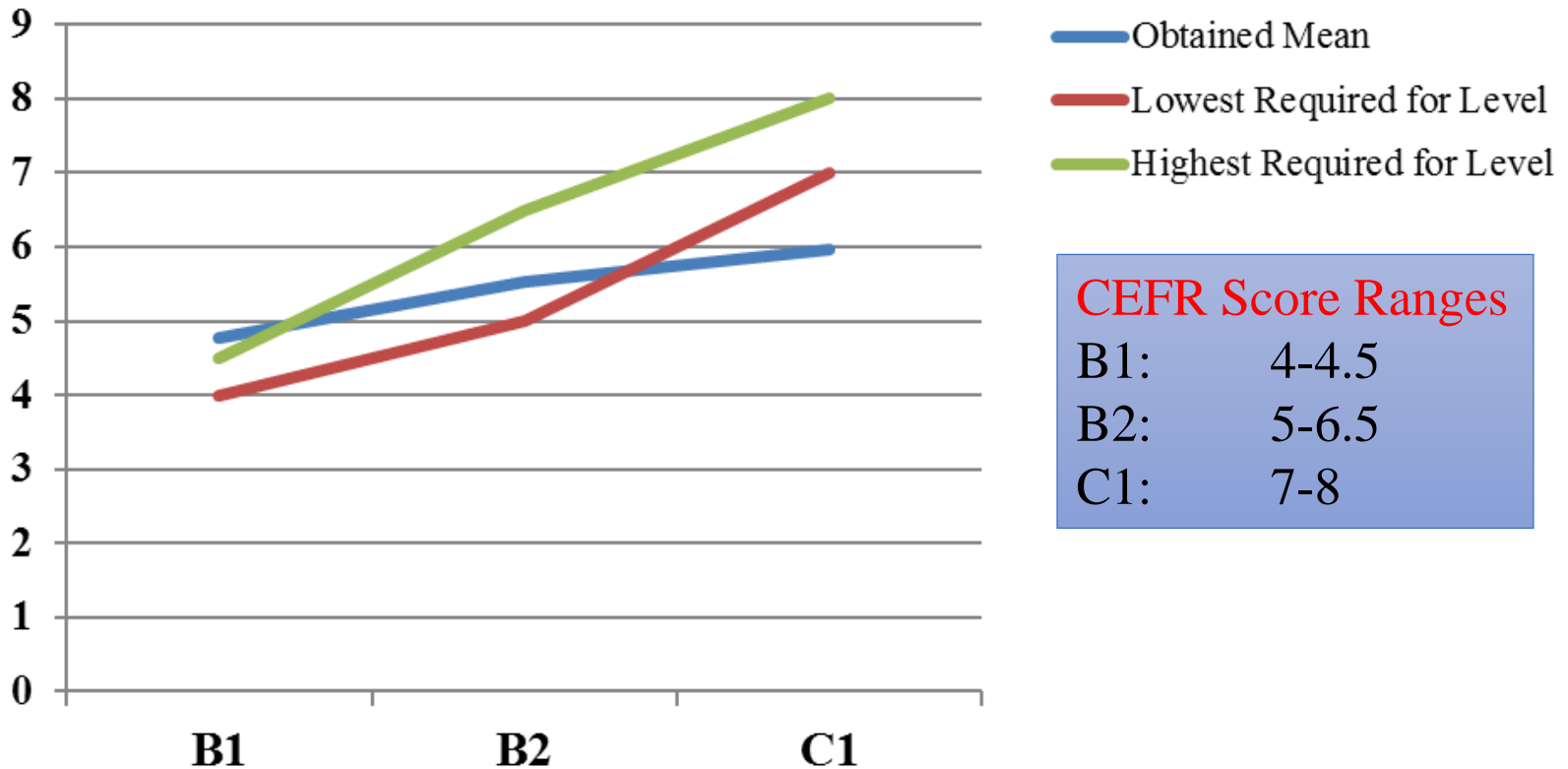
-> The total score **increased significantly with each level of proficiency**, however the mean difference between levels B2 and C1 was not as large as in the other two comparisons.

# Discussion

- The results support studies that have found positive developments (Archibald, 2001; Elder & O’Loughlin, 2003; Hu, 2007; Sasaki, 2007, 2009)
- They contradict other studies in which changes fell short of significance:
  - O’Laughlin and Arkoudis (2009): The development of writing skill happens at different rate & at different proficiency levels.
  - Knoch et al’s (2015) study (IELTS > 6.5 & only 30 minutes to finish essay (vs.45 mins)
- The overall increase was only by approximately one band (1.19) (>< IELTS, 2002 and BALEAP Guidelines, 2012). Possible reason:
  - \*\* The curriculum does not include sufficient number of writing classes (2 hours per week)
  - \*\* In intensive programs, the curriculum is more focused and more effectively structured.
- Less progress between levels B2 and C1  
Because B2 and C1 levels are fairly advanced -> take more time to make significant progress (e.g., Craven, 2012; Elder & O’Loughlin’s, 2003; Green, 2005; O’Laughlin & Arkoudis, 2009)



# TOTAL SCORE in relation to CEFR-IELTS



# Obtained Scores vs. CEFR-IELTS expected band ranges

Overall, the obtained scores do not satisfy the CEFR-IELTS standards

- B1 Mean score (4.8 vs. 4.0 - 4.5) -> the placement of the first year students was not very accurate -> need to reevaluate the existing system and the specific criteria for placement.
- B2 level, the Mean score does not go beyond the mid-point of the range.
  - Because, B2 (1.5 band) vs. B1 (.5 band) -> learners at level B2 will need a proportionally longer/ more intensive training
  - labels students at levels B1, B2, and C1 according to their year of study, giving exactly the same amount of time to each year and not recognizing the fact that the widths of the ranges of expected CEFR-IELTS band score vary for each level
- C1 level, Mean score <<< B2 highest score (6.5) -> calls for serious reevaluation of the existing placement system (should be B2+)

# Results: Research Question Two

If improvement is observed, is it observed on both the macro and the micro skills across CEFR levels?

ANOVA + post hoc Tukey comparisons on:

- a. band score on Task Response
- b. band score on Coherence and Cohesion
- c. band score on Lexical Resource
- d. band score on Grammatical Range and accuracy

# Macro Level Results

## Task Response

Levels	Mean	SD	Levels	p-value	MD
B1	4.77	0.91	B1-B2	0.002	0.72
B2	5.48	0.64	B1-C1	<0.001	1.18
C1	5.95	0.83	B2-C1	0.067	0.47

## Coherence and Cohesion

Level	Mean	SD	Levels	p-value	MD
B1	4.75	0.79	B1-B2	0.001	0.70
B2	5.45	0.48	B1-C1	<0.001	1.24
C1	6	0.87	B2-C1	0.014	0.54

# Macro Level Results

- On both Coherence and Cohesion and Task Response: B2 level showed a significant gain.
- B2 to C1: 1) Task Response showed no significant gain: 2) Coherence and Cohesion showed a significant gain.

## Explanation for Coherence and Cohesion gain at level C1.

\*\* This skill may be faster and easier to build through instruction and practice (Craven, 2012).

\*\* Writing teachers may put more emphasis on it.

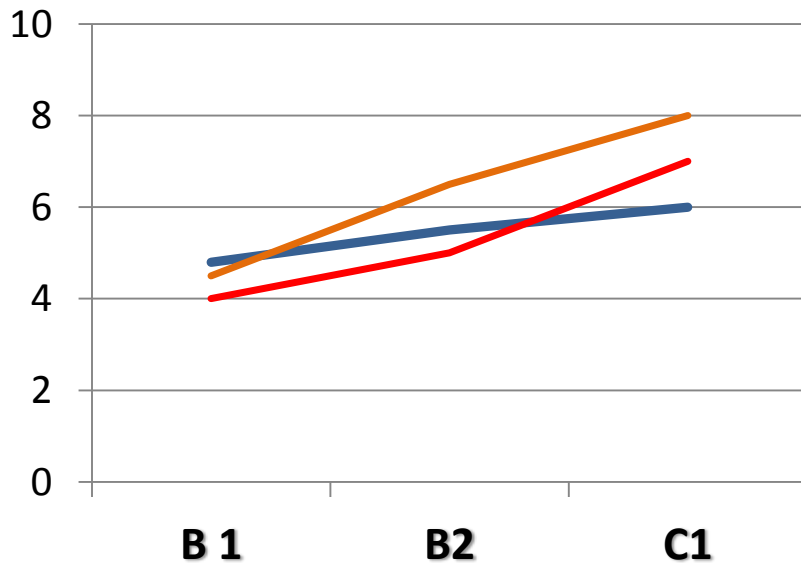
## These results support:

- The ascending development of the macro skills (Storch, 2009; Storch & Hill, 2008)
- B2 - C1: partial support to Knoch et al's (2014, 2015) results

# Macro Skills vs. the CEFR-IELTS band ranges

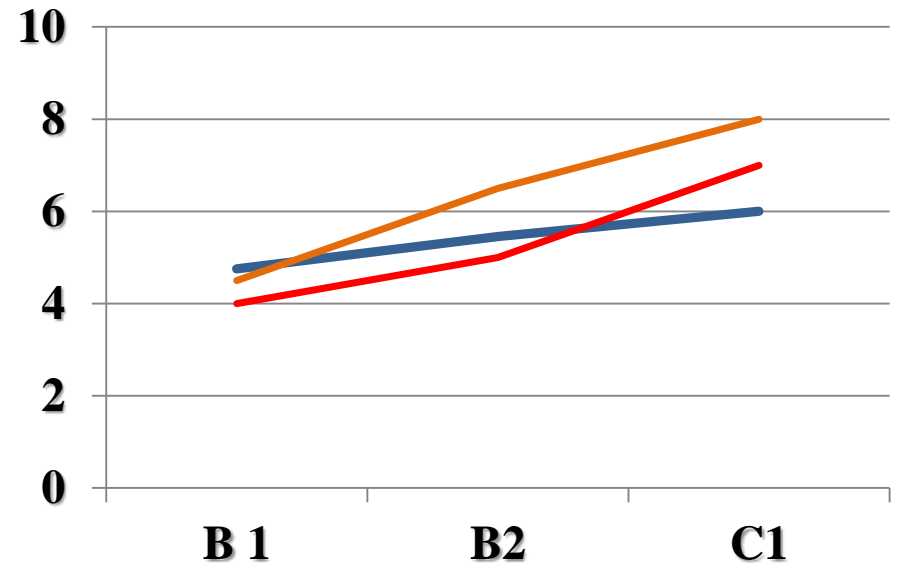
**Task**

— obtained — CEFR lowest — CEFR highest



**Coherence and Cohesion**

— obtained — CEFR lowest — CEFR highest



## Discussion: Macro skills in relation to CEFR

- For the most part, the obtained scores do not correspond to the expected performance according to the CEFR-IELTS standards:
  - B1 level shows higher score than the expected range (4 – 4.5)
  - B2 level falls into the expected range, but on the lower side, not the upper side (5 – 6.5)
  - C1 level falls lower than the expected range (7-8)
- These results suggest a flaw in the existing system of assigning CEFR levels based on the year of study rather than on actual assessment data.

## Micro Level Results

**Table 7**

Lexical Resource

Level	Mean	SD	Levels	p-value	Mean Difference
B1	4.85	0.77	B1-B2	0.001	-0.77
B2	5.62	0.45	B1-C1	<0.001	-1.12
C1	5.97	0.67	B2-C1	0.094	-0.35
Grammatical Range and Accuracy					
Level	Mean	SD	Levels	p-value	Mean Difference
B1	4.78	0.82	B1-B2	0.001	-0.80
B2	5.58	0.56	B1-C1	<0.001	-1.22
C1	6	0.74	B2-C1	0.067	-0.42



# Discussion of Micro Skills Results

- A significant gain at the lower levels for both micro-skills. B2 level showed a significant gain
  - \*\* Support for results reported in Larsen-Freeman (2006) and Tsang and Wong (2000)
  - \*\* Not in line with other studies (e.g., Knoch et al., 2014; Shaw & Liu, 1998; Storch, 2007, 2009; Storch & Hill, 2008; Xudong, Cheng, Varaprasad, & Leng, 2010)

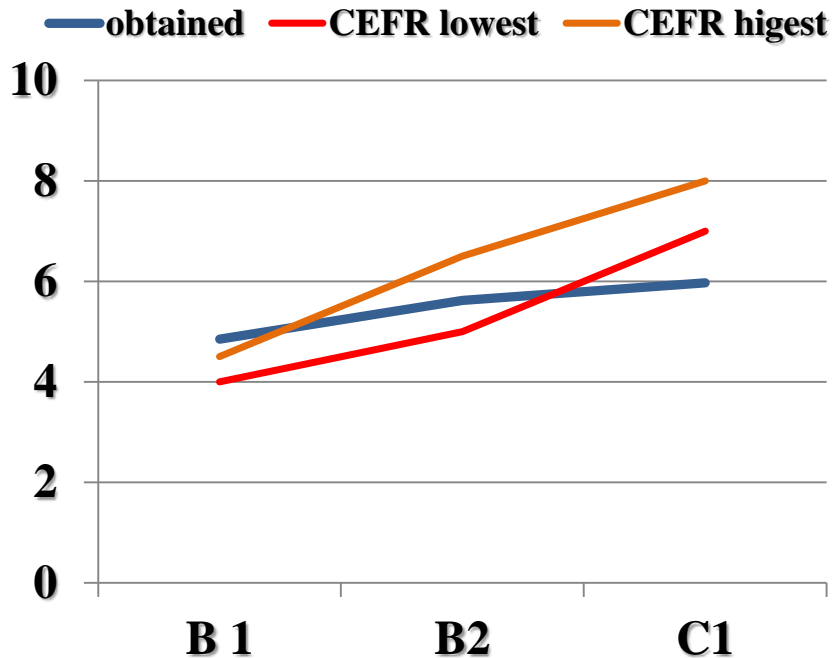
## **Possible explanation:**

It may take more than 12 months of academic study for any significant developmental trends to occur, especially regarding lexical and grammatical development (Ortega, 2003).

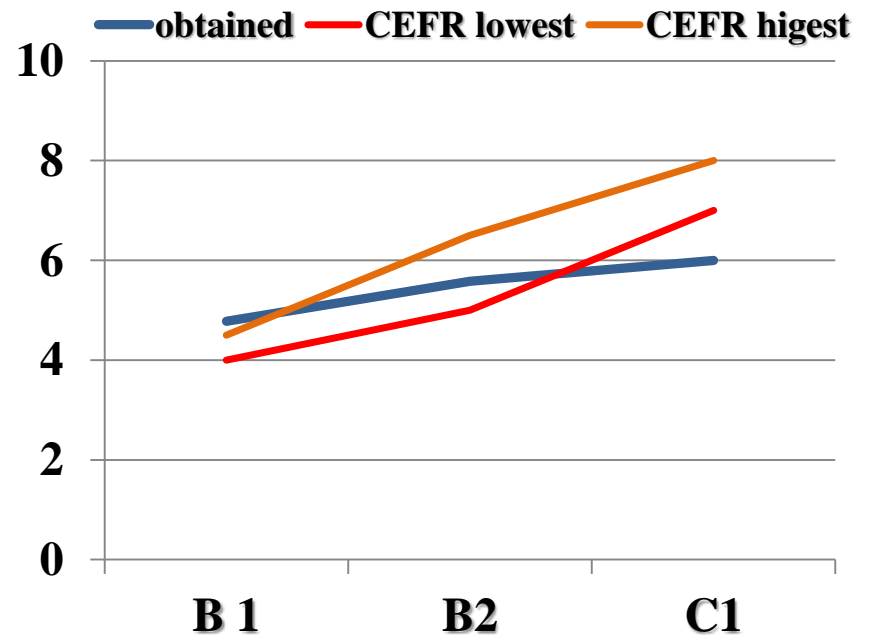
- On both micro-skills, there was no significant development from level B2 to C1.
  - \*\* Support for Green (2005) and Storch (2009)

# Micro Skills Scores vs. the CEFR-IELTS band ranges

## Lexical Resource



## Grammatical Range and Accuracy



## Discussion: Micro skills in relation to CEFR

- Similar to the macro skills:
  - B1 level : better lexical and grammatical competence than expected (4-4.5)
  - B2 level: demonstrated an acceptable level within the required range (5-6.5)
  - C1 level: lexical and grammatical skills were far below the expected range (7-8)
- They suggest the need for a re-evaluation of the existing system of assigning CEFR levels.

## Macro vs. Micro Skills

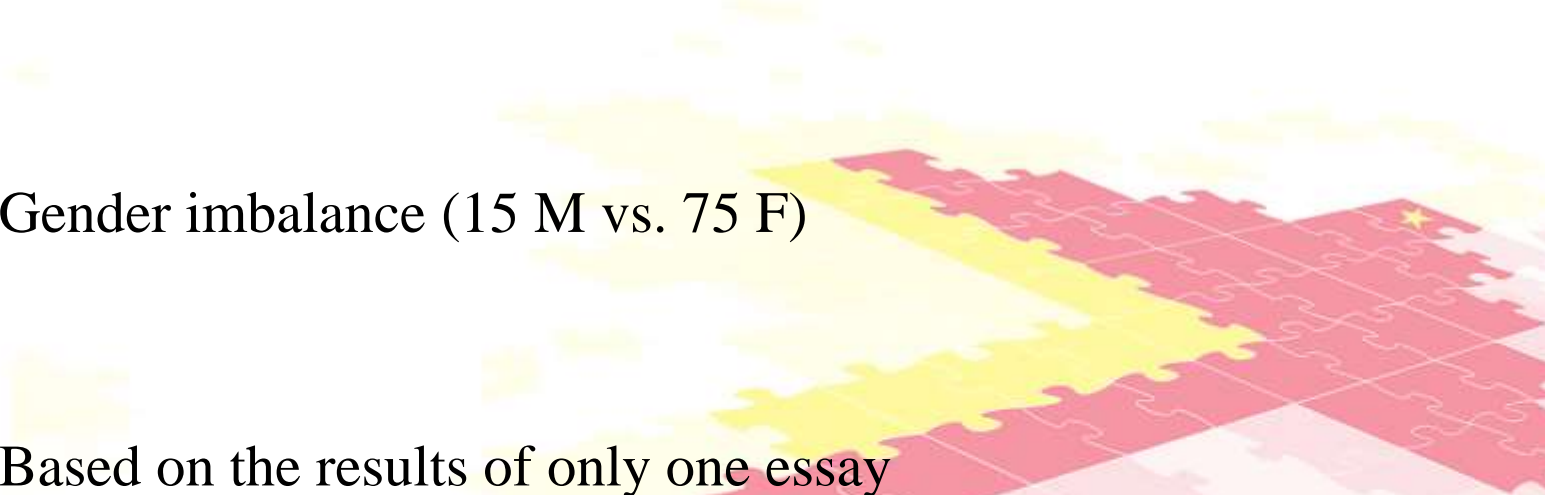
Level	Macro Skills Mean	Micro Skills Mean
B1	<b>4.76</b>	<b>4.82</b>
B2	<b>5.47</b>	<b>5.60</b>
C1	<b>5.98</b>	<b>5.99</b>

- The almost equal means for macro and micro skills at each level suggest that the development follows a similar trend.
- That is, the macro and micro skills are in supportive relationship as found in Robinson (2001) and Van Geert & Steenbeek (2005).
- These results also suggest that the curriculum follows a balanced approach

# Pedagogical Implications

- The writing skills have improved in all macro and micro areas → The writing curriculum and the teaching practices follow a well-balanced approach.
- A disparity between the actual English proficiency levels and the CEFR levels they were identified with. → A reevaluation of the entrance placement for English-language undergraduate programs → It seems more appropriate to have the following levels:  
**B1+, B2, B2+** rather than B1, B2, and C1.
- To have level C1 in the major:
  - add another year of study to the program (B1+, B2, B2+ and C1)
  - make the training at level B2 more intensive
- Need for curriculum and program changes based on CEFR and related theory and research.
- A need for a regular and systematic assessment of students' progress and the effectiveness of the program in view of the goals, objectives, and the framework in which it is set up.

# Limitations

- Limited to ESL Vietnamese learners in the context of Vietnamese undergraduate programs
  - Gender imbalance (15 M vs. 75 F)
  - Based on the results of only one essay
- 

# Contribution of the Study

- The first to look at the alignment between an English major undergraduate program in Vietnam and CEFR
- Provides valuable information to: a) other programs that have adopted or will adopt CEFR, and b) future research exploring the alignment
- The results and conclusions can be useful to program evaluators
- L2 academic writing is analyzed both on the macro and micro level in a systematic way across levels of proficiency.

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**Thank You!**

