

THAI EFL LEARNERS' VOICES ON LEARNING ENGLISH ONLINE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Krittat Sukman and **Tiwphai Mhunkongdee**
North Bangkok University, Thailand

ABSTRACT: *During the current pandemic, the unprecedented closure of universities and schools has revived the application of fully online teaching and learning. This study aims to explore Thai EFL learners' views on online learning implementation during the Covid-19 outbreaks. Data were collected qualitatively with 30 Thai undergraduate students majoring in business English through written reflections, and five of whom were selected purposively to participate in a semi-structured interview. Based on qualitative data analysis, the findings indicated that the student participants expressed positive attitudes towards online learning as it was seen as suitable during the current pandemic, yet they preferred learning English in face-to-face classrooms to online ones. Also, unstable internet connection, lack of interaction and teachers' explanation, as well as potential distractions were common challenges for their online English learning. Suggestions were also provided by the participants, and pedagogical implications were discussed.*

KEYWORDS: Online learning, COVID-19, EFL learners, reflections

INTRODUCTION

The current COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably altered almost all walks of life, including teaching and learning in all educational levels. Most schools and universities have implemented or declared closure of their educational. Consequently, this sudden phenomenon has revived the significance of online or distance learning, for most universities and schools globally have transformed their mode of instruction from face-to-face to remote or online platforms. In Thailand, the government supports the online learning to be held in the areas affected by COVID-19 in order to promote physical distancing and reduce virus spread. English language education is not without an exception since they have been shifting from face-to-face classes to digital or online classes, using Blackboard, Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams or other online platforms.

This abrupt change necessitates both teachers and learners to master digital literacy. As asserted by Bagata et.al (2020), the outbreak has forced both lecturers and learners to acquire technology so as to use it in teaching and learning process. He goes on to the point that online learning technology has a crucial role to succeed the teaching and learning process itself. Simply put, teachers need the mastery of online technology so that they can manage their classrooms during the pandemic, deliver the course materials and encourage learners' motivation during the virtual class. Likewise, learners are also obliged to develop skills in using online platforms in order to facilitate their learning. This should be of crucial issue since learners at recent time are considered digital natives. That is, they have been well accustomed to using smartphones and surrounded by online applications since childhood. Undeniably, this phenomenon of disruption and change

affects EFL learners' attitudes towards online English learning. Although there are some studies conducted on learners' perceptions of online learning in several countries (e.g., Tanjung & Utomo, 2020; Rakhmanina, Martina, Halolo, Syafryadin & Noermanza, 2020; Rahman, 2021; Saudi, 2021), a scarce attention has been paid specifically to English language teaching and learning in Thailand. Consequently, it is important that Thai EFL learners' voices are heard. And to fill the void in literature, this study is aimed at discovering how Thai EFL learners view online learning during this current pandemic.

The following research questions are addressed to help accomplish the research aims:

1. What are Thai undergraduate students' perceptions of learning English online during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the potential challenges faced by Thai undergraduate students in learning English online?
3. What are Thai undergraduate students' suggestions for effective online English learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The benefits of online education have been well documented. According to Cakrawati (2017), in the event that teachers rely on the utilization of technology in English language teaching and learning, it is likely that students' enthusiasm and interest are profoundly boosted. By using those online platforms, not only can learners involve in learning process in real time synchronously, but they can also be active in virtual class asynchronously without being hampered by time, place and any other conditions. Furthermore, Smart and Cappel (2006) suggest that the use of online platforms in language education can be cost-efficient or cost-saving in delivering instructions. In support of these views, Hamilton (2015) claims that through online digital devices, students can teach and learn from each other spontaneously. That is, they could turn a teacher-directed a teacher-directed, technology-based, non-individualised activity into a project that expressed their interests and viewpoints as well as demonstrate creativity and collaboration. In brief, this online learning creates an engaging as well as enjoyable learning by providing unique features to gain better interaction as well as a learning environment.

However, this instant shift from face-to-face classroom to online learning also sparks diverse reactions among stakeholders involved in language education. For example, Tanjung and Utomo (2020) investigated 104 Indonesian EFL learners' perceptions on online learning amidst the current pandemic. Based on the data obtained from a questionnaire, it was found that the participants had both positive and negative perspectives on fully online English learning. The positive side held that online learning improved digital literacy and promoted autonomous learning. Nevertheless, some negative views were related occasionally poor internet connection, inconsistency of schedule in conducting online classes, and paucity of teachers' frequent feedback. A similar study was conducted by Rakhmanina, Martina, Halolo, Syafryadin and Noermanza (2020) in which 66 Indonesian EFL learners' perceptions on online English learning were investigated. The data obtained from online questionnaire revealed that most participants exhibited their interest in online learning because of its flexibility and fun. Also, WhatsApp application was

seen as the best or dominant application in this research context. Another interesting study was carried out by Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2020) whose findings were similar to the previous studies in many ways. Apart from their complaints about unsteady internet connection and less direct interaction, what makes their study appealing, however, is that the participants provided some useful suggestions for learning English online. They proposed that the teacher should incorporate games or any other means to maintain students' interest and motivation.

More recently, Mulyani, Fidyati, Suryani, Murnia Suri and Halimatussakdiah (2021) explored EFL undergraduate students' perceptions of e-learning implementation during the current COVID-19 pandemic. In their study, 109 EFL learners from a university in Indonesia were recruited, and the data were obtained by means of qualitative approach where thematic and comparative analyses were applied. The findings disclosed that 50% of the participant were negative about their internet network, a high need of internet quotas, the limitation of learning materials and explanation, as well as social media influences. Another 59% reported on positive features of e-learning implementation such as more freedom and cost-efficiency. In Saudi Arabia, Rahman (2021) examines EFL learners' perceptions about learning English through mobile during the pandemic. The data were gathered from 50 students at Qassim University who were invited to complete a questionnaire survey. A quantitative analysis uncovered healthy and positive perceptions of mobile learning since it promotes physical distancing and flexibility of learning pace as well as learner motivation. However, there were some negative claims about the internet connection, lack of prior familiarity with mobile learning, and teacher-student interaction. Suadi (2021) studied EFL learners' perceptions of the use of Zoom and WhatsApp in learning English amidst the COVID-19. The data were collected from 53 undergraduate student through online questionnaire. Despite some reports on internet connection, the results were mostly positive since the students viewed online applications as efficient in terms of time, place and expense. Moreover, students agreed that the two online platforms helped them improve language skills and reduced shyness in virtual class interaction.

Nevertheless, an empirical study on this matter in Thailand has been nothing more than scant. Yet, a study conducted by Imsa-ard (2020) is one of a very few that can be illustrated here. In his study, Thai undergraduate students' perceptions of online learning during the global pandemic were investigated. A mix-method study was conducted with 315 students in which they were asked to do a questionnaire, and of this number, 15 students were purposively selected to participate in a semi-structure interview. The findings disclosed that the majority of them preferred face-to-face classrooms to online learning. More importantly, these students did not express their willingness to learn online in the future. Still, they believed that their instructors were willing to provide assistance and useful feedback during this online time.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to address the research questions. In this study, a students' written reflections and a semi-structure interview were espoused to gain insights on the online English learning issues.

Participants

The participants in this study were selected based on convenient sampling technique due to the convenience and the availability of the students at hand. This is because the researcher was also a teacher who were assigned to teach the students this semester of the academic year 2/2020. As a result, 30 undergraduate students majoring in Business English at a private university in Pathum Thani were conveniently recruited, five of whom were also purposively chosen to participate in a semi-structure interview session.

Research instruments

In this study, a descriptive qualitative design was employed to elicit Thai EFL learners' perceptions in response to examining the quality of language teaching and learning by using digital technologies during this pandemic. According to Yin (2015), the descriptive qualitative is aimed at revealing an in-depth understanding about a particular phenomenon. To this end, written reflections and semi-structure interviews were employed to obtain data about learners' perceptions of learning English online. For the sake of clarification, written reflection is a written story templates, comprising a set of guided questions or/and instructions and blank spaces in which the participants are encouraged to write their responses (Barkhuizen, 2014). This sort of instrument allows the researchers to collect rich and insightful description of data, for the participants freely express their thoughts and feelings by writing them on the reflection. To achieve the research aims, the guided questions were used as follows: 1) How have you learned English through online classrooms? 2) How do you feel about learning English online during the pandemic? 3) What are some potential challenges you faced during online learning? and 4) What are your suggestions to make online English learning more effective? In this study, the reflection task was posted on Google Form to avoid physical interaction during this pandemic time. Besides this, semi-structured interview was also used to seek more deeper insights regarding participants' perceptions. As stated by Harding (2018), this type of interview enables the researchers to come up with a new idea or question during the interview in response to the interviewee's answers. After consideration of their merits, both instruments were selected in this present study.

Data Collection

In a form of web-based survey using Google Form, the link to the reflection sheet was sent to 30 students by means of Line application at the end of the second semester of the academic year 2/2020. It took three days until the researcher received all responses from the student participants. Subsequently, five of them were purposively selected to participate in online semi-structured interview sessions where they were followed up their interesting stories and description as written in their reflections. The interview was conducted individually by means of Google Meet which lasted about 30 minutes each. They were requested to explore their answer in the reflections and elaborate with examples and current issues in teaching and learning English online.

Data Analysis

For the sake of data analysis, the researcher meticulously scrutinised the data from both written reflections and semi-structured interviews. In this light, the data were analysed based on emerging themes, and all repeated and unnecessary data were removed during the coding. All 30 written

reflections followed the same procedure until they reached the point of saturation. Afterwards, the researcher compared, reviewed and integrated the emerging themes from both written reflections and semi-structured interviews which led to final data analysis and conclusion. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments, two researchers were invited to perform data coding before achieving consensus on the final results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents students' responses in accordance with research questions. The most representative responses from both written reflections and interviews are presented in verbatim English in order to assist the delineation of the findings.

RQ 1: What are Thai undergraduate students' perceptions of learning English online during the COVID-19 pandemic?

When asked of their views on learning English through online platforms, all participants come to an agreement that online learning is the best way to continue their study during the current pandemic since it promotes physical distancing. Yet, they also reported on their preference of face-to-face classroom over online instruction. The following responses are some examples of this view:

Online learning is appropriate for carrying on my study during this hard time since it helps reduce the figure of infected cases. Although I miss my friends and learning in classrooms so much, online learning can promote physical distancing and reduce chance of exposing the virus outside. (Student A: Written reflection)

In my opinion, the policy about online learning during the pandemic is good enough whether we like it or not. This is because it offers the best option during this pandemic time as it is much safer to study from my own place. Still, I kind of hope that the situation would return to normal real soon because I prefer face-to-face instruction to online classrooms. (Student B: Interview)

I think it is best to learn online during this time, not only English but every subject. I do not feel safe to go out since there is a risk of catching the virus. Learning online also complies to government policy, and I believe this is a common practice in several countries across the globe. However, I wish we would not do this again in the future. I mean doing online learning because learning in classroom is a lot better. (Student C: Interview)

This finding corroborates with the findings in a study by Rahman (2021) and Rakhmanina, Martina, Halolo, Syafryadin and Noermanza (2020) which reported on the usefulness of online learning regarding its capacity to maintain physical distancing. The findings are also in line with Imsa-ard (2021) whose study revealed students' preference of face-to-face classrooms to online learning.

RQ 2: What are the potential challenges faced by Thai undergraduate students in learning English online?

Generally, the participants complained about problems pertaining to unstable internet connection due to the fact that many students at the research context were from provinces. For instance, Student A shared her challenges in joining online classes.

The very problem I have faced when attending online classrooms is that the internet connection is either poor or unstable from time to time. This is because I am living in an upcountry area which might contribute to this problem. And my family cannot afford to pay a better WIFI package. (Student C: Written reflection)

Some students also expressed that online classrooms are not as effective as learning English in face-to-face classroom, and that it reduced interaction between teacher and students as well as students and students. The following responses exemplify such thought:

The problem is learning English without meeting face to face is very difficult for me to improve my communication skills. I feel that learning online does not really promote interaction similar to a real-life situation. (Student D: Written reflection)

I think learning English online is not very easy for me because I cannot catch up with the lessons that well. I also feel a lack of understanding of the teaching materials and also a lack of teacher's explanation of my correct or incorrect use of the language, especially in my writing. (Student A: Interview)

Interestingly, there are also some students who honestly reported that online learning deteriorated their commitment in learning. Less control and guidance from the teacher as well as inattention to the lessons of their peers make them lazy to learn. The following response are of this view:

The problem I have faced during online English classes is that online classrooms can only provide less than maximum guidance from the teacher in comparison to on-site classrooms. I think this is a serious drawback and an obstacle in learning English for me and perhaps for some of my classmates. Slow learners like me need maximal guidance and explanation from the teacher which I cannot find in an online class. This really made me want to give up my intention to improve English. (Student E: Interview)

In my opinion, online learning is not as fun as face-to-face classrooms. Even worse, most of my classmates do not usually pay attention to the teacher during online class, I think this made the rest of the class inattentive. So, I got bored and turned to something else. I wish no more online learning in the future. (Student C: Written reflection)

Learning online is not so fun because many students do not pay attention to the lecture which makes me bored as well. When no one gives responses to the teacher, I also do not want to participate. Moreover, online learning requires the use of computers and other similar technological devices. This means a lot of distraction for me as well. These temptations tend to loosen commitment. It will even be more important to play the game or its social media when compared to learning, especially a boring class. (Student C: Written reflection)

As students reported on unstable internet connection which is apparently a common problem in many contexts. This supports the studies by Tanjung and Utomo (2020), Rakhmanina, Martina,

Halolo, Syafryadin and Noermanza (2020), and Rahman (2021). Interestingly, the findings in this study disclosed some bold and honest responses which point to their demotivation and lack of interest in learning online when their peers do not participate.

RQ 3: What are Thai undergraduate students' suggestions for effective online English learning?

When asked of their suggestions for effective online English learning, most students believed that the teacher should do everything in their power to keep the lesson interesting and enjoyable. For instance, student B and student D suggested as follows:

I think the teacher should keep the condition of the class relaxing and fun. Maybe providing learning material in the form of games such as word-guessing game in English and any other games in order that the students not feel bored. Providing English songs during a short break may also help students to become more accustomed to hearing English sentences and pronunciation. (Student B: Written reflection)

I understand that it is hard for both teacher and students to cope with our teaching and learning during this COVID time. However, my suggestion is that the teacher should come up with interesting instructional media so as to maintain our interest. There is one teacher who incorporates games into every class which helps most students concentrate to the online class better and makes the lesson fun. More importantly, it draws more attention from those idle students. (Student D: Interview)

Clearly, the findings suggest that in order to maintain students' interest and motivation in learning English online, it seems incumbent upon the teacher to come up with something interesting such games and music. This is seconded by a study carried out by Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2020).

CONCLUSION

In this study, Thai EFL undergraduate students' views on online English learning were investigated. This study addresses three aspects: students' perceptions of learning English online, challenges faced by the students, and their suggestions for effective online classroom. The findings revealed mixed attitudes. The majority of the students agreed that online learning is the best mode of the study during this time of COVID-19 pandemic, since it helps to maintain physical distancing and slow down the spread of the virus as well as reduce students' contact with the virus. Nevertheless, there were some reports on their preference of face-to-face instruction since the student participants expressed no desire in learning online in the future. Concerning the challenges, most students faced some similar issues during learning online such as poor or unstable internet connection, lack of teachers' adequate feedback and guidance, and interaction. Further, some students admitted that they lost their interest and motivation in learning English during online classrooms. This is attributed to the fact that their many of their peers did not engage or participate during the lesson. Another challenge rested in distraction issue like social media influence. In

addition, the students suggested that the teacher should be equipped with interesting lesson and material in order to maintain their interest and enthusiasm during online classrooms.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study as follows:

1. It is important that EFL teachers make certain that their learners have sufficient access to internet connection and technological resources before delivering their lessons. By doing so, their lessons could be designed and executed in a more effective fashion.
2. Unlike face-to-face classrooms, it can be difficult for EFL teachers of online classrooms to check whether all students can keep up with the lessons. A possible solution is that providing some quizzed or comprehension-check after each topic or lesson taught. The teacher should also be prudent enough to open for students' questions during or after class. This should help learners who feel left behind and demotivated because of their inability to follow the pace of the lessons.
3. Online lesson design is of paramount importance, and the teachers should keep in mind that the nature of online learning differs drastically to that of on-site instruction. Hence, online lessons should be orchestrated by considering fun atmosphere, relevant contents, and students' needs and interests. As students can get distracted relatively easily in online learning, tedious and irrelevant lessons could be contributing factors to such behaviour.

References

- Bagata, D.T.R., Umamah, A., Fikri, D. (2020). EFL university students' perception of the use of online learning platform in the covid 19 pandemic. *Jurnal Penelitian, Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran*. 15(34), pp. 1-12.
- Barkhuizen, G. (2014). Revisiting narrative frames: An instrument for investigating language teaching and learning. *System*, 47, pp. 12–27.
- Cakrawati, L. M. (2017). Students' Perception on the Use of Online Learning Platform in EFL Classroom. *English Language Teaching and Technology Journal*, 1(1), pp. 22-30.
- Hamilton, B. (2015). Integrating Technology in The Classroom. Tools to Meet the Needs of Every Student. *International Society for Technology in Education: United States*
- Imsa-ard, P. (2020). Thai university students' perceptions towards the abrupt transition to 'forced' online learning in the covid-19 situation. *Journal of Education Khon Kaen University*, 43(3), pp. 30-44.
- Mulyani, Fidyati, Suryani, Suri, M., & Halimatussakdiah. (2021). University students' perceptions through e-learning implementation during COVID-19 Pandemic: Positive or negative features dominate? *Studies in English Language and Education*, 8(1), 197-211.
- Nartiningrum, N. & Nugroho, A. (2020). Online learning amidst global pandemic: EFL students' challenges, suggestions, and needed materials. *Academic Journal of English Language and Education*, 4(2), pp.115-140.
- Rahman, M. M. (2020). EFL Learners' Perceptions about the use of mobile learning during COVID-19, *Journal of Southwest Jiaotong University*, 55(5), pp. 1-7.
- Rakhmanina, L., Martina, F., Halolo, F., Syafryadin & Noermanza. (2020). Students' perception on online English learning during COVID-19 pandemic era. 3(2), pp. 428-439.

- Smart, K.L & Cappel, J.J. (2006). Students' Perceptions of Online Learning: A Comparative Study. *Journal of Information Technology Education*, 5(1), pp. 1-19
- Suadi, S. (2021). Students' perceptions of the use of zoom and whatsapp in ELT amidst COVID-19 pandemic. *SALÉE: Study of Applied Linguistics and English Education*, 2(01), pp. 51-64.
- Tanjung, Z. F. & Utomo, A. Investigating EFL students' perceptions on online learning amidst COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Indonesian Education and Teaching*, 5(1), pp. 102-115.
- Yin, R. K. (2015). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford publications.