



EAP Students' Attitudes Toward Instruction Online at a Thai University: Preliminary Findings

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Introduction

As educators around the world make abrupt, mandatory transitions to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the impact of this transition on students is of the utmost importance. Because of the novelty of the situation, research on such cases of involuntary participation in online teaching and learning is truly unprecedented, thus representing an almost completely unexplored area of inquiry. While the importance of attitudes and motivation to language learning is well documented, little is known about students' attitudes and motivation toward language learning online during times of crisis. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the attitudes and motivation of second language (L2) learners participating in mandatory online English language classes.

Literature Review

Attitudes, Motivation, and L2 Development

Numerous researchers have substantiated the relationship among learner attitudes, motivation, and second/foreign language (L2) development (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner et al., 1997; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003) and have demonstrated, for example, that learners with positive attitudes and high levels of motivation for L2 learning tend to achieve greater learning outcomes. Conversely, research has shown a negative relationship between L2 anxiety and L2 learning (Teimouri et al., 2019)—that is, L2 anxiety tends to have a detrimental effect on L2 learning. However, 'attitudes' and 'motivation' are not unitary nor static traits, but rather are complex and dynamic, consisting of multiple constituent attributes which shift in response to contextual factors (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). To understand L2 learners' attitudes and motivation thus requires probing multiple dimensions of the social, psychological, and (inter)personal aspects of L2 learning. To this end, researchers have investigated various related attitudinal subconstructs including anxiety (e.g., Ushida, 2005), autonomy (e.g., Oxford, 2003), convenience (e.g., Chang et al., 2012), and open-mindedness (e.g., Webb & Doman, 2016).



In parallel, a growing body of research has emerged over the last three decades that has investigated these and other learner variables in the context of technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and online L2 learning, such as students' motivation and attitudes (e.g., Ushida, 2005), student readiness (e.g., Winke & Goertler, 2008), and second language development (e.g., Plonsky & Ziegler, 2016). Webb et al.'s (2014) study looked at students' perceptions of interactivity, engagement, and effectiveness of instruction in a flipped EFL classroom at a Chinese university. The researchers observed that the flipped model was initially at odds with students' expectations, but the students' attitudes towards these dimensions of the flipped approach improved by the end of the semester. In a later study, Webb and Doman (2016) found that students in two flipped classrooms in Macau and the United States reported increased comfort with flipped L2 learning over time. In both of these studies, students were initially relatively hesitant about the new mode of instruction but became more open-minded and accepting after a period of exposure. Ushida (2005) examined the motivation and attitudes of students enrolled in online French and Spanish language courses and discovered that, although students were initially anxious about studying language online, their motivation and attitudes were positive in both the pre- and post-tests. The author highlighted the importance of individual teachers in motivating students during online language learning and noted that the lack of interaction between teachers and students is a major disadvantage of this mode of teaching. Tratnick et al. (2019) compared the satisfaction of students enrolled in an online business English course and a face-to-face equivalent, finding that the students in the face-to-face course registered higher levels of satisfaction and motivation. While these studies do provide insight into student attitudes and motivation towards online language learning, they were not conducted during times of crisis, which limits their applicability to the current context of teaching and learning shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student Attitudes in Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)

Largely absent in the body of research on student attitudes toward language learning are investigations into unplanned, *mandatory* transitions to and participation in online/distance teaching and learning—what has recently been termed “emergency remote teaching,” or ERT (Hodges et al., 2020). In contrast to more typical online teaching and learning, ERT involves “a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate [online] delivery mode due to crisis circumstances” (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 13). In such situations, teachers may be asked to transition to online teaching with as little as one day advance warning, and students, teachers, and support staff alike may be tasked with acquiring a completely new skill set.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, transitions to remote learning (or ‘ERT’) have rapidly emerged as a means of coping with governmental mandates of social distancing and self-quarantining while maintaining [some] continuity of education. As a unique type of environmental constraint (Nation & Macalister, 2010), the impact of this transition on L2 students' attitudes toward online learning and dispositions toward language learning more generally are unknown. However, evidence from previous studies that have investigated education in times of crisis suggest that attitudes, motivation, and learning outcomes may all suffer due to such outstanding conditions (e.g., Iida, 2016; Nelson & Appleby, 2015; Schmidt, 2019). Thus, a better understanding of how this transition impacts students' attitudes toward learning could have important implications for instructional design, curriculum development, and teacher training.

Research Questions

Based on previous research findings, current gaps in the literature, and the timeliness of the present research topic, the following research questions guided the present study:

1. What are students' attitudes toward online learning at the beginning of the transitional period?

2. Do students' attitudes toward online learning vary according to their level of L2 learning motivation?
3. Do students' attitudes toward online learning vary according to previous online learning experience?

Methods

Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design combined with between-groups comparisons to gauge students' current attitudes toward online language learning, as well as to detect possible differences in attitudes among sub-groups within the sample. The dependent variable in the study was students' ratings on a questionnaire divided across eight subscales (see Instrument below). The independent variables were prior online learning experience and motivation. Average subscale scores for the entire sample were calculated and analyzed descriptively. Then, mean rating comparisons were made between students who had and students who did not have prior online learning experience. Finally, correlation analyses between the L2 motivation subscale and the various attitudinal subscales were performed to determine whether a relationship existed between L2 motivation and attitudes toward online language learning.

Participants

The participants in this study were 368 Thai undergraduate students enrolled in an intensive English program (IEP) at a large public university in Thailand. The instrument was administered near the beginning of the participants' first term of ERT. The total number of students in the IEP was 412; thus, the sample in this study represents 88% of the total target population. A total of 117 participants had prior experience learning online, whereas 251 participants had no prior experience learning online. Characteristics of the study participants are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1
IEP Level, Gender, Online Learning Experience, and Age of Participants

IEP level	Gender			Online learning experience		Age range	Totals	%
	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Yes	No			
1	34	21	1	19	37	17-19	56	15
2	81	59	1	36	105	16-23	141	38
3	50	42	2	36	58	16-21	94	26
4	37	38	2	26	51	16-23	77	21
Totals	202	160	6	117	251	16-23	368	100

Data Collection

Instrument

The data collection instrument used in this study was a questionnaire designed by the researchers to assess students' attitudes toward online learning. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was created using Google Forms and translated into Thai. The instrument comprised 33 selected-response items (i.e., attitudinal statements about online learning), each followed by a 5-point Likert scale with levels of agreement ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*).

It should also be noted that the anxiety subscale was reverse coded for the sake of consistency with the other subscales. Thus, on the actual questionnaire, a student who ‘strongly agreed’ with a statement such as *I am concerned I might fail my online class* would have selected ‘1’ on the questionnaire’s Likert scale. However, after reverse coding, this would be registered as a ‘5.’ In brief, then, ratings on the Anxiety subscale that are closer to 5 suggest greater anxiety, whereas ratings closer to 1 suggest lower anxiety.

The general attitudes construct to be measured by the questionnaire was made up of seven sub-constructs related to attitudes toward online language learning. Each of these attitudinal sub-constructs comprised a multi-item scale (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012) of four items. An additional sub-construct, L2 learning motivation, with a multi-item scale containing five items, was also included in the questionnaire for comparative purposes. The 33 items were presented in random order in the questionnaire. In addition, both positively and negatively worded items were included to help combat the effects of the acquiescence bias (Dörnyei, 2010, p. 9, 43). The sub-constructs, corresponding item numbers, reliability estimates (Cronbach’s alpha) for the multi-item scales, and sample items are given in Table 2. The alpha of the entire survey was .92, indicating a high level of reliability.

TABLE 2
Subscales, Item Numbers, and Reliability Estimates of the Attitudes Questionnaire

Sub-constructs	Item numbers	Scale reliability (α) ^a	Sample item
Anxiety	7, 13 ^b , 19, 22	.63	I am worried that learning online will be difficult.
Autonomy	2, 10, 17 ^c , 27	.54	I am able to learn independently in an online class.
Convenience	1, 8, 16 ^d , 26	.57	Taking online classes fits my schedule.
Effectiveness of instruction	3, 11, 18, 29	.78	Online classes help me learn English.
Engagement	4, 9, 20, 30	.75	Taking online classes is interesting.
Interactivity	6, 14, 24 ^c , 32	.69	I can communicate a lot in online English classes.
L2 learning motivation	15, 21, 25, 28, 33	.77	Learning English is important to me.
Open-Mindedness	5, 12, 23, 31	.72	I am excited about learning online.

^a An alpha level of .60 is considered a threshold level of reliability below which doubts arise about the structure of (i.e., relation between items in) a given scale (Dörnyei, 2010).

^{b, c, d, e} Items, which removed, would improve increase reliability to .64, .58, .63, .71, respectively.

The sub-constructs and items in the multi-item scales were adapted from questionnaires used in Gardner et al. (1997), Ushida (2005), and Webb and Doman (2019). A link that describes the survey design, including descriptions of the subconstruct operationalizations and multi-item scales, is given in the Appendix.

At the end of the questionnaire (see Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991, p. 39), a background information section was also included, which contained questions about gender, age, current level within the IEP, and previous online learning experience. Respondents’ email addresses were also collected in the questionnaire (automatically), and this collection was made explicit to students. In this regard, it is important to note that the questionnaire responses were not anonymous because the researchers would need to compare student responses prior to and after the instructional term. However, the directions to the questionnaire assured respondents that absolute confidentiality would be maintained (following Dörnyei, 2010, p. 16-17) and that no specific identification of individual respondents would be made nor shared at any point during or after the study (see Appendix).

Results

To answer RQ1—‘What are students’ attitudes toward online learning at the beginning of the transitional period?’—the Likert-scale items in each subscale were combined to derive average subscale scores, then the mean and standard deviation were calculated. Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for each of the attitudinal subscales. As can be seen in the table, average ratings across the scales ranged from a high of 2.05 (for L2 motivation) to a low of 3.33 (for anxiety). It is worth pointing out that a lower rating (i.e., closer to 1) indicates a higher level of agreement, whereas a higher rating (i.e., closer to 5) indicates a lower level of agreement. (This perhaps confusing nomenclature is mitigated in the actual questionnaire; see Appendix). Thus, for instance, students tended to agree more with statements about the convenience of online learning than they did about the interactivity of online learning.

TABLE 3
Descriptive Statistics for Subscales of the Attitudes Toward Online Language Learning Questionnaire

Subscale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Anxiety	3.33	0.82
Interactivity	3.32	0.80
Effectiveness	3.09	0.79
Engagement	2.96	0.82
Autonomy	2.87	0.71
Open-Mindedness	2.79	0.82
Convenience	2.59	0.76
Motivation	2.05	0.74

Note. Items within each subscale are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*).

RQ2—‘Do students’ attitudes toward online learning vary according to their level of L2 learning motivation?’—was investigated by examining the relationship between L2 motivation and attitudes toward online language learning. The motivation subscale was correlated with each of the other attitudinal subscales using Spearman’s rank-order correlation. The correlation coefficients (Spearman’s ρ) are presented in Table 4. As can be seen in the table, all correlations were statistically significant. In all cases except the anxiety subscale, $p < .01$; in the case of anxiety $p < .05$.

TABLE 4
Spearman’s Rank-Order Correlation of Motivation Subscale with Attitudinal Subscales

Subscale	Spearman’s ρ	Strength of correlation
Convenience	0.43**	Moderate
Engagement	0.42**	Moderate
Open-Mindedness	0.42**	Moderate
Autonomy	0.35**	Moderate
Effectiveness	0.31**	Moderate
Interactivity	0.25**	Low
Anxiety	0.11*	Low

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The final research question, RQ3—‘Do students’ attitudes toward online learning vary according to previous online learning experience?’—was addressed using the Wilcoxon rank sum test, the results of which are shown in Table 5. This test, which is the non-parametric equivalent of an independent-samples t -test (Dörnyei, 2007), was chosen because the data were ordinal level and were not normally distributed. The data in each subscale were first subjected to the Shapiro-Wilk normality test. The p value for each Shapiro-Wilk test was below .05, indicating that the data were not normally distributed. Therefore, non-parametric statistics were applied. The Wilcoxon rank sum test was used to detect whether there was a statistically significant difference in mean ratings on the subscales between the students who had and

students who did not have previous online learning experience. The Wilcoxon rank sum test indicated that there was no significant difference in the mean subscale ratings of the two groups.

TABLE 5

Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test: Previous Online Experience Versus No Previous Online Experience

Scale	<i>p</i>	Effect size
Anxiety	0.23	0.063
Autonomy	0.45	0.040
Convenience	0.11	0.084
Effectiveness of Instruction	0.11	0.083
Engagement	0.67	0.095
Interactivity	0.12	0.081
L2 learning motivation	0.41	0.043
Open-Mindedness	0.25	0.060

Discussion

The present study had both practical and theoretical aims. RQ1 was exploratory, and asked, ‘What are students’ attitudes toward online learning at the beginning of the transitional period?’ The results shown in Table 3 suggest that overall, students felt some concern about the transition to ERT. In particular, students tended to agree with statements that expressed anxiety toward online language learning (e.g., ‘I feel nervous about learning English in an online class’) and indicated concerns regarding the degree of interactivity possible in online classes. This is perhaps not surprising, given that fewer than half (i.e., 107 out of 368) of the respondents reported having taken an online class in the past, coupled with the markedly different structure of online classes as compared with traditional classes. Students rated items associated with the convenience subscale somewhat more positively ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.76$). Students may have felt that online classes afford them more time and flexibility, which would be consistent with findings from other studies that have investigated students’ attitudes regarding the convenience of online courses (e.g., Ku & Lohr, 2003; Webb & Doman, 2019). Finally, ratings for L2 motivation showed the highest level of agreement among all of the subscales, with students ‘agreeing’ on average ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.74$) with statements that indicated their motivation to learn English as an additional language.

The second research question (‘Do students’ attitudes toward online learning vary according to their level of L2 learning motivation?’) looked at the relationship between students’ general L2 motivation and their specific attitudes toward language learning in an online environment. As can be seen in Table 4, there were low to moderate positive correlations with L2 motivation among all the subscales. Students’ ratings for the sub-constructs Convenience, Engagement, and Open-mindedness had the highest correlations with L2 motivation ($r_s = .43$, $.42$, and $.42$, respectively), while Interactivity and Anxiety had the lowest correlations ($r_s = .25$ and $.11$, respectively). Apparently, students who felt online learning was convenient and engaging and were open to the experience were more likely to be highly motivated to learn English, while those who felt anxious or believed they may not have many opportunities for interaction in an online class were more variable in terms of their L2 motivation.

Contrary to what might be expected, students’ prior online learning experience did not have a significant effect on their attitudes toward online language learning. The results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, which was employed to answer RQ3, did not achieve the required p value (i.e., < 0.05) needed to reject the null hypothesis of no difference between the two groups in question (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991). This result may have derived from a discrepancy between what was meant/intended by the term “online course” and what students understood by this term (see Appendix). The researchers intended for the term to signify ‘an academic course with typical pedagogical and logistical characteristics (e.g., a syllabus, instructional units, distinct content and topics, lessons, assessments) taught fully online over multiple meetings.’ However, students may have understood the term to mean something more akin to ‘any instructional activity completed online’—potentially including, for example, the initial one or two

course meetings participants had engaged in before completing the questionnaire. This possible discrepancy was noted by the researchers and is an area in which the questionnaire could be improved.

Limitations

As this was primarily a pilot study, there are a number of limitations. First, as with all self-report data, it is possible that respondents were less than totally truthful in their responses. Because responses to the questionnaire used in this study were not anonymous, some students may have further been susceptible to the social desirability bias (Dörnyei, 2010). Identifying data was collected because doing so allowed the researchers to prevent duplicate submissions and would also allow the researchers to compare the results of the initial questionnaire to data collected at a later date as part of a longitudinal study. Another limitation was the low reliability (i.e., alpha level) of some of the attitudinal subscales (see Table 2). Statistical analyses indicated that excluding items would not have significantly increased the alpha level; thus, the decision was made to include all items in the analysis. Due to the urgent nature of the research, which was carried out at the beginning of a period of ERT, insufficient time was available for further revision and testing of the instrument before it was administered. In future studies, the items in subscales that have low alphas could be revised to increase the internal consistency of the questionnaire. Finally, because participants in the study comprised intact classes from a fairly homogenous group of participants, the results reported here have limited generalizability beyond the target population.

Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation about English for academic purposes (EAP) in ERT by investigating students' attitudes toward online language learning after their initial mandatory shift during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the results of the present study indicated that the Thai university students who responded to the Attitudes Toward Online Language Learning Questionnaire appear to have somewhat negative attitudes toward the mandatory shift to online instruction. In particular, they expressed moderate levels of anxiety about the prospect and appeared particularly concerned about their opportunities for interaction, the effectiveness of instruction, and their level of engagement in online language courses. The preliminary findings in this report will doubtless be extended and developed by future research. The global spread of COVID-19 has presented numerous challenges to educational institutions throughout the world. It is vital to seize this moment to learn as much as possible about the effects that this crisis has on teaching, learning, and other aspects of education in order to be prepared for the future. The current study has endeavored to take one small step in that direction.

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Appendix

Attitudes Toward Online Language Learning Questionnaire (English Version) and Design Specifications

Questionnaire formatting model

<https://tinyurl.com/yc8pzmfs>

Questionnaire specifications (with Thai translations)

<https://tinyurl.com/yddc4fta>

Questionnaire background questions and additional information (with Thai translations)

<https://tinyurl.com/y8z3c7uz>