



Challenges of Online EFL Classes: The Case in a Thai University During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The impact that the coronavirus has had on life in general has altered everything we do especially since March 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic of global impact (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). One of the many tough decisions that countries had to make is that of school closures. Consequently, institutions had opted and, in some cases, even mandated remote teaching as an emergency response. Going online typically allows flexibility of teaching and learning anywhere and anytime. For teachers and students to remain connected and engaged with the content while having to stay at home, it was deemed an immediate solution. Desperate to mitigate heavy losses in learning, the education system around the world made big changes, literally, overnight. The one thing that, perhaps, changed significantly in the recent past is the degree of technology used in the teaching and learning process (Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015). ICT in education was already receiving major attention by both practitioners and researchers. Merits and demerits, best practices and pedagogical implications of ICT integration, among many other topics have already been previously addressed. However, the urgent shift that we have witnessed since the outbreak of the pandemic is unprecedented. To some, such a shift is a quick fix until better solutions are made available and to others it is an excellent marketing tool that has potential for good returns (Mata & Quesada, 2014). To have a better understanding of such transitions, knowing the challenges that teachers faced can aid in future endeavors.

With the need for teachers to engage students in the learning process, the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) cannot be undermined. ICT is a necessity as it provides lots of opportunity for teachers to foster learning. Research shows that technology can handle a wide range of activities and meets the demands of both language teachers and students. It can be a powerful tool in delivering efficient and quality education without the instructor's presence (Mahini et al., 2012). ICT tools and facilities help in successful delivery of technology-based teaching and learning (Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015). Further, instructors with good knowledge of implementation of ICT tools can also effectively enhance students' learning in any given situation. It also enhances learning and interaction between students and teachers and puts students at the center of the educational process (Mahini et al., 2012). ICT helps learners in providing relevant data and obtaining information quickly (Hashemi & Aziznezhad, 2011). The integration of ICT in education also caters to the customization of learning



materials based on the needs and requirements of the learners and instructors. Consequently, educators are potentially able to implement differentiated assessments allowing students to demonstrate their understanding based on their unique skills, abilities and interests.

Although ICT integration has been noted to have tremendous advantages, taking a closer look at possible adverse effects would be beneficial as well. It has been argued that technology replaces and alters the functions of a trained teacher in imparting knowledge (Bulger, 2016). As such, it has been suggested that computers should be used by teachers as supporting tools in the learning process (Hashemi & Aziznezhad, 2011). As much as it has been noted positively, autonomous learning may also lead to a lack of peer association and collaboration in learning. Particularly in online environments the absence of face-to-face interactions can impact the emotional aspect. Additionally, over dependence on technology in online learning can cause lower academic achievement (Sindiani et al, 2020). Also, maintaining and supporting computer systems and other technological tools requires high expense which may affect learners of lower socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, the digital divide that exists in many developing countries can impact the success of the efforts made towards the transition to online environments.

Online education in Thailand is growing rapidly due to the development of technology and its implication in learning (Thongsri & Bao, 2019). According to Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO, 2010), it was found that development of ICT in Thailand and Vietnam was more significant than their neighboring Southeast Asian countries as a result of development in action plans and policies regarding ICT for learning. Since technology helps bridge the gap between a learner and the instructor, educational institutions in Thailand also focus on improving education using ICT tools.

The response to moving education online, as a result of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was almost instantaneous. In such a situation the chances of a smooth transition are lower than when it is well planned. The uncertainty surrounding the return to normalcy has left many educators dealing with the need for education in ways that were already available (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). The constraints set by local authorities left families economically displaced affecting the well-being of students (Whittle et al., 2020). One thing that was common to most institutions that were forced away from all kinds of face-to-face work was moving online. This includes educational institutions who were already familiar with the online modality of learning. However, in the wake of this crisis a myriad of online applications and other technologies have emerged leading to a disruptive shift to online ecosystems (Soni, 2020). A previous study conducted to examine the impact of the change caused by the pandemic revealed that considerable emphasis was placed on the teaching process that often compromised learning goals (Whittle et al., 2020). Additionally, assessment was also found to be an issue that left teachers with the inability to discourage cheating and plagiarism (Khan et al, 2020). In order to avoid the shutdown of education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for good internet connection speeds to support the heavy reliance on online learning was an obvious need. The overall goal of this study is to explore the challenges of online EFL classes during COVID-19 that could provide research-based guidance for the formulation of online learning policies.

Consequently, the question formulated for this study is:

What are the challenges in online EFL classes during COVID-19?

This is part of a larger mixed-methods research project that contains two parts which utilize both qualitative and quantitative methods. The current study is the first part of this project as illustrated in Figure 1.

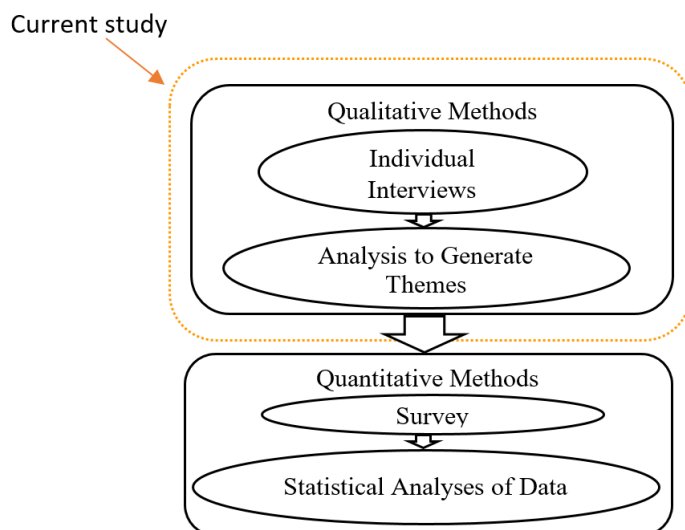


Figure 1. Illustration of the current study.

Methodology

To achieve the objective of this study a qualitative approach was deemed suitable. In particular, a phenomenological design was used because the chief objective of the study was to reveal the experiences of the sample population (Groenewald, 2004). In adherence to the qualitative approach, five participants (pseudonyms used for anonymity) were recruited from a Thai University. The criteria used for participant recruitment included (a) they had to have experience delivering EFL classes using remote teaching, (b) they had to be willing to participate in the study. Individual interviews provided data for this study and were carried out after securing participant' consent. Further, these interviews were recorded and transcribed which was later verified with the participants. As common to all qualitative research processes, the data was then analyzed to generate themes, which are discussed in the findings.

Data Collection

A semi structured interview protocol was developed to conduct the interviews with six participants who volunteered to participate in the study. However, only five participants were eventually interviewed due to data saturation. The questions focused on challenges that teachers experienced during the transition to online learning and teaching. All the recruited participants had completed online teaching for an entire term in a Thai university. The term lasted for three months, and the interviews were conducted at the end of the term. Each of these interviews lasted between 50-60 minutes. Due to the pandemic restrictions, participants were interviewed online using the Zoom application. The participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Demographic Information of the Participants

Participants	Age	Teaching Experience	Gender
P1	35	8	M
P2	46	13	F
P3	44	10	M
P4	38	9	M
P5	35	5	F

Findings and Discussion

To answer the research question, the data gathered was closely examined to generate themes. There were four major themes that emerged which are discussed in the following sections.

Orientation for ICT skills and Application Features

In the midst of any change, orientation to what is expected may be vital to the success of any effort. Similarly, the need for orientation pertaining to the applications to be used during an emergency transition into remote teaching was expressed by the participants as is evident in the following excerpts.

I felt that the expectation for implementation of various ICT tools and learning apps by administrators were too ambitious resulting in creating more confusion and delayed learning which could have been avoided through proper orientation.)P2(

It is important that student' awareness of the applications that are selected for remote teaching is also critical for the success of its implementation. I felt that orientation on the basic skills and the functions of selected applications could have helped a lot in making the transition to remote teaching.)P4(

I think both teachers and students should have knowledge about remote teaching before they start using it, for example preparing the ICT tools they are going to use and what equipment is needed such as a camera and microphone. Teachers should also be aware of some challenges that are highly possible to happen such as internet connections and student's motivation.)P1(

It was too sudden, so I had little to no preparation in terms of using the software and preparing the materials suitable for online teaching. We were also not given any orientation on the usage of the software nor the preparation of the materials. I had to adapt and tweak the syllabi to ensure they are engaging for online teaching.)P5(

To successfully make the shift to online platforms teachers noted the need for orientation for all relevant stakeholders. A clear understanding of what is expected, from students and teachers, could ensure that the learning goals are not compromised.

Adequate IT infrastructure

The need for adequate infrastructure is indispensable to teaching online)Tynan et al., 2015(. In a similar vein, one of the teachers identified that, "Technology is like the heart of remote teaching. It makes remote teaching convenient and possible")P4(. Since learning online can rarely happen in the absence of good quality technology, its need cannot be overemphasized. A similar need was highlighted by other

participants. One teacher pointed out that, “In the beginning stages we were not equipped with enough cameras to have video conferences and that slowed down the transition a lot”)P2(. Similarly, there were concerns regarding the nature of students’ needs in this regard. Relating to this one teacher noted that,

Students’ with better infrastructure tend to participate more compared to the other peers on budget infrastructure... Inability to load materials, poor video and audio were also the other common issues during remote teaching. And inferior equipment could be a strong reason.)P1(

It is relevant and something which is encouraged given that students, lecturers as well as the institution have enough infrastructure to accommodate the demands of online teaching. Without the proper infrastructure, I think online or remote teaching will be hard to execute.)P5(

Creating a Supportive Environment

The environment in the classroom depends a lot on the teachers’ practices. This in turn can have an impact on the success of the learning outcomes. Being supportive to the needs of the students can foster the right attitudes in students towards learning. The task of the teacher in creating a supportive environment is unique to the context of being online such as having longer hours of online presence supporting discussions)Ke, 2010(. Often this can become taxing to the psychological needs of teachers. We can see these issues in the responses of the participants below.

The transition from regular classes to remote teaching...was urgent causing me and many of my students some disorientation initially. A lot of my time was spent in responding to students’ personal messages just showing them how to use the tools that we were using. At the end of the day I felt irritated when I heard the notification alert on my phone.)P4(

Besides class hours I had to be available to respond to students’ messages and provide a lot of additional materials that could help explain in more detail what I couldn’t teach during the designated class hours. I feel this is a major drawback in synchronous online teaching.)P5(

I find remote teaching requires me to do more preparation and more follow-up after classes. Each student has different needs and it is not that easy to recognize it during remote teaching. This is rather daunting for someone like me who is more familiar with traditional teaching methods)P2(

I tried to use the software as much as possible in terms of the apps within the software such as whiteboard, screen sharing etc.to ensure students benefit and can understand the lesson well. Other applications were used too such as LINE and Facebook to follow up with the students in case of any questions.)P1(

Limited Student Engagement

When students actively interact with the learning material, they have a better learning experience. However, the challenge of having limited student engagement in remote teaching was real as expressed by the participants.

Language teaching even in regular classes can be pretty challenging to engage students. Getting students to interact on a video conference is even more challenging especially when there is a mental block towards learning the target language)P2(

I've noticed that lack of confidence among Thai learners is one major obstacle to engage actively during the lesson. Now add to that the factor of remote teaching and it is possible that there is limited to no interaction at all.)P3(

Based on the interview excerpts, due to constraints caused by the sudden shift teachers had to adapt and tweak the syllabi to make it engaging for online learning. Orientation with the relevant tools seemed to be a factor that visibly affected the transition. Further, it was found that infrastructural inadequacies were also part of the challenges that teachers experienced. The psychological and emotional needs of students and teachers alike contribute to the success in the teaching and learning process. In like manner, teachers are generally tasked with the responsibility to create supporting environments in the classroom. Shifting to the online platform limited the ability of the teachers to efficiently do this. They expressed having to spend additional time to connect with students so that they could provide necessary support. Additionally, teachers noted that it was challenging to get students to participate in the online sessions. One reason that discouraged students from participating was their lack of confidence in using English. For students who are generally non-participatory in traditional classes, teachers would need significant effort to get them involved in online environments. This was a notable challenge that emerged in this study.

Conclusion

As a response to the crisis resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, educational institutions sought alternative ways to continue teaching. Consequently, an urgent shift to online platforms became common in several contexts. Thailand too, had implemented online learning in most higher educational institutions. An examination of the challenges could smoothen such transitional needs in the future. Therefore, this study was carried out to serve this purpose. As part of a larger mixed method research project, it presents the findings of one part of the study that sought to highlight the challenges faced in teaching EFL classes using remote teaching. The findings suggest that proper orientation for both teachers and students, proper IT infrastructure, supportive learning environment and student engagement suffered the most in remote teaching.

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