



Contextualizing Online EFL Learning Experience: Thai University Students' Voice

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Introduction

As educational institutions continue to find ways to deliver much-needed quality education during this pandemic, learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Thai universities has become more challenging for many students the past few semesters. The sudden shift from the traditional “face-to-face” mode to remote learning has so far led to a number of challenges for the learners in virtual classrooms. This Thai university, for example, whose students are required to take EFL courses during their first two years into the program, turned to “online learning” later in 2020 after the Covid-19 virus hit the country early on. Some students share their own stories about their experience with learning online. Consider the experiences of three students - Pun, Infa, and Karn, pseudonyms.

Pun, a Pharmacy student, shares her unpleasant experience during her English learning online. She finds it irritating when power outages at her home, her study place, occur while she is in the middle of her online study. According to her, if this happens again and again, everything else follows including “internet” signal to also become unavailable.

Ingfa, another student from the same university, laments the unnecessary noise in the background when she joins the class online. This is because she also has her younger siblings studying on Zoom and a few family members staying home with them.

The above experiences simply reflect the real situations of many university students who have been studying online for over a year now. For Kun, learning online in general is really a challenging approach as this involves many factors - some beyond her control. Ingfa, on the other hand, tries her best to keep focused but admits the very challenging side of remote learning.

Karn, another student from a different program of the same university, shares what she does to cope with the difficulties the online learning offers to many students. According to her, she reads her lesson ahead of the online class schedule and reinforces learning using available resources online. To her, she does not want to join the class on zoom unprepared.



Unlike Pun and Ingfa, Karn demonstrates a different mindset towards the new mode of learning. What she offers actually appears to be an enhanced level of learner autonomy that could somehow help her learn better and more effectively during this pandemic.

This qualitative study, therefore, centers on the narratives of the students on their experience learning EFL online. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students view online learning? What affects this view?
2. What are the students' alternative ways on how to learn effectively during the pandemic?

Transition to Online Learning

When the pandemic hit the country in the year 2020, many universities in many parts of the world have also shifted from the traditional face-to-face to online learning. This sudden shift, however, has resulted to a number of challenges in the virtual classroom for both the teachers and the students. Aguilera-Hermida's (2020) recent investigation laments the complicated process during the transition period. Aside from this, her investigation also revealed students' preference for face-to-face instruction over online learning, citing lack of supporting resources, such as access to learning center, library, and interaction with professors, among other factors.

In online learning, Tichavsky et al. (2015) note students' view on themselves as poor self-motivators, saying, the latter rely on others to regulate and direct their learning experience. "*Verbal reminders and being together with real people are highly valued*," they point out. With this, Bower (2019) claims that the interaction between students and teachers is mediated by technology, and the design of learning environments (e.g., space where learning occurs) "can have considerable influence on learning outcomes".

Despite these perceived challenges, however, some studies manifested positive impact on online learning. Gonzalez et al. (2020), for instance, analyzed students' performance during COVID-19. Their investigation revealed that students improved their performance when compared from the previous year. This means that there was "significant improvement" in the scores of both modalities, online and face-to-face, when students were confined due to COVID-19," they argue.

Thai Students' Voice

A number of scholars have so far explored students' views on online learning in Thai context. Sukman and Mhunkongdee (2021), for example, investigated Thai EFL undergraduate students' views on online English learning. Their investigation revealed participants' expressed positive attitudes towards online learning as the latter label "online learning" as the best mode of study during the pandemic. The two add that the students remain optimistic for face-to-face learning over the online mode though. Krishnapatria's (2020) work appears to support this claim. He carried out a study to explore university students' perceptions of e-learning during the COVID-19 outbreak. The result indicates that the students view e-learning as being somewhat advantageous.

While claims on positive impressions from the students became evident in some investigations, it cannot also be denied that these claims come with perceived challenges. In fact, Sukman and Mhunkongdee's study (2021) has identified a number of issues that have affected students' learning. These include "unstable internet connection, lack of interaction and teachers' explanation, as well as potential distractions were common challenges for their online English learning," they admit. Aguilera-Hermida (2020) takes note of students' expressed "stress" related to online learning, including the issue on poor internet connection that appeared to have led to the decreased quality of "learning process" after the transition to online learning.

Method

Participants

The research was carried out, using “focus-group” interviews, at an autonomous university in Thailand. The participants were divided into 2 groups. The first group was composed of 3 students taking the Public Administration Program under the School of Political Science and Law. The second group was composed of another 3 students from a Nursing Program under the School of Nursing.

All six student participants were 20 years old, second-year students, and were taking English courses at the time the interview was conducted. These English courses were offered as pre-requisite requirements for the students’ first two years in the university.

Design and Instrument

This qualitative research used the data gathered through “focus-group” interviews. The interview questions focused on the students’ experiences in learning English online – practices, challenges, and alternative ways on how to learn English language during the pandemic. The participants to the “focus-group” interviews were purposively chosen based on the following criteria: (a) second-year student in the university; (b) can express himself/ herself in English; (c) willing to be interviewed with other students.

The above criteria were set by the researcher, citing the following reasons: Firstly, second-year students were chosen as the participants in this investigation because of the length of their “online learning” experience. This means that they were already learning in the university as first year students when the pandemic hit the country in 2020. This gave them close association with online learning practices. Secondly, it is necessary that the students joining the focus-group interview was able to speak and express him/herself in English as interview data needed to be transcribed and analyzed. Also, if the participant is able to speak in English, the researcher would not need to have the interview data translated from the local language into English. Lastly, the most important thing is the willingness of the participant to join in the interview. Citing Kvale (1996; 2003), Alshenqeti (2014, p. 39) believes that interviews, compared to questionnaires, have become “more powerful in eliciting narrative data” as they allow researchers to explore people’s views in greater depth. This is in agreement to Berg (2007, p. 96) who, according to Alshenqeti (2014), said that the value of interviewing enables interviewees to “speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings.”

Data Collection Procedures

Before the data could be gathered, the researcher sought the approval from the Ethics Committee of the university to conduct the study (with approval number WU-EC-LG-0-289-65). Students were contacted through their social media accounts and were asked if they could give permission to the researcher to interview them by group.

Initially, two students were contacted - one student from each of the two programs – Public administration and Nursing programs. Both students were asked to recommend two other friends who they wanted to be interviewed with them as a group. The students were informed about the criteria as the bases for their friends to join the interview.

The initial two students, one from each program, were able to convince two more students from each program, following the criteria set above. This made the number even for both groups – 3 students from the Public administration program and another 3 students from the Nursing program. Because of the rising number of active COVID-19 cases in the area, the “focus-group” interviews were held online using the zoom app.

During the interviews online, questions were prepared on PowerPoint slides and shared on the screen on zoom. This allowed the students to have a clear understanding of the topic they were asked for. The interviews, which ran between 30-40 mins for each group, were scheduled and done separately.

Analysis of the Interview Data

The “focus-group” interviews with the research participants yielded a large amount of data. This opted the researcher to employ Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework (see Table 1) for doing thematic analysis. This was used by the researcher as a guide in the analysis of the interview data. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), Braun and Clarke’s framework is “arguably the most influential approach, in the social sciences at least, probably because it offers such a clear and usable framework for doing thematic analysis” (p.3353).

TABLE 1

Braun & Clarke’s Six-phase Framework for Doing a Thematic Analysis

Step 1. Be familiar with the Data	Step 4. Review themes
Step 2. Generate initial codes	Step 5. Define themes
Step 3. Search for Themes	Step 6. Write Up

Discussion

The discussion highlights the themes that emerged from the interview data with the university students. These themes include students’ views towards online learning, the factors that affect these views, and the alternative ways to learn English effectively during the pandemic.

Students’ Views on Online Learning

This section highlights the answer to the first research question “How do students view online learning?” Based on my interview with the university students, most of them have similar impressions.

Student B, a public administration student, for example, when asked how her online learning experience was, she had this to say.

It is okay but it is so [boring] because I want to see my friends and my teacher face to face and [I want] to learn onsite. It’s so hard. If possible, I want to learn in [the] University [where] I [would] normally learn.

Another student from the same school, Student C, laments about what she feels about her daily learning schedule.

It’s boring I cannot meet my friends and teacher.

Student B, also adds on top of what she previously said, that she finds it hard to work with other students online.

It’s hard for us [to do] group work.

When asked why she has negative impression towards learning online, Student F, a nursing student, says without giving further details,

Because I want to learn [with] teacher more in class.

For Student D, another nursing student, she prefers “onsite class” over online. When asked for further reasons, she says,

I think onsite because I want to meet my teachers and friends [in person].

These English language learners cited a few factors that have affected their online learning. These are family issues, noise, poor internet connection, and the risks of cheating among students.

Family Concerns

Students also took note of their family as a factor that affects their online learning. Student A, a student from the School of Political Science and Law, narrated how her mother annoys her.

Sometimes my mother tells me to do something and I cannot do it because I'm studying.

Student A also believes that there is no such a thing as the best day to learn online and suggests her mom not to disturb her until she is done with her class.

In online class you don't have to find the best day. If I think I have to study today I need to tell my mother about [it]. I have a class so please don't ask me to do something or anything and [anyway] after this I will do it for you.

Noise as Distraction

Student C, another student from the same school, complains about the noise that distracts her during her online class. When pressed to respond about her complaint, she says

For me I think it's [the] noise.

Student D, a nursing student, also gets annoyed whenever she hears unnecessary noise in the background.

Sometimes there's [some] noise or sound of something [during] online class.

Poor Internet Connection

If the internet is vital in the online learning process, students also consider the same as a challenge. Student E, for example, concedes that having a poor signal could affect learning as a whole.

It [is the] bad internet because if we have a bad internet in online learning, my teacher [would usually] ask why can't I hear [you]? or you cannot stay [online] and not [able] to understand [anything taught] in online learning. But if [the] internet [is] good, [then] I think, [everything] can turn out okay because voices can be [heard] clearly and learning can [get] better because [we] can understand [better] and [become] active in online class.

Student B, also thinks internet has it all. To her, if this problem becomes worse, then everything else follows.

My problem in learning online is internet. Sometimes it's so bad and sometimes when you call me, I cannot hear you. And sometimes I cannot turn on [my] camera. It's [a] problem [in] learning online.
When asked what she does not want to lose during her online class, Student A replies,

I think Internet too because if teacher calls me and the internet is bad, I cannot hear and I cannot answer. And [if] the teacher is teaching, I cannot understand.

Risks of Cheating

Another reason why some students do not like to study online because of the risks of cheating among students. Student E, a nursing student, believes that cheating can happen online.

When [having] the test, some people cheat. Some have the [tendency] to bully my other friends. I think this is not fair.

Alternative Ways on How to Learn EFL Effectively during the Pandemic

This section discusses the answers to the second research question “What are the students’ alternative ways on how to learn effectively during the pandemic?” While many students lament the problems “online learning” brings to their daily routines, the same students, however, offer ways on how to counter these challenges. These are the following: (a) Use English to communicate online; (b) Use newspapers, online sources for “reading” skills; (c) Turn your cameras on; (d) Watch movies, listen to music; (e) Study by yourself; (f) Speak English with friends, family; and (g) Participate actively online.

Use English to Communicate Online

On top of the importance of internet, students also count on the tools that help facilitate learning. Online application tools go with the internet if the latter works well. For the students, they use their mobile phones and notebook computers to access the main learning platforms – zoom or e-learning.

Student C, for example, does it her way to improve her English language skills.

For me, I learn listening from movies or songs and I learn reading on Facebook if [the] text is in English and I [communicate] on Facebook and Instagram with my foreign friends and I participate on Zoom using [the given] link.

But when pressed to respond how she communicates with her friends and teacher during online class, she admits using Facebook, line apps, and even zoom.

For easy communication, I [use] Facebook and Line [apps]. I [also] participate on Zoom if [my] teacher calls me and I answer in [return].

Use Newspapers, Online Sources to Improve “Reading” Skills

Student A, for her part, supports Student C’s response. She, however, learns reading from newspapers.

Yes, I learn [from] listening music and [watching] movies. I [also] learn reading from newspapers.

Student E, another student, suggests that using online sources shared on the group forum could also help improve reading skills among students. When asked what she thinks she should do to improve her reading skills, she had this to say.

Learning reading online [with] the teacher [using] the sources posted on Facebook. I think it's good so [I should] try to [practice] reading more to [be] better.

Turn Your Cameras On

On the issue of participation in the virtual classroom, Student A, believes that turning on the students' camera may maximize interaction between the students and the teacher.

Teacher [can] see you all the time because we turn on the camera. [With this], we can participate and respond [to] questions.

When asked to respond to this concern, Student B, while a little hesitant, right away says,

Yes I think it's better if we turn on [our] camera in [the] class on time. I turn on [my] camera sometimes if [the] teacher wants me to turn [it] on.

Student E, for her part, also believes that turning her camera on during the online class is also good for her. She says,

I turn on [my] camera all the time during class so the teacher would remember me. I [also] think everyone should turn on the camera because we [all] have [it]. I want to see everyone's face [because] it makes me want to study more and if everyone wants to study more, answering the questions from the teacher is good too.

Watch Movies, Listen to Music

Student C, a Public administration student, when pressed to comment on what she does to help herself, she simply says,

We can find time to study more easily. We can practice pronunciation and listening [from] movies in this term [during] Covid-19, [because] students cannot learn in [the] classroom. In listening to music and watching a movie, you can practice [English] for this and when you find time, you can practice all day all [the] time.

Student E, a nursing student, agrees with Student C. "For listening, I try [to] listen from videos and [my] teacher [and] so I also try [watching] movies."

Study by Yourself

If other students find online learning challenging, Student A, for her part, looks at the brighter side of it. According to her,

I learn English [during] online learning. Actually, I can study for myself [using] the internet for learning... maybe reading. I can improve my speaking [skills] from Google about pronunciation, about reading, about everything. I learn [by] myself and [if] I cannot understand, I will contact [my] teacher for improve[ment].

Student B, on the other hand, does the same. She tries many other ways to improve her English language skills. When pressed to comment on how she improves her English language skills, she had this to say.

I [learn] from using YouTube or from movies, music or songs in [the] English language.

Speak English with Friends, Family

Learning the target language may be difficult for many students but trying to practice it on a daily basis could also help.

Student A points out,

I think English online is easy to learn because everyone speaks English and [everyone can] learn from movies. Every day you can speak English with your friends or your family and get better, [and] to improve your English [language] skills.

Participate Actively Online

Many students suggest that in order to curb the negative effects of online learning on students, active participation in the virtual classroom is the key. Student E, a nursing student, thinks students should play an active role online.

I think students should [be] active in online class and when you [are] active you can [achieve] online learning better.” She adds, “I answer the teacher when he asks me [questions].

Student F, another nursing student, encourages fellow students to respond whenever the teacher asks questions. She admits, though, that some students are too shy to answer the latter’s questions. She points out,

Students can share their comment to get an idea to improve. Students should [respond] to the teacher [but] some students [are] shy to turn on their microphone to answer.

Conclusion

As the themes emerged, it appears that students’ view on online learning speaks for their preference for onsite learning over the current online mode. The qualitative data shows a number of factors that affect this view – family issues, noise, poor internet, and the risks of cheating among students. These must have prompted the participants to prefer a real face-to-face interaction with their classmates and their teacher. This confirms Tichavsky et al.’s (2015) earlier study that claims “interaction”, specifically interaction with professors, as an important factor for students’ preference for face-to-face over online learning. Also, despite the pandemic, learning EFL effectively remains possible given the alternative ways that emerged from this qualitative investigation.

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