

Challenges of Virtual Thai EFL Classes: Times of Pandemics

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted human life for over two years. To learn to adapt to the new normal era, we have to change the way of living, working, communicating, and so on. Similarly, the educational platform has been changed and most impacted from elementary to tertiary level in Thailand. In this regard, teaching and learning have been conducted on digital platforms. Therefore, this paper aims to recognize the challenges of the virtual EFL classes encountered by Thai instructors of English from a university in the deep south of Thailand during the Covid-19 pandemic. Survey questions were done from the instructors' perspectives. The challenges of teaching and learning in the virtual EFL classes faced by Thai instructors showed mainly three issues, namely (1) technological issues; (2) pedagogical issues, and (3) personal issues. These three principally issues could be valuable preliminary information for the English department as well as the university management to understand the problems by seeking and providing proper methods for the virtual EFL classroom during the times of pandemics.

Keywords: Challenges, Virtual Thai EFL Classes, Pandemics, Synchronous.

INTRODUCTION

Over two years, people around the world have faced the pandemics – the Covid-19. We have learnt to adapt the ways of living in this situation called 'the new normal life' and everything seems to be shut down and has become different such as health, economy, and education. Educational institutions – schools, universities, colleges and other tertiary institutes have replaced to online teaching methods (Amita, 2020) due to the outbreak of coronavirus. According to Kulal & Nayak (2020, p. 286), this Covid-19 pandemic has been influential factor the educational institution to employ online teaching-learning transition to traditional mode. Likewise, Thai educational platform has absolutely changed from traditional lecture (face to face) to digital learning platforms in order to prevent the spread of the outbreak. Undoubtedly, using technology has become currently potential element in online distance teaching and learning. More recently, access to technology and improved performance have opened up new possibilities for teachers and students to interact and communicate closer to live situations, using innovative technology in synchronous environments, such as virtual classrooms. Therefore, the paper focuses on teachers' perspectives towards 'EFL online virtual classroom' from a university in the deep south of Thailand

The Virtual Classroom and Traditional Classroom

To compare many of the features of the traditional classroom that have been transformed into a virtual

classroom. Both use similar learning theory, curriculum design, and pedagogy. Teaching in the traditional classroom and the virtual classroom concerns learner-centered. Although, there are key differences between the traditional classroom and the virtual classroom. These key differences involve time and circumstance, size, distribution of content, and mode of communication. The traditional classroom is a physical room that must be visited at an appropriate time to participate, while a virtual classroom is not accessible. Some virtual classrooms may suggest the optimal number of students; they can usually accommodate a larger student than real classrooms. The content structure in the two classes is relatively similar, but the way the content is transferred from the teacher to the student is very different. In the virtual classroom, content is disseminated using discussion boards, chat rooms, email, and so on. However, verbal/visual cues such as body language and eye contact are absent in the virtual classroom (Ananthasayanam, Thangamrajathi & Tamilselvi, 2008).

According to Dilamaghani (as cited in Fooladvand & Yarmohammadian, (2011, p. 647), traditional education refers to the group of doctrines on which the basic part of the order is based on the educational system. In other words, in traditional education, learners are forced to harmonize their learning techniques and abilities with the types, techniques, skills and desires of the teacher. In contrast, virtual education is discussed under headings such as electrical education, internet education, computer and "web" education and finally, virtual education refers to the teaching group whose

basic part of the system based on a networked learning system where the learner is the main axis.

What is a Virtual Classroom?

The term ‘virtual classroom’ has been used to describe a variety of online learning environments, in the dimension of both ‘asynchronous and synchronous’ systems. “Most global institutions opt to use synchronous and asynchronous online teaching methods: synchronous is where faculty and their students meet in a pre-scheduled time as a part of interactive learning classes, while the asynchronous method refers to the faculty giving the course without interaction with the students. There is no interaction between the faculty and students” (Almahasees, Mohsen & Amin, 2021, p. 2). Asynchronous online learning does not happen in real time. Students are more self-sufficient, completing coursework and assignments within a timeframe. The interaction of teacher-student in asynchronous online learning occurs via inbox, discussion forums, blogs, email, and so on. There is no designated class meeting time. On the other hand, synchronous is flexible and effective for students with time constraints or busy schedules and allows students to participate in a classroom at home in real time (Dung, 2020, p. 45). Similarly, it deals with interactive learning spaces established in virtual worlds such as Second Life (Masters & Gregory, 2010).

On the other hand, a synchronous online learning needs teachers and students to interact online at exactly the same time. Teachers provide guidance to students in order to interact between teachers and students, also students with students through text, audio chats, and video chats in a synchronous virtual classroom. Likewise, Falloon (2012, p. 111) stated that the learners are able to engage in ‘live’ virtual meetings, and communicate using multimedia services such as streamed video and audio. In addition, “A virtual classroom is an online learning environment that allows for live interaction between the teachers and the learners as they are participating in learning activities.” (Racheva, 2018).

In other words, a synchronous virtual classroom is a system that creates a shared online space and provides simultaneously working together between teachers and students. Furthermore, this type of interaction, teachers have the particularly significant role of the facilitators who guide the learning process and supports group activities and discussions (Racheva, 2018). Besides, the virtual classroom helps teachers to manage their lesson through using computer hardware and software, which concerns an online distance learning (ODL). Again, the virtual classroom aims to give students an

exposure that is balance what they would face in a regular mode classroom, it is clear that there are many advantages of the synchronous virtual classroom for students as well as teachers and educational institutions (Ananthasayanam, Thangamrajathi & Tamilselvi, 2008).

In the paper, virtual classrooms mean teachers interact with students in real-time; students can express their questions and interact with their peers as in a regular classroom, but through the internet. The virtual classrooms are also in sync because learners and teachers appear online at the same time to facilitate instant interaction. However, virtual classrooms also use pre-recorded components such as videos, presentations, and lesson slides to facilitate learning, just like offline classes.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Virtual Classrooms

Yadav (2016) discussed the advantages and disadvantages of virtual classes in his research. He pointed out that virtual classroom is a new term for E-learning, where students will be present with their teachers and other learners in a classroom over the Internet. He also addressed that the availability of different ways of communication between teachers and students in virtual classrooms considers the beneficial role of synchronous online classes. It plays an important role in maintaining interaction. He also mentioned the training needs and technical issues that are considered disadvantages of virtual classrooms.

Dung (2020) claimed that “virtual education is widely appreciated for its flexibility, cost effectiveness, and convenient access. With asynchronous courses, the student can enjoy a more flexible schedule that conveniently fits their available time and location.” In addition to the research of Al-Qahtani (2019, p. 234), he discussed the pros and cons of virtual classrooms because teachers have the ability to use multimedia environments and feel highly motivated to their students and they can give immediate feedback. However, technical problems can arise at any time and it is difficult to check student understanding.

METHOD

This current study focuses on the challenges of the virtual EFL classes encountered by Thai instructors of English from a university in the deep south of Thailand during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study is a small scale of nine participants in English Department from one of universities in the deep south of Thailand. The university is a local institution for serving local students. Open-ended survey questions were delivered through an application of Google Form. The data was

returned immediately to the author after the participants had done the open-ended survey questions. Regarding the data analysis, step 1: the author gathers all information, i.e., demographic information and open-ended survey questions from nine participants, step 2: classifies the data, and step 3: groups the data in each issue, finally presents the data. The author organized the procedures to analyze the current study in the following figure 1.

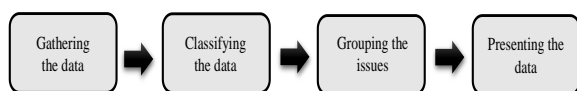


Figure 1. Four steps of data analysis procedures

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics of sample data

The first data provides the demographic results of nine instructors belonging in the English Department from a university in the deep south of Thailand. The demographic information deals with gender, education, and teaching experience that shown in figure 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

As figure 2 and 3 demonstrated, out of the total respondents, 88.9% of the instructors were female and only 11.1% were male instructors. Additionally, out of nine instructors, 88.9% graduated in Master degree and 11.1% graduated in Ph.D or Ed.D as the highest education.

The last demographic data is ‘teaching experience’ as shown below in figure 4. Among the total respondents,

44.4% were with teaching experience of “1-5” years and around 33.3% of instructors were having teaching experience of “6-10” years. Around 22.2% of instructors were having more than 10 years of teaching experience.

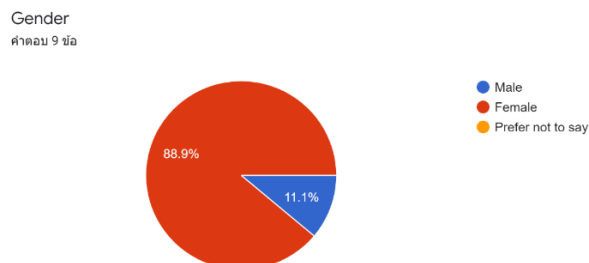


Figure 2. Demographic information – Gender

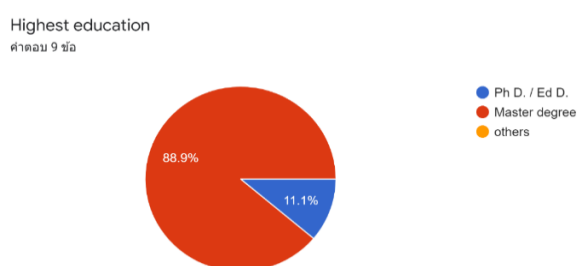


Figure 3. Demographic information – Highest education

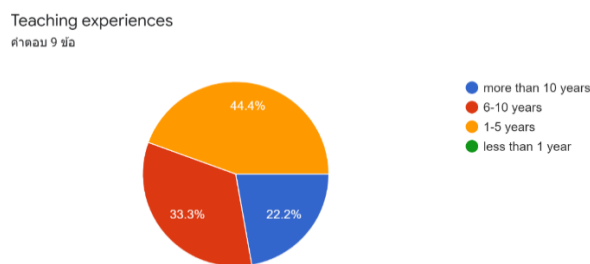


Figure 4. Demographic information – Teaching experience

Table 1. The responses of instructors regarding the question 1

Question 1	Respondents	Answer
What's the most challenge of teaching English in a virtual classroom and why?	R1	“No reaction from students”
	R2	“Classroom management because there are variety of students’ background.”
	R3	“Mutual interaction between teachers and students because it's a main factor to see whether teaching is successful or not.”
	R4	1) “Developing and integrating quality e-contents because of the lacking of designing a virtual classroom.” 2) “Monitoring students’ progress because we don’t see our students’ reactions as clearly as in a face-to-face classroom to see if they can understand what we’re saying.”
	R5	“Pedagogical methods & techniques of teaching in an online class”
	R6	“Personally, the most challenge is how to teach interactive ways. I think it's very difficult to manage when I teach students it would be better if they could interact as same as they learnt in the class. The use of technological material is important in the way of building a lively virtual classroom.”
	R7	“The distractions of the students are the most challenge. Some students can be easily distracted by their family members, social media or TV. These can pull one's attention away from the class.”
	R8	“Teacher's knowledge and skill in technology. Both can make the students interested and engaged with the class. Besides, the teacher can be confident and trustful.”
	R9	“Engaging students by using different approach to keep them learning in the classroom.”

Open-ended survey questions

The author provided 3 main open-ended questions: 1) What's the most challenge of teaching English in a virtual classroom and why?; 2) What's your best teaching method towards students' engagement through a virtual classroom?; and 3) What are your students' problems when they've learnt English through a virtual classroom? To start with the first question as shown in Table 1.

Based on the answering question 1 of the instructors, the author could classify and group the data into 3 main issues, namely (1) technological issues; (2) pedagogical issues, and (3) personal issues in the following Table 2.

Table 2. Classification and group the data from question 1

Issues	Responses
<i>Technological issue</i>	<p>Teacher's knowledge and skill in technology. Both can make the students interested and engaged with the class. Besides, the teacher can be confident and trustful." – R8</p> <p>The use of technological material is important in the way of building a lively virtual classroom." – R6</p>
<i>Pedagogical issue</i>	<p>"Classroom management because there are variety of students' background." – R2</p> <p>"Mutual interaction between teachers and students because it's a main factor to see whether teaching is successful or not." – R3</p> <p>"Developing and integrating quality e-contents because of the lacking of designing a virtual classroom." And "Monitoring students' progress because we don't see our students' reactions as clearly as in a face-to-face classroom to see if they can understand what we're saying." – R4</p> <p>"Pedagogical methods & techniques of teaching in an online class" – R5</p> <p>"Personally, the most challenge is how to teach interactive ways. I think it's very difficult to manage when I teach students it would be better if they could interact as same as they learnt in the class." – R6</p> <p>"Engaging students by using different approach to keep them learning in the classroom." -R9</p>
<i>Personal issue</i>	<p>"The distractions of the students are the most challenge. Some students can be easily distracted by their family members, social media or TV. These can pull one's attention away from the class." – R7</p>

Instructors' responses of the open-ended question 2, the instructors expressed their teaching experience in reference to the best teaching method towards students' engagement through EFL virtual classroom due to a

large challenge of the instructors as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. The responses of instructors regarding the question 2

Question 2	Respondents	Answer
What's your best teaching method towards students' engagement through a virtual classroom?	R1	"Using sharing idea via jam board"
	R2	"Active based learning, game-based learning"
	R3	"Nothing is the best one; it depends on the situation at that time but making them get involved with the instructor in the right time is a main point for consideration."
	R4	"Activity based teaching"
	R5	"Using social media and sometimes online games"
	R6	"I think the use of games can engage everyone to pay attention to the class. I've tried to use 'wheel of name' in order to random students' names for answering questions. That's an example of what I've done and my students were excited and fun with this activity."
	R7	"Game-Based Teaching method."
	R8	"Teacher just provides the content of the course to the students and let them design and lead the class."
	R9	"Having students do activities through various kind of platform such as Padlet, Booklet, Quizizz etc."

As the illustration of Table 3, most instructors shared their best teaching methods towards students' engagement through EFL virtual classrooms. Game-based and activity-based teaching methods by using online application platform - Padlet, Booklet, Kahoot, and Quizizz - obviously are a tendency of greater ways to apply in EFL virtual classrooms in terms of engaging students.

According to the responses of the open-ended question 3, the instructors faced their students' problems when they've learnt English through a virtual classroom as illustrated in Table 4.

From Table 4, the instructors found the students' difficulties involving learning in EFL virtual classrooms. The author classified and grouped the data within three main issues from the question 3 as shown in Table 5.

Table 4. The responses of instructors regarding the question 3

Question 3	Respondents	Answer
What are your students' problems when they've learnt English through a virtual classroom?	R1	"Cannot connect the stable network"
	R2	"They are shy and never try to use English in the classroom."
	R3	"Unwillingness to join the class"
	R4	"Students are often learning from home and, therefore, may be learning among a host of distractions."
	R5	"Lack of attraction/focus on the topic and weak internet signal"
	R6	"Most of them turned off their cameras and no responded to the teacher."
	R7	"Some students may keep quiet and stay silent when they do not understand. Finally, they feel discouraged, frustrated, and having learned nothing."
	R8	"Less interaction."
	R9	"Internet connection, learning device"

Table 5. Classification and group the data from question 3

Issues	Responses
<i>Technological issue</i>	"Cannot connect the stable network" – R1 "weak internet signal" -R5 "Internet connection and learning devices" -R9
<i>Pedagogical issue</i>	-
<i>Personal issue</i>	"They are shy and never try to use English in the classroom." – R2 "Unwillingness to join the class" -R3 "Students are often learning from home and, therefore, may be learning among a host of distractions." -R4 "Lack of attraction/focus on the topic" -R5 "Most of them turned off their cameras and no responded to the teacher." -R6 "Some students may keep quiet and stay silent when they do not understand. Finally, they feel discouraged, frustrated, and having learned nothing." -R7

The Challenges of EFL Virtual Classrooms

The preliminary finding of this paper could be discussed that the study can identify into 3 main issues: technological issues, pedagogical issues, and personal issues. The first two issues might tend to be mutual difficulties faced by the instructors in synchronous virtual teaching. Due to a technological literacy, the instructors need to sufficiently train; otherwise, it could affect to the quality of students' learning. From the instructors' responses, they were facing with the technological knowledge, especially the use of applications as the channels for teaching students in the virtual classes; for instance, Google Meet, Zoom, and MS-Team, and so on. Besides, the use and selection of online materials, online application games, those are the major challenges faced by them. Likewise, Gurung (2021, p. 14) his study regarding challenges faced by teachers in online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic found that "lack of technical and software knowledge becomes one of the biggest challenges in conducting online classes for teachers." This finding also matched to the study of Izhar, Na and Na (2021, p. 1299) that they highlight to 'the challenges teaching in the time of Covid-19 in initiating online class sessions' – that "teachers faced challenges in preparing teaching materials that can cater to students of different levels, creating suitable methods for all students, and

preparing synchronous lessons." Therefore, teachers in the 'new normal era' should integrate technology, content, and pedagogy (TCP) based on knowledge and skills contributes to an effective lesson delivery (Koehler, Mishra & Cain, 2013).

Moreover, in terms of personal issues faced by the teachers in their synchronous virtual classes concerned obviously with students. Most students did not respond or interact to teachers, turned off camera, poor network connectivity, insufficient learning devices, like they have only one mobile phone used for online classes. Some distractions at home were also big problems; for instance, students have to help business family, look after younger brothers or sisters, and so on. Similarly, a study of Al-Qahtani (2019, p. 232) reveals that students faced to internet problems, and they were not serious punctuality, this point could be reflected to students' self-discipline. Therefore, it could be said that all 3 issues are basically the greater impact to teaching and learning in the EFL virtual online classes.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the challenges on EFL virtual classes faced by the teachers from a university in the deep south of Thailand. The study showed that three basic issues are the difficulties for the teachers

encountering in the virtual online classes. So, these three key issues can be valuable preliminary information for the English program as well as the university management to understand the research problems and come up with further suitable methods for the EFL virtual classroom in the pandemic time.

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