Problems of Online Study of Political Science Students towards ESP Courses in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study in a Northern University

ปัญหาของการเรียนออนไลน์ของนิสิตสาขารัฐศาสตร์ในวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวัตถุประสงค์เฉพาะในสถานการณ์โควิด: กรณีศึกษามหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในภาคเหนือ

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the problems of online study for undergraduate students in Political Science enrolled in English for Specific Purposes courses during the COVID-19 pandemic at a university in the north of Thailand. This mixed-methods research was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2021. The participants were selected by random sampling from 204 third-year students enrolled in 4 ESP classes. A questionnaire was used to obtain quantitative and qualitative data. Statistics used for data analysis were percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The findings revealed that the highest level of problem was found in teaching and learning activities (3.64), followed by problems from students (3.08), problems applying knowledge in daily life (2.49), and problems towards lecturers (2.30). An analysis of open-ended questions found that on-site classes were more efficient than the online ones. The problems identified call upon executive administrators, lecturers, and educators, as well as those involved in all educational levels, to improve online study to be more efficient and beneficial for students.

Keywords: Problems of Online Study; Political Science Students; English for Specific Purposes

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บทคัดย่อ (Abstract)

การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาปัญหาการเรียนออนไลน์ของนิสิตปริญญาตรีสาขารัฐศาสตร์ที่มีต่อการจัดการเรียนการสอนรายวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวัตถุประสงค์เฉพาะในช่วงการระบาดของเชื้อไวรัสโควิด-19 ในมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย การศึกษาวิจัยเป็นแบบผสมผสานซึ่งเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลในภาคเรียนที่ 2 ปีการศึกษา 2564 ประชากรคัดเลือกจากการสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบเจาะจงจากนิสิตชั้นปีที่ 3 จำนวน 204 คน จาก 4 หมู่เรียนที่ลงทะเบียนเรียนในรายวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวัตถุประสงค์เฉพาะ เครื่องมือที่ใช้คือแบบสอบถามเพื่อเก็บข้อมูลทั้งเชิงปริมาณและเชิงคุณภาพ สถิติที่ใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล ได้แก่ ค่าร้อยละ ค่าเฉลี่ย และส่วนเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ปัญหาด้านกิจกรรมการเรียนการสอนเป็นปัญหาที่พบสูงสุด (3.17) รองลงมาคือปัญหาจากตัวผู้เรียน (3.08) ตามด้วยปัญหาด้านการประยุกต์ในชีวิตประจำวัน (2.79) และปัญหาด้านอาจารย์ผู้สอน (2.30) การวิเคราะห์จากคำถามปลายเปิดของนิสิตที่ได้แสดงความคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับปัญหาการเรียนออนไลน์พบว่า นิสิตส่วนใหญ่เห็นว่าการจัดการเรียนการสอนในชั้นเรียนมีประสิทธิภาพมากกว่าการเรียนการสอนผ่านระบบออนไลน์ ดังนั้น ผู้บริหาร อาจารย์ นักวิชาการทางด้านการศึกษา หรือผู้ที่ส่วนเกี่ยวข้องด้านการศึกษาในทุกระดับจำเป็นที่จะต้องพัฒนาและปรับปรุงการเรียนการสอนออนไลน์เพื่อให้เกิดประโยชน์สูงสุดกับผู้เรียนต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: ปัญหาการเรียนออนไลน์; นิสิตสาขารัฐศาสตร์; ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวัตถุประสงค์เฉพาะ

Introduction

The 21st century is the era of information and technology in which citizens should implement the use of devices in daily life, such as for education, entertainment, and commercial purposes (Netjoy, 2022). Furthermore, since the World Health Organization's (WHO) announcement on the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020, drastic decisions have been made in all areas of life. Social distancing was promptly adopted to prevent the virus from spreading. Online education has grown dramatically as educators attempt to maintain accessible classrooms for students. Educational institutions at all levels, from primary to tertiary, were required to make suitable and timely changes in order to maintain student education and academic advancement. A report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) acknowledged that since April 2020, school functions had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and almost 196 countries experienced national-wide closures of schools, subsequently affecting almost 1.6 billion young learners (Mirahmadizadeh et al., 2020). Globally, the decision to close educational institutions was deemed rational for social distancing and halting the spread of the disease. Some countries promptly switched to online learning. As a result, teaching

and learning activities were immediately shifted to full distance learning (Koet & Aziz, 2021; Somsathan & Sanjaipro, 2021). Although online teaching is not a novelty, it offers new and exciting experiences in learning for diverse students (Melvina et al., 2020).

Over the past two decades, online learning has been activated in many countries around the world. E-learning is becoming more popular in schools, colleges, and universities around the world. Online education, or online study, is defined as an instructional delivery system that contains any kind of learning and allows learners to learn from anywhere at any time via the Internet. Examples of online learning include distance learning, e- learning, remote learning, and virtual learning (Thanavisuth, 2021). MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) is another example of online learning that encourages people to learn comfortably since they can choose their own courses of interest depending on their practical orientation on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. For teachers and students alike, online learning provides educational experiences customized according to their individual technological capabilities and time allotment. Basar et al. (2021) assert that it is as efficient as face-to-face learning. The main purpose of online learning is to protect all teachers and students from the coronavirus. Ideally, it is carried out to maintain the same quality of education as provided in the classroom. Teachers attempt to incorporate online methods and platforms in order to maintain the efficiency of traditional face-to-face teaching while meeting learning objectives (Curelaru et al., 2022). An advantage of online learning is that learners are able to learn from anywhere. Additionally, students can replay recorded teaching videos in the programs anytime they want. It saves time for the teacher as they do not have to repeat the same lesson (Satsin & Wongwiseskul, 2021). The way that students in the 21st century will thrive in this critical time is indeed to study through online learning. However, learning through an online class can also be disadvantageous. For instance, after long hours of online classes, students might experience some physical concerns such as backache, headache, and eyestrain. They may also suffer from mental health issues, including depression and anxiety (Prasertsong et al., 2021).

In regards to teaching and learning English in Thailand in the 21st century, the national curriculum requires language learners to practice the language and apply it in their daily lives as it has been accepted as the "linguafraca" or "lingua franca" (Wangmanee, 2022). It goes without saying that the trends in English language

teaching are derived from the need for markets, economics, culture, and traditions, which results in language learning becoming more essential. As mentioned earlier, it affects teaching approaches, forms, and procedures (Kováčiková, 2020). As a result, the demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is growing rapidly, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) countries where English is used for instrumental purposes (Quadeer & Signh, 2021).

Due to the world economy and the growth of mass media, the demand for ESP has increased as a result of English being the international language through which people can communicate their ideas, knowledge, and culture. Furthermore, the need to use English to exchange information in specific fields intensifies the language demand in meetings and conferences. ESP has been an integral part of English language teaching and learning since it was developed as a part of English back in the 1960s. At that time, special groups of people asserted the necessity of integrating ESP into the university curriculum (Ahmadvand et al., 2015; Bosco et al., 2020). Learning ESP is a phenomenal development. Most of the EFL learners cover trends in their demand for English that suit their specific needs in a profession. In this course, the focus is not only on learning in the specific fields but also on linguistic features. Undoubtedly, the definition of ESP is generally defined as the learners' approach based on the learners' needs and goals (Pardayevna et al., 2021; Rajabi et al., 2012). ESP courses traditionally begin at the undergraduate level with general English for academic purposes or study skills, and then move towards more subject-specific conventions as students acquire more disciplinary expertise that meets their language needs. With regards to teaching practices, it is especially important for the learners who study English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language to continue to learn aspects of the language such as vocabulary and grammar (Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017).

It is evident that Thai education is affected by the COVID-19 status, and online learning offers a solution. At the University of Phayao, Thailand, online learning is not new because the university has been using technology in online education since 2016. The innovative educational systems employed in online courses included Learning Management Systems (LMS), Thai Massive Open Online Courses (Thai MOOCs), as well as programs such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The university provides online learning for both general education (GE) courses and for the major

courses, including compulsory and elective ones. This research aims to study the attitudes of students regarding online English learning in this critical time.

Research Objective

This study is carried out in order to identify the problems facing political science students in ESP online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic and improve the effectiveness of online teaching.

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research in order to gain quantitative and qualitative data. To collect the quantitative data, the questionnaire was used to gather information on the problems of online study in ESP courses. For the qualitative data, an open-ended question was used to obtain the data in order to collect in-depth information. The data obtained was then analyzed qualitatively using descriptive analysis.

Participants

The participants were 204 third-year students majoring in Political Science at the University of Phayao's School of Political Science and Social Sciences. They were selected by purposive sampling from 4 ESP courses in Semester 2 of the academic year 2021.

Research Instrument

The research instrument was a questionnaire that aimed at investigating the students' problems pertaining to their online studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire was adapted from Jirapraditpol's (2020) study, whose emphasis was also to survey students' perspectives toward online learning during the outbreak. It was produced online with Google Forms, as all participants were studying online during the data collection period.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first one aimed at exploring the participants' general information. The second involved a set of questions about students' perspectives on the problems of studying ESP courses online in Semester 2 of the academic year 2021. There were four sub-topics in this part. The first inquiry was about the problems students encountered during their online classes. The

second sub-topic dealt with the problems related to the lecturers, and the third was about the activities provided in the online classes. The last sub-topic was about having problems applying their knowledge in daily life and targeting their self-improvement after studying online. Each sub-topic in Part 2 consisted of 5 items, accounting for the total of 20 items. The third section was an open-ended question seeking students' opinions about online learning. To ensure a reliable and accurate questionnaire, all questions were reviewed by three experts to determine their appropriateness.

Data Collection

There were three steps in the data collection as follows. Firstly, the participants were asked to sign a consent form to ensure their confidentiality. They had the right to withdraw at any time without prejudice or giving any justification. Secondly, the questionnaire was distributed online to 204 participants, with a total response time of approximately 10-15 minutes. Finally, the data was gathered and analyzed.

Data Analysis

For quantitative analysis, the data from the questionnaire was statistically analyzed using the mean, SD, and percentage. For qualitative analysis, the content from open-ended questions was analyzed and written into a descriptive analysis.

The criteria for data analysis and interpretation in Part 2 were derived from Silcharu (2017) as follows:

Score	Level of Perspectives
4.50-5.00	very high
3.50-4.49	high
2.50-3.49	moderate
1.50-2.49	low
1.00-1.49	very low

Research Results

The results were presented based on the quantitative data as follows:

Table 1: General Information (N = 204)

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	132	64.71
Male	72	35.29
Total	204	100.00

According to Table 1, the general information, the participants were 204 students, including 132 female participants, accounting for 64.71%, and 72 male participants, accounting for 35.29%, and all of them were third-year students.

Table 2: Online Learning Issues in ESP Courses During COVID-19 (N = 204)

Statements	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Meaning
Students' Problems in Learning			
1. Students did not have enough equipment for online study.	2.60	0.90	Moderate
2. Students did not think they could clearly understand the lessons from an online study.	3.16	0.84	Moderate
3. Students found the contents of the subjects too difficult for online study.	3.23	0.75	Moderate
4. Students could not catch up on the lessons with their classmates.	2.96	0.82	Moderate
5. Students could not concentrate on online learning.	3.47	1.01	Moderate
Total	3.08	0.63	Moderate
Lecturers' Communicative Problem in Teaching			
6. Students found it difficult to communicate with lecturers during class.	2.74	0.89	Moderate
7. Students found it difficult to communicate with lecturers after class.	2.60	0.91	Moderate
8. Students found that lecturers did not give them the opportunity to ask questions.	2.02	0.81	Low

9. Students found that lecturers were unfriendly.	2.09	0.92	Low
10. Students found that the lecturers did not listen to their opinions.	2.03	0.91	Low
Total	2.30	0.73	Low
Problems with Teaching and Learning Activities			
11. Students did not find online teaching activities interesting.	2.97	0.88	Moderate
12. Students thought that online teaching activities were not diverse.	3.00	0.89	Moderate
13. Students thought that there were many activities during the online study.	3.12	0.86	Moderate
14. Students found that there was so much homework and assignment work after online study.	3.11	0.93	Moderate
15. Students found that online teaching made them feel stressed and worried about studying.	3.64	1.04	High
Total	3.17	0.75	Moderate
Problems with Applying Knowledge in Daily Life			
16. Students could not improve their communication skills with teachers and friends.	2.86	0.93	Moderate
17. Students could not improve their thinking skills.	2.65	0.87	Moderate
18. Students could not develop problem-solving skills.	2.65	0.86	Moderate
19. Students could not improve their technological skills.	2.41	0.89	Moderate
20. Students could not improve moral values.	2.43	0.93	Low
Total	2.60	0.76	Moderate
Average	**2.79**	**0.72**	**Moderate**

To address the research objective, there are four sub-topics concerning the problems of online learning in ESP courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, including problems from students themselves, problems in communication with lecturers' teaching, problems in teaching and learning activities, and problems in applying knowledge in daily life. From Table 2, in terms of teaching and learning activities, online teaching is a cause of students feeling stressed and worried about studying at a high level (3.64), followed by problems with online learning that show students' concentration at a moderate level (3.47). In regards to difficulties in applying knowledge in daily life, most students believed that they could not improve their communication skills with teachers and friends (2.86). Concerning the issues related to lecturers, it was revealed that many students found it difficult to communicate with teachers during class at the moderate level (2.74).

Table 3 Information Obtained from Open-ended Questions (N = 204)

Feedback	Frequency	Percentage
1. Online classes were less comprehensible than on-site classes.	61	29.90
2. Students could not concentrate on online learning.	28	13.73
3. There was too much homework.	25	12.25
4. Students had problems with the Internet connection during class.	20	9.80
5. Students lacked enthusiasm for online study.	20	9.80
6. Students got eyestrain from online study.	14	6.86
7. Students lacked discipline in online study.	11	5.39
8. Students did not have relationships with friends through online study.	11	5.39
9. Online learning was boring.	8	3.92
10. Noise always interrupted online classes.	6	2.94

The qualitative data was analyzed from students' opinions towards online learning in ESP courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, as revealed by the open-ended question in the third part of the questionnaire. The opinions were analyzed based on 10 main topics. Firstly, almost one-third (29.90%) of the respondents pointed out that online classes were less comprehensible than on-site ones,

followed by the statement that they were unable to concentrate on online study (13.73%), and that there was too much homework (12.25%). Two aspects with the same percentage (9.80%) were that students experienced problems with the Internet connection during class and that they lacked enthusiasm for online study. Moreover, students reported themselves suffering from eyestrain (6.86%). Online study also caused students to lack discipline, and they did not have relationships with friends through online study; both statements had the same percentage at 5. 39. Furthermore, 3.92% stated that online learning was boring. At the least frequency (2.94%), students reported noise interruption during online study.

Discussion

Key issues pertaining to the problems of online study in ESP courses during the COVID-19 pandemic were analyzed as follows:

The research results showed that the levels of problems with online study in ESP courses during the COVID-19 pandemic encountered by political science students were at a moderate level. To elaborate, the main issues students encountered were teaching activities that made them stressed and anxious about their studies, such as when they had to wait for their teachers' responses. This is consistent with Prasertsong et al.'s (2021) assertion that, in online learning, students were highly stressed from long online classes. Some students had long classes of six or eight hours a day, and they felt pressure from their classes. The second issue was derived from the students themselves. The research found that they could not concentrate on their online classes, as most of the students were unable to focus on online learning for a long time. This is in line with Basar et al. (2021) in that learning has suffered as a result of people's perception shifting from traditional classroom learning to online learning. The third problem involved the lecturers. Students specified that they had difficulty communicating with lecturers during class. In addition to this, through an online program like Microsoft Teams, when students had questions and sent messages through the chat section, their teachers were still giving the lecture, so they did not see the students' messages. Therefore, they missed instant communication with their lecturers. This is supported by the research by Satsin and Wongwiseskul (2021), which indicates that students have used an application to communicate with each other and that it can be used for learning in online learning. For the issue of everyday life application, the most important concern was that the

students were unable to develop their communication skills with teachers and friends. In online learning, neither the lecturers nor classmates are actually present. This contributes to the students' lack of opportunity to communicate with other people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concurrent to Curelaru et al.'s (2022) study, building relationships between people in groups, such as in teaching and learning management, must relate to the relationships in the classroom by allowing students to participate in learning. In terms of recommendations from political science students towards online learning in ESP courses during the COVID-19 situation, students expressed their opinions in an open-ended question, insisting that they prefer on-site classes to online ones. It is due to the fact that, when studying a language, particularly English as a foreign language, students find it challenging to learn from online courses. This is in line with the studies of Ahmadvand et al. (2015) and Bosco et al. (2020), which affirm that, as social animals, we need to meet and talk to other people.

In summary, the students' opinions implied that ESP courses are better taught in a face-to-face classroom. As the effectiveness of online learning depends significantly on a teacher's role as a classroom leader and educator (Koet & Aziz, 2021; Somsathan & Sanjaipro, 2021), the teachers could help encourage students to be more involved in their learning. Being merely virtually present, students cannot properly develop their knowledge and human connection as much as they could by learning in the classroom.

Body of Knowledge

The findings revealed the political science students' attitudes towards online learning in English for Specific Purposes courses. The main issue that students face is that online learning is less accessible than classroom learning. Students agree that studying online can make their studies more distracting, and the lack of enthusiasm to study makes them unable to fully improve the efficiency of studying. Online learning also prevents them from interacting with friends and teachers. However, as it is difficult to learn online in the COVID-19 situation, teachers play a crucial role in helping students gain knowledge as well as improve relationships with their peers. In both an online and an actual classroom, teachers are therefore a key player in improving educational efficiency so that, regardless of the platform of learning, it is most beneficial to the learners.

Research Suggestions

1. Student perspectives can be studied at all levels of education and over many years of study in higher education.
2. To obtain more information, a study can be conducted on various topics that might be useful for both learning and teaching strategies.
3. This study focuses on the perspectives of political science students toward learning English online. Therefore, further studies can use the results of this study to improve the quality of online teaching.

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