

Exploring English Language Courses on the Thai MOOC Platform

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Abstract

In response to the growing importance of lifelong learning, the Thai MOOC platform provides a diverse range of courses, including those specifically designed for English language skills. To gain insights into the current status of these English language courses, this study utilized a descriptive study design, analyzing the course documents of 18 courses available on the platform as of May 2023. The primary objective was to examine the characteristics of these courses in terms of their purpose, duration, and competency levels. The findings revealed that 56% of the courses were English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The remaining 44% were General English (GE) courses. ESP courses emphasized language skills, research proficiency, critical thinking, specialized vocabulary, and communication in professional settings. GE courses covered basic English skills, everyday life communication, and cultural awareness. Most courses had short durations of 5-10 hours and were classified as basic courses. This study offers insights into the English language courses available on the Thai MOOC platform, serving as a foundation for future research in this area. Understanding the landscape of these courses is vital for educational institutions to optimize their offerings and promote lifelong learning by avoiding duplication and developing targeted courses.

Keywords: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Thai MOOC Platform, English Language, ESP (English for Specific Purposes), General English (GE)

Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have been considered a tool for lifelong learning. Individuals who have work commitments can enroll in MOOCs to upgrade their skills at their own pace since they are available 24/7 (Gupta & Jain, 2017, p. 832). These platforms offer a wide variety of English language courses that cater to different learning needs. The courses available on these platforms comprise General English (GE), also known as English for General Purposes (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 198). According to Harmer (2007, p. 19), GE is typically “taught in most schools and private language institutes” to improve learners’ communication

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abilities in everyday situations. In addition, there are English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses that cater to the specific needs of learners who require English for academic, professional, or vocational purposes (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). The courses are readily accessible and can be taken at the learners' preferred pace and convenience. As a result, MOOCs have become a crucial resource for learners seeking to improve their English language skills and proficiency.

The Thai MOOC platform (<https://thaimooc.org/>), launched in 2017, is one such platform that provides access to a wide range of courses in various subjects to expand access to education and promote lifelong learning for learners in Thailand and beyond. Thai Cyber University has developed an open system approach for teaching and learning management, in line with the need for educational technology reforms in Thailand as part of the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2023-2027) and government. The plan's 12th goal emphasizes the need for a high-performing workforce that focuses on learning and meets future development needs (Thammetar, Theeraroungchaisri, Khlaibang, Boonlue, & Duangchindra, 2022, p. 2).

Leading universities in Thailand have developed their platforms, such as Chula MOOC from Chulalongkorn University, MUX from Mahidol University, CMU MOOC from Chiang Mai University, and MFU Academy from Mae Fah Luang University, as a response to the success of Thai MOOC (Boonroungsri, Saroinsong, Eiamnate, & Kim 2021, p. 4140). However, this paper focuses solely on the Thai MOOC platform because the Thai MOOC platform is the main collaborative platform used by Thai universities.

In today's interconnected and globalized world, English language skills have become increasingly vital. Proficiency in English is often seen as a crucial factor in obtaining educational degrees, securing employment opportunities, and achieving social mobility. English language learning has expanded beyond traditional educational institutions, such as schools and universities, to cater to individuals of various ages and backgrounds who are seeking to enhance and refine their English language proficiency through lifelong learning initiatives such as via MOOCs.

Gaining a comprehensive understanding of English language courses on the Thai MOOC platform is crucial for educational institutions. It helps them avoid redundancy, develop tailored courses, and maximize the platform's impact in promoting lifelong learning.

Literature Review

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

The use of online learning platforms, including Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), has grown exponentially in recent years, providing learners with opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills in a flexible and accessible way. MOOCs are online courses that do not

have formal prerequisites or admission requirements and are available to an unlimited number of participants free of charge (Gaebel, 2013, p. 3).

The inaugural MOOC was “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge,” an online course taught by George Siemens and Stephen Downes and offered through the Learning Technologies Centre and Extended Education at the University of Manitoba (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, & Williams, 2013, p. 204). Since then, other MOOC platforms such as Coursera, edX and FutureLearn have emerged, and the number of courses and participants has grown significantly.

MOOC content is often designed to be easily consumable, allowing for the successful completion of MOOCs (De Freitas, Morgan, & Gibson, 2015). Nevertheless, MOOCs are primarily suitable for higher education students and also post-graduate students as MOOCs require learners to have a high degree of responsibility and self-discipline to effectively manage their participation per their learning objectives (Chunwijitra, et al., 2020, p. 1079).

MOOCs are also helpful in addressing competency gaps in various domains by providing short courses divided into different levels of expertise (Gupta & Jain, 2017 p. 832). MOOCs are being considered by universities for different purposes, such as reducing education costs, making better use of existing resources, providing more flexible learning opportunities, and reaching new groups of learners (Gaebel, 2013, p. 11). They are also valuable tools during the COVID-19 quarantine period (Lytovchenko & Voronina, 2020).

MOOCs have the potential to offer new perspectives in education and cater to diverse audiences. Integrating MOOCs into higher education can provide advantages to students, including improving their English language skills, enhancing self-directed learning, and engaging in an international learning community (Stognieva, 2019, p. 438).

MOOCs in the Thai Higher Education Context

In the context of Thai higher education, MOOCs have become a topic of interest and discussion among universities due to the potential benefits they offer, including the opportunity to reach a wider audience, particularly in the face of low birth rates and intense competition for admissions. Therefore, universities can no longer focus solely on students within the traditional system (Thammetar et al., 2022, p. 2). According to Chunwijitra et al. (2020, p. 1085), integrating MOOC programs into the curriculum can increase the university’s enrollment and attract more participants through online courses.

The Thai MOOC platform aims to develop the potential of Thai people by providing online education to upskill and reskill them for the 21st-century workforce. The platform has international collaborations and credit transfer agreements with MOOCs from other countries. Popular courses include English for Communication, Cross-Cultural Psychology in the Workplace, Basic English, Psychology and Daily Life, Korean 1-2, Blockchain and Bitcoin Technology, Professional Development Team Building, and Networking through Social Media (Public Relations

Department, n.d.). As of April 2023, the platform had around 1.6 million users according to the Thai Cyber University website. Table 1 summarizes the number of courses available on the Thai MOOC platform in each category as of May 2023.

Table 1

The number of courses available on the Thai MOOC platform in each category (as of May 2023).

No.	Category	Number of Courses	%
1	Computer and Technology	136	19.68
2	Business and Management	125	18.09
3	Life Skills and Self-Development	77	11.14
4	Education and Training	76	11.00
5	Health and Medicine	71	10.27
6	Language and Communication	51	7.38
7	Arts, Culture, and Religion	33	4.78
8	Mathematics and Science	31	4.49
9	Society, Politics, and Government	28	4.05
10	Agriculture and Environment	27	3.91
11	Engineering and Architecture	25	3.62
12	Food and Nutrition	10	1.45
13	Others	1	0.14
Total		691	100%

The top five categories with the highest number of courses are Computer and Technology, Business and Management, Life Skills and Self-Development, Education and Training, and Health and Medicine, respectively. Despite the growth in the number of courses available on the Thai MOOC platform, the Language and Communication category still has a relatively low representation. This indicates a need for more MOOCs focused on language learning, particularly English, to provide Thai learners and the workforce with opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills required for their jobs and communicative goals.

Course developers must adhere to Thai Cyber University's Requirements and Guidelines for Conducting Courses on Thai Cyber University (n.d.). The courses must be designed to be completed within 15 hours, with units lasting between 1-3 hours. Additionally, courses must not exceed six weeks and must include videos, which should account for 65% of the learning hours and not exceed 10 minutes. The remaining 35% of learning hours should consist of other materials such as activities and reading resources. The teaching system should incorporate activities, assessment methods, and collaborations. Before proposing a course, it is

recommended to review existing course information available on the platform and check for any potential duplication of course content. It is important to be cautious of using the same course name to avoid confusion.

Many researchers have examined the platform, its management, and the courses offered from different perspectives. In line with the aims of this study, this section describes previous research that has investigated the design and format of the courses, the engagement, performance, and expectations of learners, as well as the relationships between some of these factors. This knowledge highlights the characteristics of effective MOOCs specifically designed for Thai learners, serving as a valuable framework for the data analysis in the current study.

To begin with, Phithak, Wanapu, Kittidachanupap, and Kamollimsakul (2018) analyzed the expectations and self-regulated learning behaviors of 462 active users in a 16-week E-Commerce Website Development for “Online Business” course offered in Thai MOOC. The learners had high expectations of applying the knowledge gained to improve their work performance. Most learners expected to spend two hours per week on learning but actually spent no more than 30 minutes per week.

Another study found a significant relationship between course structure and design and learners’ performance and engagement. Anutariya and Thongsuntia (2019) analyzed the Thai MOOC platform in terms of its course structure and design, as well as the learners’ performance and engagement. The dataset for the courses analyzed in this study consisted of information from 28 MOOCs that were offered in the STEM subject area in 2018. The researchers clustered Thai MOOCs into short (less than 15 hrs., <3 hrs./week effort), medium-length (15-40 hrs., 3-8 hrs./week effort), and long (> 40 hrs., > 5 hrs./week effort) course clusters. The researchers discovered that most of the MOOCs were designed as short courses, which is understandable given that MOOC users are usually students and working professionals. The authors further analyzed learners’ performance and engagement by using grades and attempt rates to cluster Thai MOOC learners into sampling, targeting, and comprehensive learners. Thai MOOC learners demonstrated the best learning performance in medium-length MOOCs as they had the highest percentage of passing learners, as well as the highest number of comprehensive and targeting learners. On the other hand, long MOOCs were found to perform poorly in both performance and engagement dimensions. This finding is supported by Chansanam, Poonpon, Manakul, and Detthamrong (2021)’s systematic literature review regarding factors that pose challenges to the success of MOOCs.

MOOCs have been widely integrated into English language education programs and have been reported to enhance students’ independent learning and achievement (e.g., Jitpaisarnwattana & Chalmers, 2022; Shalatska, 2018), but there is a lack of knowledge regarding the features of English language courses offered on the Thai MOOC platform. Given the insights

provided by Poonsawad and Lawthong (2021) regarding the necessity for more extensive documentation of English language courses on the Thai MOOC platform, this study aims to address this gap by categorizing the courses based on two key criteria. Firstly, the study focuses on the characteristics of the courses, including their duration and the target competency levels associated with them, encompassing beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. Secondly, the study examines the content of the courses, specifically differentiating between English for Specific Purposes and General English, and analyzing the topics covered in each course.

Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive study design with a focus on providing insights and describing the current state of English language courses offered on the Thai MOOC platform. It study incorporates a documentary analysis methodology, following the guidelines provided by Robson and McCartan (2016). This approach involves examining and analyzing existing documents related to the English language courses available on the Thai MOOC platform.

The data was drawn from the courses available on the Thai MOOC platform as of May 2023. The researchers used the search terms “English” and “ภาษาอังกฤษ” from the search menu. The search yielded 19 results; however, one was excluded as it was not related to English skills development. Next, the researchers cross-referenced the figure with the roster provided on the Thai Cyber University webpage (https://mcl.thaicyberu.go.th/course_info2_tcu.php). The remaining 18 English courses were found across the categories of Education and Training, Business and Management, and Language and Communication. These courses were published from 2020-2022 by 14 universities or institutions. Content analysis was conducted to analyze the data. The researchers carefully read the course descriptions, learning outcomes, and course structures multiple times and coded relevant words or phrases related to the purposes and topics of the courses. The data was then categorized into groups based on recurring patterns. The data was organized in a spreadsheet and visualized through bar graphs illustrating the course purposes, lengths, and competency levels. Subsequently, the characteristics of the analyzed courses were discussed by comparing them with the requirements and guidelines for course delivery on the Thai MOOC platform as outlined by Thai Cyber University (n.d.), as well as incorporating insights from previous studies.

Findings

Table 2 presents an overview of the characteristics of the 18 English language courses available on the Thai MOOC platform, including course titles, hosting institutions, English skills targeted, length, and competency levels. Certain course titles may be ambiguous. For instance, the “English Start-Up” mentions their target group as people in the community in the following course description:

The English Start-Up course on the Thai MOOC platform is designed to promote interactive learning within the community of content owners or individuals with the knowledge they wish to share. It encourages community members to communicate independently, such as sharing stories about weaving, agriculture, tourist attractions, community narratives, and more, to provide insight to international visitors and learners. Additionally, it supports the development and sustainability of language skills by emphasizing community-based learning, where content creators and local residents design and determine the language learning content they wish to develop. (English Start-Up course description).

However, the learning outcomes and course structure were focused on understanding and explaining the fundamental principles of using the English language for communication. These included fostering a positive attitude towards English and recognizing its value and benefits in various contexts, particularly in daily life and professional settings. Hence, the course was categorized as a GE course rather than ESP.

Table 2

Characteristics of Thai MOOC English Courses

General English (GE) Courses					
No.	Course titles	English skills targeted	Host institutions	Competency level	Length (Hrs.)
1	English Start-Up	Speaking	Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University	Basic	30
2	English for Social Communication	Speaking	Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University	Intermediate	4
3	English Communication Skills	Vocabulary, speaking, grammar, reading and writing	Institute of Community College	Basic	15
4	Ready English	Vocabulary, speaking, and grammar	University of Phayao	Intermediate	10
5	English for Cultural Tourism	Speaking	RMUTT	Intermediate	6
6	Easy English for Everyday Life	Vocabulary and grammar	Buriram Rajabhat University	Basic	24
7	Explorative English	Vocabulary and speaking	University of Phayao	Intermediate	10
8	English for Communication	Speaking	Chiang Mai University	Basic	10

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Courses

No.	Course titles	English skills targeted	Host institutions	Competency level	Length (Hrs.)
1	Academic Reading and Writing English for Graduate Program	Reading and writing	Kasetsart University	Basic	15
2	English for Hotel Business	Speaking	Hat Yai University, Business Administration	Basic	5
3	English for information technology	Listening, speaking, reading, and writing	Khon Kaen University	Basic	10
4	Describing figures in English	Writing	Chulalongkorn University	Basic	10
5	Academic English Listening and Speaking Skills for Graduate Program	Listening and speaking	Kasetsart University	Basic	15
6	English for Fundamental Nursing	Vocabulary and speaking	Suratthani Rajabhat University	Basic	5
7	English for Industrial Technology	Speaking and reading	Vocational Education Commission	Intermediate	5
8	English for Computing	Vocabulary and grammar	Naresuan University	Basic	5
9	English Pronunciation and Basic English Phonetics for English Teachers	Pronunciation and phonetics	Chiang Mai University	Basic	10
10	Spoken English for Pharmacist	Speaking	Naresuan University	Basic	5

Purposes and Topics of the Courses

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of course purposes, lengths, and competency levels as percentages. Fifty-six percent (10) of these courses were English for Specific Purposes (ESP), three of which focused on Academic English, namely: “Academic Reading and Writing English for Graduate Program,” “Academic English Listening and Speaking Skills for Graduate Program,” and “English Pronunciation and Basic English Phonetics for English Teachers.” The rest are “English for Hotel Business,” “English for information technology,” “Describing figures in English,” “English for Fundamental Nursing,” “English for Industrial Technology,” “English for Computing,” and “Spoken English for Pharmacists.”

The analysis of the course descriptions, learning outcomes, and course structures revealed several patterns in the topics covered by these ESP courses. Firstly, a significant emphasis is placed on developing and enhancing language skills. The courses tend to prioritize the improvement of essential English skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing. Secondly, a subset of courses aims to equip students for academic settings, especially in the context of graduate programs. These courses place importance on fostering academic skills essential for success in higher education. The emphasis lies in developing research proficiency, critical thinking, and analytical skills. These courses aim at navigating academic texts, interpreting data, selecting information, articulating academic findings, writing abstracts, and composing theses.

Furthermore, specialized vocabulary plays a significant role in many of the courses. These courses cater to students pursuing specific fields or professions and introduce industry-specific terminology and vocabulary, for instance, courses like “English for Hotel Business,” “English for Information Technology,” “English for Fundamental Nursing,” and “English for Industrial Technology”.

Lastly, courses such as “English for Hotel Business,” “English for Information Technology,” and “English for Industrial Technology” focus on developing communication skills in professional settings.

Figure 1

Percentage of Course Purposes, Lengths, and Competency Levels



While GE courses (8 courses, 44%) on the Thai MOOC platform are not the majority, their inclusion highlights the acknowledgement of the significance of English proficiency in everyday communication. These courses tend to be designed for learners to enhance their

overall language skills and communicate effectively in various social and personal situations. The topics covered by these courses can be grouped into three main categories. Firstly, some courses focus on basic English language skills for communication, including pronunciation, sentence structure, and reading comprehension. Secondly, there are some courses that aim at everyday life communication skills, teaching students how to navigate situations such as asking for directions, discussing travel plans, describing tourist destinations, and addressing common health issues. Lastly, some courses emphasize cultural awareness and understanding, aiming to enhance intercultural communication skills and promote cultural sensitivity by exploring different cultures, customs, and traditions, particularly those of foreign communities. It is worthwhile to note that GE courses incorporate lessons on grammar and structure, whereas ESP courses do not.

Duration and Level of Competency of the Courses

The length of each course ranged from 4 hours to 30 hours. The most common length of courses was 10 hours, accounting for 33% of all courses. The second most common length was 5 hours, representing 28% of all courses. Courses with a length of 15 hours and 4 hours accounted for 17% and 6% of all courses, respectively. In addition, courses with a length of 6 hours, 24 hours, and 30 hours were less common, accounting for 6% of all courses each. Based on this information, there are several patterns and trends that can be observed in the course durations.

The analysis of the course durations reveals several patterns on the Thai MOOC platform. Most courses (11 out of 18) have durations between five and 15 hours, indicating a preference for shorter courses. Among these, 10-hour courses are the most frequent, suggesting a standardized format. Longer duration courses, such as 24 and 30 hours, are less common. The relationship between course duration and the type of English being taught shows that General English courses span a wide range of durations (four to 30 hours), while ESP courses tend to be shorter (five to 10 hours). Additionally, course durations vary based on the target competency level, with Basic and Intermediate courses offered across different durations and Academic courses typically lasting 10 or 15 hours.

Based on the analysis of the course syllabuses, the data indicates that most courses (72%) were categorized as basic, with 13 courses falling into this category. Additionally, five courses (28%) were classified as intermediate. No courses were identified as advanced. In comparing the level of competency between GE and ESP courses, ESP courses predominantly focus on the basic level, with nine out of 10 courses falling into this category. In contrast, GE courses show a more balanced distribution across competency levels, with four courses each classified as basic and intermediate. However, it is important to note that the classification of courses into different levels appears to be somewhat unreliable. For instance, a GE course

titled “Academic Listening and Speaking English for Graduate Program” was categorized as basic, while other General English courses such as “English for Social Communication,” “Ready English,” “English for Cultural Tourism,” and “Explorative English” were labeled as intermediate. It is worth mentioning that the researchers did not evaluate the difficulty level of the course content but relied on the information provided in the course documents. This discrepancy suggests that the level classification may not always accurately reflect the actual difficulty level of the courses.

Discussions

The findings suggested that the majority of English language courses offered on the Thai MOOC platform were designed for ESP. The ESP courses cover a range of specific fields such as Academic English and professions, such as Hotel Business, Information Technology, Fundamental Nursing, Industrial Technology, Computing, and Pharmacy, providing industry-specific vocabulary and workplace communication skills. This is in line with previous research that indicates MOOCs are increasingly being used for skills development in specialized fields, especially ESP (Gupta & Jain, 2017; Lytovchenko & Voronina, 2020; Stognieva, 2019). However, it has been observed that there are certain areas of professions and purposes that are still lacking in terms of English language support, such as English for Tourism (beyond the hotel business) and English for Business.

Regarding the length of the courses, according to Thai Cyber University guidelines for Thai MOOC courses, the duration should not exceed 15 hours, with each unit lasting between 1-3 hours (Thai Cyber University, n.d.). Apparently, longer courses were developed before the new guidelines were implemented. Anutariya and Thongsuntia (2019) found that most courses on the Thai MOOC platform were designed to be short, which is consistent with this study’s finding that most courses were 10 hours long. This is because MOOC users are typically students and working professionals with limited study time and longer courses can affect the efficiency of learning (Chansanam et al., 2021). However, there should be more medium-length courses to cater to learners who want to improve their skills more comprehensively, as these learners tend to engage better in medium-length courses (Anutariya & Thongsuntia, 2019).

The finding that most English language courses on the Thai MOOC platform were categorized as basic is consistent with previous research that suggests that MOOC content is often designed to be easily accessible and manageable for learners to complete the courses (De Freitas et al., 2015). However, the lack of advanced courses may limit the platform’s ability to serve more proficient learners who are seeking to develop higher-level language skills (Chunwijitra, et al., 2020, p. 1079).

It is also important to note that the levels of the courses were categorized vaguely into basic, intermediate, and advanced by the course developer, without clear criteria and information on the equivalence with any standardized framework such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This lack of clarity in course levels may make it difficult for learners to accurately assess their own language proficiency and determine which courses are appropriate for them. When the difficulty level of a MOOC is not matched to the skills of the student, it can prevent the successful completion of the course (Chansanam et al., 2021; De Freitas et al., 2015). To address this issue, course developers should consider aligning their course levels with established language proficiency frameworks, such as the Common European Framework (CEFR), to provide learners with a clear understanding of the skills and knowledge they will develop through each course.

Conclusions

This study sheds light on the current status of English language courses on the Thai MOOC platform. The availability of English language courses tailored to specific purposes on the Thai MOOC platform reflects the platform's responsiveness to the demand for targeted skills development in diverse domains. However, courses in the Language and Communication category, particularly English, are underrepresented on the Thai MOOC platform compared to categories such as Computer and Technology, Business and Management, Life Skills and Self-Development, Education and Training, and Health and Medicine. This presents an opportunity for universities to actively address this gap and meet the demand for language and communication courses.

Course developers can utilize the findings of this study as a reference for existing courses and identify gaps that need to be addressed to improve learners' language skills. It is crucial to recognize that no one-size-fits-all approach exists (Thaipisutikul & Tuarob, 2017, p. 2). This, in turn, can contribute to enhancing the country's workforce, aligning with the goals of the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2023-2027).

Recommendations

The study identified a lack of clear course-level criteria and a standardized framework for course design that may impede the effectiveness of the courses in meeting learners' needs. To address this issue, Thai Cyber University should consider incorporating standardized frameworks like the CEFR in course design. For future studies, as the present study relied solely on documentary analysis of course materials, future research could include a comprehensive exploration of course content.

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