



# The Perceptions of Thai EFL Primary School Teachers towards the Shift from the Classroom to Online Teaching during Covid-19 Period

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#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to find out the perceptions of EFL teachers in Thai primary schools regarding online teaching, two years after the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic. In this study, the participants were 6 full-time Thai EFL teachers (1 male and 5 females) teaching in Intensive English Program (IEP) in primary level from various private Catholic schools in the central region in Thailand. The selection of the participants was conducted through the purposive sampling technique. The participants have had teaching experience in the English language for 1-5 years. For this study the participants are simply named P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6. To collect data and information, the instruments consisted of semi-structured interviews were employed. The interviews were conducted online on the Zoom platform over a course of three evenings, 2 interviewees each day. The data and information, then were analyzed using the integrative approach, combining deductive and inductive methods. The findings indicated that the positives of online teaching were underlined by the participants, who mentioned time, energy, and location flexibility as advantages. Furthermore, the teachers were able to improve their teaching talents by learning how to use ICT in the classroom. In contrast, the participants perceived the disadvantages of English online instruction from two perspectives: higher workload for teachers and less effective learning for students. Thai learners in primary school, as noted in the discussion of the downsides of online teaching, require more hands-on supervision and benefit from the social and physical

interaction that may be offered when learning onsite. In comparison to secondary school and college students, Thai primary school kids behave differently and are less autonomous.

**Keywords:** Perceptions, Thai EFL Primary School Teachers, Online teaching, Covid-19 Period

### 1.Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic situation that took global center stage since March 2020 affected the day-to-day lives of billions of people. Many countries locked down their population and enforced strict quarantine to control the spread of the virus. This resulted in involuntary emergency online teaching and learning, as schools, colleges, and universities were forced to physically close their doors. Although online classes and platforms had been around prior to this time, it had mostly been on a voluntary basis and incomparable to the worldwide scale of Covid-19 times when administrators, teachers, students, and parents found themselves grappling with an immediate and nearly complete shift to online instruction. It is, therefore, to be expected that a wealth of research studies on the impacts and effects of such transition to online instruction would emerge in the ensuing period. We find immense value in Erarslan's (2021) integrative literature review study of 69 research studies from 24 countries, including Thailand, conducted between March 2020 and February 2021, which lends a global perspective due to its wide coverage of literature on English language teaching and learning during Covid-19. The major themes unearthed from the analysis were: from 47 studies, the impact of Covid-19 on English language teaching and learning, and from 22 studies, the perceptions of attitudes towards emergency online teaching and learning. On the basis of this comprehensive review study, we uncover several noteworthy gaps: All 69 studies were either in tertiary education or K-12, but none were in primary education. Furthermore, conflicting results were reported in its various findings, which included teachers' perceptions: some teachers were confident that online teaching could effectively sustain language teaching, while others had negative opinions. Narrowing down to Thailand in particular, two research studies pertinent to English online instruction after Covid-19 come to the forefront. One is the research of Kawinkoonlasate (2020), which analyzed the effectiveness of online learning methods and tools, for both the instructors and the language learners. The author concluded by positing that "while the classroom implementation of EdTech in general and online learning technology specifically does provide both advantages and disadvantages. These advantages are no less prevalent for the acquisition of language, and in fact, some benefits are especially strong for the language learning process." Nevertheless, though not explicitly stated, the author focused exclusively on tertiary education. Furthermore, the analysis mostly stems from the author's observations and literature review but does not include any particular perspective of Thailand teachers. In contrast, another key research in Thailand by Todd (2020) focuses on the perceptions of English language teachers on the shift to online classroom teaching. Todd cites Chapelle (2007) who posited two ways to evaluate teaching innovations technology from either students' performance or the teachers' judgement. Todd's rationale for focusing on the teacher's perspective is because of the difficulty in observing students' performance during the shift to online in Covid-19. However, this research tool was conducted exclusively at the level of (one Thai) university, which leaves room for further studies on the lower educational level. We have noted that a multitude of research studies are limited to the one-year critical period immediately after the onset of the global pandemic when emergency online teaching and learning was thrust upon all countries; whereas, teachers' perspectives may have shifted when taken from a view of two-years post-implementation of emergency online instruction.

Therefore, our research focus is on the EFL teacher's perspective two years after the onset of the pandemic for Thai primary schools regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching. Knowing advantages and disadvantages can help us direct future classrooms, moving forward to "post-Covid". From our literature review, research on primary school is relatively unexplored, and no single study on primary school teachers' perspectives has been made in Thailand during Covid-19. Teaching young learners is an important area of study as young learners may have different needs in English language learning than older students (high school, University). The results of teaching young learners will ultimately affect how they learn at later stages of language learning.

# 2. Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to find out the perceptions of EFL teachers in Thai primary schools regarding online teaching, two years after the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The results of the study can provide insights into the quality of current online EFL instruction and the improvements that can be made.

# 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants included 6 full-time Thai EFL teachers (1 male and 5 females) teaching in Intensive English Program (IEP) in primary level from various private Catholic schools in the central region in Thailand. The selection of the participants was conducted through purposive sampling technique. The participants have had teaching experience in the English language for 1-5 years. For this study the participants were simply named P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6.

Table 01: Participants' Information Details

Participants' names	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience(s)	Year(s)
Participant#1	F	28	Primary 1-3	5 years
Participant#2	F	29	Primary 1-6	6 years
Participant#3	M	23	Primary 6	1 year
Participant#4	F	28	Primary 4-6	5 years
Participant#5	F	25	Primary 1-3	3 years
Participant#6	F	27	Primary 1-3	4 years

## 3.2 Data Collection

To collect data, the instruments consisted of semi-structured interviews were employed. The interviews were conducted online on the Zoom platform over a course of three evenings, 2 interviewees each day. The research team collectively interviewed each participant individually and recorded the session. The interview was primarily conducted in English but with the option to switch to Thai whenever clarification was necessary. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview was transcribed verbatim and translated into English wherever necessary. However, in the case of one participant (P2) the video recording failed, so immediately after the interview, the research team reconstructed and summarized it.

# 3.3 Data Analysis

In this study, the integrative approach, combining deductive and inductive methods were employed. Initially, the applied the deductive method was employed, with the 3 predefined themes taken from the research questions; namely Advantages, Disadvantages and Future Preference. This means in the first reading of the transcription, the task was to identify which category the participants' data belonged. In the subsequent readings an inductive, or

bottom-up approach was omployed. The primary focus was in identifying the sub-themes, or the reasons that support the Advantage, Disadvantage and Future Preference, in a free-flowing manner. Thereafter, the sub-themes were reviewed and clustered more logically together, which the effect of trimming down the sub-themes. On the other hand, there were instances expressing the necessity of adding one more level to the sub-themes. Under the theme Advantage, the sub-theme Convenience, for example, was broken down into Convenience-Time, Convenience-Energy and Convenience-Flexible Location. In some cases, certain data were overlapping between several sub-themes, in which case we applied the same data for each of the sub-themes. For example, P2 said "It's easy to access, the students can access these materials easily" which was coded both as a sub-theme for Advantages under Convenience as well as Online Technology-Materials Improvement.

# 4. Findings

#### 4.1 Perceived Advantages

On the first sub-question pertaining to the advantages of online learning, there were two distinct categories that were identified: Convenience and Benefit from the use of Online Technology. Convenience came in the form of saved time for teachers, as in "I like it coz I can just stay at home, that's my problem" (P5), as well as for students: "Students could not get up so early to prepare to go to school" (P4). This is closely linked to convenience derived from the flexibility of location. "It's convenient, can learn from anywhere, can use technology" (P3) and other byproduct of staying at home, such as "I don't need to carry so many materials to school." (P2). Another form of convenience is the saved energy. "Online, you don't have to use a lot of energy, you just sit and teach" (P5) and "I didn't lose energy like when we try to control classes as we teach onsite" (P1). Benefits of using Online Technology had to do with some classroom administration such as making a roll call: "I use Class 123 program to ask the students questions and kind of attendance check, to make them participate because I will point if they answer" (P3) or the ability to mute noisy children (P1). The participants also cited the increase and variety of materials online, such as the ability to integrate games into the class. The ease of accessing such material was also mentioned. This in part led to increased enjoyment when using online technology, for example, "I change my face to emoji or cartoon, when I ask "What is your favorite food?" and asked them to look at my face, it was funny" (P2).

### 4.2 Perceived Disadvantages

With regards to the second sub-question, about the disadvantage of online learning, a longer list was derived, having to do with class involvement, teacher's workload, lack of social interaction, technical issues, and testing reliability. Class involvement was broken into 3 issues, that of attendance, less participation and less concentration. One participant (P1) reported as low as 50% online attendance at one time. P2 commented that students cannot be forced to learn or come to class. P5 lamented the difficulty in numerous absences:

When it's onsite, err, there's a time for them to finish the exercise in the class, and send it to me within, like, the same day, so they don't have homework. [But for online I have to give homework] because some of the kids they didn't join the class, like some of them absent, something like that, so then they have to send it back to me, like, the next day....

Aside from attendance is the amount and quality of participation. P2 admitted that students do not join in much, and with their cameras off, the teacher cannot know if students are actually participating. P3 reported that most students do not switch on their camera. P4 noted that "The majority of the students are kept silent. The same students are keep answering my questions. I always have a lot of questions to ask but only few of the students are turning on the microphone and talk to me."

Concentration is another notable issue, which is partly compounded by the presence of others in the room of the student. According to P6,

When I teach online you know, they cannot focus all the time. It's not, it's not like at school because like this is computer or laptop or anything. They cannot focus because around them has mommy, daddy, or some student learn at the shop of mommy or daddy that's why they cannot focus all the time. ...She sits down but maybe she talk with her mommy or her daddy.

P2 mentions having to call the students' names often in order to get them to answer questions. P5 recounts the behaviour of some of her students - one liked to listen to music, another liked to play with their toys, and others were sometimes eating while studying. Additional teacher's workload when teaching online was determined to be one key disadvantage. For instance, P5 mentioned having to prepare additional homework for the absent students to catch up, which meant more work. On the other hand, P1 complained of having to repeatedly follow up submission of homework. The following is P6 explaining what was learned about teaching online:

I think online, I have to prepare more material, more than at school. Because you know why? Like I taught at school, yes, I can exercise, I can show them, I can let they play game, any game that I want, but, if online, I cannot let they move, I cannot let they write, because some students, some parents, cannot write on the screen, cannot write, just sit down and only listen to me. So

I have to prepare more things, more game, like more games that they can play with me if they cannot write on the screen. How to do, how to let them clear, how to let them understand. I have to think a lot more than taught at school. This is my lesson.

P6's quote above has touched on the other disadvantage of online teaching, that of the lack of social interaction. "At school it's too fun, more than online, because they can activity, they can exercise, they can move, they can join anything that they want," says P5, whose students tell her that they want to go to school to see their friends and teachers. P5 further elaborates on the importance of direct contact with the teacher and among students:

For onsite, yes, I am, like I told you, I can touch them. I know their feel. They can talk together. They, like ah, student and student can talk together, student can talk with me. But in Zoom, some student, like I told you at the first time, they cannot focus to me all the time, so sometime, they talk with mommy, they talk with daddy, not talk to me, not talk to their friends.

Though technical issues were brought up as another disadvantage, this was not highly emphasized and mainly took place at the beginning stage. For example, P4 cited problems with skype, with unclear pictures due to the weak internet connection. P5 recalls how students and teachers were not ready at the beginning of the first time, and the hassle of using message services to communicate with parents about students' homework. One of P2's students was not able to access the internet as they had not paid for the service.

As a final point, the issue about testing reliability was brought up. P6 acknowledged the possibility of "fake score" for online tests, as it is unclear whether the students themselves produced the answer to the tests. P5 attested to a similar concern at their school:

So, there was a rule of the school as well that when you do the exams you have to turn on your camera, do not turn off your camera, in case your parents help you... in case you ask your parents or your friends... And also, not.. not only my class that did that, like, other school teachers as well, they had to send, like, Google Forms of exams to them, so they can't, they can't turn off their cameras.

#### **4.3 Post-Covid Teaching Preference**

Ultimately, all 6 participants in the study said that they inherently would prefer onsite teaching once all regulatory constraints of the Covid pandemic are removed. P1's reason is that "onsite is more fun. Students can do more activities, and have chances to work in a group". P2 was initially ambivalent about which option to choose, but said that if the use of technology

were eventually allowed in the classroom, onsite would be preferred. P3 cites better attention and participation as the reason for selecting onsite.

Onsite is better because more students pay more attention. You can see them face to face. Sometimes the people who don't say anything online can speak a lot onsite. I would prefer to teach onsite because I can not get students' attention more when I teach online. So, when I teach onsite I think I can gain more students' attention.

P4 did have a preference for online teaching but this was only for tutoring a maximum of 5 students, and not for regular classes such as 40, a typical class size of primary schools. P5 does not mind teaching online but considers teaching onsite at school better and more immediate: "I see the students and it's, like, err, how to say, like, immediately action, you know, like, I give them the worksheet, they do the worksheet, they send it to me, I check, I give them score." P6 quipped that despite the teacher's personal advantage of being able to wake up late for online teaching, it is still more beneficial on the part of the student to learn onsite.

#### 5. Discussion

## **5.1 Perceived Advantages**

The participants highlighted the conveniences of online teaching, in the form of saved time, saved energy, and flexibility of teaching location. The teachers benefit from being able to sleep longer, not having to dress for work, not needing to commute to school or carry their materials, and having the flexibility of teaching from the comforts of their home or elsewhere. Additionally, the mandatory and sudden switch to online teaching gave the teachers the opportunity to upskill their teaching abilities as they learned to implement the use of ICT. Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2021 stated that teachers also needed to improve their ability to effectively use various ICTs in diverse scenarios. They had to find practical solutions for classroom management and explore creative ways to conduct their classes on the online platform. They were motivated by the challenge to make their teaching successful, despite the additional problems and stress that came with the switch. Though not stated, we (the researchers) feel they have a sense of pride and achievement in adjusting to the crisis and the uncertainties that came along with it. Currently, some participants even have to do hybrid teaching or synchronous/simultaneous online and in-person instruction. Stressful as this sounds, the participants actually seemed confident and pleased with themselves to be able to handle this complex task. The favorable disposition towards technology in general, including the willingness to embrace the use of online platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, and the chat message apps for communication, might also be correlated to the age of the participants, none of whom are over the age of 30. This is in contrast to another study that cited older teachers struggling to teach on online platforms. Furthermore, with the exception of 1 who just started her first year of actual teaching during Covid, the participants already had enough onsite teaching experience (between 2-5 years) to allow them to comfortably transform their onsite teaching practice to online. Parallel to what participants perceived as advantages to themselves as teachers, they also viewed their students as having similar benefits: the convenience of online studying (e.g. students do not have to wake up so early to come to school); and the chance to apply more technology in their learning process, such as the use of web-based platforms and online games for medium of instruction, which was not prevalent in pre-Covid times. Most especially, being allowed to play the assigned online games during class was fun for the students.

#### **5.2 Perceived Disadvantages**

From the point of view as teachers, the participants see the drawbacks of English online instruction from two main perspectives: increased workload on the part of teachers, and less effective learning on the part of students. Primary teachers' increased workload come mostly from the administrative side, the need to adapt the materials, including finding and/or creating new or additional materials that would suit the online teaching platform, and the necessity of giving more homework. As was similarly experienced in other researches, teachers needed to spend time to check attendance and monitor the ongoing or fluctuating presence and participation of their students. Some students did not turn on their cameras. Teachers had to communicate more with the parents and students on the online platforms as well as LINE messaging apps, for example to follow up homework or to ask the parents to wait until the break before giving their children snacks. Pairwork or group work on the online platform was limited which meant that teachers had to come up with other varieties of activities to fill in the gap of student-student interaction. Teachers found themselves having to exert more effort and spend more energy to keep up the students' interest and motivation, and to monitor and elicit their participation. Students had distractions at home which made them lose focus; some were not even learning online from home but from elsewhere; others had family members or guardians hovering nearby the student. Lack of focus and overall, less consistent student attendance compelled teachers to give and create more homework. Ordinarily, when teaching onsite, teachers could complete the lesson and in-class assignments within the allotted time. in contrast, for online teaching, giving homework was a necessary supplement to give absent students the chance to catch up, and to provide the teacher more basis for evaluation of students' performance. The teachers also mentioned the reluctance to rely solely on online tests to assess their students ("fake scores"), and cited this as is a reason for giving more homework. Primary students' less effective learning was attributed to poor participation in online classroom, with less focus and concentration as mentioned above. Another major contributing factor for less effective learning is the absence of physical and social interaction as found in a 'real-world' classroom setting that would otherwise enable movement, body language expression and direct contact between students and with the teacher. Online, the teacher lacks a clear and more immediate overview of the class in its entirety, and cannot oversee the student's performance efficiently. A number of students who would normally participate in onsite class chose not to participate online. We postulate that primary school students have a stronger need for teachers' disciplinary and overall guidance, because they are still in their formative years and not yet as self-directed as students in high school or higher education. Other research on online teaching during the pandemic have mostly been on higher level of education and this could be the reason why the physical and social interaction factor did not play a major role in the findings of those research. It can be observed that youth in Thailand and other Southeast Asian nations are raised in a more protective manner and are generally less independent than youth in developed Western nations. This implies that to enable more effective learning, Thai primary students may need greater hands-on supervision, something much harder to provide in online teaching. With regards to technical issues, discovered a barrier, some were pointed out by the participants but these are not of high significance, i.e, the lack of internet connectivity, Kumi-Yeboah (2013) or ability to pay for online resources were not in focus. In contrast, one research (Indonesia) strongly highlighted technical issues. One reason for less technical problems cited in our study can be because the schools taught by our participants are private Catholic schools in the urban areas, which may have more resources and be better prepared compared to public schools or those in rural areas. A second reason might be that this research was conducted after 2 years of online teaching, by which time everyone (teachers, school, students, parents) has had more experience and has already settled into the new norm.

#### **5.3 Post-Covid Teaching Preference**

From the longer list of perceived disadvantages versus advantages of teaching online, perhaps it is not surprising that the 6 participants all select to teach their Thai primary students onsite rather than online. Nevertheless, some aspects of online teaching are seen favorably and

may be incorporated in onsite teaching. In particular, the use of online devices and web-based learning within the onsite class was cited as a preferred way forward. Furthermore, the current confidence of the participants in their ability to adapt to either way of teaching, online, onsite or even hybrid, two years after the onset of the Covid-19 global pandemic, is an indication that there is a high degree of agreement in some of the benefits online teaching, something that may have been unimaginable before the Covid-19. The teacher's individual personality, age and teaching style is bound to influence their preference where to teach. Teachers with more years of experience, who have a stronger student-centered philosophy, and who are more creative by nature, will tend to have less issues teaching online. In addition, a teacher who is more familiar with ICT and is tech-savvy is also more likely to appreciate the advantages of teaching online. What emerges from the findings is that the research participants ultimately have their students' best interests in mind rather than the benefit to themselves as teachers. The 6 participants ultimately chose onsite teaching for the reason that overall, they perceived this to be the more effective way of teaching English to Thai primary students within the context of typically larger classroom sizes (25 and above). As mentioned in the discussion of disadvantages of online teaching, Thai students at the primary level need more hands-on supervision and stand to benefit from the social and physical interaction that can be provided when learning onsite which is similar to Nartiningrum & Nugroho, (2021) which stated the lack of social connection among students is a serious concern. Thai primary school students behave differently and are less autonomous compared with secondary school and collegiate level learners, at this stage of their education, these younger learners may not yet be ready to exercise the higher degree of responsibility which is required in order to benefit more from the online platform.

## **5.4 Implications**

During the pandemic of Covid-19, the teachers had to teach online. Our main aim in this study was to discover the perceptions of EFL teachers in Thai primary schools regarding online teaching. The other studies emphasized high school teachers and university lecturers in Thailand. While our study aims to focus on teachers who teach young learners who have a hard time focusing in the classroom simply. A lack of concentration could actually be a lack of understanding the material. This lack of understanding can lead to students to stop paying attention, and consequently falling further behind. And teachers, themselves, might have a hard time teaching online because they have to gain students' attention much more than onsite. For Example, students mute their mikes when taking online classes, talk to their friends and some

students are also prone to get up and wander away from their class. We would like to know more about primary school teachers' perception of whether they have a good or hard time teaching online and whether they prefer online or on site classes. We have done so by interviewing six primary school teachers from Catholic private schools in Thailand. Accordingly, our interview questions start from asking general information to get to know more about our participants, then start with open questions about teaching online experiences and their perceptions. This information is important given that the primary school teachers prefer to teach onsite rather than online because of time, energy, and location flexibility. Furthermore, the teachers would prefer to teach onsite better if they could use technology in the classrooms, the schools allow students to use their device appropriately. However, we have found that there are some teachers who would be strict on onsite classes only, without using any devices and technologies, because they are not familiar with technology. In this sense, we believe that our research reveals teachers' unpreparedness to teach online. They need teaching online training using technology.

#### **5.5 Conclusion**

By conducting an online interview with six participants in order to learn more about Thai EFL Primary Teachers' Perceptions on the Shift from Classroom to Online Teaching in the Covid-19 Pandemic. The positives of online teaching were underlined by the participants, who mentioned time, energy, and location flexibility as advantages. Furthermore, the teachers were able to improve their teaching talents by learning how to use ICT in the classroom. In contrast, the participants perceived the disadvantages of English online instruction from two perspectives: higher workload for teachers and less effective learning for students. Thai learners in primary school, as noted in the discussion of the downsides of online teaching, require more hands-on supervision and benefit from the social and physical interaction that may be offered when learning onsite. In comparison to secondary school and college students, Thai primary school kids behave differently and are less autonomous.

### 6. Recommendations

Quantitative research can help learners understand the relationship between research variables more intuitively. In the study of the online and offline blended learning mode, if there is situational field research, it will be perfect. If we want to do more in-depth research on learners' development of listening ability, it needs to more comprehensively and systematically

sort out relevant knowledge and theory. It is best to go deep into the wider selection of study, which should also do interviews or research in public schools, rural areas, teachers with more years of experience, and higher grades' students.

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