



Investigating the Learning Behaviours and the Perceptions of Graduate Students towards the Online Intensive English Programme of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand

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(Received 11/04/2024, Revised 13/05/2024, Accepted 14/05/2024)

Abstract

The Intensive English Programme at STOU has been an onsite course for years helping students who are required to meet the English proficiency standards for graduation. During the pandemic, the entire course has radically shifted to online platform through MS Teams (for teaching and learning) and Moodle (for evaluating). This paper aims to investigate student's learning behaviors and perceptions of the online learning process. To carry out this study, the 30 students from 2 groups were observed during the classes and the focus group interview was conducted through MS Teams. After observing students' behavior in 4 aspects: 1) online learning tools 2) learning motivation 3) Instructor-students and Students-student interactions 4) English content, some students had technical and Internet issues during the course. Some lacked ~~of~~ motivation and interaction with the instructor and other students. As it is an English language subject, some students who are not familiar with the language and some students with advanced English language skills may not pay much attention in class. Therefore, some of them failed to reach an acceptable level of proficiency in 3 English skills at the end of 4-day course. However, in the focus group interview aimed to explore 3 aspects; 1) the use of learning tools 2) lesson content and supplementary materials and 3) instructors' teaching styles. Students stated that there were advantages of online learning in this course--low costs, convenience, and flexibility, they still encountered difficulties in using the learning tools. The lesson content was challenging; nevertheless, the instructor could effectively teach to ensure understanding of the materials. If there are still students facing limitations in terms of learning tools and facilities, which the university needs to consider, this research suggests that hybrid learning might be a suitable approach for ongoing learning effectiveness for students.

Keywords: Online learning, Open University, Learning Behaviours and Perceptions , Intensive English Programme

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Rationale and objectives of the study

Since the pandemic began, much human activity has transitioned online. (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020). Reading the opening statement always brought people flashback to the beginning of the COVID-19 to the day it was lifted up. As an instructor, we cannot deny that the COVID-19 pandemic has also suddenly brought the transformation classroom activities into online and distance learning worldwide. Online learning might not be a brand-new model for distance learning universities around the world, it still affected students and some on-site activities especially the activities that need a lot of interaction between teachers and students and active participation and learning of the students. There are numbers of on-site activities in distance learning universities, and intensive English course for graduated students is one of those activities since they need to practice all 4 English language skills including English structures in order to pass the English language test to meet the university graduation requirement.

With reference to Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) Announcement on the English language proficiency examination scores regulations for the applicants in Ph.D. Program and master's degree Program B.E. 2565 (2022), the examination scores must not exceed more than 2 years since the report date until the announcement of exam results having score of B1 level in the CEFR framework (Common European Framework of Reference for Language) for master's degree Program and B2 level in the CEFR framework for Ph.D. Program. Students who can be able to pass the exam on their own can submit their result directly to the university; while students who do not have English score or have unacceptable score, can attend the university Intensive English course. Normally, STOU provides a 4-day English intensive course for graduated students at the university campus in Nonthaburi province. They will study English structure on day 1, listening- speaking skill on day 2 and reading skill on day 3 and writing skill including examination on day 4. COVID-19 impacted the university Intensive English course forced an abrupt switch to online learning. The course team had to organize the online course and made use of educational technologies to provide education at a distance; Microsoft Teams offering real-time online interactive classes, and Moodle offering examination platform. However, it is still a 4-day course but the speaking and writing skills were removed according to the time limitation. The researcher once did the informal survey exploring students 'perceptions of the learning process that took place over that period of time with no face to face education at all during the pandemic. Students were satisfied at average of 4.01. The research also asked their opinion towards the course. They mentioned they concerned a lot about using MS teams and Moodle in the course along with the internet connection at their place even though they adapt quickly to the sudden changes, learning and taking the online examination.



Although, Barbour and Reeves (2009) mentioned that the benefits of online schooling could be classified into five main areas: expanding educational access, providing high-quality learning opportunities, improving student outcomes and skills, allowing for educational choice, and achieving administrative efficiency. However, during the sudden changes, almost all the global activities have been paralyzed especially the education systems, technology had to play a major role in the sudden shift that has happened, and it provided a solution to the learners who are unable to access the traditional schooling due to the present situation (Soni, 2020). As a result of that, instructors had to create the courses all of sudden, decided which online platforms to use, selected the content and designed the new evaluation and measurement, as Hodges et al. (2020) stated due to the huge discrepancies between the normal pedagogical approach to online teaching and that necessitated by COVID-19, some researchers have made a conceptual distinction between the two and labelled the latter “remote teaching”. However, to design a course, instructors have to concern about the context such as students’ learning styles, strategies and method as Brown, A. H., & Green, T. D. (2019) indicated that instructors need to start with an analysis of students’ needs and prior experiences, as well as a range of instructional methods, and strategies are reviewed to find the optimal approach to teaching particular content to the target students. Besides the course content, instructors have to concern about the evaluation as well. Therefore, it might be difficult for instructors with sufficient knowledge or experience for effective online teaching.

Besides those aspects, as Moore (1993) stated that three key classroom interactions are often investigated when trying to understand the factors influencing student engagement: student-student interactions, student-instructor interactions, and student-content interactions. Martin and Bolliger (2018) also mentioned that student-student interactions prevent boredom and isolation by creating a dynamic sense of community and maintaining student engagement, and they were more likely to be engaged if an online course had online communication tools, ice breakers, and group activities. Moreover, teacher presence, feedback, support, time invested, content expertise, information and communications technology skills and knowledge, technology acceptance, and use of technology all can influence the types of interactions students might have with their teachers which would then impact their engagement (Zhu, 2006; Ma et al., 2015; Quin, 2017).

In 2023 the committee, a group of both teaching and non-teaching staff appointed by the President of the university, had reviewed the instruction document and the exam paper of the online intensive English programme which has been particularly used during the pandemic and agreed to improve the quality of them. The committee set up the new document and exam paper and was responsible for quality assurance of examinations to ensure appropriateness of assessment and maintenance of CEFR standards. By passing examinations after learning the Online Intensive English Programme, students must show that they have acquired the specific English skills required for CEFR. The new instruction document



and the examination was initially used in February 2024. The voice of the students would impact on the changes of the instruction. Then the instruction can be delivered effectively by the instructors in the suitable places or through education technology. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate student's learning behaviors on 4 aspects which are 1) online learning tools 2) learning motivation 3) Instructor-students and Student-student interactions 4) English content and then study students' perceptions towards the online learning process in the following aspects: 1) the use of MS Teams for learning, Moodle for the examination, along with the orientation and practice sessions for both tools, 2) lesson content and supplementary materials and 3) instructors' teaching styles.

Methods

Participants

The participants in the study were 30 students from 2 groups who enrolled in online intensive learning programme of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in March and April 2024. They were asked for a permission to observe their behavior during classes and invited to participate in the focus group interview after the end of the course to collect the qualitative data.

Materials

Research tools comprised (1) a behavior observation form and (2) a semi-structured interview form for the focus group interview. The behavior observation form and the interview form were examined by three experts. Their comments were considered of omitting some items of the form and the interview form due to their irrelevance. One pilot interview was conducted, which resulted in some minor changes to the interview guide. The results from the pilot interview are not included in the results.

Procedures

The researchers were observing the students' behavior during 4-day course while they were studying online. Then the researchers interviewed 30 students in a focus group to learn about their perception towards the online learning process. In the focus group interviews, the researcher asked the participants' demographic data to provide general information on their background, then the participants reflected on their own experiences and perceptions towards the online course in three aspects. Two focus group interviews were scheduled in each class via MS Teams with a minimum of 60 minutes and not exceeding 2 hours, and the moderator guided the discussion using a semi-structured interview guide. This guide was prepared based on the research questions. The interviews were not recorded, but the moderator took notes, ensuring that the participants remained anonymized to the university. The researchers analyzed the obtained data and presented as a narrative.



Results

The result section was divided into 3 sections.

1. This first section presented the participants' demographic data that provide general information on their background. The data helped illuminate the data of this study. They identified as female (60%) and male (36.7%) learners between the ages as follows: more than 40 (46.7%), 31-40 years (36.7%), 20-30 years (16.7%). They were mainly from the Central region (43.3%) and southern regions of Thailand (20%), followed by the north east and the north (16.7%) and the east (3.3%), and none of the respondents were from the west. Most of the respondents were Government officers (73.3%), followed by the Private sectors (10%), and business owners (13.3%%).

2. The second section described student's learning behaviors during the online learning course. Actually, before the 4-day class, the university always provides the students with the orientation to understand the learning process, the ground rules and the use of MS Teams and Moodle. The orientation normally takes 2-3 hours to practice using the learning tools. However, there are usually some students who cannot understand how to use the online learning tools. They will have the permission to practice and come back for the next round of the course. The learning behaviours of students were described each day ranging from day-one to day-four in 4 aspects which were 1) online learning tools 2) learning motivation 3) Instructor-students and Student-student interactions 4) English content as follows:

The first day (English structure part)

Aspect 1 online learning tools

Some students had difficulties using MS Teams and Moodle, some of them had internet issue as they live in areas with poor network coverage to fully participate in online studies.

Aspect 2 learning motivation

One of the main difficulties of online learning during online Intensive English course was students lacked the drive to study and did not focus on the lesson. Some students were generally beyond control and supervision as they still worked and some were in the other meetings or talking to others.

Aspect 3 instructor-student and student-student interactions

Students seemed very quiet in class; however, the teachers have set one of the ground rules that they have to turn the camera on all time and mute their microphone if they do not have any questions. When they were asked a question, a few students might answer while other kept quiet and waited till they heard their names. However, they didn't talk to other students, asked questions even they knew each other before class. When they had any



questions ranging from learning tools to English content, they usually asked the instructor or STOU Staff.

Aspect 4 English content

In learning structure, they had to remember and understand the English structure rules as they had different Language levels which typically defined according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Students who were good at English language could understand faster than others. The instructor needed to teach more than once in class, students with good level of English were bored and did something else. All students in both groups passed the B2 Level exam in the English structure part. Some of them spent the whole 40 minutes of exam time.

The second day (Listening part)

Aspect 1 online learning tools

On the second day, students with poor Internet connection were frustrated and found it difficult to keep up with the instructor with constant disturbances. As it is listening part, when there were something happening about the internet connection, students seemed to be worried.

Aspect 2 learning motivation

At the beginning of day 2, students seemed to be very keen to learn as the instructor informed them that they had to have the correct answers 21 out of 25. The researcher still found some students operated their mobile phone while the teacher played the same record repeatedly, some students were back to their routine duties at works after they understood the content.

Aspect 3 Instructor-student and Student-student interactions

After passing the first day, the students collaborated better in class. They started voluntarily answering questions and asked questions. They started playing jokes in asking other students during the in-class break and the instructor asked about their general study, careers and some personal questions such as “where are you right now? / what province are you in? what is your major? what does you do?”

Aspect 4 English content

However, listening was the most difficult task for the students as some were not familiar with English language, they did not listen to English language regularly. Therefore, some of them needed to listen to the conversations more than three times; this might made students who were good at English language bored and stopped paying attention to class. It would be the same situation as the first day. It was the instructor’s duty to revive their interest with the learning strategies, talking to them, playing a joke and asking questions. There were a few students failed in the listening part.



The third day (Reading part)

Aspect 1 online learning tools

On the third day, students rarely had problems with internet connection and learning tools. They might be familiar with them and there was only MS Teams that they had to use. Mostly they learned by themselves. Then the instructor explained and asked questions.

Aspect 2 learning motivation

The instructor informed the students that they would receive the reading materials in the morning at 08:30 before class; thus, they were very enthusiastic to read. Moreover, the reading materials in the morning were at A2 and B1 level, they were not complicated, most students were able to read by themselves. On the other hand, they seemed to be reluctant in the afternoon section as the passages were long and difficult (B2 level).

Aspect 3 Instructor-student and Student-student interactions

As they had to learn 6 passages along with reading techniques, the instructor would call students' names one by one to read, find the main idea and summarize the passages to check their reading comprehension. The researcher heard some feedback during classes, they preferred a group study to study with friends. Some of them may need additional supports to be able to understand the passages. They said they were afraid to make some mistakes in class.

Aspect 4 English content

Since most of students had never practiced reading strategies, it might be hard for them to answer the question the instructor asked promptly in class. When it came to reading part, students with low level of English could not following or were easily distracted. Most of the time, the instructor had to slow down answer their questions 2-3 times.

The fourth day (Exam day)

There was no teaching on the fourth day. They had to do the exam through Moodle platform. So, the researcher could describe the learning behaviors in only aspect 1 online learning tools. From the observation they seemed very relaxed comparing to the first day; however, they still had some difficulties using Moodle as they couldn't click all buttons to submit their exam.

3) The third section was the data from the focus group interview towards perceptions of the learning process. The data were divided into three aspects as follows:

Aspect 1: The use of MS Teams and Moodle, along with the orientation and practice sessions for both tools.

Mostly they were very satisfied with the online course. They also agreed on the benefits of online learning ranging from low costs, convenience, and flexibility. Most of them emphasized that online learning platforms, both MS Teams and Moodle, are easy to use.



It might be frustrating at the beginning especially while they were doing the pre-test on the first day, as they were required to press many buttons to submit the exam.

S1 “I never use MS Teams and Moodle before, it is good that the university provide the useful orientation for us”

S4 “I’m not sure if I pressed all the buttons in the Moodle to submit the exam.”

S10 “I have difficulties in listening task as my internet connection is not good.”

S11 “I have difficulties on submitting the exam in Moodle, I think there should be an instruction for students to learn by ourselves.”

Furthermore, online learning course help them save time commuting to the university and save much money. As the online Intensive learning course needs the students to attend the classes synchronously (the exact time of the lecture), most of them are living different places far from the campus; thus, normally they have to travel to Bangkok to stay while studying. (In April, 2024 class, there was one student learning from abroad.) Therefore, the fare, the accommodation cost and the other cost of expenses have to be paid.

S5 “I like it, it saves me time and money, please keep doing it.”

The most obvious concerns among students were a lack of social interaction with their teacher and among friends especially before participating the online class. A few students said they are afraid of English language; so, when they study in the face-to-face classroom, they will be able to make friends in person and help each other during class.

S3 “I can’t catch up while studying online, I can’t ask anyone as I don’t know them all.”

S2 “Sometimes I don’t understand, I’m afraid to ask the teacher, I just go with the flow.”

Moreover, the students emphasized that they faced a set of challenges through online learning; there are some internet issues and computer devices. Some students said they could have problems due to technical issues, internet access and the lack of IT competency. Some of them mentioned that as they were not very good at using computers and the applications; so, they have to ask others to help.

S7 “I am very old, I am not good at using computer and mobile phones. It is very difficult.”

Last but not least, they mentioned about their motivation, some of them admitted that they didn’t initially have a learning motivation and some of them said they still had to go to work while they were studying online English. Therefore, something at work might distract them, they cannot pay a full attention to class at all time.

S6 “I should have submitted a sick leave or an annual leave to the company; so, I could pay full attention in class”

Aspect 2: Lesson content and supplementary materials.

They all mentioned that the lesson content-structure, listening and reading were very difficult. They agreed that if they did the exam by themselves, it would be very difficult for them.



S19: I forget English language that I have learnt when I was young. I am sure I can't do the exam myself. I was shocked once I saw the pretest.

S25: I was worried every day since the first day, the content was very difficult. I felt relieved after taking the exam.

S28: The listening and reading materials are very difficult, Lucky me I pass.

Actually, in the English intensive course, the students won't be provided the document before their class; so, they are always concerned a lot about the supplementary materials. Some of them asked about the supplementary materials in the orientation and how to prepare themselves before their class. However, after the end of the course, they were very satisfied.

S17 "The learning materials given to the students were useful discussion topics but it is hard to read through computer screen as most of them were prohibited to print."

S24 "The instructor had provided materials that were knowledgeable, inspiring, and interesting."

Aspect 3: Instructors' teaching styles

The students had an extensive discussion in this aspect. They had various reasons about teaching methods and instructors' teaching styles as follows:

S1 "Learning activities that instructor applied in the online learning process were varied ranging from question and answer, individual work to dialogue activities but it did not like learning in the classroom environment which the instructor applied other activities such as group presentations, role play, debating and group projects.

S12 "The instructor got a sense of humor, she was very funny; so, I had fun learning."

S27 "The utterances expressed by the instructor had provided useful input, especially in the learning process, namely by helping the students to learn systematically and effectively."

S28 "I am grateful for the instructor's corrections when I'm wrong, particularly when it comes to errors in pronunciation."

Discussion

The discussion section is divided into 2 parts: learning behaviours and perceptions.

1) The instructor observed the students' learning behaviours, some students have learning issues during online classes, those students also reported difficulties in online learning as they never had online experiences and had to change everything at once all of sudden. It is related to Baticulon et al., (2021) he stated that students faced difficulties and challenges adapting to the abrupt and unplanned shift to online learning. In this case, the university and instructors still need to have a laser focus on any particular course to assist students and solve the problems. The university has to concern that the obstacles to fully online learning or distance learning were not only technological and instructional challenges but also social and affective challenges of isolation and social distancing since Joshi et al. (2020) concluded



that the instructional achievement of online learning is debatable because it causes absence of face-to-face relationship among learners, learners and instructors. It is very difficult for the instructor to manage the teaching plan according to the diversity in class. Moreover, the interaction between instructor-students and student-students is still very important in an online learning. Students can help each other discussing and answering questions or even asking questions they do not understand. As Li et al. (2020) clarified that “Internet + teaching” is the information interaction between teachers and students and teaching elements in a specific environment, reflecting the change from one-way to multi-directional interaction. Martin et al., (2018); and Guo et al., (2022). also stated that students’ success on online learning is affected by their interaction of with their teachers and peers. Thus, it is necessary to integrate interactions between instructor-students and student-student to promote learning engagement in online learning platform.

2) From the focus group interview the students were overall satisfied with the online learning and they emphasized that the learning platforms were easy to use. This literally means lots of things 1) students have got training to attend online classes or students might use these platforms before 2) the academic institutions or university may share guideline usage with their students or the university provides orientation for the students before class. In STOU, the university always provides orientation to every course for students to ensure that students won’t have any difficulties while teaching and learning. This is related to Erarslan, A. and Arslan, A. (2020), they did the research on “Online Learning Experiences of University Students in ELT and the Effects of Online Learning on their Learning Practices”. They have stated that students’ experiences in different online courses offered in the English Language Teaching department, either in hybrid form or independent of face-to-face class content as explained previously, revealed that they found it as strength of online learning providing efficiency and individualized learning. Regarding this, participants reported that online learning had positive aspects such as offering time flexibility on the part of the learners. In terms of offering time flexibility, several students reported that online learning contributed to their learning by giving them the chance to tune their timing within their own pace of living.

Thus, the online classroom atmosphere is still an important concern, we do not need our students to increase stress, anxiety and difficulties concentrating before, during and after class. The anxiety and stress can present through students’ behaviors, instructors have to observe and assist when needed. As Hodges et al. (2020) differentiated adequately planned online learning experiences from courses presented online as response to crisis, there are still lots of thing for instructors to work on if they still need to continue teaching the course online. Moreover, instructors still need to observe the behaviors and the perception of students to explore the learning activities that might suit them. When the situation changes, students might change their learning styles especially the students in higher education. Thus, it is true



that students in higher education carry out more various learning activities in the classroom in order to practice their English language skills and to increase their understanding of the learning materials. In the case blended learning might be considered to use as Muhammad, A. A., (2021 mentioned that blended learning aims to combine face-to-face and online settings, resulting in better learning engagement and flexible learning experiences, with rich settings way further the use of a simple online content repository to support the face-to-face classes. It also offers new possibilities to design an innovative teaching model that effectively integrates resources and activities online and traditional classroom offline into dynamic and sustainable teaching and learning experience without limitation of time and space. (Yajie & Jumaat, 2023).

Conclusion

Based on findings and discussion, it can be drawn the conclusions that students' behaviors and perception of students towards online intensive learning. Even though students had little previous experiences with online learning, they adapt quickly learning and taking the online examination. They might still face some limitation and lack of motivation and interaction. It can be said the students had a positive perception towards online intensive English course in 3 aspects. However, there are some difficulties using the learning tools as distance learning students might be familiar with printed materials, they still need to work while they are learning through online platform. It might be true that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. Nevertheless, a full online learning might work as a temporary alternative due to COVID-19 but it still could not substitute face-to-face learning. The study recommends the university needs to consider the behaviors and the voice of the students. Hybrid learning would help in facilitate a deeper understanding of the material and provide more opportunities for collaboration. Students are totally different some students might watch virtually and then they fully understand it all; while others have to go to the classroom. The study never ends.

Recommendations

Researchers might employ more both quantitative and in-depth qualitative analysis methods to explore the need of students on online Intensive English course what platform they would like to study online, onsite or hybrid learning.

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the School of Educational Studies and Office of graduate Studies. I also would like to extend my sincere thanks to the participants of the study for their contribution to the focus group interview.



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