

***A Study of the Online Learning Environment in the B.A. (English) Program of
Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand***

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The Asian Conference on Society, Education & Technology 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study aims to study the interactivity patterns of online learners, as well as the factors influencing interactivity patterns based on the principles of constructivism theory. It makes use of a survey, which stresses that the learners play the role of learning constructors by themselves in a socially constructed environment. According to social constructivism, learners express their opinions to construct knowledge based on personal experience, including their collaboration with other learners and/or instructors.

The findings from the Constructivist On-Line Learning Environment Survey (COLLES) questionnaire showed that the item 'Tutor support,' which is the component of the theory of social constructivism, was at the highest degree of agreement, while the least agreement is on the item of 'Peer support'. The questionnaire results were confirmed in student group interviews and in focus group discussions which learners volunteered for. The factors influencing this may likely be that most learners value tutor support much more than peer support for learning in the university online environment. Also, they are all distance learners who are part-time learners, and may prefer learning in traditional ways to collaborative learning or constructivism, and there are also variations in terms of age, learning experience, background, career, etc.

Moreover, they mostly agree on the correlation of the online learning curriculum with the 5 learning domains of the Thai Qualification Framework (TQF) comprising ethical and moral development, knowledge, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and responsibilities and analytical and communication skills.

Keywords: Social Constructivism, Tutor Support, Peer Support

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Introduction

Since its foundation in 1978, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) has cultivated a distance learning system that makes quality higher education accessible to all who wish to further their studies. STOU is committed to offering equal opportunities in education for all people and promoting education which people can access without limitations of time or place. This affordable and convenient system enables students to study by themselves without having to attend conventional classes, and it provides students in different locations with the freedom to study according to their individual circumstances and interests. Besides, in accordance with the university policy of the “open” university, there are no selective measures to screen applicants. Students are able to continue their careers, study simultaneously in other institutions, and take control of their own intellectual development by choosing from a variety of instructional activities. Self-guided instruction is mailed to students at the beginning of the semester through integrated media comprising textbooks, workbooks, audio and visual materials, supplementary reading materials, radio and television programs, computer-assisted instruction and e-Learning. In addition, students are able to access face-to-face instruction and guidance at regional and provincial study centers.

In terms of internal academic organization, the university is divided into 12 schools. Each school is responsible for the planning of the curricula and the provision of instruction in the group of subjects it supervises. The programs offered by these schools range from certificate programs up to doctoral programs. The School of Liberal Arts, one of the schools in STOU, is responsible for developing curricula, providing foundation courses in the bachelor's degree programs for every school, and offering certificate, bachelor's, master's and doctoral programs in liberal arts subjects. Under this school, the English department is responsible for offering foundation courses and programs for practicing English skills for STOU students.

Online English Language Learning in the B.A. (English) Program

After three decades of distance education in the certificate program in English for specific purposes via printed-based teaching materials, a new challenge appeared. With the integration of the Internet into a large number of fields including language learning, the English department of STOU saw an opportunity for launching an online B.A. program in English. First, we produced a number of new online courses in English language learning in order to prepare for the start of the online program. Subsequently, in 2011 the program was launched online using two Learning Management Systems (LMS): D4L+P and Moodle, and our first group of 99 students graduated in 2013.

This first group of 99 students graduated from the B.A. program in English which is the first online distance language learning program of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). Several follow-up studies on the students' satisfaction with the program have been carried out. For example; graduate and employer satisfaction with the program has been studied and a survey has been carried out on the correlation between the program curriculum and the Thai qualifications framework (TQF) for higher education. In general, these studies confirmed the success of online distance language education, focusing on student/peer and student/teacher interaction as the

main focus of language learning. The study specifically monitors learner interactivity in the online English program by focusing on learner construction of knowledge according to the social constructivism principle. However, up to now there has not been any study assessing the efficacy of online teaching using a constructivist online learning environment survey.

The Theory of Social Constructivism and the Online Learning

One key concept of Vygotsky's social constructivism theory is that knowledge construction is both a social and cognitive processes. Knowledge and meanings are actively and collaboratively constructed in a social context mediated by frequent social discourse. In a social constructivist learning environment, effective learning happens only through interactive processes of discussion, negotiation and sharing. Guidelines from social constructivism has been widely accepted in investigating learner knowledge construction in various fields, such as mathematics, science, technology, pharmacy, and others. For the field of language learning, several research projects have been conducted to investigate the students' perception on each of the scales based on social constructivism theory, comprising Professional Relevance, Reflective Thinking, Interactivity, Tutor Support, Peer Support and Interpretation of Meaning. The research findings by Galvin (2012) confirmed that there were some students who are reluctant to interact with others in the online learning community. However, Peer Support is a voluntary activity which supports students' online learning experience. Giving or being given advice from peers is beneficial to students in an enhancement of their learning from teachers. In addition, the study by Ware (2008) underlined online language learners may be satisfied with the peer feedback but they prefer direct advice given by their teachers.

For this study, it has been used to examine the learning collaboration among online distance learners in the B.A. English program. In light of the social constructivist theory, the quality of the learning management system D4L+P is studied. Regarding the other LMS, Moodle, while it has been used as the platform for doing assignment and course content delivery, it is currently not used as a place for online group work activities for learners.

The University Online Learning Management System: D4L+P

D4L+P stands for Design for Learning plus Portfolio. It is the online learning management system that supports collaborative learning developed from T5 Model learning design (T5 refers to task, tool, tutorial, team and instructor interaction). This means "learning is about the learner making an effort to engage in their own learning". Distance learners must devote their time to constructing knowledge within a limited time frame. There should also be support for learners to work and construct their knowledge. In this LMS, learners are first assigned collaborative work, then give feedback to peers. They must also consider peer feedback on their own work. At the end, learners cooperate with their team members to finish the final piece of work that will be posted on the system. Overall, the learning design under this model focuses on the learning process rather than the product. The overall scheme of online assignments in this LMS are as follows (Sataporn, 2014):

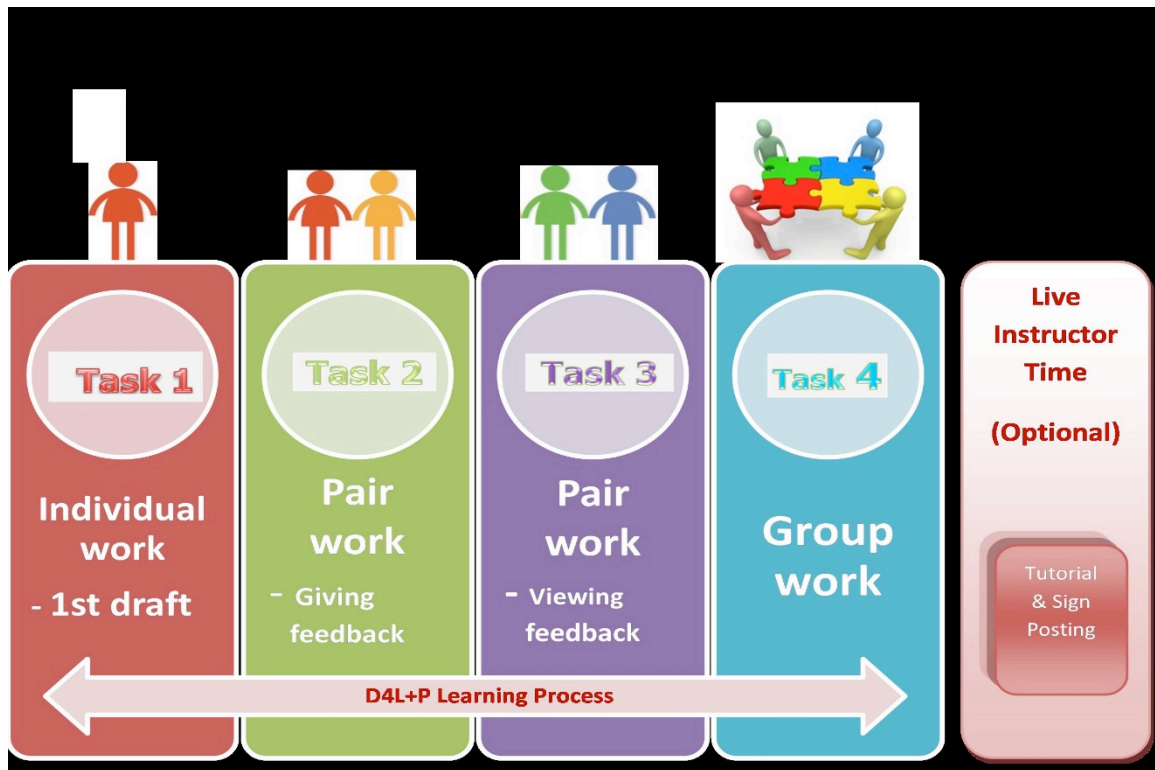


Figure 1: The overall scheme of online assignments in D4L+P

Task 1: Learning by Doing and Problem Solving

In the first step, or Task 1, students are assigned to do individual work where they have to study the information in their resources. These resources can be certain pages in their textbooks or study guide, video/audio clips, or links to online learning objects prepared by the instructors. The first attempt students make to submit their first assignment is not the end of their chance to learn from doing that task. In doing this step, they create their meaning of the topic covered by the task and solve the problem challenged by the task. Their study with the resources has to be more active, focused and meaningful as well, as they do not just read or listen passively but try to get the full meaning out of what they study.

Task 2: Learning from examples and comparing work

After the first step, they move on to Task 2, to view their peer's work for Task 1. They then give feedback on each piece of work. By doing this, they have another chance to think about the task. By comparing their work with their peers, they can also learn from the examples their peers set. They have a chance to give suggestions of how to do the task to other learners as well, if they find that their work does not yet meet the requirements set by the instructors. Learners can also defend their work at this stage when they see that their peer's interpretation of the task is different from how they see it. Students are motivated to do this task as well because they know that their feedback will be given marks from the peers who receive it.

Task 3: Learning from Feedback and Improving One's Work

The next step is Task 3, where students are able to view the feedback given by their peers in Task 2. In this step, they have to judge how useful each piece of feedback is for them and assess it accordingly. During these two steps, students learn more about the content covered by the task.

Task 4: Learning from Sharing One's Work in the Community

In the last step, or Task 4, students work in teams to share their ideas and work together to do the assignment, which is an extension of Task 1. After the team leader submits this assignment, every team member gets into the system to assess their teammates' contribution. The marks each member gets from this teamwork are factored into his/her total marks. The system is so strictly set that if students fail to do any of tasks 2-4, they will not be awarded the marks for that piece of module assignment given to them by their peers.

Live Instructor Time: Learning from Instructor and Signposting

Live Instructor Time, is when the instructor gives feedback on student work and answers students' questions at an appointed time. Actually, throughout this process, the chat room is open 24/7 for them to communicate with their team, classmates, and instructor. This learning process keeps them active and engaged with each weekly assignment, so that some students get into the habit of working online nearly every day over the course of the semester (almost 4 months or 15 weeks).

Briefly, the D4L+P learning employs both pedagogy and digital learning technologies. The pedagogy includes a constructivism belief about how one learns (Task-based, and Problem-based Learning Concepts). Each task submission is locked after the due date is over. As each task submission due date is set as the time frame throughout the course, students also get to practice managing their time, since they are responsible for task submission. They are also responsible to their peers, as their feedback has to reach them before the deadline in order for it to be responded to. In all, this study mainly involves an investigation of learner interactivity in constructing knowledge by interacting with other learners and/or teachers in the D4L+P learning environment, which is set up in accordance with the principle of social constructivism theory.

Objectives

1. To study the online learners' interactivity patterns in accordance with social constructivism theory
2. To study factors affecting online learners' interactivity patterns in the online learning environment in the program

Methods

There were both quantitative data collected from the online questionnaire and interview data obtained from the interview and the focus group in this study. The

quantitative data was collected from the groups of samples who enrolled in the course of 14423 Professional Experience in English in the first semester of the 2014 academic year, as well as the first group of graduates in the program who volunteered for filling in the online questionnaire. More interview data were collected from the samples who volunteered for participating in the interview and focus group sessions.

The online questionnaire respondents

The first group of 148 graduates and another group of 61 current students (the 2014 academic year) in the B.A. English program were asked to fill out the online questionnaires giving their opinions on each questionnaire items. The main part of the Constructivist On-line Learning Environment Survey (COLLES) questionnaires used in this study reflect the scales developed by Taylor and Maor (2000) based on the theory of social constructivism. The scales are concerned with student perceptions of a virtual classroom environment that helps reconstruct themselves as both reflective and collaborative learners. The online questionnaire of this study is mainly designed to measure student perception of:

- Professional Relevance – the extent to which engagement in the on-line classroom environment is relevant to students' professional worldviews and related practices.
- Reflective Thinking – the extent to which critical reflective thinking is occurring in association with online peer discussion.
- Interactivity – the extent to which communicative interactivity is occurring on-line between students and between students and tutors.
- Interpretation of meaning (Making sense) – the extent to which students and tutor co-construct meaning in a congruent and connected manner.
- Tutor support (Cognitive demand) – the extent to which challenging and communicative role modelling is provided by tutors.
- Peer support (Affective support) – the extent to which sensitive and encouraging support is provided by peers.

In addition to the constructs of the theory of social constructivism above, the researcher has added more questionnaire constructs into the online questionnaire. The following constructs are also used to examine more details or components of D4L+P, which is the Learning Management System used in the program.

- Overview of online learning environment – the extent to which the online learning environment provided in the course assists practicing language learning skills.
- Learning contents – the extent to which the learning contents provided in the online learning course are useful, appropriate and beneficial to student language learning.
- Components in learning environment – the extent to which all other components provided in the online course (resource links, live chat, and web boards are beneficial to student language learning.
- Online activities – the extent to which the online activities provided assist in constructing the language learning community.
- Peer evaluation – the extent to which feedback from peers as well as feedback to peers is helpful.

In order to collect the information from learners concerning their perceptions on the online English curriculum program, another construct on TQF below has been added to the questionnaire. According to the Thai Ministry of Education, The Qualifications Framework for Thailand's higher education system (TQF) is designed to support implementation of the educational guidelines set out in the National Education Act, to ensure consistency in both standards and award titles for higher education qualifications, and to make clear the equivalence of academic awards with those granted by higher education institutions in other parts of the world. The Framework is meant to provide appropriate points of comparison in academic standards for institutions in their planning and internal quality assurance processes, for evaluators involved in external reviews, and for employers, in understanding the skills and capabilities of graduates they may employ.

- Correlation with the Thai Qualifications Framework for higher education (TQF) – the extent to which the online language learning in the course is relevant to the 5 learning domains of the Thai Qualifications Framework for higher education: ethical and moral development, knowledge, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and responsibility, and analytical and communication skills.

The interview and focus group respondents

There were 15 students who volunteered to be interview respondents and 29 students who volunteered to participate in the focus group interview.

Results

The following graph displays the results from the analysis of the online questionnaire which comprises two main items: the group of questions applied from the Constructivist On-line Learning Environment Survey (COLLES) and another group of questions concerning the overall perspectives of the learning environment of the B.A. program. The graph display the mean scores for twelve questions of the online questionnaire which its web link was sent to the group of students who volunteered for this study after their end of the 4-year program.

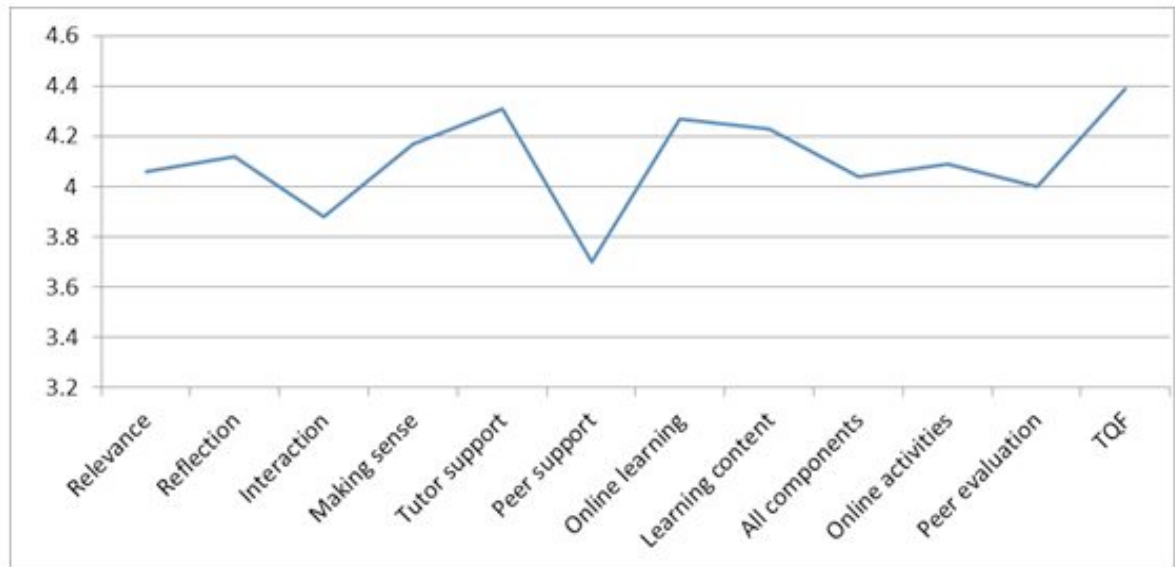


Figure 2: Overall perceptions of students' online learning environment (N = 47)
Note: The numbers on the left signify the mean scores of each online questionnaire items

From the analysis of the online questionnaire, the results can be divided into two parts: the mean score of response to the question items from the social constructivist theory (COLLES) and the mean score of response to the additional question concerning the overall perspectives of online learning environment as in the following table.

COLLES question items	Mean scores	Overall perspectives on online learning environment items	Mean scores
Tutor support	4.31	Correlation with TQF	4.39
Interpretation	4.17	Overview of online learning	4.27
Reflection	4.12	Learning content	4.23
Relevance	4.06	Online activities	4.09
Interactivity	3.88	Component in online environment	4.04
Peer Support	3.70	Peer evaluation	4.00

Table 1: Overall perceptions of students' online learning environment
In the following tables, the mean of each component of the 12 groups of questionnaire items is displayed in each table.

Relevance I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
Online learning increases my professional skill.	4.20	0.22
What I have learned is related to my profession.	3.97	0.14
What I have learned is important for my profession.	4.00	0.16
I have learned how to improve my work.	4.06	0.15
Average mean	4.06	0.17

Table 2: Respondents' perception on the relevance of the online learning and their professions

For the item "Relevance" which is drawn from the theory of social constructivism, the overall respondents' perception is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 4.06). Concerning 'Online learning increases my professional skill' is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 4.20). It is followed by the perception concerning 'I have learned how to improve my work' (mean = 4.06), 'What I have learned is important for my profession' (mean = 4.00) and 'What I have learned is related to my profession' (mean = 3.97).

Reflection I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
I have revised my learning method.	4.23	0.09
I have revised my opinions.	4.17	0.13
I have revised my colleagues' ideas.	3.93	0.22
I have revised the learning contents which I have read and learnt.	4.17	0.12
Average mean	4.12	0.14

Table 3: Respondents' perception on the Reflection on the online learning environment

For the item "Reflection" which is drawn from the theory of social constructivism, the overall respondents' perception is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 4.12). Concerning 'I have revised my learning method' is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 4.23). It is followed by the perception concerning 'I have revised my opinions' which has the same mean value as the item 'I have revised the learning contents which I have read and learnt' (mean = 4.17). The least agreement is on the item 'I have revised my colleagues' (mean = 3.93).

Interaction I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
I explain my idea to other students.	4.36	0.11
I ask other students to explain their ideas.	3.70	0.16
Other students ask me to explain my ideas.	3.57	0.17
Other students respond to my ideas.	3.89	0.15
Average mean	3.88	0.5

Table 4: Respondents' perception on the Interaction in the online learning environment

For the item “Interaction” which is drawn from the theory of social constructivism, the overall respondents’ perception is at the high degree of agreement (mean= 3.88). Concerning ‘I explain my idea to other students’ is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 4.36). It is followed by the perception concerning ‘Other students respond to my ideas’ (mean = 3.89), ‘I ask other students to explain their ideas’ (mean = 3.70) and ‘Other students ask me to explain my ideas’ (mean = 3.57).

Making Sense I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
I understand my friends’ opinion.	4.21	0.10
My friends show that they understand my opinions.	3.93	0.14
I have a good understanding of what the teacher explains.	4.29	0.08
The teacher shows that he/she understands my opinion well.	4.27	0.11
Average mean	4.17	0.11

Table 5: Respondents’ perception on the Making Sense from the online learning environment

For the item “Making sense” which is drawn from the theory of social constructivism, the overall respondents’ perception is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 4.17). Concerning ‘I have a good understanding of what the teacher explains’ is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 4.29). It is followed by the perception concerning ‘The teacher shows that he/she understands my opinion well’ (mean = 4.27), ‘I understand my friends’ opinion’ (mean = 4.21) and ‘My friends show that they understand my opinions’ (mean = 3.93).

Tutor Support I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
My teachers encourage me to learn.	4.34	0.14
My teachers support my online activities and help me when I need it.	4.30	0.15
My teachers are good guides communicating information	4.30	0.16
My teachers are good models in evaluating peers creatively.	4.32	0.16
Average mean	4.31	0.15

Table 6: Respondents’ perception on the Tutor Support from the online learning environment

For the item “Tutor Support” which is drawn from the theory of social constructivism, the overall respondents’ perception is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 4.31). Concerning ‘My teachers encourage me to learn’ is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 4.34). It is followed by the perception concerning ‘My teachers are good models in evaluating peers creatively’ (mean = 4.32) and the item ‘My teachers support my online activities and help me when I need it’ has the same degree of agreement as the item ‘My teachers are good guides communicating information’ (mean = 4.30).

Peer Support I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
My friends encourage or support me to join them in online learning.	3.61	0.14
My friends value my online work.	3.83	0.14
My friends are aware of my participation.	3.57	0.02
My friends gave me valuable feedback on my work.	3.78	0.15
Average mean	3.70	0.14

Table 7: Respondents' perception on the Peer Support from the online learning environment

For the item "Peer Support" which is drawn from the theory of social constructivism, the overall respondents' perception is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 3.70). Concerning 'My friends value my online work' is at the high degree of agreement (mean = 3.83). It is followed by the perception concerning 'My friends gave me valuable feedback on my work' (mean = 3.78), 'My friends encourage or support me to join them in online learning' (mean = 3.61) and 'My friends are aware of my participation' (mean = 3.57).

To conclude from the analysis of the COLLES questionnaire, the item 'Tutor Support' is at the highest degree of agreement and 'Peer Support' is at the lowest. It could be seen that most samples in this study are still in need of support from their teachers order to interact with others in the environment. This could also be in contradiction with the focus of the social constructivist principle in that learners should collaboratively learn to construct their own knowledge and teachers are just the facilitators.

The following tables illustrate the result from the analysis of the questionnaire constructs focusing on the components of the D4L+P online learning system.

Overview of Online Learning I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
Learning management of online learning in the curriculum assists me to easily understand the learning content.	4.15	0.11
Learning management of online learning in the curriculum assists me in remembering the subject matter for a long time.	4.15	0.13
Learning management of online learning in the curriculum assists me in constructing and understanding by myself.	4.36	0.10
Learning management of online learning in the curriculum assists me in applying my learning to other fields.	4.40	0.10
Learning management of online learning in the curriculum assists me in developing any language learning and thinking skills at higher levels.	4.36	0.09
Learning management of online learning in the curriculum assists me in making reasonable decisions.	4.31	0.11
Learning management of online learning in the curriculum assists me in making friends and in understanding them.	4.15	0.15
Online activities help me to work with others.	4.27	0.13
Average mean	4.27	0.11

Table 8: Respondents' perception on the Overview of the Online Learning Environment

For the item ‘Overview of Online Learning’ which is the additional items apart from the constructivist items in the questionnaire, the respondents’ perception concerning ‘Learning management of online learning in the curriculum assists me in applying my learning to other fields.’ is the highest degree of agreement (mean = 4.40).

Learning Contents I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
Learning contents are clear and can be easily understood.	4.20	0.15
There is systematic organization of learning contents and activities in all courses.	4.23	0.14
The amount of content in all courses is appropriate.	4.14	0.12
The learning contents and activities in all courses are beneficial and assist me in learning English.	4.34	0.10
Average mean	4.23	0.13

Table 9: Respondents’ perception on the Learning Contents in the Online Learning Environment

For the item “Learning Content”, the respondents’ perception concerning ‘The learning contents and activities in all courses are beneficial and assist me in learning English.’ is the highest degree of agreement (mean = 4.34).

All Components in the Learning Environment I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
The data under the Resources button are beneficial for doing activities.	4.25	0.13
The live chat is beneficial to me.	3.72	0.16
The course web boards are beneficial to me.	4.13	0.16
The group web boards are beneficial for my work.	4.06	0.17
Average mean	4.04	0.15

Table 10: Respondents’ perception on All Components in the Learning Environment
For the item ‘All Components in the Learning Environment’, the respondents’ perception concerning ‘The data under the Resources button are beneficial for doing activities.’ is the highest degree of agreement (mean = 4.25).

Online Activities I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
I have found that my participation in online activities with friends stimulates learning and was a valuable learning experience.	4.08	0.13
The participation in Assignments 1-3 in D4L+P helps prepare for team activities (Assignment 4).	4.25	0.13
This online learning helps develop teamwork and communication skills.	4.15	0.13
This kind of learning is more beneficial than classroom learning.	3.66	0.15
I have found that I belonged to a learning community.	4.00	0.14
I have found that my English is much better.	4.17	0.10
I will continue practicing English by myself.	4.31	0.17
Average mean	4.09	0.13

Table 11: Respondents' perception on Online Activities

For the item 'Online Activities', the respondents' perception concerning 'I will continue practicing English by myself.' is the highest degree of agreement (mean = 4.31).

Peer Evaluation I have found that.....	Mean	S.D.
Reading and giving comments to others helps me understand work problems as well as stimulating my thoughts in my work development.	3.87	0.13
Knowing there will be peer evaluation helps motivate me to finish the assignments.	4.06	0.14
I have evaluated my friends' online work without any problems.	4.06	0.16
Average mean	4.00	0.14

Table 12: Respondents' perception on Peer Evaluation

For the item "Peer Evaluation", the respondents' perception concerning 'Knowing there will be peer evaluation helps motivate me to finish the assignments.' and 'I have evaluated my friends' online work without any problems.' are the same highest degree of agreement (mean = 4.06).

The Relationship with the TQF according to the 5 Learning Domains have found that	Percentage	Mean
The learning management in online learning makes me aware of ethical and moral issues.	48.9	4.23
The learning management in online learning helps me gain knowledge from the courses.	59.6	4.51
The learning management in online learning motivate me to know all courses' contents in the curriculum.	55.3	4.45
The learning management in online learning motivates me to cooperate with others and be responsible.	53.2	4.42
The learning management in online learning helps me practice numerical analysis, communication and technology use.	48.9	4.36
Average mean		4.39

Table 13: Respondents' perception on The Relationship with the TQF according to the 5 Learning Domains

For the item 'The Relationship with the TQF according to the 5 Learning Domains', the respondents' perception concerning 'The learning management in online learning helps me gain knowledge from the courses.' is the highest degree of agreement (mean = 4.51).

To conclude, from analysis of questionnaire constructs focusing on the components of the D4L+P online learning system, it is shown that there is the highest degree of agreement on the item 'Correlation with TQF' and 'Overview of online learning' respectively. It could be stated that most learners agreed that the online learning program in the study is beneficial for them in assisting their study as well as the program in correlating with the TQF's 5 learning domains. Meanwhile, the lowest agreement is on the item 'Peer Evaluation', which seems to show that learners do not much rely on their peers in evaluating their work.

Discussion of the results of the study

The questionnaire results can be reviewed and analyzed as follows.

Teacher-led learning environment?

There is a general perception among the questionnaire respondents that there is an optimum correlation for TQF and Tutor support. Students consider that the online course is correlated with the 5 learning domains of TQF (mean = 4.39) which is the highest degree of agreement on the questionnaire. Meanwhile, for the group of items applied from the theory of social constructivist, the respondents' perception concerning 'Tutor Support' is the highest degree of agreement. It seems students in this study prefer to have tutor support that they expect their tutors almost always (mean = 4.31) to encourage, praise, and value their online participation and to be empathic and responsive to them.

These results might prompt us to reflect that students prefer to rely on the teachers and regard teachers as their authority. How can we persuade them to reconsider their expectations for tutor support? Might the current high expectation result from

uncertainty with the new learning environment, with the English learning or even with both of those issues?

High satisfaction close to the maximum degree

Students generally have indicated very high satisfaction in the items concerning online learning environment in this B.A. program. They consider that the online learning environment used in all courses of the program assists them in understanding the learning content, constructing their own knowledge and practicing language learning skills (mean = 4.27). They also perceive that the learning content of the online learning courses is clear, appropriate and beneficial for learning and practicing English (mean = 4.23).

High degree of agreement for the question items from the social constructivist theory (COLLES)

Many questionnaire items applied from components of the theory of social constructivist obtain high degree of students' agreements. Students in this study agree that they themselves and their fellow students as well as tutors very often (mean 4.17) are able to understand the messages posted on the electronic forums or course web board. Likewise, students prefer to be engaged often (mean = 4.12) in thinking critically about their own ideas and other students' ideas, and about how they are learning. In addition, students find that their participation in online activities is beneficial for practicing English and teamwork skills and it enhances their sense of learning community as well as their English skills (mean 4.09). Also, students consider their online learning to be almost always (mean = 4.06) interesting and directly related to their professional practice. In fact, some students intend to become English teachers after completing the program. Similarly, students have indicated that they are highly satisfied with all components of the learning environment comprising information provided under the resource link, the live chat, course web board and group web board (mean = 4.04).

Lesser agreements on peer support and interactivity constructs

Overall, students' opinions about peer support show (mean = 3.70) that students do not place much value on encouragement, admiration, feedback or awareness of participation from peers. Similarly, agreement on the interactivity construct (mean 3.88) seem to show that most students in this study agree that their involvement through online communication with peers and teacher in the online learning environment is on the lower level compared with other items of the social constructivist theory.

These results are interesting in that although we provide the student centered learning environment (D4l+P and Moodle) for our program, students seem not to value the peer support and interactivity. This might be a result of several causes. First, most Thai students are familiar with the 'spoon-fed' learning system both in the typical and virtual classroom. Mostly, they have been taught by the classroom teacher without training to

learn by collaborative learning especially in language learning. Teachers are their authority and take control in all cases in the classroom. Learning by working in teams

with their peers, brainstorming and sharing knowledge among their peers seem to be a new approach for the Thai learning system. Second, it is one of our university policies that we are an open university and we must accept all variable background of students in terms of their age, learning background, language proficiency and etc. Last, most Thai students may have never been trained to express their ideas in class because they may be afraid of losing face. They always just passively listen to the teacher and keep quiet. However, there are some students who are confident to do so.

The difference of peer support

Given the above finding, the results from the peer support construct are seemingly different (mean = 3.70). As the constructs underpinning the peer support scale lie at the pedagogical heart of our online environment, we might expect that students would value highly the opportunity to interact often with fellow students, they would value and appreciate peer support. It is not surprising that the sample group of students who are our questionnaire respondents do not agree much with an importance of the peer support item. This might be because almost all of the students in the program are part time, and their backgrounds are diverse in terms of profession, work experience, level of English, age and gender. Also, most students have been using English in their work for a period of time, some are senior or high-ranking officers with long work experience, so they do not seem to rely much on peer support. Results from this study contradict one of the constructivist principles that collaborative learning or interactivity among learners can promote active learning. Teachers should also be trained to apply the concept of constructivism to create a learning environment that promotes active learning in order to acquire knowledge, as in Holzer (1994). For Thailand, there is a study by Nomnian (2012) which investigates an application of the constructivism principles to language teaching. It is found from this study that constructivism cannot be achieved if students do not focus on doing their class activities and teachers do not motivate them to participate, but they rather focus on the university entrance exam. This research also strengthens the importance of constructivism that a real learning environment should be created to facilitate and promote the learning skills focused on in constructivist theory.

Since quantitative data alone cannot shed further light on these results, we must turn to other data sources in order to make sense of this apparent anomaly. From the interviews with volunteer students in this study, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Learners' diversity

Online distance learners are different in terms of their background knowledge especially in English. Some can give advice to their peers as long as they have the confidence to do so but others are not able to.

2. Team work

There are both advantages and disadvantages to doing the team work. It is good to exchange knowledge and ideas in order to help in clarifications but some friends do not assist, some always say that they just agree with others, some do not listen to others but just believe in their idea and etc. Some students should attempt to do their work themselves before asking to others for help. It was common to encounter the kind of person who always asks for help without doing the work for themselves. On the other hand, there are many good team members who always help others and show kindness in all matters such as registering, preparing for the exam etc.

3. Online activities

There are several online students' behaviors, some are very active in posting on the forum. For example a student mentioned on the interview that "I always go to post on the course web board at the very beginning in order to know friends, then I will stay in contact on the phone in order to help each other." Some said about their team member that "I know some friends who give much or less help, it depends on each individual." While another student claimed that "I was not given much help from others because some do not know about the course either."

Conclusions and recommendations

This study has made evident several points of perception among the online learners in the program, which uses a learning management system set up based on a constructivist theory.

1. Most online learners in this study agreed that the online learning in this program is correlated with the five learning domains of the Thai Qualification Framework for higher education (TQF), comprised of ethical and moral issues, knowledge, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and responsibility, and analytical and communication skills. The highest percentage of their perception score is that they believed they gained knowledge from the program.

2. The online learners in this study reported that they valued teacher support in participating in the online activities. They also believed in teacher guidance and expected teachers to be available most of the time. This is similar to the findings in a study by McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) that assistance given to online learners can increase cognitive growth and understanding and it is much better to create learner collaboration than to have them work independently. However, McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) also found that more capable teacher support and peer support are valuable to online learners. This finding differs in part from this study's because most students in this study did not place great value on peer support.

3. The online learners in this study did not attract great value to either their peer support or interactivity. This might be that because they are experienced learners who have been working for some years. The results from this study may be on the contrary to some previous studies for example Galvin (2012), which showed that the participants benefited from peer support when they gave and/or received academic, practical and emotional support. In addition, there is a study by Ware and O'Dowd (2008) that indicates that the feedback provided by peers is often limited in scope and accuracy.

Recommendations from this study are as follows:

1. Teachers should monitor, guide and also give regular feedback to each individual online assignment.
2. The university should provide for sufficient staff in order to give feedback to each student's work. This can lead to an improvement in quality of the online learning system of the program.
3. There should be more training for students in terms of their responsibility in participating in online activities, which should be supportive of their peers.

The limitations of this study are as follows:

1. The conclusions from this study are limited to the particular context of the first two groups of graduates of the B.A. (English) program at the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University. There were two groups of volunteers: the first was a group who agreed to complete the online questionnaire and the other group was those who were interviewed for the study.
2. The online learners participating in the context of this study are all distance learners, and most are part-time learners and come from many parts of the country. Therefore, they are diverse in terms of their background, learning experience, profession and expectations for study in the program. That might have affected student perceptions and opinions shown in responding to the online questionnaire as well as the interview.
3. When this study was carried out, there were two learning management systems used as the university online system: D4L+P and Moodle. However, D4L+P is the only system for most courses that is as a platform for online group activities. The Moodle is currently used only as a platform for course content and online assignments for a few courses.

Recommendation for further study

Further studies could address several issues. For example, an analysis of the benefit of online activities in order to compare the results of students who participate in the online activities with those who do not. Besides, there could be a comparison of the efficiency of the two learning management systems currently in use (D4L+P and Moodle).

Acknowledgements: First, I would like to thank all the B.A. (English) program students who took part as the subjects of this study. Also, thanks to Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University for funding this research. Last but not least, special thanks to Mr. Christopher Hinkle for his kind assistance in editing this paper.

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