

Empowering Digital Education: Thai University Students' Views on Online Learning

Phasuk Boontham, Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand

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Abstract

Online learning has become an essential part of education worldwide, including in Thai universities. While it offers enhanced learning experiences, it also poses various challenges. This study examines the perspectives of 83 third-year Chinese education students at Mae Fah Luang University, who have been engaged in online learning for three years. Using a mixed methods approach, the research collected data through student reflections. Quantitative results, presented in tabular form, highlight both positive and negative opinions, while content analysis was used to explore students' views on the challenges and benefits of online learning. The findings reveal that most students perceive online learning as having more disadvantages than advantages. Key recommendations emphasize the need for both students and instructors to acquire digital technology skills and adopt strategies for online platforms. Promoting continuous engagement with technology-enhanced learning activities is vital for student development. Mastery of online learning today equips Thai learners to thrive in tomorrow's digital society. Moreover, online learning helps develop essential life skills critical for future success. This study supports the continued use of online methodologies by educators, supporting for persistence in online teaching approaches despite the challenges, as these methods foster an adaptable and effective learning environment.

Keywords: Student's Views, Online Learning, Obstacles and Benefits of Online Learning, Language Education Students

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted all aspects of daily life, especially education. In response, educational institutions worldwide accepted online systems to ensure the continuity of learning (Sa & Serpa, 2020). This shift from traditional classrooms to online platforms introduced a 'new normal' in teaching and learning. Educational technology has been essential in this change, enabling for the adoption of innovative methods (Lai & Bower, 2019). Rapid technology advancements further facilitated this transition. Organizations such as UNESCO have promoted distance and online learning to make education more flexible and accessible (UNESCO, 2015). As a result, online learning has become increasingly common. This shift not only reflects the advancement of educational institutions in the digital era (Casey et al., 2016) but also enhances interaction between teachers and students. Platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams enable real-time communication, while tools such as YouTube, OBS Studio, and Loom help create engaging multimedia content. In today's tech-driven environment, the effective use of these tools can significantly enhance student engagement.

Many studies highlight the advantages of online learning, citing its flexibility and capacity to enhance student learning effectiveness. It boosts student interest and engagement (Deeley, 2018), reduces costs, and increases convenience. Most importantly, it addresses educational inequality by allowing students from different regions to access lessons simultaneously and at any time (Hill, 1997; Webster & Hackley, 1997). Additionally, online learning plays a key role in shaping learning behaviors, fostering self-discipline and responsibility (Wongyai et al., 2019). However, significant challenges remain (Conlon, 1997; Crawford et al., 2020), including internet instability and inadequate institutional support (Brandt, 1996; Velle et al., 2020). To overcome these challenges, educators and students must stay up to date with rapidly evolving technologies (Crawford et al., 2020). Effective online learning requires students to exhibit high levels of responsibility (Sumbawati et al., 2020), while educators need to continuously develop their skills to align with the 'new normal.' Utilizing technology effectively is essential to support learning and achieve educational goals (Ming et al., 2021). Selecting appropriate platforms and adapting to modern educational trends will enable students to reach their learning objectives (Sumbawati et al., 2020; Ming et al., 2021).

The Format of Online Teaching in Universities

Wongyai et al. (2019) emphasized the growing use of technology in education, aligning with Christensen et al. (2011), who predicted the increasing trend toward online learning in higher education. Online teaching has developed into a flexible, advanced platform suited to various learning contexts. Educators today can choose from numerous available platforms, with the primary goal being to prepare students for future challenges (Stewart et al., 2011). In Thai universities, online teaching is primarily conducted through synchronous and asynchronous methods. Synchronous teaching involves real-time interaction between students and instructor similar to face-to-face classes, while asynchronous teaching offers flexibility, allowing learners to engage with content at different times. Both formats have advantages and limitations, depending on the educational context. Stewart et al. (2011) noted that the key strength of synchronous teaching is its immediate, two-way communication, allowing students to ask questions and receive instant feedback. Partlow & Gibbs (2003) added that a well-designed online learning environment can stimulate student engagement, even if it does not fully replicate in-person learning. In contrast, Stefan (2008) highlighted the flexibility of asynchronous learning, which enables students to access materials anytime, fostering self-

discipline and responsibility. However, limitations may arise from poorly designed content or a lack of readiness among individual learners.

The National Education Act of 1999 in Thailand presently promotes 21st-century skills, including digital literacy, with the goal of preparing students for the modern workforce. Mae Fah Luang University has embraced a blended learning approach, combining synchronous and asynchronous methods across subjects, including the Chinese language curriculum. The main goal is to equip students with the technological skills needed for future teaching roles. As the instructor teaching students in this field, the researcher values students' reflections on their online learning experiences as essential contributions to the broader discourse on online education. This study seeks to analyze students' reflections on online learning in the Chinese language teaching program at Mae Fah Luang University, examining both positive and negative aspects. The research addresses two key questions:

1. What are students' favorable impressions of their online learning experiences?
2. What negative reflections do students have on their online learning experiences?

Methods

The study employs a mixed-methods design, informed by Crawford et al. (2020) and Wongyai et al. (2019), who focus on online learning strategies and disruptive innovation in education. Data were collected from 83 third-year students in the Chinese language teaching program, all of whom had three years of online learning experience since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Purposive sampling was used to include participants with significant online learning experience, aligning with the study's goals. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered through open-ended questions (Worley, 2015) and analyzed using content analysis (Erlingsson et al., 2017). The findings were organized into thematic categories and integrated into the discussion to provide insights into students' perspectives on online learning

Results and Discussion

The collected data were categorized into positive and negative reflections on online learning, aligned with the research objectives. A total of 164 comments were analyzed: 119 identified challenges, while 45 highlighted benefits. These comments reflect the experiences of students who engaged in online learning over three academic years (six semesters) following the COVID-19 outbreak as shown in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Table 1: Problems and obstacles encountered in online learning

Problems and obstacles encountered in online learning	Number	Percent
Internet signal devices and platforms	39	32.7
Emotional state and readiness of learners	34	28.6
Teachers and methods for carrying out activities of teachers	29	24.3
Environment while studying online	10	8.4
Content of online lessons	7	5.8
TOTAL	119	99.8

Table 1 summarizes the 119 negative comments, ranked by frequency. The most common issue, reported by 39 students (32.7%), was related to internet connectivity, communication devices, and platforms. Emotional stress and lack of preparedness accounted for 34 comments (28.6%). Challenges with teachers' methods and online learning environments were noted in 29 comments (24.3%) and 10 comments (8.4%), respectively. The least mentioned issue was the inadequacy of online lesson content, with only 7 comments (5.8%).

Table 2 Benefits of Online learning

Benefits	Number	Percent
Convenience to access to course contents	13	28.8
Development of 21st Century Characteristics	11	24.4
Freedom for learning	6	13.3
Flexible repetition	5	11.1
Safety for health	5	11.1
Others (interaction with teachers, lowering of costs, Modernity, etc..	5	11.1
TOTAL	45	99.98

Table 2 presents 45 positive comments, categorized into six main benefits. The most frequently noted benefit, mentioned by 13 students (28.8%), was the convenience of accessing course materials. Development of 21st century skills followed, with 11 comments (24.4%), while 6 students (13.3%) appreciated the freedom to learn at their own pace and according to their interests. Additional benefits, each noted by 5 students (11.1%), included health safety from infectious diseases, improved interaction with instructors, reduced costs, and the modernity of online learning.

Perspectives on Challenges in Online Learning

Technology and Management Factors. The most commonly reported issues related to technological challenges. Internet instability and limited network availability were significant barriers, which significantly obstruct students' ability to attend live classes or access course materials. Other issues included outdated devices, complex procedures for accessing online platforms, and disruptions caused by environmental factors like weather. These factors contribute to delays in student engagement with both online activities and assessments. For example, one student remarked:

The system is often unstable, and internet outages frequently disrupt learning, causing delays in responses compared to other students.

Another shared:

The steps to access online platforms are complicated, and students in dormitories often face difficulties connecting to the internet or accessing programs.

The requirement for multiple devices during online exams added to the burden. As one student noted:

During online exams, we were required to have at least two devices, which created more difficulties than onsite exams. The limited time given by instructors also caused delays in completing the exams.

These findings as presented above align with previous studies (e.g. Brandt, 1996), which indicate that technological challenges in online learning can be alleviated through adequate institutional support and instructor's training. To ensure effective learning outcomes, educators must improve their technological skills and become proficient in selecting appropriate platforms for students' needs (Ming et al., 2021).

Learner Factors

Students' readiness for online learning appeared as a critical issue. A lack of technological devices and insufficient skills in using online platforms created major obstacles. Moreover, economic and social factors, such as the cost of equipment, created anxiety, while limited opportunities for social interaction led to feelings of isolation and reduced interest in learning. For instance, one student stated:

I don't have a laptop or iPad, so I can't study like my friends. My mobile phone is outdated, so I learned less than my friends.

Another commented:

Online learning has many disadvantages because I can't interact with friends or ask questions. Group work is hard since we're in different places. I feel more anxious and bored with studying than before.

The negative impact of unpreparedness was further compounded by environmental factors, such as noise in students' surroundings, which disrupted concentration, as one student shared:

I had trouble understanding the lesson because it was difficult. My roommates made noise, which distracted me, and I couldn't focus. I was stressed and lost interest in studying. I was also afraid of failing the exam.

These reflections highlight how a lack of preparation for online learning, especially the absence of essential equipment, obstructs students' ability to keep up with their classmates. The financial problem of acquiring technology worsens the challenges. Despite advantages and expected growth of online education, the issues presented here underscore educational inequalities among students in different situations, as noted by La Velle et al. (2020). Besides, students expressed feelings of loneliness, boredom, and disengagement. Some phrases like 'I can't ask my friends', 'I'm more bored with studying than before', 'I can't concentrate', and 'I'm less interested in studying' illustrate these struggles. These challenges

emphasize the need for better support and strategies to help students develop life skills such as self-reliance and self-regulation, which are crucial for fostering a positive learning experience and adapting to the demands of modern education.

Factors Regarding Teachers and Teaching Methods

Challenges related to teachers and teaching methods were also prominent. Many students expressed dissatisfaction with traditional teaching approaches that were not adapted to the online environment. These methods often resulted in unengaging activities, lack of interaction, and reduced understanding. Furthermore, the absence of hands-on activities contributed to boredom, and reduced interaction between instructors and students worsened the experience.

Some students felt neglected, believing that some instructors did not care about their learning progress, leaving them feeling unsupported and disinterested in online learning. For example, one student expressed concerns:

Some teachers just recorded their lessons and sent us the clips. When I didn't understand something, I couldn't ask questions or clarify anything, so I just let it go. This makes learning incomplete, and we don't participate in any activities.

Another student shared:

The content is good, but there's no interaction with the teachers, which makes learning boring. Sometimes, students just log in and do other things without the teacher noticing.

These views reflecting common challenges with online instruction align with Partlow and Gibbs (2003) who emphasized the importance of engaging activities and strong interaction between instructor and students during online learning. In the digital age, instructors must take responsibility for preparing students to become competent digital citizens. For doing this, they should continually update their technological skills and explore innovative strategies. For instance, Prensky (2001) highlighted the need for educators to meet the demands of "digital natives" by integrating dynamic, relevant content. Similarly, Wongyai et al. (2019) emphasized the growing importance of online education in higher education, necessitating stronger competencies in educational technology among teachers.

Perspectives on Benefits of Online Learning

Convenience in Accessing Course Content. According to student feedback, the convenience was the most frequently mentioned benefit of online learning, highlighted by both synchronous and asynchronous modes. In synchronous learning, students appreciated the ability to attend classes from any location, saving time and costs associated with travelling. Asynchronous learning provided additional flexibility, allowing students to return to the course materials at their convenience. As student shared:

Learning with modern technology is much more convenient. I can study from my dorm, avoid commuting, and don't need to wear a uniform. It saves time, and I can study from anywhere.

Another student remarked:

For me, online learning is good, even if it's not perfect. I liked that I could study whenever I wanted. In some subjects, the teacher posted videos that I couldn't watch immediately, but the benefit was that I could review them later, even multiple times.

These findings are consistent with prior research (Stewart et al., 2011; Stefan, 2008) which emphasizes the motivational benefits of flexible online learning environments. For students and instructors, advancing digital skills supports effective learning and knowledge management, contributing to broader educational goals. In a rapidly evolving world, both students and instructors must continually advance their digital skills. For students, technological proficiency supports efficient learning and knowledge management, while instructors need to be adept in digital tools to meet the growing demands of today's job market.

Development of 21st-Century Skills. With the push toward 21st-century skills as a key educational objective, students recognize that online learning is valuable. Around 20% of the feedback indicated that online learning helped students improve their technology skills across different platforms, especially when overcoming technical challenges. Online learning helped them become more self-reliant and proactive. As one student noted:

Learning through modern, high-quality apps lets me try out new platforms and become more proficient with technology. When I encounter problems, I have to find ways to solve them myself.

Another student added:

Online learning is new to me and requires more self-reliance. It takes time to adapt, learn new things, and become more disciplined. Attending live online sessions also requires punctuality. Overall, I feel that online learning has made me more proactive.

These reflections underscore how online learning fosters students' self-awareness and independence in the digital age. Unlike traditional settings, online learning places greater responsibility on students, encouraging the development of critical skills like self-regulation and adaptability. It requires students to take responsibility and adapt to new learning environments. These digital skills are crucial for 21st-century learners and are increasingly necessary for future job markets. Additionally, developing self-regulation is key to online learning success, it helps students stay on their goals and adjust their behaviors when necessary. The acknowledgment of these skills by students is a positive outcome of this study.

Freedom to Seek Knowledge. While not all students highlighted this benefit, some acknowledged the modernity and flexibility of online learning. This kind of learning provided students with greater freedom to explore topics of interest independently, reflecting a shift toward more student-centered learning. Moreover, it motivates students to explore new knowledge and think more independently, beyond the limitations traditionally set by teachers. This benefit highlights the progress of universities in embracing digital education, fostering modern attitudes toward learning, and encouraging independent exploration beyond teacher-guided boundaries. For instance, one student noted:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities had to switch to online learning, which reflects modernity and is in line with the times. In some subjects, teachers used engaging media that weren't boring. The quality platforms also helped me become more skilled with new technologies. It feels very modern.

Another student shared:

Some teachers assigned tasks and recommended resources for independent learning. It was beneficial because it allowed me to explore topics I was personally interested in without pressure. I had the freedom to discover a world of knowledge.

Interestingly, some student mentioned that online learning allowed them for more personal interactions with instructors, as they could ask questions privately during synchronous sessions, felt more private than in a traditional classroom.

As one student remarked:

Asking questions during synchronous classes felt more private than in a traditional classroom, where I would feel shy about speaking in front of my friends. This made me feel more comfortable and helped me understand lessons better.

This might be due to the student feeling shy about speaking up in front of peers during in-person sessions. The virtual environment provided an opportunity for direct communication with the instructor, which enhanced their learning experience. Such insights highlight the importance of active instructor and student interaction in both physical and virtual classrooms. Active engagement by instructors not only enhances the learning experience but also promotes a supportive and inclusive educational environment.

Conclusion

Online learning has become an integral part of modern education, offering both advantages and challenges. This study explored the perspectives of third-year Chinese language students who have been studying online for three years at Mae Fah Luang University. The analysis revealed that while online learning provides certain benefits, however, most students perceived it as presenting more obstacles than advantages. The primary challenges included technological issues, student-related limitations, and the effectiveness of teachers' instructional methods. On the other hand, some students acknowledged the benefits of online learning, such as convenient access to lessons, the development of digital skills, and the freedom to explore knowledge independently. The findings point out that to maximize the effectiveness of online learning, educators should implement strategies that address these challenges which include enhancing teachers' proficiency with digital platforms, designing interactive and engaging activities, and providing necessary resources to minimize technological and environmental barriers. Additionally, fostering essential life skills, such as self-regulation and self-reliance, can better equip students to navigate the demands of modern education.

Recommendations for Practical Applications

1. University should consider providing subsidized devices, such as laptops or tablets, for students who lack adequate equipment. University could also invest with internet

providers to offer discounted or free internet access for students in remote or underserved areas.

2. Professional development programs should be implemented to continuously train instructors in effective online teaching strategies, including interactive methodologies and the use of digital tools.
3. Both instructors should be encouraged to develop skills in creating learning environments, both synchronously and asynchronously; whereas students should be provided workshops on life-skills: self-regulation, and technological proficiency to enhance their readiness for being survived in digital age.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. To determine whether challenges and benefits vary by level of experience, the perspectives of students across different academic years should be comparatively analyzed.
2. To develop more effective online teaching strategies, the experiences and challenges faced by instructors in delivering online education should be explored.
3. Student expectations for online learning environments should be assessed before each semester starts to proactively address potential challenges and design tailored educational experiences.

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Contact emails: phasuk.boo@mfu.ac.th
pomme597@yahoo.com