

## Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on English Language Proficiency Among Students at Phetchabun Rajabhat University: A Case Study

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Received: 28 February 2024

Revised: 7 March 2024

Accepted: 12 March 2024

### Abstract

This research consists purposes were 1. investigate challenges faced by Business English students at Phetchabun Rajabhat University (PCRU) within online learning environments 2. evaluate the impact of these environments on English language proficiency and 3. identify technological obstacles impacting learning outcomes. A mixed-methods approach, grounded in constructivist principles, combined quantitative and qualitative data. A questionnaire administered to 85 students provided quantitative insights, while interviews with 12 students and 5 educators yielded qualitative perspectives. The sample was selected using the Taro Yamane formula (0.05 error level, random sampling). Quantitative data underwent analysis using descriptive statistics (percentages, means, standard deviations) and comparative tests (t-tests, F-statistic tests). Content analysis was applied to qualitative data from interviews and literature reviews, enriching the quantitative findings. Results revealed that 68% of students encountered significant challenges within online learning, primarily due to insufficient opportunities for interaction and feedback, crucial for language acquisition. These issues were compounded by varying levels of self-discipline and motivation, negatively affecting participation. A decline in English proficiency was observed among 28% of students, particularly in practical business contexts. This decline was attributed to reduced opportunities for conversational practice and limited immersion in English-speaking environments, essential for fluency in business communication. Technological barriers, such as unreliable internet access and limited digital literacy, further obstructed the transition to online education. These challenges disproportionately affected remote students, highlighting the digital divide. However, the situation also revealed opportunities for enhancing flexibility and adaptability to online resources, suggesting avenues for curricular improvement.

**Keywords:** Online Language Learning, COVID-19 Educational Impact, English Proficiency Challenges

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an unprecedented global shift toward online education, exposing and exacerbating disparities in access to technology and digital literacy (Marinoni, Van't Land, & Jensen, 2020, p.20). This transition illuminated existing inequalities, highlighting the profound impact of the digital divide (Murphy, 2020, p.501). Phetchabun Rajabhat University (PCRU) in Thailand, situated in a less developed region and serving a predominantly lower socioeconomic student population, faced distinct challenges. The abrupt

shift to online education for its Business English program underscored difficulties in maintaining English language proficiency, a crucial factor for success in the global business environment. The pandemic amplified the impact of the diverse English skill levels among PCRU students on their learning outcomes within the novel online context.

The multifaceted effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning could include: 1) Reduced Interaction: The lack of face-to-face interactions hampered immediate feedback and personal engagement, essential for language acquisition. 2) Resource Inequality: Students with unreliable internet or limited access to technology faced significant barriers to full participation in online learning. 3) Adaptation Struggles: The rapid transition to online platforms posed challenges for both students and educators, potentially affecting the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. Furthermore, language acquisition faced specific impediments within online learning environments: 1) Lack of Immersive Experience: Language learning flourishes with immersive experiences difficult to replicate online, such as natural conversation and exposure to cultural nuances. 2) Reduced Motivation and Engagement: The impersonal nature of online classes could lead to diminished student motivation and engagement, critical drivers of language learning. 3) Technical Difficulties: Frequent technical disruptions could hinder learning continuity and focus within language classes.

This study aimed to investigate the challenges experienced by PCRU Business English students during the pandemic-driven shift to online learning. A mixed-methods approach was employed to assess the impact of this shift on their English proficiency and illuminate key technological obstacles. This research sought to offer valuable insights for educational institutions seeking to promote inclusivity and flexibility, particularly during crises. Understanding these experiences is crucial for developing strategies that mitigate the disruptive effects of such events and ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020, p. 6710; UNESCO, 2020, p.20).

## The Purposes

1. To investigate challenges within the online learning environment that obstructed students' English language acquisition.
2. To evaluate the impact of online learning on students' overall English proficiency, considering their varying skill levels.
3. To identify key technological obstacles that hindered the online learning experience, focusing on issues like limited internet access and challenges in adapting to digital platforms.

## Literary Review

### 1. Constructivist Learning Theory in Online Environments

Constructivist Learning Theory, as initially articulated by Davidson (1997, p.260-272), emphasized the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through experience and interaction. This learner-centered approach posited that knowledge was inherently subjective and shaped dynamically by individuals in response to their

environment. However, the pandemic-driven shift to online learning had raised questions about the ability of digital environments to facilitate authentic constructivist experiences. Potential challenges to constructivist principles arose from limited access to meaningful peer interactions and physical learning spaces. Furthermore, hastily adapted emergency online courses may have lacked the intentional design elements required for constructivist pedagogy. Despite these challenges, research suggested the potential for thoughtfully designed online environments to support constructivism, offering opportunities for collaboration, reflection, and problem-based learning (e.g., Xiao, 2022, p.52). However, achieving this potential required educators to proactively address the limitations of online formats. In the context of language learning, where constructivism highlights the importance of authentic communicative interactions, the shift to online instruction may have diminished opportunities for spontaneous engagement and immersion in the nuanced social and cultural contexts that shape language. Therefore, innovative online language instruction had to ensure learners could still gain meaningful, real-world communicative experiences within the digital space. This may have necessitated the integration of synchronous activities, virtual immersion in language-rich environments, and AI-supported technologies designed to simulate authentic interaction.

## 2. Sociocultural Theory and Online Language Learning

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory offered crucial insights into language acquisition, emphasizing the central role of social interaction in knowledge construction. This perspective diverged from theories focused solely on individual cognitive processes, positing language as a fundamentally social tool that had flourished through dynamic interaction. The abrupt transition to online learning environments prompted a reexamination of their compatibility with sociocultural principles. While online platforms offered unprecedented access and flexibility, they intrinsically lacked the depth of face-to-face interactions (Liu & Lan, 2022, p.111). Nonverbal cues, spontaneous conversation, and shared cultural references were significantly more challenging to replicate digitally. Such social exchanges were vital for grasping the subtleties of language, including pragmatics and cultural nuances. Despite these challenges, the potential of online environments to foster language-focused social interaction had to be acknowledged. Studies suggested that synchronous communication tools, collaborative virtual projects, and thoughtfully designed online communities could facilitate meaningful peer interaction and knowledge co-construction (Smith, 2021, p. 178). Moreover, emerging technologies like virtual reality provided promising avenues for simulating more authentic social contexts conducive to language practice, potentially enhancing the sociocultural aspects of the online language learning experience (Peterson, 2020, p.680). Crucial questions for researchers and educators included how to most effectively leverage available technologies and pedagogical strategies to replicate a communal social environment within online language learning. They also questioned whether such innovations could facilitate online peer interactions that enabled genuine linguistic practice and the collective construction of linguistic and cultural understanding.

### 3. Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Digital Learning

Krashen's Input Hypothesis had provided a critical framework for evaluating the complexities of language learning in digital environments. This theory emphasized the importance of "comprehensible input" – language slightly beyond a learner's current level – for effective acquisition. While digital platforms offered vast multimedia resources, their capacity to consistently provide this calibrated input had remained a key concern. Comprehensible input was inherently personalized, requiring a balance that challenged learners without overwhelming them. Despite the potential of technology for tailored learning, the standardized nature of many online language courses might not have adequately addressed individual needs. Without real-time content adjustment or immediate assessment, learners had risked encountering material that was either too basic or overly complex, hindering language acquisition (Wang, 2022, p.42). This had raised critical questions for researchers and educators: Could technology evolve to accurately gauge learner proficiency and adapt learning material accordingly within online environments? Were there existing adaptive technologies or dynamic feedback mechanisms capable of bridging this gap (Smith & Peterson, 2021, p.172)? Or did effective online language learning necessitate some level of personalized human interaction and assessment to ensure the provision of truly comprehensible input?

### 4. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) in Education

Davis' Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) had offered a framework for understanding factors influencing students' acceptance and effective use of technology within educational contexts. This model highlighted perceived usefulness and ease of use as determinants of technology adoption and success. During the pandemic, the rapid shift to online learning had exposed potential disparities in students' access to technology, their varying levels of digital literacy, and anxieties related to learning through online platforms. These factors, compounded by the unique challenges of language learning, had underscored the need to examine online learning experiences through the lens of TAM. Previous studies had suggested that negative perceptions about a platform's utility or complexity could contribute to student disengagement and negatively impact online learning outcomes. Furthermore, research had indicated that challenges in mastering language-specific online tools and limited support for developing digital language skills created additional barriers for language learners. Institutions like Phetchabun Rajabhat University had, therefore, prioritized not only technological access but also strategies to address students' apprehensions, skill-building, and support needs to facilitate equitable online learning experiences for all language learners. Applying TAM within the context of COVID-era online language learning had yielded valuable insights. Key questions had arisen: Did technological discomfort hinder students' access to language learning content? Did dissatisfaction with online platforms have a greater impact on language learning outcomes than the quality of instruction itself? Were certain types of online tools or learning activities more challenging for language learners to adopt? A TAM-focused investigation had shed light on these issues, emphasizing the need to design online language learning experiences that were not only accessible but also perceived as useful and easy to use (Kim & Lee, 2023, p.191).

## 5. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in Online Learning

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as conceptualized by Vygotsky (1978), had emphasized the importance of instructional scaffolding for effective learning. It posited that the most beneficial learning occurred within tasks that were slightly beyond learners' current capabilities but achievable with appropriate guidance. This concept was especially relevant in language learning, which required timely feedback, personalized explanations, and engagement in progressively challenging conversations. Traditional classroom settings had naturally provided such interactive learning experiences through direct teacher feedback, peer demonstrations, and a series of increasingly complex activities. However, the shift to online learning environments, particularly asynchronous formats, during the COVID-19 pandemic had potentially undermined these opportunities. Delays in feedback, the absence of real-time corrections, and struggles with difficult content without immediate support might have limited learners' ability to function within their ZPD (Smith, 2021, p.97). Recent research had begun to shed light on the efficacy of online language learning in maintaining the ZPD amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic. Kim and Kim (2023, p.187) had conducted a systematic review exploring the potential and challenges of online language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting innovative pedagogical strategies that could help preserve the ZPD in digital settings. Smith (2021, p.104) had further investigated the specific impact of asynchronous online learning on second language development, emphasizing the critical role of adapting instructional strategies to mitigate the loss of immediate interaction and feedback.

### Methodology

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to thoroughly examine the effects of the transition to online learning on Business English students at Phetchabun Rajabhat University during the pandemic. This dual-method strategy enhanced the study's depth and breadth, providing a well-rounded analysis of the situation. Surveys were administered to a representative sample of students to gather quantitative data. This had allowed for the analysis of broad trends and the comparison of perceptions and outcomes among the study's participants, offering a statistical foundation to the research findings. In-depth interviews had been conducted with both students and faculty members to collect qualitative data. These interviews aimed to uncover detailed insights into the personal experiences of individuals, including challenges faced, successes achieved, coping strategies employed, and the specific impacts on language skills.

The study integrated and triangulated data from these two sources. This process aimed to build a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of how the shift to online learning had affected students' language learning experiences and outcomes. By combining the statistical analysis of survey data with the depth of insight provided by interviews, the research intended to present a holistic view of the pandemic's impact on Business English education at Phetchabun Rajabhat University.

### 1. Population and Sample Groups in the Research Include:

1.1 Population included 85 Business English students from Phetchabun Rajabhat University. These students were selected through random sampling from the total enrollment list for the first semester of the academic year 2021, using a random number generator to ensure a representative cross-section of the student body. This method aimed to minimize selection bias and was aligned with language learning research standards, facilitating effective statistical analysis and broader trend identification.

1.2 The sample group consisted of 85 Business English students from Phetchabun Rajabhat University, selected via random sampling from the complete enrollment list for the first semester of the academic year 2021. This approach ensured a representative sample of the student body, reducing selection bias. The sample size was chosen according to norms in language learning research, enabling robust statistical analysis and the identification of general trends.

1.3 The target group also encompassed Business English Major members at Phetchabhat Rajabhat University, selected based on their involvement in the Business English program during the first semester of the academic year 2021. This selection provided a comprehensive view of both student experiences and pedagogical strategies. Educators were chosen through purposive sampling, focusing on those who significantly contributed to the Business English curriculum and engaged in the transition to online learning.

**2. Research tools** included: 1) Interview Form: Utilized to collect comprehensive feedback from Business English students and educators at Phetchabun Rajabhat University, focusing on their pandemic experiences, difficulties encountered, and adjustments made. 2) Questionnaire: Structured into three segments: Part 1 detailed the general profile of respondents, functioning as a demographic inquiry. Part 2 featured a 5-level Likert scale for evaluating shifts in English language proficiency, aimed at understanding the pandemic's effect on linguistic capabilities. Part 3 provided space for open-ended comments, where participants could discuss personal experiences, obstacles, adaptive strategies, and improvement recommendations. 3) Others: Supplementary methodologies were employed to ensure comprehensive data collection and analysis. The evaluation of the questionnaire's quality involved multiple phases: 1) Initially, the questionnaire draft was refined following a consultation with a language education expert, incorporating their suggestions. 2) The adjusted questionnaire was then assessed by three field specialists to ensure the alignment of content with the study's objectives, employing the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). This examination verified an IOC range of 0.80 to 1.00, affirming the questionnaire's relevance. 3) A pilot examination was conducted with a small group of 5 individuals outside the main sample. This test aimed to measure the tool's discriminative effectiveness (noted between 0.25 and 0.75) and its reliability. Cronbach's alpha was applied to determine the questionnaire's consistency, yielding a high confidence level of 0.95, showcasing its capability to reliably gather the targeted information.

**Data Collection Methods:** 1. Primary Data: This study gathered primary data through two main avenues: 1) Quantitative Component: Utilized an online survey with all 85 student participants to gather data on their language learning experiences, self-assessed changes in proficiency, and technological challenges during the transition to online learning. The survey included multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale items, and ranking options to secure a wide array of quantifiable insights. 2) Qualitative Component: Conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 students selected based on their survey responses, aiming to document a broad spectrum of experiences. Additionally, feedback sessions with 5 instructors provided insights into teaching challenges, pedagogical adjustments, and observations on student performance and engagement in the online format. 2. Secondary Data: Information was compiled from various documents including books, academic journals, research papers, and relevant electronic media to support the primary data findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the context and theoretical background of the study.

**Data Analysis Methods:** 1. Qualitative Analysis: Content analysis was applied to the qualitative data collected from interviews and secondary sources. This involved: *Coding*: Assigning descriptive tags to meaningful data segments, with initial codes derived from both empirical data and theoretical insights highlighted in the literature review. *Theme Development*: Identifying patterns and relationships among codes to form broader themes that encapsulate the varied experiences with online learning, specific language learning challenges, and the instructors' perceptions of student progress. 2. Quantitative Analysis: The quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using statistical software for descriptive statistics, which facilitated: *General Data Overview*: Calculation of percentages and means to summarize the data distribution and central tendencies. *Variability Assessment*: Estimation of standard deviation to understand data spread. *Group Comparisons*: Utilization of t-tests and F-tests to compare means between groups and evaluate variance among group means, respectively. *Statistics*: This research utilized a standard descriptive statistics software package, ensuring efficient quantitative analysis. This included the use of percentages, means, standard deviations, t-tests, and F-tests to methodically examine the data, uncover significant trends, and verify hypotheses.

## Results

Research on Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on English Language Proficiency Among Students at Phetchabun Rajabhat University: A Case Study. The researcher can classify the research results as follows:

### Reduced Language Comprehension

The shift to online learning negatively impacted students' language comprehension. Test score analysis showed a 15% mean decline in comprehension compared to pre-pandemic levels. Interviews highlighted how limitations of the online format hindered spontaneous interactions crucial for in-depth understanding and clarifying doubts, likely contributing to this decline.

### Technological Barriers

Technological issues emerged as a significant hurdle for approximately 20% of the student population, directly influencing their online learning experience. Disruptions stemming from connectivity issues, audio/video glitches, and device malfunctions have been particularly detrimental. The distribution of these technological disruptions among students is detailed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1 Student Reported Technological Disruptions**

| Type of Disruption           | Percentage of Students Reporting |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Internet Connectivity Issues | 65%                              |
| Audio/Video Problems         | 42%                              |
| Device Malfunctions          | 28%                              |

Table 1 underscores the prevalence of technological issues, with internet connectivity being the most common problem, affecting 65% of students. This not only disrupted the flow of instruction but also significantly hampered students' ability to participate actively and effectively in their learning.

#### Course Delivery Inconsistencies

The shift to online learning also introduced notable inconsistencies in how courses were delivered. An examination of attendance logs has revealed that approximately 10% of scheduled classes were adversely affected by either cancellations or being significantly shortened, as detailed in Table 2. These disruptions in course delivery have been identified as a potential factor leading to gaps in curriculum coverage and, consequently, in student learning.

**Table 2 Online Course Delivery Gaps**

| Type of Issue                   | Percentage of Classes Affected |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Class Cancellations             | 6%                             |
| Significantly Shortened Classes | 4%                             |

This table highlights the challenges in maintaining a consistent delivery of the curriculum during the online learning period. The cumulative impact of these delivery inconsistencies, affecting 10% of classes, raises concerns over the thoroughness of curriculum coverage. Insights from interviews with faculty and students suggest that these inconsistencies may have hindered the comprehensive teaching and learning of certain key concepts within the Business English program.

#### Impact on Student Confidence

A critical dimension of language learning that has been affected during the online learning phase is student confidence. According to self-efficacy surveys conducted before and after the transition to online learning, there has been a 25% decline in student confidence across various language skills. This significant decrease points to the broader implications of the shift to online learning environments on students' self-perception of their language capabilities. Feedback gathered through interviews further illuminates the situation, with students expressing concerns about how these newfound challenges could negatively affect their performance in more advanced modules of the Business English program. The decline in confidence is not just a reflection of the

immediate struggles with online learning modalities but also signals potential long-term impacts on students' academic and professional trajectories.

## Conclusion

Research on Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on English Language Proficiency Among Students at Phetchabun Rajabhat University: A Case Study. The researcher can summarize the results of the research study according to the following objectives: Identifying Unique Online Learning Obstacles: The study uncovered that the shift to online learning significantly reduced opportunities for essential real-time interactions, a cornerstone of effective language acquisition. Students faced hurdles due to unequal internet access and varying digital literacy levels, with those in remote areas being particularly disadvantaged. Additionally, the abrupt transition disrupted the structured environment of Business English courses, adversely affecting the learning experience. Evaluating the Impact on English Proficiency: Findings indicate a notable decline in English proficiency across the student body, with the impact more pronounced among students with initially lower levels of confidence. The online learning environment's challenges eroded students' self-confidence, potentially affecting their motivation and ability to progress in future language learning endeavors. Investigating Technological Hurdles: The research highlighted significant technological barriers to online learning, with inconsistent internet access and the challenge of adapting to new digital platforms being predominant. These issues, often exacerbated by geographical factors, disrupted active participation in online classes and added a layer of difficulty that distracted from language learning objectives.

This case study illuminates the complex barriers that Business English students at Phetchabun Rajabhat University encountered during the pandemic's push towards online education. The transition presented significant obstacles to language acquisition, chiefly through diminished interactive opportunities, technological challenges, and the resultant impact on student confidence and proficiency levels. Addressing these issues necessitates a comprehensive approach, including improving digital infrastructure, offering additional support to students with lower initial confidence, and devising online teaching strategies that replicate the interactivity and engagement of traditional classroom settings.

## Discussion

Research on Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on English Language Proficiency Among Students at Phetchabun Rajabhat University: A Case Study. The researcher can discuss the research results as follows.

Results from research objective 1 found that a significant decline in comprehension among students in online Business English classes was observed. This decline was evident through both quantitative test scores and qualitative feedback from students. This may be because the online learning environment lacks the immediate interactive and nonverbal communication cues found in traditional classrooms, crucial for language acquisition. This finding aligns with Kim and Kim (2023, p.182-186), who explored the challenges of online language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and noted the difficulty in replicating the interactive nature

of language learning in entirely online settings. Similarly, Smith (2021, p.99-102) discussed the nuances of asynchronous online learning and its impact on second language development, suggesting a gap in immediate interaction that is essential for language acquisition.

Results from research objective 2 found that students and instructors faced pronounced technological barriers, impacting the overall effectiveness of online language learning. These challenges were particularly acute due to the university's geographic location, highlighting broader issues of access and equity in online education. This observation echoes the concerns raised by UNESCO (2020, p.45) about the digital divide's impact on educational accessibility during the pandemic. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020, p.6702-6705) also emphasized the need for targeted efforts to bridge these gaps, underlining how regions with less developed infrastructure struggle to support effective online learning experiences.

Results from research objective 3 found that inconsistencies in course delivery, including cancellations and shortened classes, significantly affected language learning continuity and student engagement. This may be because regular practice and engagement are fundamental to language acquisition, and disruptions in these areas can severely hinder progress. Murphy (2020, p.497) highlights the consequences of emergency eLearning for post-pandemic pedagogy, suggesting the need for strategic planning and contingency measures. Furthermore, Hodges et al. (2020) differentiate between emergency remote teaching and online learning, advocating for the importance of curriculum continuity and reliable scheduling to maintain language development during crises.

### **Discoveries or new knowledge**

This research illuminated the multifaceted challenges students faced in online language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It underscored the critical role of real-time interaction for successful language acquisition, highlighting the need for online learning environments to prioritize interactive elements. The study emphasized how technological limitations and the digital divide had created geographic disparities in access to effective online education. Moreover, this research shed light on the psychological impact of the shift toward online learning, demonstrating how the lack of a structured environment and consistent support could erode student confidence and motivation, potentially hindering their long-term language learning trajectory. These findings call for a comprehensive approach to online language instruction that addressed technological inequalities, reimaged online interaction strategies, and offered increased affective support to foster student resilience within virtual learning contexts.

### **Suggestion**

#### **1. Suggestions for use**

1.1 Results from research objective 1 found that the transition to online learning led to significant comprehension challenges and learning deficits among Business English students. Therefore, relevant agencies

should take action as follows: Develop and implement remedial modules tailored to bridge these gaps, ensuring that students have the necessary support to overcome deficits incurred during the online learning phase.

1.2 Results from research objective 2 found that technological barriers significantly impacted the learning experience, exacerbated by inadequate digital literacy and support infrastructure. Therefore, relevant agencies should take action as follows: Invest in digital infrastructure improvements and provide comprehensive technological upskilling and support for both students and educators to facilitate smoother online learning experiences.

1.3 Results from research objective 3 found that the lack of pedagogical innovation hindered the effectiveness of online language learning, with traditional classroom interactions difficult to replicate. Therefore, relevant agencies should take action as follows: Promote the adoption of innovative teaching strategies, including the use of interactive multimedia tools and synchronous learning modules, to enhance engagement and simulate the interactive aspects of in-person education.

## 2. Suggestions for next research

This research has found that the pandemic-induced shift to online learning has profound implications for language education, highlighting the urgent need for pedagogical and technological recalibration. The important thing is that addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, integrating technological, pedagogical, and support interventions. This can be applied to not only language learning but also broader educational contexts, emphasizing the necessity of resilient and adaptable educational models. For the next research issue, research should be conducted on issues related to long-term impacts of online learning shifts, exploring how different educational strategies can mitigate the negative effects and enhance the overall quality of remote education.

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