

Advanced Writing Courses through Online Learning: Thai EFL Learners' Perception

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Abstract

The study aims at analyzing Thai students' perception as EFL learners on advanced writing courses taught and learned online. The participants are 100 Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University students in Year 3 and 4 majoring in English, English Education, and English for Business Communication. The participants have experienced online writing courses in Research Report Writing, Essay Writing, Creative Writing, and Business Writing subject. The data were collected using a survey and an in-depth interview to 20 of the participants. The results show that the challenges that the students face in learning advanced writing courses online outweigh the advantages. The students' main problem were the difficulty in comprehending the lessons and the teachers' explanations as well as the feedback. The second challenge were the poor internet connection. They are problems due to the lack of skills and technical devices. The other problem was due to the more workload in having an online advanced writing courses. And finally the last problem is that online classes make the learners feel alienated, disengaged, and demotivated. Besides the problems faced, the learners admitted that learning advanced writing online provides more flexible time in constructing the pieces of writing and they feel less pressured in writing since the teachers do not supervise them in person.

Keywords: *advanced writing, EFL learners, learners' perception, online learning*

INTRODUCTION

English has become a global language of communication and is widely used in various fields, including business, science, and education. The ability to communicate effectively in both spoken and written English is crucial for achieving academic success and professional growth in today's globalized world. However, for EFL learners, developing writing skills can be a more challenging task due to linguistic and cultural differences. English writing courses in EFL contexts pose additional challenges for learners, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom and cultural differences that can impact writing style and preferences. Writing courses have also been proven to be a big challenge for Thai learners. Not only that they require learners' creative mind for the production, but they also require a wide variety of vocabulary and knowledge in grammar applications. The higher the level of writing, the higher English proficiency is required.

Although most writing courses in Thailand are conducted in a conventional, face-to-face way, blended learning has also been applied. Studies show the applications of blended learning to teach English, including writing ([Hassan et al., 2021](#); [Singh et al., 2021](#)). The blended learning applies a few online platforms such as websites ([Turmudi, 2020](#)) and Facebook ([Anggoro & Rueangrong, 2021](#)) as supplementary input for the learners. However, since the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, educational institutions all around the globe are forced to turn into online learning and Thailand is not an exception. Schools and universities have to quickly adapt to the situation and conducted the courses online which include English writing courses. Therefore, the study aims to investigate Thai EFL learners' perspective in studying advance writing courses taught and learned online. The findings of the study will give insights into the benefits and challenges of online advanced writing courses based on the students' points of view. These insights can help EFL practitioners, educators, and policymakers to design better online advanced writing courses and to anticipate the problems that can possibly occur.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Previously conducted studies showed that online courses can provide EFL students with the flexibility and access to resources that traditional face-to-face classes may not provide ([Baćzek et al., 2021](#); [Singh et al., 2021](#)). This includes the ability to learn at their own pace and schedule, making it easier for them to balance their responsibilities with their studies ([Baćzek et al., 2021](#); [Salleh et al., 2020](#); [Zboun & Farrah, 2021](#)). Additionally, online courses can also provide EFL students with access to a wider range of resources and materials that may not be available in traditional classes ([Baćzek et al., 2021](#); [Thamrin et al., 2021](#)). A study by [Park & Yang, \(2020\)](#) also found that online writing courses provided EFL students with more opportunities to practice and receive feedback on their writing, which improved their writing skills. Similarly [Zhang et al. \(2022\)](#) have found in their study that students admitted getting benefits from the online peer feedback in academic writing courses. Some studies also have found that online writing courses can be as effective as traditional face-to-face classes in improving EFL students' English skills, including writing ([Awada & Diab, 2023](#); [Hazaymeh, 2021](#); [Turmudi, 2020](#)).

On the other hand, other studies claimed that online courses may not be as beneficial for EFL students as the onsite courses. An old study conducted by [Sapp & Simon, \(2005\)](#) suggested that there was a higher number of students who failed in online writing courses compared to the conventional ones. A study conducted by [Thamrin et al. \(2021\)](#) suggested that online courses lead to lack of understanding on the subject. In the same line, the research findings of [Zboun and Farrah \(2021\)](#) and [Curelaru et al., \(2022\)](#) also indicate that students showed minimum understanding on the teacher's explanations, instructions, and feedback in online courses. Numerous studies have also shown that one of the biggest

challenges in online studies is the lack of technical skills and supports which include poor internet connection, lack of technical device to study online, and lack of skills to use the applications and programs required for online courses ([Ametova & Mustafieva, 2020](#); [Bączek et al., 2021](#); [Curelaru et al., 2022](#); [Hazaymeh, 2021](#); [Suharsih & Wijayanti, 2021](#); [Thamrin et al., 2022](#); [Zboun & Farrah, 2021](#)). Online study also affects the social and psychological aspects of learning. Online courses are believed to give more workload compared to traditional classes ([Curelaru et al., 2022](#)) which leads to more stress. Students also have very less to zero opportunities for social and physical interactions with teachers and classmates ([Hazaymeh, 2021](#); [Thamrin et al., 2021](#)). In addition, studies show that students are less motivated and less engaged during online courses compared to onsite classes ([Bączek et al., 2021](#); [Suharsih & Wijayanti, 2021](#); [Zboun & Farrah, 2021](#)).

At present, there have been still numerous studies conducted on students' perspectives on general online learning during the pandemic ([Adnan & Anwar, 2020](#); [Bestiantono et al., 2020](#); [Le & Truong, 2021](#)). Some studies have also been conducted on the feasibility of online writing courses ([Sapp & Simon, 2005](#)) and the use of online peer review for writing courses ([Coit, 2004](#); [Jensen, 2016](#); [Lin, 2019](#)). Regarding students' perception of online writing courses, there is only one study conducted by Litterio, (2018) on native English-speaking students' perception of a first-year online writing course. Thus, there is a missing gap in the literature on EFL learners' perception of online advanced writing courses.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a qualitative research method. According to [Taylor and Bogdan \(1998\)](#), qualitative research is a procedure that yields descriptive information from the subjects and objects being studied, either in the form of written or spoken words. The participants of the study were 100 Year 3 and 4 students of Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University majoring in English, English Education, and English for Business Communication. They were selected using purposive sampling with the criteria of: 1) Thai EFL learners; and 2) have experienced studying advanced writing courses online. The participants have experienced studying online writing courses namely Research Report Writing (32 participants), Essay Writing (13 participants), Creative Writing (27 participants), and Business Writing (28 participants). The data were collected using an online survey through Google Forms. The survey consisted of 16 questions with nine close-ended questions and seven open-ended questions. The questions were initially reviewed by two EFL writing lecturers to assure the validity and reliability. The questions aimed to investigate the participants views regarding the advantages and disadvantages of studying advanced writing courses online. From the results of the survey, 20 participants were invited for an online in-dept interview through Google Meet. The participants invited were those who gave interesting and vague answers on the open-ended questions. The purpose is to understand the participants' perception in more details. The study used content analysis to analyze the results by coding and analyzing the participants answers from the survey and the interview, before finally drawing the conclusion to answer the research question.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that there are both advantages and challenges of studying advanced writing courses online according to the students' perspectives. In this section, the results are presented descriptively with the citations of students' opinions on the advantages and challenges.

The advantages of online advanced writing courses

Based on the research, there are two advantages that students experienced on studying

advanced writing courses online. The first advantage is time flexibility, which is aligned with the studies conducted by [Salleh et al., \(2020\)](#), [Baczek et al. \(2021\)](#), and [Zboun and Farrah \(2021\)](#). Students acknowledge that online writing courses give them more freedom in terms of time in creating their piece of writing.

“I can think best at night, sometimes pass midnight. When I study writing online, I can write at midnight and my brain works better than when I write during daytime.”

Each individual has different time of productivity. Some students work best in the early morning, some feel more productive during daytime, and some others find the inspiration to work at night ([Levin, 1993](#); [Shishegar & Boubekri, 2016](#)). In on-site advanced writing courses, students are required to write during the class schedule, which mostly is in the daytime. However, not all students are in their highest level of productivity. In online course, on the other hand, students have more flexible time in writing since most of the time the instructors use the online meetings to explain the theory and give general feedback and ask the students to write outside the online meeting. Thus, students have higher chance of producing higher quality of writing since they can write during their productive time. This finding is aligned with the study conducted by

The second benefit of online advanced writing courses is that students feel less pressured and less anxious in producing a piece of writing because the instructors do not supervise them in person while they are writing.

“In class I cannot write. I am very nervous and cannot think because the teacher always goes around the class and check the students’ progress in writing. When studying online, I can write better because I am not worried of the teacher spotting my mistakes while (I am still) writing.”

Anxiety and pressured feelings are one of the factors that hinder students’ production of English, both writing and speaking ([Aloairdhi, 2019](#); [Pabro-Maquidato, 2021](#)). Many students suffer from writing anxiety led by the worry feeling of committing mistakes in writing. This is often triggered by during-writing proofreading, although the original purpose of the instructors going around the class checking students’ writing is to prevent them from creating mistakes before they finish their writing. In online advanced writing courses, students feel more at peace in writing since the instructors do not proofread their writing until they submit it. This is in line with the study conducted by [Zboun and Farrah \(2021\)](#) which found out that students feel less pressured and less shy in online classes.

The challenges of online advanced writing courses

Despite the advantages, the results indicate the challenges that students face during online advanced writing courses. The biggest challenge is the difficulty to understand the instructors’ explanation. The participants admitted that they understand the teacher’s explanation less, or do not understand at all. This difficulty of understanding is caused by three aspects. The first one is the difficulty to understand explanations due to psychological, distance aspect.

“Sometimes I don’t understand what the teacher is explaining. I ask the teacher and she explains again, but I still don’t understand.”

Some students can understand better when they are explained in person rather than online. This is consistent with studies conducted by [Thamrin et al., \(2021\)](#) and [Curelaru et al. \(2022\)](#) showing that distance affect students’ understanding of instructors’ explanations. The

second is difficulty caused by social, environmental aspect. When students study on-site, the classroom provides more supportive environment compared to when they study online. Most students have to study from home where other family members are there doing their own activities which oftentimes shift students' focus from the lesson.

"I can't focus when I study from home. Sometimes it's noisy too and I cannot get what the teacher is explaining."

The third aspect is related to the other challenge which is the Internet connection. The instability and low internet connection may cause students to miss some of the lecturer explanations which results in not understanding the explanations at all since some of the information are missing.

"When the teacher's voice turns like robot (due to buffering or video lag), I can't understand."

The next challenge is difficulty to understand the instructors' online feedback. Students frequently misunderstand the written feedback, whether it is direct or indirect feedback. When it is spoken feedback, they also cannot listen clearly.

"When the teacher gives written feedback, I don't understand what she wants me to do or how she wants me to fix my writing. When the teacher calls to give feedback, I also can't understand because I can't listen to her well."

When the students were asked the follow up question on how they prefer their feedback to be delivered, one of them suggested:

"I understand better when the teacher explains the feedback to me in person."

It is aligned with the previous challenge of which distance hinders students' understanding of the instructors' explanations.

The next challenge, which has been briefly discussed, is poor internet connection. Poor internet connection from both students' and instructors' sides contributes the most to learners' failure in understanding the lesson and the feedback.

"I often get disconnected from the online class, and when I join again, I cannot understand what I miss."

Several studies have pointed out at internet connection as the most common challenge in conducting online courses ([Ametova & Mustafieva, 2020](#); [Bączek et al., 2021](#); [Curelaru et al., 2022](#); [Hazaymeh, 2021](#); [Suharsih & Wijayanti, 2021](#); [Thamrin et al., 2021](#); [Zboun & Farrah, 2021](#)). In online advanced writing courses, the effect of poor internet connection is worse than in other online courses because students cannot see the shared screen with weak connection.

"The poor internet connection makes me can't see what the teacher is sharing on the screen. It's blurry and sometimes I cannot see anything at all."

Students' lack of technical device is another challenge. Most of the participants come from medium to low economy family background, thus many of them only have smartphones to join the online class.

“I don’t have laptop or computer so I only can use my phone. Sometimes I can’t see clearly what the teacher is presenting because my phone screen is small.”

In addition, they also lack technical skills. Most students are not familiar with online meeting apps and other online learning apps such as Google Docs, Google Drive, Google Forms, and Google Classroom. This causes them to miss the deadline and the feedback which of course affect their writing scores.

“In the beginning, I did not know how to see the teacher’s feedback on my writing, so I thought my writing was okay.”

“I often submit the assignments late simply because I don’t know how to upload it. Sometimes I don’t realize that it’s not uploaded yet.”

However, this problem can be easily addressed by giving students quick lesson on the required application before starting or at the beginning of the online writing courses.

Another challenge pointed out by the students is that online writing courses give them more workload compared to onsite writing courses. Online courses often require students to be more self-directed and proactive in their learning, which can be challenging for EFL students who may not be accustomed to such learning environments. In addition, online courses may require more assignments, readings, and discussions, which can lead to increased stress and anxiety for EFL students. Although students understand that the instructors’ intention is to give them more chances to practice, they argue that online writing courses give them more assignments, along with other online courses.

“I don’t understand why teachers, not only in this subject, but also in other subjects, give so many homework and assignments. I don’t have time to do all the assignments. I feel stressed and tired with all the assignments. It’s too much to handle.”

The last challenge is the feeling of alienated, disengaged, and demotivated. Lack of social interactions in online writing courses makes the students feel excluded and disengaged from the teaching and learning process. As a result, students feel demotivated to study.

“When I study in class, my friends are around. Seeing my friends actively participating makes me feel motivated too. When I don’t understand, my friends can help me understand. But when I study online, I am alone. No one to ask in person. No one to interact with. I also feel lazy to join the class.”

This is in line with the findings of previous studies, indicating that students show less motivation and participation in online courses due to a lack of social interactions ([Baczek et al, 2021](#); [Hazaymeh, 2020](#); [Suharsih & Wijayanti, 2020](#); [Thamrin, 2021](#); [Zboun & Farrah, 2021](#)).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, there are some advantages and challenges of online advanced writing courses from Thai students’ perspective as EFL learners. The advantages are the flexible time to produce pieces of writing and less anxiety and pressure in writing because there is no direct supervision from the instructors during writing. However, the challenges outweigh the advantages. Students face difficulty in understanding the instructors’ explanations and feedback on online advanced writing courses. They also do not have sufficient technical

supports and skills which make it hard to follow the online writing courses. In addition, online writing courses are claimed to give students more assignments and homework which cause them to stress out. Lastly, students feel alienated and disengaged from the lessons, and demotivated to study. The findings indicate that Thai EFL learners are not ready for online advanced writing courses. Alternatively, blended learning can be applied to gain maximum benefits for the learners. However, these results cannot be applied to all Thai students as there is a possibility of different results in different institutions. Moreover, further studies on how to deal with the challenges are required.

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