

# Thai Undergraduate and Graduate Students' Satisfaction with Synchronous Online English Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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<b>Article information</b>	<b>Abstract</b>
<p><b>Article history:</b> Received: 12 Aug 2022 Revised: 24 Sep 2023 Accepted: 25 Oct 2023</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Online learning satisfaction Emergency remote teaching (ERT) English language teaching and learning The COVID-19 pandemic Thai undergraduate and graduate students</p>	<p><i>The COVID-19 pandemic forced educational institutions across the globe to adopt and adapt to emergency remote teaching (ERT) at an unprecedented rate. This transition to synchronous online English learning had similar impacts on English Language teaching and learning in Thai higher education. This paper focuses on Thai undergraduate and graduate students' satisfaction with their synchronous online English learning regarding three aspects, namely technical, class-engagement, and instructional issues. It reports students' responses to an online survey questionnaire consisting of a set of 25 five-point Likert scale items. The data were collected from 72 undergraduate and 65 graduate students studying online English skill development courses at a public university in Thailand. The results showed that although both groups of students were satisfied with the three aspects to a high level, significant differences were found between the two groups in their overall satisfaction towards this type of learning and between the aspects of technical and class-engagement. Thus, it is believed that this study will give insights into the lessons learnt from the forced ERT caused by COVID-19. If English teachers are to deal with emergencies again, such as another pandemic in the future, then it is important for them to recognize their students' unique learning needs and adapt their online teaching practice to the expectations of their students to ensure continuous motivation to learn English effectively while studying remotely.</i></p>

## INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late December 2019 turned face-to-face classroom instruction into a fully online remote teaching or emergency remote teaching (ERT) format. The shifting mode of teaching from face-to-face to ERT affected both teachers and students globally, including those in Thailand. Teachers in all areas of education in Thailand, including English Language Teaching (ELT), were forced to incorporate both synchronous and asynchronous learning contexts into their online classrooms. To maintain the quality of instruction in response to the COVID-19, Thai English teachers tried to adjust their ways of teaching to suit ERT. Although online instruction has been found to be effective in various Thai English learning contexts

(Deerajviset, 2014; Dokchumpa, 2019; Wongpornprateep & Boonmoh, 2019), abrupt online English instruction, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, presented a big challenge for Thai teachers and students.

As student success in learning outcome is the ultimate goal of any class instruction and as student learning success depends largely on their innate need satisfaction (Hu, 2016), knowing more about the effectiveness and efficiency of online learning through the perceived satisfaction towards this method can give teachers insights into how to motivate their students so that their students can achieve the best learning outcome in accordance with their English ability. Though there are some studies that take the satisfaction of Thai students towards online English learning into consideration (Chiablaem, 2021; Jittisukpong, 2022; Khuankaew & Trail, 2021; Nanni & Pusey, 2021; Sakulprasertsri, 2022; Sukman & Mhunkongdee, 2021; Thongsongkleeb, 2020), information focused on this novel form of English methodology among Thai students at different levels of tertiary study is profoundly limited.

Moreover, as the researcher teaches English skill development courses at both post- and undergraduate levels, she comes across students with different generational identities. While most graduate students are millennials, the vast majority of undergraduate students are Gen Zers. In terms of their familiarity with technology, compared with millennials who have been living with the advancement of technology in their daily social lives, Gen Zers are digital natives who have been surrounded by online applications since childhood (Selingo, 2018). As digital natives, undergraduate students can be expected to be more satisfied with their experience of online English learning than those from other previous generations (Demir & Sonmez, 2021). In this respect, it is worth investigating the differences between these two groups of students in terms of their satisfaction towards online learning in English skill development courses taught by the researcher.

Finding out the satisfaction levels of these two different groups of students on issues relating to their online English learning experience will help English teachers to embrace more pedagogically sound online English language teaching and learning models to meet the different demands of the two different generations. Moreover, the findings will help teachers to better prepare for any emergency remote teaching (ERT) situations that may arise again in the future. This study, thus, employed a survey methodology to answer the following question: “To what extent do Thai undergraduate and graduate students differ in their satisfaction with online English learning?”

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Online English learning**

Telecommunications and information and communication technologies (ICTs) make it possible for an advanced kind of learning where teachers and students are physically apart. With the combination of computer and internet, online learning has created new educational opportunities. Generally, online learning consists of education from a distance using electronic devices, such

as tablets, smartphones, laptops, and computers, that need internet connectivity. There are two main types of online learning: synchronous and asynchronous (Acosta-Tello, 2015). Synchronous learning is real-time online face-to-face instruction, while asynchronous online learning has no limitations in time and place. With synchronous online learning, a virtual real-time live video presentation is delivered from a computer device to learners anywhere with an internet connection via video conference services or online learning platforms such as Google Meet/Hangout, Microsoft Teams, WebEx Meeting, and Zoom.

These online learning platforms replace the traditional real-time instruction of traditional classrooms (e.g., giving lectures and sharing class materials, in-class activities, assignment submissions, feedback on assignments, quizzes, and exams), making it become possible online. However, to participate in an online course successfully, certain kinds of commitment are required from both teachers and students.

For teachers, adopting this new way of synchronous online instruction requires new instructional delivery skills. At the onset of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thai teachers were either struggling on their own or were trained by their workplaces in using online learning platforms to deliver their courses. With the adoption of synchronous online instruction, students also needed to adapt themselves to this new way of course instruction. In doing so, various challenges were encountered. The factors affecting Thai students' success in online learning both synchronously and asynchronously have been discussed in recent research publications.

Peechapol et al. (2018) provide a systematic review of research from 2005 to 2017 and a list of factors that influence online learning, including the online learning experience and knowledge gained, feedback and reward, online communication and interaction, social influence, and learner motivation and attitude. Kuama and Intharaksa's (2016) study on factors correlating with online English learning focused on cognitive, metacognitive, resource management, and affective strategies. Fields of study, computer skills, and geographical areas were factors investigated in Chomphuchart's (2017) study with Thai university students towards the use of the internet in learning English. For synchronous online English learning in Thailand, Ramsin and Mayall's (2019) study was the only one found in the literature to examine correlations between Thai English learners' online learning self-efficacy levels and demographic characteristics. The study reported significant correlations between the students' online learning self-efficacy levels and their demographic characteristics, namely self-reporting computer skills, comfort levels using the internet, self-reported English proficiency scores, and prior online learning experience. The researchers claimed that the high levels of online learning self-efficacy reported by the students indicated their readiness for engagement in online learning courses.

### **Emergency remote teaching (ERT)**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most educational institutions all over the world were forced to move their courses to what Hodges et al. (2020) described as emergency remote teaching (ERT). ERT "involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated" (Hodges et al., 2020,

Emergency Remote Teaching section, para.1). According to the study, ERT is distinctively different from online education under normal circumstances in terms of the very limited time for course preparation; thus, the delivery of ERT should not be seen as a proper example of online education. Moreover, Fuchs (2021) further pointed out that the rapid transition to the new circumstances without enough preparation could have resulted in an unsuitable learning atmosphere for students.

### **Online English learning satisfaction**

Researchers have utilized different aspects of online instruction to investigate students' perceptions towards online English learning in their studies (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020; Chiablaem, 2021; Erarslan & Arslan, 2020; Pham & Nguyen, 2021; Jittisukpong, 2022; Khuankaew & Trail, 2021; Nanni & Pusey, 2021; Rahayu, 2020; Sakulprasertsri, 2022; Sukman & Mhunkongdee, 2021; Thongsongkleeb, 2020). Online learning activities are perceived as making effective language learning possible. Through online learning platforms, students can create and share linguistic content, as well as interact with teachers and other students.

In terms of Thai students at different levels of tertiary study and their satisfaction with online English learning, there is only one previous study found in the literature. Thongsongkleeb (2020), however, examined different years of undergraduate study, not different levels of university students. The researcher investigated 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> year undergraduate students' satisfaction with three aspects focused on using Google Classroom in an English for Proficiency Test Preparation Class, namely accessibility, benefits, and activities. The satisfaction levels of all the three aspects, together with that of the overall mean scores, were found to be high. With regard to students' different years of study, no statistical significance was found between the mean scores of any of the three aspects and the overall mean scores.

Other studies found in the literature concerning online English learning in Thailand were conducted only with undergraduate students (Chiablaem, 2021; Jittisukpong, 2022; Khuankaew & Trail, 2021; Nanni & Pusey, 2021; Sakulprasertsri, 2022; Sukman & Mhunkongdee, 2021). The results found that the majority of Thai undergraduate students felt satisfied with their online English learning experience, except for the following two studies.

Khuankaew and Trail (2021) conducted a study with Thai undergraduate students to investigate their learning achievement and perceptions towards online English learning in their Fundamental English 2 Course. A significant difference between online and traditional classroom instruction was found in the students' learning achievement. The students in the traditional classroom outperformed those learning online. For the students' perceptions towards two aspects of online learning (tools and other resources) and students' needs satisfaction and preferences, it was found that the students' perceptions were mostly neutral.

The findings revealed in the study conducted by Nanni and Pusey (2021) were somewhat similar. The researchers investigated the attitudes of Thai university students enrolling in an intensive English program towards online language learning after their initial mandatory shift during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under seven sub-constructs related to attitudes towards online

language learning, including anxiety, autonomy, convenience, effectiveness of instruction, engagement, interactivity, L2 learning motivation, and open-mindedness, the researchers found that the students appeared to have somewhat negative attitudes towards the mandatory shift to online instruction.

With regard to positive results, Sakulprasertsri's (2022) study, which looked at Thai first year students' perceptions of an online Foundation English Course, is the most recent one found in the literature. In terms of students' perceptions, this study considered the five aspects: engagement and interaction, learning tasks and activities, instructional media used, English skills development, and course effectiveness. All of the five aspects were reported to be important for teaching and learning in the online English course. Similarly, a qualitative study was conducted by Sukman and Mhunkongdee (2021) using written reflections and semi-structured interviews. The researcher collected data from Thai undergraduate students majoring in Business English. The researchers addressed three emerging themes, including students' perceptions of learning English online, challenges faced by the students, and their suggestions for effective online classrooms. The results also indicated that these students expressed positive attitudes towards online learning.

In addition, Chiablaem (2021) investigated Thai first year students' perceptions towards the use of Google Applications for Education (GAfE) in a fundamental English course. The results indicated a positive experience in integrating the applications within the online learning contexts. Another study which also looked at perceptions of Thai first year students regarding using Google Classroom Application and its benefit in an English Foundation Course was conducted by Jittisukpong (2022). The findings also showed a positive perception of students towards using the Google Classroom Application.

From a review of these related studies, it can be concluded that very few have focused specifically on Thai university students' satisfaction with synchronous online English learning, and none of them were found to have compared the satisfaction of Thai university students at different levels of tertiary study. Moreover, there is still no consensus on the findings of these studies. Thus, whether teachers are able to utilize these online learning platforms in their online English courses appropriately and effectively to facilitate their students' English skill development is still questionable. To investigate the gap found among previous studies, this paper focuses on Thai undergraduate and graduate students' satisfaction with their online English learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online English learning in this study resulted from the delivery of ERT forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a type of online education known as synchronous learning, which utilizes 100% of the learning process online.

The author's motivation in undertaking this research initially arose from her observation of the different learning behaviors between undergraduate and graduate students taking online English skill development courses with her during the onset of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the academic year 2020. Thus, the author decided to conduct a study to identify the different perceptions between these two groups of students on factors affecting success in learning English online and found both commonalities and differences between them. Taking into consideration the implications of this previous study, the author incorporated them in

delivering online English skill development courses to her undergraduate and graduate students during the academic year 2021. At the end of the academic year 2021, the present study was conducted to investigate whether these undergraduate and graduate students were satisfied with their online English learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The participants of this research were 137 Thai university students who had studied online during the COVID-19 pandemic. They consisted of 72 undergraduate and 65 graduate students from various social science faculties in a public university in the central region of Thailand. The students took synchronous online English skill development courses offered by the university with the author during the academic year 2021. The courses taken by the undergraduate students included English for Work and English for Job Applications. The courses the graduate students enrolled in were Developing Effective Reading Skills and Developing Effective Paragraph Writing Skills. The undergraduate students consisted of 20 males and 52 females. All of them were under 25 years old (100%), and they were mostly in their junior and senior years (81.85%). All of the graduate students were studying for a master's degree (100%). They consisted of 25 males and 40 females, and most of them were over 25 years old (84.61%).

### **Instrument**

The instrument used in this study involved an online survey questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part was the demographic data of the participants. The second part included 25 closed-items exploring students' satisfaction with their online English learning experience using a 5-point Likert scale beginning from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Building on questionnaires from previous related studies (Cakiroglu, 2014; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021; Yordchim & Gibbs, 2014), 25 items were adapted and categorized under three aspects of online English learning experience: technical issues (4 items), class-engagement issues (5 items), and instructional issues (16 items). The questionnaire was translated into Thai, which was the native language of the participants.

### **Procedures**

The data were collected via Google form at the end of the academic year 2021 from undergraduate and graduate students taking English skill development courses with the author. The students were involved in the study voluntarily, and 137 valid responses (72 from undergraduate and 65 from graduate students) were used for the data analysis. For the overall 25 items in the questionnaire, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.932, indicating a high degree of internal consistency. The data collected were then analyzed using descriptive statistics: frequency measures to present demographic information, means and standard deviations, and levels of satisfaction towards their online English learning. The resulting means were distributed into three levels of satisfaction as suggested by Ketsing (1998): "High" (3.67 or higher), "Moderate" (2.34 - 3.66),

and “Low” (2.33 or lower). An independent-sample t-test was further performed to analyze the differences between the overall means, the means of the three aspects of online English learning experience, and the means for each individual item between the two groups.

## RESULTS

The results from the second part of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1. The table shows a comparison of the responses between undergraduate and graduate students in terms of overall means, the means of the three aspects of online English learning experience, and the means for each individual item between the two groups together with the standard deviations and the levels of satisfaction. Results from the independent-sample t-test were indicated at both the 0.01 level (\* $p < 0.01$ ) and the 0.05 level (\*\* $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 1**  
**Means and standard deviations of the satisfaction of undergraduate and graduate students regarding their online English learning experience**

Item	Undergraduate (n = 72)			Graduate (n = 65)		
	M	SD	Level	M	SD	Level
1 Access to digital devices and other equipment	4.42	0.67	H	4.34	0.89	H
2 Access to a reliable internet connection*	3.68	0.92	H	4.08	0.82	H
3 Knowledge and skills of how to use required technologies and online platform applications	4.13	0.89	H	4.20	0.79	H
4 Ability to solve technical problems	3.74	1.03	H	3.91	0.82	H
<b>Technical Issues**</b>	<b>3.97</b>	<b>0.93</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>4.13</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>H</b>
5 Communication with teachers**	3.53	0.96	M	3.85	1.03	H
6 Interaction with other students*	3.19	1.21	M	3.92	1.05	H
7 Participation in class discussions*	3.56	0.96	M	4.02	0.86	H
8 Participation in small group discussions**	4.01	0.88	H	4.31	0.83	H
9 Working on assignments independently	4.26	0.86	H	4.23	0.93	H
<b>Class-engagement issues*</b>	<b>3.71</b>	<b>1.05</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>4.06</b>	<b>0.96</b>	<b>H</b>
10 Teachers' ability to use required technologies and online platform applications	4.31	0.70	H	4.42	0.77	H
11 Availability of needed information for class management**	4.10	0.92	H	4.37	0.74	H
12 Availability of learning materials	4.10	0.92	H	4.17	1.02	H
13 Teachers' teaching methods*	4.03	0.93	H	4.55	0.75	H
14 Time allocated to practice lessons*	4.07	0.88	H	4.46	0.77	H
15 Clarity of assignment instruction*	4.04	0.94	H	4.42	0.81	H
16 Easiness to submit assignments	4.42	0.76	H	4.46	0.90	H
17 Teachers' feedback on assignments**	4.28	0.94	H	4.54	0.83	H
18 Test organization and delivery*	3.97	0.89	H	4.37	0.80	H
19 Scoring and grading reports**	4.04	0.93	H	4.35	0.89	H
20 Workload demands*	3.96	0.88	H	4.42	0.83	H

Item	Undergraduate (n = 72)			Graduate (n = 65)		
	M	SD	Level	M	SD	Level
21 Availability of teachers for class inquiry	4.17	0.95	H	4.38	0.91	H
22 Access to lecture recordings	3.74	1.15	H	3.57	1.17	M
23 Suitability of learning environment*	3.32	1.22	M	3.91	0.98	H
24 Ability to concentrate in class*	3.00	1.26	M	3.85	1.00	H
25 Enthusiasm for learning*	2.85	1.32	M	3.89	1.06	H
<b>Instructional issues</b>	<b>3.90</b>	<b>1.15</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>4.26</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>H</b>
<b>Overall*</b>	<b>3.88</b>	<b>1.05</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>4.20</b>	<b>0.93</b>	<b>H</b>

\*p < 0.01

\*\*p < 0.05

As can be seen in Table 1, the overall means and standard deviations rating the satisfaction of both undergraduates (M = 3.88, SD = 1.05) and graduates (M = 4.20, SD = 0.93) and the overall means and standard deviations of all of the three aspects (technical issue: M = 3.97, SD = 0.93 and M = 4.13, SD = 0.82; class-engagement issues: M = 3.71, SD = 1.05 and M = 4.06, SD = 0.96; and instructional issues: M = 3.90, SD = 1.15 and M = 4.26, SD = 0.88) are at a high level. While significant differences between the two groups were found at the 0.01 level for the overall means and standard deviations ( $t = -3.210$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and for the aspect of class-engagement ( $t = -4.585$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), the overall means and standard deviations of the aspect of technical issues between the two groups were significantly different at the 0.05 level ( $t = -2.257$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). No significant difference was found between the two groups for the overall means and standard deviations of the aspect of instructional issues ( $t = -8.236$ ,  $p = 1.509$ ).

For the participants' levels of satisfaction, while graduate students rated only Item 22: Access to lecture recordings (M = 3.57, SD = 1.17) at a moderate level, undergraduate students rated 6 items at this level: Item 5: Communication with teachers (M = 3.53, SD = 0.96); Item 6: Interaction with other students (M = 3.19, SD = 1.21); Item 7: Participation in class discussions (M = 3.56, SD = 0.96); Item 23: Suitability of learning environment (M = 3.32, SD = 1.22); Item 24: Ability to concentrate in class (M = 3.00, SD = 1.26); and Item 25: Enthusiasm for learning (M = 2.85, SD = 1.32).

The table also shows the means and standard deviations of each individual issue. For undergraduate students the means range from Item 25: Enthusiasm for learning at the moderate level (M = 2.85, SD = 1.32) to Item 1: Access to a digital devices and other equipment (M = 4.42, SD = 0.67) and Item 16: Easiness to submit assignments (M = 4.42, SD = 0.76), both of which were scored at a high level. For graduate students, the means range from Item 22: Access to lecture recordings at the moderate level (M = 3.57, SD = 1.17) to Item 13: Teachers' teaching methods at a high level (M = 4.55, SD = 0.75).

Significant differences between the two groups at the 0.01 level were found in Item 2: Access to a reliable internet connection ( $t = -2.662$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ); Item 6: Interaction with other students ( $t = -3.752$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ); Item 7: Participation in class discussions ( $t = -2.941$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ); Item 13: Teachers' teaching methods ( $t = -3.609$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ); Item 14: Time allocated to practice lessons ( $t = -2.764$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ); Item 15: Clarity of assignment instruction ( $t = -2.481$ ,  $p = 0.007$ );

Item 18: Test organization and delivery ( $t = -2.848$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ); Item 20: Workload demands ( $t = -3.125$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ); Item 23: Suitability of learning environment ( $t = -3.090$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ); Item 24: Ability to concentrate in class ( $t = -4.326$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ); and Item 25: Enthusiasm for learning ( $t = -5.075$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

In addition, Item 5: Communication with teachers ( $t = -1.865$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ); Item 8: Participation in small group discussions ( $t = -2.007$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ); Item 11: Availability of needed information for class management ( $t = -1.786$ ,  $p = 0.038$ ); Item 17: Teachers' feedback on assignments ( $t = -1.715$ ,  $p = 0.044$ ); and Item 19: Scoring and grading reports ( $t = -2.006$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ) were found significant at the 0.05 level.

No significant differences were found between the two groups in Item 1: Access to digital devices and other equipment ( $t = 0.586$ ,  $p = 0.279$ ); Item 3: Knowledge and skills of how to use required technologies and online platform applications ( $t = -0.998$ ,  $p = 0.160$ ); Item 4: Ability to solve technical problems ( $t = -1.392$ ,  $p = 0.083$ ); Item 9: Working on assignments independently ( $t = 0.213$ ,  $p = 0.416$ ); Item 10: Teachers' ability to use required technologies and online platform applications ( $t = -0.873$ ,  $p = 0.192$ ); Item 12: Availability of learning materials ( $t = -0.182$ ,  $p = 0.428$ ); Item 16: Easiness to submit assignments ( $t = -0.315$ ,  $p = 0.377$ ); Item 21: Availability of teachers for class inquiry ( $t = -1.366$ ,  $p = 0.087$ ); and Item 22 Access to lecture recordings ( $t = -0.840$ ,  $p = 0.201$ ).

It can also be noticed from the table that while undergraduate and graduate students rated Item 22: Access to lecture recordings at different levels (high and moderate), the t-test results indicated no significant difference between them.

It can be concluded that, in general, both undergraduate and graduate students reported a high degree of satisfaction with their online English learning experience. Undergraduate students, however, were found to report significantly less satisfaction than their graduate counterparts with the various issues.

## DISCUSSION

Although the results indicated an overall satisfaction with synchronous online learning and towards all of the three aspects of English online learning at a high level in both undergraduate and graduate students, the undergraduate students reported lower levels of overall satisfaction, particularly, towards the aspects of technical and class-engagement.

### Overall satisfaction

In terms of both the groups' overall satisfaction with their online English learning experience, these findings share similar conclusions to those reported in Chiablaem's (2021), Jittisukpong's (2022), and Thongsongkleeb's (2020) studies. These studies, however, investigated only the perceptions of undergraduate students. Thongsongkleeb's study was the only study that further investigated differences related to students' years of study. The results of the study indicated

that though there was no significant difference in the students' overall satisfaction, there were statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level among second, third, and fourth year students under the aspect of activities using Google Classroom in English for Proficiency Test Preparation Class. The different results among the students' years of study are also in line with those found in a study conducted by Fuchs (2021). Younger freshmen students in Business and Management in Fuchs' study were found to struggle more with virtual classrooms than their older peers.

The findings in Khuankaew and Trail (2021), Nanni and Pursey (2021), Sukman and Mhunkongdee (2021), and Sakulprasertsri (2022), however, indicate somewhat different results. In general, students in Khuankaew and Trail's study expressed neutral perceptions, but specifically there were more students who responded negatively than those who gave positive responses. The students also reported a preference towards traditional learning over studying online if they had a chance to choose. Using a qualitative research design to explore students' perceptions of learning English online, the challenges faced by students, and students' suggestions for effective online classrooms through written reflections and interviews, Sukman and Mhunkongdee found mixed attitudes. Some students even expressed no desire to learn online in the future. Similarly, the qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews in Sukulprasertsri's study showed both positive and negative perceptions among students. Besides, the findings from the questionnaire with regard to the effectiveness of the online course indicated that the students perceived a face-to-face classroom to be more effective and provide more learning opportunities than an online class. Nanni and Pursey also found negative attitudes in their students after the initial mandatory shift to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were found to be concerned about their available opportunities for interaction, the degree of effective instruction, and overall engagement levels.

### Technical issues

On the technical aspect, the only significant difference found between the two groups, which indicates less satisfaction among undergraduate students, was access to a reliable internet connection. This finding is not in line with what was found in Jittisukpong's (2022), Sakulprasertsri's (2022), and Thongsongkleeb's (2020) studies. The students in Khuankaew and Trail's (2021) study, however, reported neutral opinions both in terms of stability and easiness to access the internet. Similarly, the students in Sukman and Mhunkongdee's (2021) study complained about problems pertaining to an unstable internet connection. They speculated that the unstable internet connection reported in their study might be due to the fact that many students in their research context were from rural provinces with less reliable internet connections. Chiablaem (2021) claimed that losing internet signals sometimes caused anxiety and dissatisfaction among her undergraduate students.

For the undergraduate students in this study, it could also be due to the same reason as mentioned in Sukman and Mhunkongdee (2021). The majority of the undergraduate students in this study also came from provinces all over Thailand. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they returned home and studied online there. To support students' online learning, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation had issued a notice requesting cooperation

from higher education institutions to enforce measures to help those affected, particularly students from underprivileged families (Rattanakhamfu, 2020). Thus, the university distributed internet SIM cards to its students. However, giving out internet SIM cards might not have been enough to ensure undergraduate students' access to reliable internet connections. It is possible that the reason why the graduate counterparts were more satisfied with this technical issue could be that they had more opportunities to access high-speed internet either from their workplace or from their own affordability.

### **Class-engagement issues**

In terms of the aspect of class-engagement, undergraduate students were found to be significantly less satisfied with issues concerning communication with teachers, interaction with other students, participation in class discussions, and participation in small group discussions. In terms of communication with teachers, this finding is incongruent with the findings found in Sukman and Mhunkongdee's (2021) and Thongsongkleeb's (2020) studies, in which they reported their undergraduate students' lack of adequate teacher interaction. Jittisukpong (2022), however, reported that the undergraduate students in his study agreed that the Google Classroom Application could enable better communication between the teacher and students because it allowed the teacher to send announcements and start class discussions right away. In regard to interaction with other students, this result is in line with the findings of Sakulprasertsri's (2022) and Sukman and Mhunkongdee's (2021) studies. Both studies indicated that their undergraduate students perceived limitations of interaction between themselves and other students. On the other hand, this contradicts with the finding found in Jittisukpong's (2022) study where the undergraduate students in his study reported sharing resources with each other or answering questions in the stream and having a chance to provide feedback to their peers by posting directly into the Google Classroom discussion stream. For participation in small group discussions, Sakulprasertsri (2022) found that while the first-year students in his study agreed that activities that promoted group discussions were necessary in online lessons, one of the most common complaints was that there was no classroom interaction and engagement when learning the course online. Nanni and Pursey (2021) also found that the undergraduate students in their study appeared particularly concerned about the opportunities for interaction and their level of engagement in online language courses.

It is possible that with their good knowledge and skill of how to use the required technologies and online platform applications, both undergraduate and graduate students in this study were able to use their technological knowledge and skills to engage in online class activities effectively. The lower levels of satisfaction among undergraduate students in this study, however, might be from their eagerness to meet their teachers and friends physically and communicate face-to-face with them. As seen in the findings of Sakulprasertsri's (2022) and Sukman and Mhunkongdee's (2021) studies, the students reported preference for face-to-face instruction.

### **Instructional issues**

Regarding the aspect of instructional issues, both groups reported their satisfaction at a high level. Although no significant difference was found between the two groups, the undergraduate

students were found to be significantly less satisfied with issues of availability of needed information for class management, teacher teaching methods, time allocated to practice lessons, clarity of assignment instruction, teachers' feedback on assignments, test organization and delivery, scoring and grading reports, workload demands, suitability of learning environment, ability to concentrate in class, and enthusiasm for learning.

With regard to both groups' high level of satisfaction, Jittisukpong (2022) and Thongsongkleeb (2020) similarly found that their students expressed positive feelings towards Google Classroom's positive impact on English learning activities. On the other hand, effectiveness of instruction was the concern among the students in Nanni and Pursey's (2021) study.

Regarding the differences between the two groups of students in terms of time allocated to practice lessons and workload demands, the first-year students in Sakulprasertsri's (2022) study similarly expressed that there was not enough time to practice English skills in the online lessons, and that it was difficult for them to complete group tasks. Concerning teachers' feedback on assignments, most of the students in Sukman and Mhunkongdee's (2021) study also reported a lack of adequate teacher feedback and guidance. Relating to the ability to concentrate in class and the suitability of the learning environment, Khuankaew and Trail (2021) also reported their undergraduate students' neutral perceptions about their ability to sustain high levels of concentration. The first-year students in Sakulprasertsri's study similarly reported that they were easily distracted and lost concentration due to the surroundings and personal matters. In the same way, some students in Sukman and Mhunkongdee's study admitted that they had lost interest and motivation when learning online due to reduction in the levels of control and guidance from the teacher and the reluctance to study expressed by their peers.

It is possible that having already taken several online courses since the replacement of conventional face-to-face learning in March 2020, the students in this study may have adapted themselves well to this new way of instruction and found online learning generally satisfactory. The differences in the satisfaction between the graduate and undergraduate students in these instructional issues might be due to the undergraduate students' lower levels of maturation and independence. Without face-to-face guidance from teachers, online learning requires students to manage and control themselves more. Thus, the undergraduate students' lack of autonomy and ability to manage and control themselves might have affected their experience with online English learning. Moreover, as digital natives, undergraduate students may expect technology to be integrated into their online lessons in a way that is different from the other generations before them. Thus, it is possible that as first-time university students, these undergraduate students wanted to focus more on both study and life experience while their graduate counterparts already had such experiences, so they became more focused on their work-life-balance (Fuchs, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the online English learning experience of Thai undergraduate and graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic focusing on their satisfaction with three aspects of online English learning: technical, class-engagement, and instructional issues. The ultimate goal of this study was to evaluate the quality of online English skills development courses from the undergraduate and graduate students' perspectives in order to see what needed to be improved in teaching these courses to Thai university students at different levels and in the future.

The results of the study revealed that, overall, both groups were satisfied with their online English learning experience at a high level. Undergraduate students, however, were less satisfied with the technical and class-engagement issues that arose when learning through ER. This suggests that these younger students, having grown up with digital technologies, are more likely to have higher standards concerning how digital learning technologies are implemented in the classroom and higher expectations as to how they are used effectively in the classroom by their often 'digital immigrant' instructors. This implies that understanding different expectations towards certain aspects of online learning among students from different generations can help teachers in finding effective ways to motivate their students when they learn English online.

Other pedagogical implications derived from this study are as follows. Firstly, because class-engagement is "at the core of all language learning" (Hiver et al., 2021, p. 24), activities focusing on communication and interaction between teachers and learners or among learners themselves should be prioritized. From their systematic review of 20 years of language engagement research, Hiver, et al. also highlighted the role of technology: "With regard to the ways teachers can build language learning environments that are engaging, it seems that many of the pedagogical implications to come out of our review have to do with technology" (p. 24). Thus, it is important for English teachers to provide engaging online class activities to give students opportunities to interact and communicate among themselves as well as between students and teachers. To encourage engagement, teachers can add entertaining class activities (Srimasorn & Farzana, 2020) and interaction questions (Phalitnonkiat et al., 2020) to their online English lessons. In addition, teachers need to master online technologies and platforms such as Google Meet/Hangout, Microsoft Teams, WebEx Meeting, and Zoom as these platforms are commonly used to facilitate interaction between students and teachers as well as students and students. Having skills in using these platforms, teachers can have a clear understanding of the nature of interaction in online learning and can facilitate online interaction appropriately. In this way, effective online interactive courses can be designed to increase students' enthusiasm in learning English online. Lastly, regarding the instructional issues, as students can be easily distracted in the online learning environment, teachers should pay attention to their students' needs when devising online English courses. Furthermore, as it might be more difficult to establish whether students are satisfied with the lessons taught to them online, teachers need to keep certain instructional issues in mind, especially the ones reported as less satisfactory for undergraduate students when designing their online English courses. By adapting online instruction based on students' needs, teachers can help students to adjust themselves and to be more motivated in learning English online.

Overall, analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire in this study has provided a deeper insight into the three core aspects of the online English learning experience (technology, class-engagement, and instruction). It has also investigated the differences of perspective between Thai undergraduate and graduate students. These findings have also shed light on the valuable lessons learned from the implementation of ERT in teaching English online for teachers who want to design more effective online English courses to maximize their students' online English learning in the future.

As a recommendation for further research, as this study has only focused on university students' satisfaction, it can be extended to include other educational stakeholders such as students from different levels of education (e.g., high school), teachers, and administrators to gain more detailed insights into online English learning.

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