

***Students' perception of participating in an online academic English course***

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**Students' Perception of Participating in an Online Academic English Course**

**Abstract**

This research investigates the students' participation in an online academic English course at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) during the outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Data was gathered by online questionnaire inquiring about the perception and difficulties of participating in an online academic English course of sample groups of undergraduate students that they took the "English for Engineers" course in the first semester of the academic year 2021. The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and were used to substantiate the findings of each other. For the quantitative analysis, the data were counted, presented by percentage and calculated in terms of arithmetic means ( ) and then interpreted by using the evaluation criteria. There are three main findings of the study, which were: 1) the students expressed they participated more in group and pair work; 2) they felt reluctant when providing questions or answers in the whole class section; and 3) they were confident in participating in small group discussions, although they did not show up themselves online. For the qualitative analysis, the coding themes were used to elaborate the above findings. Regarding the results of the study, three aspects of its implications have been suggested: 1) organizing students into small groups might be an excellent method to create student participation; 2) small group discussion has a positive impact not only on students' perceptions but also on their confidence in group work skills; and 3) the students would attend even without the use of the webcam, and the teacher takes a role in creating interaction. Although the outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) accelerates both teachers and students must adapt to online teaching and learning, there are several learning

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opportunities of adjusting to the new habit and the new normal in education. Kinds of online participants that are likely to work best are challenging to discover more for post-pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** Students' participation, Online Learning, Academic English context

## INTRODUCTION

Regarding Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, there has been an increased use of online learning and teaching in universities. Department of Learning Technologies, the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) developed knowledge management process and also investigated problems that make online learning and teaching difficult. As the results of the investigation "lacking participation from students" is one significant problem that is still challenging to many teachers (Suthidara and Binhasun, 2021).

While many researchers agree that student participation is key for learning, and interaction in online learning is not yet resolved (Nieuwoudt, 2018). Participation is central to learning (Wenger, 1998). Hrastinski (2008) defined online student participation as "a complex process comprising doing, communicating, thinking, feeling and belonging" (p.1761). While Wenger (1998) referred student participation to "a process of taking part and also to the relations with others that reflect this process" (p. 55). A high level of participation will allow students to engage in deep and meaningful learning with having a satisfying learning experience (Nieuwoudt, 2018). Low students' participation and collaboration is one of the most significant issues in online learning and teaching (Song, Rice, & Oh, 2019). This could be caused by many factors such as students face difficulties finding a conducive environment to focus and learn from home, teaching approaches with a tradition of lecturing (Tsegay, Ashraf, Perveen, & Zegergis, 2022), the online classrooms may give them more freedom, perhaps, more than they can handle ([www.montgomerycollege.edu](http://www.montgomerycollege.edu)). This environment may create a sense of isolation. Obviously, in a synchronous classroom, the students noticeably always turn off their camera, and hardly contribute their participation. Moreover, for outside classrooms, if the student cannot get involved, plan and manage their own time and learning pace, they would easily lose tracks of their learning.

Several researches suggest some solutions during this difficult period. This also requires some adjustable behaviors from both teachers and learners. They have to be active and responsible for their own teaching and learning. A sense of community in online learning (Delahunty, Verenika, & Jones, 2014) should be occurred to decrease feelings of isolation and increase retention rates (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk & Lee, 2007; Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009). To form online learning communities, teachers and learners from diverse geographical locations and background are comprised and participated that the successful interaction depends on good relationship between teaches and learners (Goertzen & Kristjansson, 2007). Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007) stated that "a community of learning is people-centered, and through dialog, discussion, and sharing, learners have opportunity to connect with others" (p.193). The form of participations could be student to student interaction that the learner interacting with another individual student or in small group. Mandernach, Gonzales, and Garrett, 2006 stated that online instructor participation is also vital in the overall success of student learning and development of a learning community which fosters student growth and positive classroom climate (p.250). From the above difficult online environment, it is not, therefore, an easy task for teachers to create classroom settings and activities to increase student participation.

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For language online classroom, it is inevitable majority of language subjects have transformed themselves for online classrooms through varieties of applications. Conducting online language classrooms provides a great deal of benefits, especially extending the area of the classroom to reach and meet needs of both teachers and learners. The curriculum could continue, and then feedback could be also provided spontaneously without the limitation of time and space. It is an opportunity to bring the language classrooms to the real world ([www.montgomerycollege.edu](http://www.montgomerycollege.edu)).

In basic or general English classrooms, for example, the students could be engaged through a number of activities and tools such as making a fun presentation by using an avatar with one's own recording voices or voices recorded on a text-to-speech. Through an online video conferencing application for an online classroom, the functions that a lively background and one's own character could be changed are also preferable. However, it might be challenging for academic English classrooms. Though a number of online collaborative tools are prevalent, and functions of the tools help create positive learning atmosphere, it might be difficult to hold the students to stay on tasks regarding the nature of the courses.

However, in an academic English course at a public university in Thailand, noticeably, on a synchronous online classroom, majority of students turned off their camera, kept silence and rarely provided contributions. Due to the informal notice, students' participation, verbal reactions and responses, hardly happened. Even though many attempts; using interactive applications, calling one's names, arranging discussion activities, etc., in creating positive learning atmosphere had been done, the silence remained noticeable. A study (Al-Ghafri, 2018) shows participation reflects the students' understanding of the lessons, and shows respect for teachers and others. It is significant to promote participation in the online classrooms. This, therefore, brought about the investigation of the study.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This study aims to investigate the students' participation in an online academic English course. There might be many factors affecting students' participation in an online classroom such as motivation, adaptation in a new learning environment, and this needs further investigation. It is expected that the results of the study will suggest some deep insights for language teachers in creating participation affecting better performance of the learners.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **1. Subjects**

The subjects of the study were third-year undergraduate students at a public science and engineering university in Thailand. They were the two online classes of 'English for Engineers' course of the first semester of the academic year 2021. Those two classes consisted of 65 students who were selected by the purposive sampling method. They were asked to answer the online questionnaire about the perceptions towards their participation in the online academic English course at the end of the semester. 39 subjects returned the answers, so they were counted as the subjects of the study. The students were mixed-abilities, and their language proficiencies were intermediate.

### **2. Target course**

As mentioned above, the target course of the study was an academic English course. It was 'English for Engineers' where the content of the course covered aspects common to all kinds

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of engineering such as civil, electrical and mechanical (www.cambridge.es). Due to the language practice, the course was not only aiming at developing English language knowledge for engineering, but also enabling students to communicate more confidently and effectively with their peers through varieties of language activities related to their specialists. The course was conducted online through a teleconferencing application, Zoom meetings, during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The students attended the online class once a week, and the lesson lasted for three hours. The course continued for fifteen weeks a semester.

### 3. Questionnaire

The data were collected through the online questionnaire at the end of the semester. The questionnaire had been adapted (De Saint Leger, 2009), and aimed at investigating the subjects' perceptions towards their participation in the online academic English course. It consisted of two main sections. The data of each individual section had been collected both quantitatively (Likert scale questions) and qualitatively (open-ended) based on the purpose of each individual question. Section one had 18 items (3-point rating scale) asking for the subjects' participation in the online class. Section two involved 3 items (5-point rating scale) calling for the subjects' difficulties in participating class activities.

### 4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and were used to substantiate the findings of each other. For the quantitative analysis, the data were counted, presented by percentage and calculated in terms of arithmetic means ( $\bar{X}$ ) and then interpreted by using the evaluation criteria (Pimentel, 2010) in Table 1 and Table 2 as follows:

**Table 1: Evaluation Criteria for 3-point Likert scale**

Score Interval (Mean)	Evaluation Criteria
1.00 – 1.67	No / not yet (N)
1.68 – 2.33	Sometimes (S)
2.34 – 3.00	Yes, definitely (Y)

**Table 2: Evaluation Criteria for 5-point Likert scale**

Score Interval (Mean)	Evaluation Criteria
1.00 – 1.79	very Easy
1.80 – 2.59	Easy
2.60 – 3.39	OK
3.40 – 4.19	Hard
4.20 – 5.00	Very Hard

For the qualitative analysis, it included the parts in which the subjects gave any suggestions or comments on their participation. The responses obtained were collected and grouped into main themes. The number of subjects who had the same ideas was also counted.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

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**Table 3: Coding analysis of students' participation in the online classroom (open-ended questions)**

The main themes	Details
1. Flexibility of class attendance	1.1 The waiting room might not be necessary. 1.2 The punctuality of class attendance needs to be practical.
2. Calling for students' talks; questions and answers	2.1 Students asked questions only when it was necessary. 2.2 The students were not confident to talk in class. 2.3 A number of methods in calling for the students' talks should be considered. - The teacher randomly picked up a student to answer. - The students themselves randomly picked up their friends to answer. 2.6 The students provided answers mainly for teacher's questions.
3. Arrangement of pair and group work collaboration	3.1 The students managed themselves in the following aspects: - team building e.g., pairing or teaming up with familiar students - time allocation - equal roles - support
4. Arrangement of whole class discussion	4.1 Creating positive discussion atmosphere - Providing help of the teacher - Using L1 - Arranging regular sharing or talks 4.2 Preparing the students - Providing sufficient content or knowledge - Encouraging risk-taking and practice - Using of technological support e.g., sources of information, applications, etc.

**Table 4: Participation in an English online classroom (3-point rating scale)**

No.	Activities	Participation in an English online classroom			Total	Average (Full Score = 3)	S.D.	Interpretation
		No / not yet (N)	Sometimes (S)	Yes, definitely (Y)				
1	I cooperate with my group members	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%	3.00	0.00	Yes, definitely (Y)
2	I cooperate with my partner	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%	3.00	0.00	Yes, definitely (Y)
3	I communicate in English with my group members	0.00%	2.56%	97.44%	100.00%	2.97	0.16	Yes, definitely (Y)
4	I communicate in English with my partner	0.00%	2.56%	97.44%	100.00%	2.97	0.16	Yes, definitely (Y)
5	I offer my opinion	0.00%	5.13%	94.87%	100.00%	2.95	0.22	Yes, definitely (Y)
6	I listen actively to the teacher	0.00%	30.77%	69.23%	100.00%	2.69	0.55	Yes, definitely (Y)
7	I listen actively to my classmates	0.00%	38.46%	61.54%	100.00%	2.62	0.47	Yes, definitely (Y)
8	I answer questions that the teacher asks	0.00%	43.59%	56.41%	100.00%	2.56	0.50	Yes, definitely (Y)
9	I answer questions	0.00%	57.89%	42.11%	100.00%	2.42	0.50	Yes, definitely (Y)
10	I answer questions that my classmates ask	5.13%	48.72%	46.15%	100.00%	2.41	0.59	Yes, definitely (Y)
11	I clarify comments made by someone else	17.95%	48.72%	33.33%	100.00%	2.15	0.49	Sometimes (S)
12	I make comments	5.13%	76.92%	17.95%	100.00%	2.13	0.47	Sometimes (S)
13	I respond to other comments made by my classmates	20.51%	51.28%	28.21%	100.00%	2.08	0.70	Sometimes (S)
14	I ask my classmates questions	10.26%	71.79%	17.95%	100.00%	2.08	0.53	Sometimes (S)
15	I use new vocabulary and expressions	10.26%	69.23%	20.51%	100.00%	2.10	0.71	Sometimes (S)
16	I ask questions	17.95%	74.36%	7.69%	100.00%	1.90	0.50	Sometimes (S)
17	I ask the teacher questions	28.21%	71.79%	0.00%	100.00%	1.72	0.46	Sometimes (S)
18	Do you feel that you have made some progress in relation to your English class participation in the next semester?	69.23%	10.26%	20.51%	100.00%	1.51	0.82	No / not yet (N)

From Table 4, The study found that the first highest average score is “I cooperate with my group members and I cooperate with my partner (3.00%)” The second is “I communicate in English with my group members and I communicate in English with my partner (2.97%)” and the third is “I offer my opinion (2.95%)” and the lowest average score is “Do you feel that you have made some progress in relation to your English class participation in the next semester? (1.51%)” the second is “I ask the teacher questions (1.72%)” and the third “I ask questions (1.90%)”

Due to the findings from the open-ended questions, they substantiated the above statistic data. The majority of students stated that they preferred to work in groups, particularly during pair work. They stated that they could work with people they were already acquainted with. It was easy to suggest and discuss ideas, as well as make arguments, in this manner. They'd figured out how to switch roles and take turns in their chat. Furthermore, the data demonstrated that students felt at ease making mistakes in front of their peers or even asking for assistance or support, such as the definition of unfamiliar words, grammatical corrections, and so on. This showed that the students were not just at comfortable when working or engaging in small group discussions, but also had faith in their own abilities to learn.

**Table 5: Difficulties in participating class activities (5-point rating scale)**

No.	Activities	Difficulties in participating class activities					Total	Average (Full Score = 5)	S.D.	Interpretation
		Very Easy (1)	Easy (2)	OK (3)	Hard (4)	Very Hard (5)				
1	Whole-class discussion	7.69%	25.64%	56.41%	2.56%	7.70%	100.00%	3.23	0.49	OK (3)
2	Small-group discussion	0.00%	10.26%	28.20%	33.33%	28.21%	100.00%	2.21	0.93	Easy (2)
3	Pair-work discussion	0.00%	7.69%	23.08%	35.90%	33.33%	100.00%	2.05	0.98	Very Easy (1)

From Table 5, The study found that the lowest average score is “Whole-class discussion (3.23%)” next is “Small-group discussion (2.21%)” and the last is “Pair-work discussion (2.05%)”

Regarding the open-ended findings, it has been found that the majority of students are terrified of engaging throughout the entire class section. They cited several explanations for this. Some claimed they lacked sufficient material understanding to contribute or participate in the entire lesson, while others admitted they lacked linguistic skills. Furthermore, a number of

students stated that they did not dare to share their opinions throughout the part because they lacked confidence and were afraid of making mistakes. Surprisingly, a few students voiced their dissatisfaction with the visual environment setting. They avoided participating in or joining whole-class activities as a result.

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

This section summarizes the research project in accordance with the research element described in the paper.

Title: Students' perception on their participation in an online academic English course

**Background information:** This research project examines the participation and the difficulties in participating class activities of undergraduate students for online learning at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) during the Novel Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

**Purpose of the research:** The study aims to investigate the students' participation in an online academic English course.

**Data collection techniques and analysis:** There are three main aspects that show how the research has been conducted systematically.

**Subjects:** The subjects of the study were 39 third-year undergraduate students at a public science and engineering university in Thailand. They took the "English for Engineers" course in the first semester of the academic year 2021. The students were mixed-abilities, and their language proficiencies were intermediate.

**Research instrument:** The data was collected through an online questionnaire at the end of the semester. The questionnaire had been adapted from the study of De Saint Leger (2009) and was aimed at investigating the students' perceptions towards their participation in the online academic English course. It consisted of three main parts. Part I consisted of a three-point scale for examining the students' reasons for their participation. Part II was designed as a five-point scale to call out their difficulties in participating in an online academic English course. Both parts include an open-ended section that asks for more clarification of a particular reason.

**Research analysis:** The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and were used to substantiate the findings of each other. For the quantitative analysis, the data were presented by percentage and calculated in terms of arithmetic means and then interpreted by using the evaluation criteria. For the qualitative analysis, The responses obtained were collected and grouped into main themes.

**Overview of findings:** There are three main findings of the study, which were: 1) the students expressed they participated more in group and pair work; 2) they felt reluctant when providing questions or answers in the whole class section; and 3) they were confident in participating in small group discussions, although they did not show up themselves online.

**Description and justification:** Regarding the results of the study, three aspects of its implications have been suggested: 1) organizing students into small groups might be an excellent method to create student participation; 2) small group discussion has a positive impact not only on students' perceptions but also on their confidence in group work skills; and 3) the students would attend even without the use of the webcam, and the teacher takes a role in creating interaction.

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## DISCUSSION

Since the objective of the study was to find out how students perceived their own participation in an online academic English course, according to the data, students engaged in small group conversations, such as group and pair work, more than individual studies. This was done not simply to foster a pleasant collaborative learning environment, but also to boost their self-esteem. The study's conclusions suggest a number of inferences.

It is suggested the students participate more when being assigned to collaborate in groups or pair work. A number of studies identified that there was a significant difference in reading and writing achievement through small group discussion methods (Arisman & Haryanti, 2019; Kaweera et al., 2019; Topping, 2017). This shows small group discussions are a practical approach to get students to interact with one another without having to speak in front of a large group. In small group discussions, the students would manage their own roles and turns. They would start the talk, and some of them might take notes on the main aspects of their conversation. They may keep track of not only what they agree on but also what they disagree on. Thus, organizing students into small groups is an excellent method to create student participation.

Regarding the students' behaviors in the academic context mentioned above, it is obvious collaboration in small groups provides the students with the advantages and experience of building on prior knowledge through dynamic interactions with and among other students, the subject matter, and even the teacher. These are essential abilities for them to compete in today's environment. They build skills for real-world cooperation as they work together. According to Lev Vygotsky (1978), social interactions play a role in cognitive development. This will allow the youngster to acquire higher-order thinking skills, which they will be able to use independently. Peer interaction is thought to be a good technique to learn new skills and strategies.

The next implication the findings of the study suggest is that the students felt confident when working in small groups. According to research, introducing additional speaking activities into the classroom, such as group or pair conversation, and encouraging students to collaborate with their peers, enhanced students' confidence (Doqaruni, 2014). Coers et al. (2010) propose that small group discussion has a positive impact not only on students' perceptions but also on their confidence in group work skills. In a similar vein to Doqaruni's study, the value of group cooperation continues to be reflected in employer demand; as a result, educators have been encouraged to continue to cultivate these transferrable abilities in today's students.

Finally, one of the results showed that while learning through the application, students commented that they contributed a large degree of their own participation or involvement in the online academic English course, even though almost all students turned off the camera. In other words, they said they would attend. Many studies have shown that many students do not turn on their cameras during a synchronous reunion for a variety of reasons (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Kozar, 2015). Common reasons for reducing the use of webcams were the perception that "webcams" were a tiring mode, embarrassment, and privacy concerns.

The study of Castelli and Sarvary (2021) affirmed a few anticipated reasons, including the most often revealed one: being worried about private appearance. Different reasons included being worried about others and the actual area being found behind the scenes and having a powerless web association, all of which the exploratory investigations recommend may excessively impact underrepresented minorities. Furthermore, a few understudies uncovered that normal practices likewise assume a part in camera use. This data was utilized to foster

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methodologies to energize without requiring camera use while advancing value and incorporation.

As is well recognized, there are several reasons that students having cameras on may be beneficial for teaching and learning. Perhaps the most obvious benefit is the ability to communicate with nonverbal cues (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). However, according to a study, the webcam's impact on online pedagogical contact was not as significant as previously thought (Guichon & Cohen, 2014). Because there were no graphics to distract students, they were forced to concentrate more on the text and their content. The learner's voice appears to be sufficient in making the interaction's rhythm fluent enough without the need for visual accompaniment. Although users are more likely to prefer higher-bandwidth media for informationally complex conversations, effective and pleasant communication occurs when lower-bandwidth media are used when high-bandwidth alternatives are limited (Walther & Bazarova, 2008, p. 626.)

According to the findings, the teacher is in charge of guiding the interaction, which may bring some relief to the students (Guichon & Cohen, 2014). Nevertheless, this is not to state that the webcam image is not useful or that it does not affect the quality of a mediated interaction. If the teacher has a critical role to play in facilitating online interaction and involvement, a brief examination of nonverbal behavior in the videoconferencing setting will reveal when and how the use of the webcam facilitates class interaction and students' participation. Such a study should allow us to give teachers instructions on how to choose a medium.

Although webcams are questioned as pedagogical tools, Pavlov et al. (2021) believe that they should be viewed as an important "proximity tool" that helps develop collaboration by bringing learners and teachers closer together. Cooperation is considered "near," which echoes "being with" in the digital sense and is essential for building a virtual collaboration environment. Some of the study's primary findings imply that webcams may be an important part of establishing online collaboration and that while students feel more at ease when all of their peers turn their cameras on, many do not believe that turning a camera on for themselves is vital. More research into how the use of cameras might enhance online collaboration, which promotes participation between teachers and students, is needed.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

### **Suggestions for future research:**

This section describes the conclusions of what have previously been discussed and some suggestions regarding this study.

1. The outcomes of the study suggest three major elements that influence students' willingness to participate in online courses. These include choosing a suitable application to promote engagement, having a valuable and dynamic conversation to facilitate lively learning atmosphere, and having a teacher who engages with students often and constructively to get students' involvement. Of course, it's not just the virtual environment that needs to be built around a good pedagogical model; it's also the design and structure of the learning tasks that are critical to promoting active or engaged learning.

2. The study was undertaken during the pandemic's outbreak, which is a unique circumstance. Teachers and students are both forced to adhere to the tight conditions under which all classes are converted to be delivered online. This unpleasant circumstance may have

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an impact on students' learning behavior such as adaptability struggle, avoidance of self-disclosure, self-motivation and so on, which, in turn, may have an impact on the study's results. Future study should focus on real-world scenarios where instructional applications are not a need.

3. The pandemic brought with it an immediately switch to the online delivery of lessons and learning activities. Many educators, however, have found developing online lessons is opportunities that we are transforming to the new habit and the new normal in education. For post-pandemic, the studies of students' participation to developing effective online teaching and learning in other aspects are still challenging.

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