

Challenges of Teaching and Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned from Thailand

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Abstract

This research aimed to: (1) study present situation of teaching and learning at primary and secondary education level during the pandemic-19 in Thailand; (2) study feedback from parents and students about teaching and learning during the pandemic-19 in Thailand; and (3) propose challenging issues and guidelines for improving teaching and learning during the pandemic-19 in Thailand. This qualitative study covered both of studying related documents and field research. The samples of the field research consisted of five school principals, fifteen teachers, twenty parents and twenty students who were randomly selected from different parts of the country. Four interview forms were employed for data collection. Data obtained were analysed by content analysis. The findings revealed that primary and secondary schools had properly arranged classrooms and school environment aligning to the hygiene safety guideline. Most of face to face teaching was replaced by studying at home via online approach. Feedback from parents and students included some families were not able to provide fully support of online facilities for their children, online accessibility in some remote areas, some students' home environment was not supportive, and parents did not have time to accompany their children while studying online. The main challenging issues were the readiness of online infrastructure in remote areas, availability of parents to assist young children in studying online, the IT skill of teachers, and teaching aspects such as the appropriateness of content design, interaction between teachers and students and evaluation in online lessons. The main proposed guidelines were the adoption of new paradigm of blended learning, the preparation of school infrastructure, facilities and learning materials to support online learning, and the coordination of parents to support students for online learning.

Keywords: Challenges, Guidelines, Online learning, Covid-19 Pandemic, Primary and secondary education, Thailand

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 virus has spread out all over the world since 2019. It affects on the economic situation, society and environment, work and occupation, health and education. Regarding education aspect, the outbreak has immensely caused a learning crisis all over the world. In Thailand, the country was locked down, and economic activities were stagnant resulted to decreasing employment and a great number of people, especially those related to the tourism sector, lost their jobs (Kaendera, S and Leigh, L. 2021). Regarding social interaction, people were asked to stay at homes, have less face to face meeting and social gathering activities. In health aspect, people need to keep distancing, wearing masks, taking care of their

health in daily life. For working people, they have to change their working style from working in the office to be working from home. All these aspects have closed relationship and effected to each other including education.

The virus was found in Thailand by the end of the year 2019 and it started to be recognized as the pandemic in late March 2020 when the school summer vacation was about to begin. During the first wave of the outbreak, the virus was not quite widely spread, school administrators, teachers and educational staff had some time to adjust the practices to be responsive to this drastic change. This needed to be in accordance to The World Health Organization (2020) which suggested that several actions and requirements should be reviewed and put in place to prevent the introduction and spread of COVID-19 in schools and into the community. This is to ensure the safety of children and school staff while at school. So school administrators, teachers and educational staff had prepared their schools to fit with the hygiene criteria, adjusted method of teaching, developed appropriate teaching media, and made proper communication means to suit with students and parents in different context.

During the later waves of the pandemic, the areas of strongly outbreak were identified. The closure of schools in those areas had to be implemented. However, some schools in the areas with very small number of covid-19 victims, could be operated depending to the situation. In both cases, school administrators and teachers managed to sustain education for their students in various practices during the time of crisis. If the pandemic is still ongoing, Kenan Foundation Asia (2020) identified the potential consequences in Thai education were: widening educational inequality and reinforcing ineffective teaching practices.

2. Literature Review

It is understood that the COVID-19 virus had spread out all over the world and becoming the potential health threats since 2019. It has impacts on living conditions of people in various aspects including education. As the pandemic was a sudden and unexpected crisis, most schools and educational institutions have to rapidly adjust themselves to the situation without well prepare. They have to turn to emergency distance learning and teaching practices (UNESCO, 2020). The crisis has effected enormously to school physical arrangement, teaching and learning approach, instructional media, readiness for distance learning, and learning outcomes of students.

At the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic, a number of schools and educational institutions tried to adjust themselves by arranging their physical environment and classroom size in order to maintain the teaching and learning activities. In the meantime, they also aware of hygiene and safety of students and teachers. WHO (2021, p.9) suggested measures that will have a beneficial effect on child health and well-being are equally important. Areas for improvements may include: water supply, sanitation and indoor air; health literacy of schoolchildren and staff through scheduled lessons that help them to enhance their understanding of the basis of the risk-mitigation measures and promote adherence by children, adolescents and school staff; and smaller class sizes in the school environment, which can help to reduce transmission. It was found that some schools face to face classrooms for 2 or 3 days a week are made available with the regulations of social distancing and hygiene conditions. Students were divided into smaller groups and take turn to attend class rooms.

During the heavy outbreak, all schools and educational institutions have to operate fully distance learning due to school closure. Online teaching and learning was employed instead of conventional face to face classroom (Daniel, 2020). In online teaching and learning, various kind of instructional media and technology were introduced. For example, the use of the Google Meet, the Google classroom, the Zoom, audio-video lectures, virtual learning environment and social media like Telegram, Messenger, WhatsApp and WeChat, etc. (Hodges et al. 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021; Reimers, 2022). Therefore, teachers need to adapt to these available technologies and pedagogy. They have to learn how to use new technology and adjust contents to be suitable with online teaching mode. However, it is noted that teachers have different knowledge and skills in using instructional technology.

Due to those shortcomings, it is believed that the quality of online learning is relatively inferior compare to face to face learning (Tongliemnak, 2020), but it is needed in this crisis of school closure. However, when schools and educational institutions organize distance learning for students to study at home, a number of problems occurred. Moreover, there are concerns about learning losses expected from the extended school closure, and arising inequalities due to distance learning or blended learning approaches that particularly affected seriously to the most vulnerable students (Tongliemnak, Maheen, and Yeun, 2021, p.87). UNESCO (2022) had conducted a study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education at lower secondary education level in eleven countries across the world. The result regarding learning outcomes showed that student learning was impeded during the disruption, with more than 50% of teachers in all countries stating that students have not progressed to the extent that they would have normally expected at that time of year. Moreover, half of the students across countries reported that it was difficult to know their progress in the study. The issue about inequalities in learning opportunities was also included. It was found that students with low socioeconomic status were less confident in completing schoolwork independently and were more likely to not feel prepared for school closures.

For student side, studying online learning is unfamiliar for them. They need to prepare themselves in several aspects. For example, they have to have technology skills and learning facilities such as notebook, tablet, mobile phone, and internet. Besides learning location in their households should be accommodate their online learning. Bagnall, Skipper, Fox (2022) found that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds were rather have home environments that not support online learning due to financial issues. Advice and interaction from teachers are required. Moreover, support from parents particularly for young children is necessary. The study of UNESCO (2022) showed that even though students received help from their parents or teachers on learning topics during the disruption. But there was still a number of students who had no one at all available to help them with their learning. Help and support are the important roles of teachers and parents particularly for lower achieving and vulnerable students including students with special needs.

The pandemic may not abruptly finish, it may take quite sometimes to decline. It was uncertain that any pandemic diseases may occur in the future. So, related people in every group such as education policy makers, education administrators, teachers, students and parents need to be well prepared for the future situation. Policy-makers and educational administrators need to develop mechanisms to support students, teachers, and schools (UNESCO, 2022). For teachers, online teaching is still necessary to use along with the common onsite practices. Students were rather getting familiar with learning via applications in teaching and learning process, teachers should concern of encouraging interaction between teachers and students and among students themselves for the sake of leaning achievement and character development of students. The World Bank (2020) noted that when the situation decline, all schools need to plan for school reopening and focus in the aspect of ensuring healthy school conditions, and using new techniques to promote rapid learning recovery in key areas once students are back in school. UNESCO (2022) proposed that further research and consideration to understand the factors that led to successful and unsuccessful outcomes for some schools, teachers, and students are required.

Objectives of the study

- i. To study present situation of teaching and learning at primary and secondary education level during the pandemic-19 in Thailand.
- ii. To study feedback from parents and students about teaching and learning during the pandemic-19 in Thailand.
- iii. To propose challenging issues and guidelines for improving teaching and learning during the pandemic-19 in Thailand.

3. Research Method

This research employed qualitative methods including studying of policy and regulations, government guidelines, academic documents, and field research. For the field research, the sample of the study consisted of three groups of participants: 1) five school principals; 2) fifteen teachers. These two groups

were randomly selected from five schools in five regions of the country; 3) twenty parents and twenty students who were randomly selected from different parts of the country. All participants were on a voluntary basis.

The research instruments were four interview forms for school principals, teachers, parents and students. For school principals and teachers, the researcher made an appointment to interview each of them in their convenient time. For parents and students, the researcher visited at their households and interviewed parents, then asked for their consent in order to interview their school children. All information and data obtained were analysed by content analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. The Present Situation

The present situation of teaching and learning at primary and secondary education level during the pandemic-19 in Thailand were found as follows:

4.1.1. Administrative Practice

There have been a number of guidelines for principals to manage schools to be responsive to this urgent situation since the beginning of the pandemic. These guidelines not only provided the knowledge about Covid-19 but also suggested the best practices of personal hygiene and environment including health education in schools. In doing so, one of the policies introduced was a Sandbox Safety Zone in School. This includes school self-assessment and readiness before the semester start, self-risk assessment of teachers and students, Antigen Testing of teachers and students before entering schools, and encouraging all teachers and students for vaccination. The school principals have applied those guidelines and worked for hand in hand with families. The administrative practices could be classified into three areas: physical preparation, building understanding for families, and teaching and learning management.

i. Physical preparation

The physical preparation mainly involved keeping the school sanitary. In the beginning of the pandemic period, while the Thai people knew quite a little about the Corona Virus, there was chaos to some extent about how to prepare the school in order to deal with the situation. Sungsi, S., Wattanakulchareon, T., Saensa, N., Daungkaew, R., and Jumpatong, D. (2020) noted that the immediate coordination with local health officials for spraying disinfectant throughout school buildings and classrooms while implementing multiple social distancing strategies for student gatherings, classrooms, catering, and movement through the buildings was urgently implemented. It is also needed to intensify cleaning and disinfection in many ways such as installing handwashing stations with soap, providing alcohol-based hand sanitizers throughout the school, particularly, cleaning toys and teaching and learning materials at least once a day, etc. Moreover, it was important for schools to seek for external funding to support the cost of COVID 19 prevention such as the sufficiently supply of alcohol-based hand sanitizer, face shield, masks etc. Schools need protocols for screening of children for fever and arranging space for students' desks to be at least one meter apart. As well, many schools may restrict or cancel extra-curricular, athletic, mass gathering and interaction during school breaks, or community activities as an official measure of reducing physical contact.

ii. Building understanding for families

Parents gradually accepted the school practices through the information of the government about the awareness on hygiene and sanitation of the people, while schools also closely communicated with parents about their children who need to learn at home via technology. Schools also need to find ways to accommodate needs of children and families at high risk through inquiring about the availability of the family to help their children study at home. In cases, schools had to provide distance learning equipment

such as smart phones, computers, learning materials and regularly exchange information with parents about their children's learning at home.

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iii. Teaching and learning management

There were drastic changes in teaching and learning practices due to the pandemic as the online teaching was needed. As well, the blending appropriate approaches for both online and offline learning depending on the availability of the individual school, was made into account. Thus, it was urgent to train teachers on how to instruct and engage all students through distance learning tools such as using online virtual lessons, ZOOM, Microsoft Team, Google Meet, DLTV, etc. As well, Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) mentioned that the education systems and the educators have to adapt to the education emergency through various online platforms and are compelled to adopt a system that they are not prepared for. Then, teachers played an important roles in preparing online content and offering online classes for students' studying at home appropriately. There were also attentions in classroom management such as:

- Some schools arranged students into two groups and regularly switch from time to time to study between online and face to face at school accordingly to the social distancing practices. For studying at home, students study via online learning to mitigate loss of learning.
- Regarding students in households with better connectivity and with higher initial digital skills, schools offer alternative services of remote learning for them such as learning via online virtual lessons, ZOOM, Microsoft Team, Google Meet, DLTV, etc.
- Besides, students with limited access of internet, cell phone, or television, teachers may provide learning materials with a study guide for parents to help their children study at home as well as visiting their students' learning at home to ensure that they can access education service equally.

4.1.2. Teaching and learning practice

The solution in teaching and learning during the pandemic for most schools was that the classes need to be less crowded due to the social distancing measure. In most schools, they divided students into two groups. One group maybe assigned to study at home for a day or a week and make a balance swop for another group. However, learning at schools had to be managed under the conditions regulated by the Public Health Office and avoiding the group work of students. Certainly, online classes were considered to be needed for students to study at home, however, it was recognized that meeting teachers and friends at schools was also important for student development in various aspects. In this regards, strategies that teachers have found very useful during the pandemic of Covid-19 were the combination between online and onsite practices as follows:

- i. Teaching approach: online and offline. Teachers used the prepared lesson plans and various teaching techniques both online and face to face learning with a clear learning objectives. Students, who study at home were provided the online classes, documents and work sheets. Teachers stated about employing various approaches in order to use more teaching technologies in their classes such as blended learning, flipped classroom, etc. In this regard, teachers made their own video of teaching and assignments posting in YouTube or Google Classroom, while applying variety of online applications to make their lessons be more interesting.
- ii. Media employed for online teaching. The online classes employed various computer applications such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. They applied variety of online activities: EPIC, Book Creator, Deep, etc. In addition, there was the TV program called DLTV supported by the government to provide various lessons for students all over the country. This was similar to the practices in other countries as mentioned by Reimers (2022) that most countries had relied on the provision of digital content on web-based portals, along with the use of TV, radio, and printed materials.
- iii. Communication between teachers and students. Teachers provided learning content to students via different types of media as mentioned above. Apart from that, teachers also communicate with their students through social media such as Line and Facebook, and telephone. In some areas, teachers had to bring the lessons and worksheets to students at home.

- iv. Learning evaluation. The evaluation was mostly in the form of assessing assignments and quizzes after studying each lesson. In case students access online regularly, they could submit their homework online. But in the areas where students had some problems accessing the internet, teachers need to bring the assignments to students at home.

4.2. The Feedback from Parents and Students

The feedback from parents and students about teaching and learning during the pandemic-19 in Thailand were as follows:

Parents had significant roles to play according to school's policy on distance teaching and learning during the pandemic. Students have to study at home by following the methods designed by their school administrators and teachers. Most of schools employ online learning method. Each student with the assistance of the parents have to prepare her or his household to be a classroom. Moreover, they have to prepare facilities such as laptops or mobile phones, internet accessibility, printers and other related electronic facilities. This is quite a big change for most families. Some families are able to provide fully support while some of them can provide partly assistance. The information from interviewing twenty parents from every part of the country can be summarized as follows. For computer laptop or mobile phones that students had to use for studying at home, eight out of twenty of the parents had computer lap-top for their children. The rest of them had only mobile phones, particularly the parents with low income. Unfortunately, some families, especially in rural areas, had only one mobile phone for 2 or 3 children to take turn for their study. Regarding internet accessibility, in some remote rural areas, internet was not regularly stable. This certainly caused interruption for students studying. Moreover, as a number of families received much less income during the pandemic, so the internet service was costly to these poor families that they cannot afford to buy internet for their children to study for the whole month. The study of Bagnall, Skipper, Fox (2022) also found that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be exposed to stressful home environments due to financial issues caused by Covid-19. For study environment at home, it is much different from environment of a classroom at school. Only a small number of households have a separate room for children to study while most of them could not manage to. So most of the children had to study at the same place that they eat, play and sleep. They did not even have study tables and chairs. Thus, it is relatively hard for children to control and study by themselves at home as they easily lost their concentration.

The situation was even worse for the young children as they could not study alone while many parents also found it was difficult to guide the lessons for their children of middle and upper secondary school level. The parents of young children stated that studying online parents had to be with them and help in guiding them. But in the real situation, most of the parents had to work for their living. So they cannot be with them everyday, this is another problem to be solved. Moreover, parents of students at middle and upper secondary school levels mentioned about their academic advices. They commented that when children had some problems regarding their lessons, they hardly gave them suggestions. This was because most of the parents have limited knowledge in the subject of the lessons. The children themselves stated that studying alone at home seemed to be more difficult to understand the lesson and not motivated in comparison with studying with teachers and friends at schools.

4.3. Challenging Issues and Guidelines

Challenging issues and guidelines for improving teaching and learning during the pandemic-19 in Thailand.

4.3.1. Challenging issues

According to the information from interviewing school administrators, teachers, parents and students, there were some challenging factors which need to be proposed. The challenging issues can be classified by levels of education as follows:

- i. Challenges in general. For organizing teaching and learning online at every level of education, four main issues needed to be clarified. The first one was about infrastructure for online learning. It was still found that in some rural areas of the country, internet or Wi-Fi signal was not yet available or was not stable. The local government and related organization in each area need to take some actions about this. The second issue was the cost of accessing to internet or wi-fi. During the pandemic crisis, most of parents obtained much lower income than those in the normal situation. So, most of them cannot afford for internet fee or wi-fi fee in the long period. The third issue was the support of parents to have notebooks or mobile phone for their children to study at home. It was still found that in some families, there was only one mobile phone to use for communication and no notebook. When children had to study online, all children in the family have to use only one mobile phone of their parents. The fourth one was learning environment at home. Home environment were varied from household to household. In some households, they did not have separate rooms. So learning environment at home was still not support and motivate student learning. However, it was happened that in some areas, this issue was put into action. That was some teenage people acted as volunteer teachers for younger children. They set a group of a few students who live in nearby area to study together at their houses or at the community place.
- ii. Challenge for primary school level. From the point of views of primary school teachers, they concerned very much about participation of parents in student distance learning. They stated that primary school students are too young to study online at home by themselves. Children need some assistance from their parents. But most of parents had to work during the week days. They could not be at home all the time. School administrators, teachers and parents had to join hands to identify the solutions for helping parents to support students learning at home. This was supported by literature review of Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) indicating that lack of parental guidance, especially for young learners, was another challenge, as both parents are working.
- iii. Challenges for secondary school level. Secondary school teachers proposed the following challenges. The first one was about IT skill of teachers. They stated that high school teachers still have different level of knowledge and skill in IT. Some of them need to upgrade their skills in order to be able to choose and employ media and applications that most useful to their lessons. The second issue was on communication and interaction between teachers and students in online learning. Teachers stated that information about schedule of learning activities had to reach every students on time. Moreover, in the process of online teaching, active communication participation of students as if they were in the face to face classrooms was required. The third one was time allocation for online lessons. Teachers warned that it seems not to be appropriate to let students watch computer screen for their online learning for the whole day or 7 hours a day. At schools, children can be in the class rooms for 6 or 7 hours a day. This was because in the classrooms children have several activities which was much different from studying online at home. For online lessons, children had to stare at computer screen all the time. This may not only had some effects on their health but it also caused fatigue in learning. Thus, teachers may have to prepare other activities to intervene online learning. The fourth one was about evaluation methods. In the class room basis, teachers employed several method for evaluating learning progress of students such as noticing, practicing, quiz and testing. For online learning, the appropriate evaluation method is the issue to be further investigated.

4.3.2. Guidelines for improving teaching and learning during the pandemic-19 in Thailand

The following are the proposed identified solutions and guidelines in order to make teaching and learning successful.

- i. In the future, online teaching technology will be available at every level of education. It will be blended with classroom or face to face learning. This relates to the suggestion of Kenan Foundation (2020) that Thai education should adapt to the new paradigm of blended learning (the combination of online and classroom instruction).
- ii. School administrators have to prepare infra-structure, facilities and learning materials to be ready to support online learning. For example the availability and stability of wifi signal need to be fixed, as this problem is still be found not only in Thailand but also happen in other Asian countries (Rivera, M.L., 2021)

- iii. Teachers should be trained IT skills continuously so that they can employ and can make full use of it in their teaching and learning appropriately. They should understand the advantages and limitation of IT. This is supported by the suggestion of Kenan Foundation (2020) that Thailand must support teachers by providing them with the training, learning materials, and technology necessary to deliver 21st-century education effectively.
- iv. Teachers should catch up with new applications regularly and select those which can make their online teaching more effectively. The applications that can encourage team working and interaction between teachers and learners, and among learners in their online learning are still needed.
- v. Students should be oriented to understand the process of distance learning and how to manage themselves to be self-disciplined, responsible and honest while studying on their own.
- vi. The school curriculum to accommodate the online classes via various applications was supposed to be revised. Teachers may have to classify contents of each subject in order to select which one is suitable for teaching online and which one is for face to face teaching.
- vii. Evaluation have to be adjusted to suit with distance learning. Students learning achievement through distance education should be evaluated by several methods and by several groups of people such as teachers, parents and peers.
- viii. Parents should be oriented to understand about distance learning and how to assist their children to study by themselves at home. Moreover, school administrators and teachers should provide some advices to the parents about their roles in helping their children study at home.

5. Conclusion

Similar to many countries in the world, Thailand has faced the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in various aspects including education. In order to response to this situation, the country have to adjust teaching and learning practices in every educational level. This qualitative research aims to study the present situation and practices in teaching and learning mainly at primary and secondary education level during the pandemic. It reflected not only the perspectives of school principals and teachers, but also those of parents and students. The results of the study revealed that every schools had to transform the teaching practices from face to face basis to online approach. However, some problems were still found in online teaching and learning due to the immediately change and unprepared beforehand. Moreover, the readiness of students to study online alone at home and the involvement of parents were also noted. Thus, there were some challenging factors that policy makers and school administrators need to consider. The research also provide a number of guidelines for teaching and learning improvement to be suitable for the pandemic situation both at present and at the next normal. The researchers believe that this study provide useful information for concerned people both at policy maker level and practice level to organize quality education as the usual situation.

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