

Decision Factors in Utilizing Distance Learning Effectiveness in Thai Private Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Coronavirus pandemic had caused Thai education chaos. The Royal Government of Thailand lockdown and paused many business activities, including schools. The Ministry of Education created a country backup plan for learning distance, but it still needed to adjust into individual area or individual school. Private schools had done very best to ease the parents staying home with their kid, by analyzing both parents and schools’ capability. Schools’ first analysis base on Costless, Effortless, Convenient, and Understandable (CECU) approach would be a simple entry step.

Keywords: Coronavirus, COVID-19, decision, distance learning, effectiveness, factors, new normal, online learning, pandemic, private school

1. A Macro View of COVID-19 on Thailand Education

During the COVID-19, health safety was the Thailand’s first priority. The business activities that draw crowded people were ordered to halt to mitigate the spread of the virus. On the first wave of pandemic the schools and education intuitions were directed to close-down on 18 March 2020 by the Royal Government of Thailand with no further instruction since it was the first time in history that the school were closed urgently. Fortunately, that was the period of ending of academic year 2019/2020 and moving forward to the summer break, so the learning activities was still light and not serious taken. The loss of learning opportunity during first 2 weeks of school closure in March 2020 was still minimized but a vague direction ahead.

In early April 2020, usually the summer classes of most Thai schools, the number of Thai infected COVID-19 was still 20-50 cases per day . The Thai government declared a state of emergency, took more solid measure to control the outbreak. The emergency decree endorsed the prime minister to ban people from leaving accommodation during specific time and banned public gathering . People were encouraged to stay home and working from home (WFH) was a new normal term coined out to slow down the pandemic. The Ministry of Education (MOE) reset the new first semester of 2020/2021 academic year to be 1 July 2020 to 13 November 2020 (normally the term would be 15 May – 30 September) and motivated the students to learn from home, either on air by TV, or online by any platform. The MOE also encouraged the schools to provide lessons to the students while they were at home during 18 May to 30 June 2020 .

Preparing for the worst-case scenario that all students had to learn from home toward to the end of 2020/2021 academic year, the MOE developed plans for distance learning and blended learning.

Table 1: MOE Distance Learning Plan

Phase	Detail
I – Preparation (7 April – 17 May 2020)	- Surveyed all the related person’s (schools, teachers, parents, students) internet accessibility. - Granted permission to broadcast on digital TV channel. - Prepared learning material and infra-structure.
II – Experimentation (18 May – 30 June 2020)	- TV Broadcast testing. - Provided distance learning material. - Received feedback from users.
III – Implementation (1 July 2020 – 30 April 2021)	- Teaching options between distance learning (on Air, online), blended learning or a new normal on-site learning, depends upon the lockdown situations.

The MOE would provide ranges of distance learning options by on air (through digital TV channel) and online (via YouTube and some other website). The blended learning was also an option to combine all both distance learning and onsite learning, in order to create social distancing at school.

The plan from MOE seemed to capture most of the detail in such a limited time it had; the 3-phases ranging from the preparation, the experimentation and the implementation might cover the ability to do distance learning nationwide. However, there were many more detail and factors that needed to be considered, for example, the quality and the availability of learning materials, and the readiness to adjust of teachers, students and parents for distance learning.

2. Private Schools' Role and Parents' Expectation

Private education is the pioneer of systematic education in Thailand, providing education administration along with public schools. Thai private schools help to meet both basic and special needs of parents and students, which mostly are more complicated than what local public schools can provide. Private schools are mostly flexible and able to respond to parents' requests every competitively, hence parents have various school options to fit their own needs.

Beyond supporting the government in providing education options to parents, private schools should be able to persist by their own will and managed as a business operation. Education is a limitless frontier; it always needs investment for regular update. Private schools naturally earn from parents' expense, the more parents expect that school to deliver, the more they are willing to pay. Therefore, private schools should be able to understand their market, parents and their own capability to deliver those expectation, to retain the business existence.

Thailand fertility rate (births per woman) has dropped from 3.4 in 1980 to 1.5 in 2018, so one Thai family now has only 1-2 children. Parents now anticipate from their child much higher and are willing to invest more on their child as well. Thai parents, like other Asian parents, believe that good basic education guarantees good university admission, good university graduate guarantees a good job, and a good job is their ultimate goal. Basically, Thai parents believe that private schools can provide basic education advantage and will pave a smooth runway to achieve their ultimate goal.

According to Skulphanarak, Thai parents are concerned about their child's further study to a higher level as well. When they choose a school for their child, they would investigate the statistics which school could drive the students to their target school. Private schools' teachers and staffs are generally supportive and willing to respond to parents' concern. Moreover, most private schools' teachers are willing to follow up with the students and parents even if it is off the working schedule.

Private schools' facilities and extra curriculum are often factors that parents used to considered a school. Fortunately, most private schools are flexible to invest in facilities and integrate extra curriculum which deemed to cope with the parents' expectation. According to the Private School Act (2007), the executive committee of Thai private schools can counsel on administration and management of a formal school regarding personnel, work plan, budget, academic, student activity, building and place, and community relations, thus private schools are flexible and keen to invest in those facilities to attract more students.

3. Impacts to Parents

COVID-19 just changed the landscape of living; people were locked down, students learned at home and parents were forced to work from home. Some were lucky, got full salary from working from home, but some were not, and the income were diminished. The number of unemployed Thai workers rose from around 400 thousand to 750 thousand, while underemployed workers recorded high level of 5.4 million. The majority were mandatory to save money for the basic needs only.

The lockdown had created double strain to parents when their child had to study at home. Normally, Thai parents could work and earn full time when their child went to school, but when the lockdown enforced, the parents needed to take care of their child by themselves and that left them less time to work and earn. Parents felt like their responsibility had doubled, working from home and spending time at home with the kid.

To alleviate the strain, parents pushed the pressure back to school, requiring school's support to provide them activities or lessons to do while lockdown at home. Since it was summer break, the activities or lessons needed not to be very academic, but at least let the kids spend the time suitably and release the parents for work. Therefore, private schools started to seize that challenge with a lot of limitation ahead.

Distance learning was of course the first approach that every schools was heading to, but to steer it effectively need a lot of deep analysis. Guided by MOE's plan, private schools also follow the steps to check the users' internet accessibility, and luckily the majority already browse the social media, especially Facebook and LINE, regularly. A parent survey from a private school in downtown Phitsanuloke province revealed that 94% and 79% of parents regularly using LINE and Facebook respectively, while overall Thailand social networks penetration was 94% on Facebook and 85% on LINE. The internet accessibility was not the main concern for the private schools' parents, but if they had to invest in more computer or equipment, that would worsen the situation. Therefore, the solution should be the least extra expense, to save parents' reduced income.

Teaching kid while working from home was not an easy task at all. Young kids needed extra care while learning, the younger the kid is, the more attention the parents needed to give. It was completely impossible to let

kids 3-6 years old learn online without any parents’ assistance. Private schools needed to factor in that distance learning for kids should be during parents’ availability as well.

In summary, COVID-19 impacted substantially to the parents. Locking them down in the house, working from home, limited income, guiding kid while doing distance learning had put crucial pressure on the parents. Increasing parents’ more workload would be unwise, and that would deteriorate the relationship between parents and schools. So, the challenge to the private schools was to optimize the limited resources everyone had and draw strategic approaches that can fit into the majority of the parents’ distance learning capability.

4. Private Schools Challenges and Actions

The lockdown from COVID-19 completely disrupted the teaching process of all schools. Private schools had to utterly reengineer teaching process, from teaching in front of a class of students in to teaching in front of a camera. Certainly, not everyone was trained or ready to the change right away. Some teachers had 30 years of teaching experience in a classroom but not a single day of teaching in front of a camera. Moreover, rather than teaching in front of a camera, they had to learn how to record, edit and broadcast the VDO. Teachers’ individual ability to adjust teaching mode was not equally prepared, but clearly, the situation required them to modify themselves along .

There were numerous sources of software, VDO clip, and social media available that could instruct teachers how to teach online. The problem was that there was too little time and too many sources to select from. It was the period of teamwork challenge that schools needed to establish small teams to cope with different tasks onward. One of team would require studying and comparing each option that can be fit to the majority of teachers’ ability and certainly not an expensive option for the school.

The process of selecting software and tools could not take very long, since there were many steps afterward, for example, teaching other teachers to fully understand and use it. The selected option needed to be as simple as it could, user-friendly, low cost and highly effective in term of time consuming. At last, but not least, before final selection, the working team would receive feedback from users and would be keen to adjust, modify or pick a better solution.

From COVID-19, private schools have found a very big opportunity in disrupting themselves and moving forward to distance teaching. It was a very good time that the situation helped to reskill their teachers. Teachers now are aware of using technology to transfer knowledge to their students. It might be the best option just for now, but at least teachers now know how to start, compare and adjust for the better solution for the near future.

5. Applying CECU Approach

Although teachers had already been able to teach in front of a camera with assistance from various software and application, it would still be worthless if there was not any appropriate channel to broadcast to the audience. Should private schools use VDO clip in YouTube, Live VDO in Facebook Live, conference like Zoom or Google Meet, or assignment follow up like Google Classroom? That was very in doubt at the beginning.

Thailand English proficiency was very low, ranked 89th from 100 surveyed countries in 2020 . Schools had to carefully consider each medium should be Thai user-friendly, otherwise it would be a big burden before parents could access into it. Surely English should be a basic language skill for everyone, but to force parents accessing distance learning with difficulty would weaken their interest. Schools should avoid any difficulties and provide a simple way to encourage COVID-19 anxious parents.

To make the most of from distance learning, there was no one absolute option that perfectly fit into the variety of parents’ background. Although the work from home let them stay home with kids, the majority still had a different routine. Their free time to assist their kid surely varied by a huge range; some were free all day, some had to work and free only some specific time. Schools should look for various approach to draw parents’ engagement, providing convenient route that parents can access any time they felt free to.

To study online effectively from any screen, The Royal College Pediatricians of Thailand and Pediatric Society of Thailand had suggested different appropriate time on screen per different age . The kindergartens, 3-5 years old, should spend no more than 1 hour a day, and maximum of 15 minutes per session, while the kids age 10-12 years old should spend maximum 3 hours a day with 45 minutes per session. Therefore, school should be able to optimize between the time and accessibility to make it the most effective for the different groups of students and the parents’ diversity.

Therefore, taking from the factors that schools could shortly capture from the limited period, in order to provide a new learning experience for parents and to cure the parents staying with their kid, schools should be considering “CECU” approach as follows.

Table 2: CECU Approach

C – Costless	E – Effortless	C – Convenient	U - Understandable
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Avoiding extra cost to parents, or otherwise minimize it as possible. Invest in a new computer and new equipment should be excluded.	Avoiding extra effort from parents to assist their kid. Learning with the kid was already troublesome to most of them. Adding extra struggle would lessen the usage.	Promoting time-convenient way for parents. They should be able to access, learn or post a question whenever and wherever they were free.	Promoting distance learning as a family activity. The content should be understandable to both parents and kids, with the appropriate time length.
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The use of CECU is also easy as its name. Schools can bring any option that want to analyze, lay it down into a matrix, and compare the effectiveness per options. Taking a school in Phitsanuloke as an example, analyzing Facebook, LINE, and Zoom;

Table 3: Analyzing options by CECU Approach

Options	C – Costless	E – Effortless	C – Convenient	U - Understandable
Facebook	No extra fee	Little effort. Currently 85% usage.	Anywhere, anytime, by mobile phone.	Repeatable anytime. Easy to access questions per session.
LINE	No extra fee	Little effort. Currently 79% usage.	Anywhere, anytime, by mobile phone.	Repeatable. Difficult to track questions.
Zoom	Fee for the host	Hard effort. Currently no usage.	Fixed time by the host	Unrepeatable

6. Every end is a new beginning – never ending process

CECU approach might be a good basis to firstly analyze any option since it tries to optimize what already exists in the market with consuming the least time and money. However, the different timeline, different event context, and different parents’ expectation will enhance the modification along the process.

The first wave of pandemic was during the summer break, so the parents did not expect serious online teaching. An activity to keep their kid active would fulfil their need for that moment. Once it moves to the academic year, an intense online class would be required to close the gap and to ensure that their kid would pass the exam or continue further study. Schools should always take parents’ expectation during a different time as a considering factor and readjust it whatever more appropriate.

COVID-19 might have created many difficulties to schools. It is disrupting the teaching and learning format, moving from brick-and-mortar to online. The feedback from parents is still negative about online learning, either by the effectiveness compared to at the campus, or by the parents’ time consuming to assist their child. Although very few people prefer online learning, everyone may not avoid more online learning due to the unforeseen pandemic in the future. To secure the uncertain future, schools should maintain simple, quickly adjustable approach, using CECU as an adjustment base. Whatever had been selected, it was just the end of the beginning, getting feedbacks, learning from mistakes, adjusting accordingly. Every mistake will strengthen schools and everyone, as once Albert Einstein said, “In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunities.”

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