

# The Assessment and Evaluation of Online B.A. English Courses in the 21st Century: Challenges and Possibilities

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## ABSTRACT

The assessment and evaluation of B.A. English online courses (first offered in 2010) at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) are facing the challenges to accommodate new contexts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century language learning and teaching, with imminent changes from all aspects. At present STOU B.A. online English provides both formative and summative assessment and evaluation in a distance learning context, and it has recently introduced an electronic English performance test. The processes are practical and the quality can be assured.

The challenges include (1) the evaluation of productive skills, (2) the inclusive measurement of formative and summative evaluation with added value of self-assessment, and (3) the adaptation to new context in multimodal texts, multiliteracies and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and electronic tests. The author proposes the possibilities of modification first with providing a placement test. With the outcome of resourceful speakers and multi competent speakers as suggested by renowned scholars in the field of English language teaching, the tests should focus more on formative assessment with the value added self-assessment, while the electronic tests can help with drills or final test for large numbers of students. The final evaluation should focus on a comprehensive portfolio of students' performance.

**Keywords:** assessment and evaluation, 21<sup>st</sup> century English competencies, B.A. online English

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Challenges in the assessment and evaluation of online English learning involve the product of the curriculum; that is, students' English competencies. They must be able to communicate employing the four language skills effectively as in the stated outcome of the curriculum. Specifically, for online, distance and open learning like the B.A. English degree at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), the concept of distance learning and learner autonomy, languages as skills and interaction, and the advance of technology must be reflected and applied comprehensively.

To ensure that the graduates are qualified enough for the real world and to be able to communicate in English effectively, the curriculum was designed based on communicative and notional/functional approach. The assessment while learning and the evaluation at the final test play an important role for the expected outcome. It is therefore crucial to review and reflect the present assessment and evaluation methods with the underlying purpose to improve the teaching, learning and evaluation system itself.

The "50th year seminar on "50 Years of English Language Teaching and Assessment – Reflections, Insights and Possibilities" organized by SEAMEO RELC (The Southeast Ministers of Education Organization -- Regional Language Center) during March 12-14, 2018 puts emphasis on language learning and evaluating the English language. It states that "the English status itself has become globalized and internationalized. And this English language learning and evaluation itself is dynamic and language educators must be aware and envision the needs of learners in an increasingly diverse world" (Conference program

retrieved from <https://www.relc.org.sg/facilities/conferences- events-2018 4/6/2018>).

More specifically, English is also declared as an official language in the ASEAN community. Thus students from the ASEAN community will gain benefit if they are able to communicate effectively in English in their professions with the flow of the 8 careers in the region. Advanced and developing technology encourages and facilitates students to learn online or via electronic media. STOU has offered B.A. in English courses online since 2010 to encourage Thai students and the workforce to improve their performance in English.

This paper focuses on comprehensive review and reflection on the assessment and evaluation system of B.A. online English, the nature of online learning and emerging issues and trends in assessment and evaluation. It aims at the possibilities to improve the evaluation system to be more effective and accommodate English competencies in the 21st century.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Background of the B.A. English online course

English is important in the changing world: not only in business but in accessing knowledge from the Internet. STOU attempts to educate Thai students from various backgrounds in their B.A. English program and 13 English for Specific Courses (ESP) at certificate level. The comprehensive and practical curriculum is based on a communicative and functional/notational approach.

Table 1 summarizes the number of registered students for English courses from 2010, (the first year that a B.A. English degree was offered) to 2015. The registered number is high; probably as

it is a second degree or in a wish to improve English performance for their jobs. The number of graduates is low in comparison; maybe because of the nature of distance learning system where

students can learn at their own pace (at present the university allows 12 years to complete the 4 year program).

**Table 1:** A summary of the number of registered students 2010-2015

Year	Number of registered students			Number of graduates
	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 3	
2010	1,202	1,446	296	-
2011	2,301	1,473	389	-
2012	3,021	2,304	383	-
2013	3,109	2,819	472	99
2014	3,226	2,256	514	129
2015	2,981	2,216	N/A	148
2016	N/A	N/A	N/A	

016: Not available at the time of the paper

## 2.2 The comprehensive picture of assessment and evaluation

### 2.2.1 Why do we assess and evaluate students?

The rationale of assessment and evaluation lies in the purpose of improving language learning outcomes, providing public accountability, and promoting desired changes in learning and teaching practices. Examinations are multi-faceted at macro and micro level. The effect of the macro level lies in tests such as entrance exam. At micro level the complex effects on behavior within the classroom (i.e. the micro context) Khalifa (2018)

### 2.2.2 How should we measure English performance for 21st century competencies?

The concepts of the 21st century competencies and types of graduates in English and appropriate pedagogy affect the curriculum

and the assessment and the evaluation and the concrete outcome of the graduates

Typical paper and pencil test, subjective test (writing) are now practiced at STOU, with online electronic tests on general performance in English (STOU-EPT). The present STOU system of assessment and evaluation covers both formative and summative assessment and evaluation (see details in Table 2).

The principal concepts of test writing, validity and reliability, are treated comprehensively and methodically. In designing the test in the first place, the validity of the tests is assured in the construct which all tests are designed according to the behavioral objectives of the course. Each test writer carefully writes the items for each unit in the textbook, then the head of the course administration team reviews them meticulously and later the evaluation specialists in the

evaluation department of the university review and proofread the items again.

The reliability of the test is practiced after each test has been used. The analysis of the discrimination and difficulty indices of multiple choice test is conducted for every time the test is used; these detailed results are forwarded to each test writer to adjust the test items accordingly with the approval of the head of the course administration team.

However, the analysis for validity and reliability of subjective tests has not been conducted yet. Theoretically, an interrater system to make the marking more reliable and 'objective' needs to be further developed. Also, the marking criteria should also be researched thoroughly.

Students are expected to be able to use English fluently and accurately in the real world at the level of 'good' for this B.A. English online curriculum. This determines the pedagogy and theory in learning languages. While learning, formative assessment can demonstrate student progress. The final summative evaluation demonstrates the overall level of student performance.

### 2.2.3 How should we measure language skills?

Paper and pencil tests for language skills are questioned that they lack the interaction with interlocutors or communication in real situations and thus cannot measure the students' performance more efficiently.

At present, STOU materials provide paper and pencil test designed according to behavioral objectives in each learning unit both in objective and subjective formats. This can be

explored in terms of content knowledge, receptive skills, and productive skills.

First, content knowledge such as theories of language, culture or linguistics is in the form of multiple choice exam. However, application and linkage to other skills, which is very important and useful, is still limited. Still the 5 multiple choice pen and pencil test (through computer marking system) is open for improvement.

Second, receptive skills which include listening and reading are treated effectively through paper and pencil tests. Reading comprehension can be measured effectively. But for multimodal texts such as Facebook LIVE, which cover a combination of various skills -- reading the letters, listening to the sound, and seeing the photos or visuals, the assessment and evaluation need to be developed so that these multiple skills can be measured at one time. For example, the competence of grasping keywords both in listening and reading, and the interpretation of the visuals for the overall understanding of the texts will have to be measured comprehensively.

Specifically, receptive skill in listening that requires student performance such as pronunciation, the listening comprehension can be accomplished and assessed to a certain extent -- with a variety of practices on one's own and with the help of the instructors during the course. But for final examination, evaluating student pronunciation is conducted through pencil and paper test and is inadequate at the moment.

Third, productive skills which cover writing and speaking are under the challenges. Writing can be marked individually through online submission. However, there are possibilities of

providing an interrater for more reliable measurement.

Speaking evaluation is the most challenging for this B.A. online English curriculum. For example, the objective states that “students should be able to use telephone expressions in a specified situation”. In the paper and pencil test, students choose the correct phrase for a situation, but do not show their performance in pronouncing or using telephone expressions in their speech. Similarly in a pronunciation course, the behavioral objectives of producing intelligible sound are not by listening to what students say or pronounce, but by reading the answers or through a multiple choice system. Vanijdee (2017 and 2018) presents

the possibilities of managing an online curriculum, focusing on improving the limited assessment of the productive skills.

Only in the Effective Presentations in English course, where students have to submit their own video clip performing the presentation, can their accent, pronunciation, and presentation be heard and seen (the presentation is rehearsed, not simultaneous speech). Only in the very final course Professional Experience in English (a 5-day training course before graduation), the students must interact with each other in English all the time and demonstrate their full potential in communication skill.

**Table 2:** Assessment and evaluation for online listening and speaking courses

English courses	Educational media	Online activities	Formative	Summative	Passing rate in percentage one semester (2014-2016)
10111 English for Communication	Textbooks	Supplementary Material provided	Written 20%	Multiple-choice test Paper and pencil	51.72, 54.51, 46.25 N (4811,4147,3864 )
10171 Interaction		None			77.17, 71.24, 97.51 N (1087,1001,912)
14215 Introduction to English Linguistics	Printed manual and online tasks	Major	Online assignment 40%		41.81,33.41,40.82 N (792, 631,608)
14320 English Pronunciation					26.81,37.66, 26.85 N (197, 224, 219 )
14422 Effective Presentations in English	Multi-media CD and online tasks	Major	Online assignment Video clip submission 40%	Multiple-choice test and subjective test Paper and pencil	74.60, 85.51, 80.18 N (319, 281, 281)

(Vanijdee, 2014)

#### 2.2.4 Modes of assessment and evaluation for courses delivered by printed texts, online and special mixture

Table 3 below shows a special group which had unique modes of assessment and evaluation: the submission of 20% assignments for 11 courses delivered in print from 2014-2017. Assignments are in written form (activities related

to the content of the course) and are sent and returned by mail. Table 4 shows the percentage of assignments and final tests for online courses with 40% formative and 60% final exam and specific categories. Table 5 shows the percentage of assignments and final texts of specific groups. The final exams are objective tests with 5 multiple choices.

**Table 3:** The percentage of assessment and final examination for printed text courses

Courses by mode of delivery	Assessment	Final examination	
	Assignment 20%	80%	Subjective test
Written paper	Objective test with 5 multiple choices		
Printed texts			
General English			
10111 English for Communication	/	/	-
10171 Interaction: Effective Communication in English	/	/	-
English for Specific courses			
11301 English for Business	/	/	-
11302 English for Tourism	/	/	-
11303 English for Hotel Personnel	/	/	-
11304 English for Office Staff	/	/	-
11305 English for Computer Users	/	/	-
11306 English for Health Personnel	/	/	-
11307 English for Technicians	/	/	-
11308 English for Agriculture	/	/	-
11311 English for Language Teachers	/	/	-

Table 4: The percentage of assignments and final examination of 8 online courses

Courses by mode of delivery	Assignment	Final Examination
	40%	60% (Objective test with 5 multiple choices)
Online courses: study online with printed manual or CD delivered home		
14212 English Grammar in Use	/	/
14213 English Reading 1	/	/
14214 English Writing 1	/	/
14215 Introduction to English Linguistics	/	/
14216 Intercultural Communication	/	/
14317 English Reading 2	/	/
14318 Principles of Translation	/	/
14421 English Writing 2	/	/

Table 5: The percentage of assignments and final examination for specific groups

Courses by mode of delivery	Assignment	Final examination Objective test with 5 multiple choices	Notes
Special group online 14111 (20143012) Self-study Skills for English Language Learning	60%	40%	This is the first online course introduced to students. Intense assessment; many activities.
Online 14422 (20143020) Effective Presentations in English	40%	60% Both objective and subjective test	Students have to submit a video clip for the assignment
Online 11312 (20143021) English for Professions in the ASEAN Community	40%	60%	An elective course
Printed text 14423 (20145001) Professional Experience in English	60%	40%	Students have to come to the university for a 5-day training course before graduating.
Printed text 14319 (20143017) Translation Skills in English	60%	40% subjective test only	An elective course. Students have to submit their translation online.

The average percentage of submission of assignment as formative assessment of the courses delivered by printed texts ranges from about 40 to 62 percent. Since this submission is not compulsory, some students prefer to take 100 percent of the test in the final examination (See Appendix 1 for detail of submission in each course).

### 3. THE LANGUAGE SKILLS WE SHOULD TEACH

The present curriculum and changes in the 21st century, English in 21st century, and especially English in the workplace determine what we should teach or set up context for students to learn.

#### 3.1 New trend in 21st century

The main expected outcome of the curriculum is that graduates must be at the 'good' level of English performance. This outcome is assured by an assessment and evaluation system where students meet the criteria expected. Specifically, in this time of change in the 21st century, the outcome or quality of graduates are now emphasized with the concept of English competencies in the 21st century.

This changing context of English language teaching and learning thus affects the assessment and evaluation of the English language. The concept of English at the workplace, English in turbulent times, English in 21st century presented by renowned scholars all suggest the comprehensive picture and trend of what and how to teach English.

#### 3.2 English as a dominant language in the workplace: successful multi-competent speakers of English

The first scholar presents the qualification of graduates with English competencies in workplace. Pakir (2017), from National University of Singapore, Singapore, gave a talk on "English for Global Competence in 21st Century International Higher Education Challenges and Opportunities". She advocates the importance of English for workplace in the 21st century. Issues of situations in the 21st century include extreme longevity, rise of smart machines, computational world, new media ecology, super-structured organization, and globally connected world. Students need novel and adaptive thinking, social intelligence, trans-disciplinary, new media literacy, cognitive load management, computational thinking, design mindset, cross cultural competence, and virtual collaboration. In the workplace, English will dominate and students and graduates need requisite language skills. Education will be a mixture of content and language and language for communication.

Parkir (2017) also proposes the questions of standardization of English in that which English will be accepted. The English taught should cover variety of accents. The inner circle includes the UK and the US. But others (the outer and expandable circles) should be accepted as well. Teachers should not be focused as native or non-native with successful multi competent speakers. This concept agrees with many other scholars in language teaching (Pennycook 2018).

#### 3.3 Changes of language norms: critically engaged trans-lingual activists, resourceful speakers

Pennycook (2018) discusses "Teaching English in Turbulent Times". He draws our attention to climate change, changing economies

migration and its responses, and changing English with new words, new meaning and sociolinguistic shifts, theoretical shifts, and digital literacies (multiliteracies). He also presents semiotic assemblages with words and meaning integrated into the English language from various cultures, such as in food culture.

Pennycook has summarized changing English language teaching from domain to trend as follows

- Language norms change from standard to diverse linguistic norms.
- Ideal teachers change from native speakers to quality teachers.
- Role of L1 changes from interference and hindrance to support and resource.
- Teaching methods change from prepackaged to multimodal multiliteracies.
- Models and interlocutors change from native speakers to diverse intercultural communication.
- Teacher development changes from knowledge of techniques to reflective practitioners.
- Teaching and learning goals change from native speaker like to multilingual and resourceful speakers.

As the dominant language of globalization, English is caught up in processes of globalization, increases in inequality and discrimination. So teaching should not only cover access to the grammar and lexicon of English. Pennycook emphasizes that students should learn to be “critically engaged translingual activists, resourceful speakers able to move in and out of languages and

to understand the role of English and the wider world in critical ways” (Pennycook 2018).

### 3.4 Communication, collaboration, autonomy/learning to learn, creativity: 21st century skills for English education

Nunan (2018), a renowned scholar in English language teaching, from the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong elaborates that “Educating citizens for 21st Century skills has become the mantra of governments and ministries of education around the world”. He presents key issues in the role of English in educating citizens for the 21st Century with changes. The very important concept is that the purpose of education is to move from ‘transmissive’ to ‘progressive’ with the following details.

The term ‘Transmissive’ means the purpose of education cultural preservation and transmission, developing in citizenry knowledge and skills to serve the needs and purposes of the state while Progressive covers the cognitive, aesthetic, emotional and moral development of an individual.

For the content, Transmissive focuses on academic content knowledge while Progressive focuses on learning processes and skills.

Nunan (2018) sums up that Education for the 21st century and in the new millennium technology and multimedia resources will enable individuals to discover things independently; the focus of education must shift from knowledge transmission to the fostering of a spirit of inquiry and independence, people will have to learn to work collaboratively in teams, with imagination and inventive thinking.

The solution to these changes is that 21st century citizens as heroes must have the following

qualities: confidence, think independently, communicate effectively, self-directed questioners, perseverance, be active contributors able to work effectively in teams, innovative, exercise initiative, take calculated risks, strive for excellence.

For communication, collaboration, autonomy/learning how to learn, creativity, which are all 21st century competencies, must be transformed into measurable activities and thus provide students in full for their real world. These key terms are worth exploring in details as follows:

*Communication covers the following ideas:*

Multiple competency model variables cover family members sharing stories about their day (local/oral/everyday). Local/glocal includes casual conversation amongst people from different parts of the world (glocal/oral/everyday). Also, students must be able to perform an oral/written international conference presentation (glocal/oral/specialized). And they must master everyday/specialized conversations.

Collaboration focuses on an experiential learning model where class behavior is owned by the whole group including the teacher. Autonomy is the ability to learn on one's own. Creativity is the most important characteristic required by 21st century citizens. Nunan (2018) sums up that project-based learning is very useful and practical for this changing world.

To sum up, all these changes in the 21st century must be embedded in the curriculum and the day to day teaching/adjusting. At present, STOU B.A. English online curriculum consists of useful courses that constitute a comprehensive picture of the skills and performance of prospect students. The changes in 'content' or 'how to teach' can be

adjusted in the process of teaching itself such as adding more multimodal texts.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

##### **4.1 The outcome of language teaching: resourceful speakers and multicompetent speakers**

According to renowned scholars, the outcome of language teaching should be geared toward producing resourceful speakers (Pennycook 2018) and multi-competent speakers (Pakir 2017), and communication in wider aspects such as local/glocal (Nunan 2018). This must be translated into the effective and appropriate assessment and evaluation.

##### **4.2 Types of texts to be used in teaching: multimodal texts**

Multimodal texts dominate communication in 21st century. They also constitute and require multiliteracies. They are the kinds of texts students are experiencing in the real world. If these multimodal texts in new context are applied, assessment and evaluation must be adjusted accordingly.

*Multimodality of texts and multiliteracies* have dominated the English circle for centuries. With new technology and IoT (Internet of Things), texts come in a variety of modes. Multimodality refers to a combination of several communication channels such as audio, text, graphic, and video. Modern MWCEs (multimodal web-conferencing environment) incorporate audio-conferencing, text-based chat sessions, live video, and an interactive whiteboard, components that can be used simultaneously, in different combinations, e.g. audio-conferencing in conjunction with chat or an interactive whiteboard, or independently, one tool

at a time, e.g. audio-conferencing or chat. (Koalovairyna, 2018).

Chia (2018), National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, in her talk on “Multimodal text assessment in the English language curriculum” introduces multiliteracies, alongside the use of multimodal texts. She demonstrates how to ‘teach’ from multimodal text, and assess making use of all components such as photos, visual, types of letter, etc.

More precisely, Vanijdee (2018) looks into the use of vocabulary in her study “the vocabulary size and range appropriate for the English courses in General Education of 27 state universities in Thailand”. She proposes the explicit teaching of content and structure (functional) words at K 2 levels with limited academic words. The study concludes that the appropriate and suggested vocabulary size and range can be detected through a communicative approach with a functional/notional syllabus.

#### **4.3 Criteria: discrete passing or failing criteria or descriptions of performance**

At present, STOU awards marks by ‘S’ as passed and ‘H’ as honorary degree with 60% as the passing rate. As many other countries gear toward CEFR (Council of Europe Framework of References for Languages) criteria of evaluation, STOU should consider this criteria for all courses. CEFR provides description in terms of A1 A2 for basic users, B1 B2 for independent users and C1 C2 for proficient users, with the expectation of B.A. graduates to have B2 level. These detailed criteria are useful and reveal the students’ performance more tangible than the grade of passing or failing. They are even more encouraging and can give concrete guidelines for improvement.

CEFR provides details of performance in each skill -- reading, writing, listening and speaking, vocabulary. These can be useful both as guidelines for syllabus design and course development and for assessment and evaluation. With its descriptions, students can be more aware of their performance than the grades by numbers only. (See Appendix 2 for Common Reference levels: global scale showing detailed descriptions of each level).

#### **4.4 Value added self-assessment and students’ attendance or effort**

Since testing in English language learning should not just be a onetime end. Language performance can be developed and adapted to different levels through time. The concept of

Self-assessment was introduced to monitor oneself and for learner autonomy. Should this be included in the final score to help students ‘pass’ the courses? Should self-assessment as accumulate marks be included? Self-assessment plays an important role in monitoring oneself and progress, and thus should be included in the “passing or failing”.

Kiely (2017), University of Southampton, UK in his talk on “Learning and Assessment in ELT,

Challenges and Opportunities” during 9-10 October 2017 proposed self-assessment as a way of learning which should be counted for student success. For this issue, STOU B.A. English in the context of distance education has promoted learner autonomy and self-assessment all along. But it is still not counted and included in the final evaluation, or considered as learning assessment.

#### **4.5 The rubric and interrater**

The rubric in assessing student’s performance must be updated in more detail, and

there should be an interrater for the validity of the evaluation of the test itself. The following criteria show the rubric for marking the video clip (20

marks) in formative assessment of 14422: Effective Presentations in English.

#### Criteria for marking

Visual aids 5 marks:

correspond to the content and purpose of presentation	3
attract the audience	1
neatness	1

Oral presentation description 15 marks:

helpful outline and contains the language of presentation (introduction/ topic/ scope of the topic/ time needed/ transition/ summary/ conclusion)	7
correct grammar and expressions	5
spelling	3

This rubric needs to be revised, based on research, into more detailed description. At least two interraters should be employed for reliability.

#### 4.6 Portfolio

For the final score of a student to pass the English courses and the whole curriculum, there should be a portfolio showing the progression of what they have learned comprehensively. This can be formative and evaluation. It helps students learn and the portfolio can record all the improvement or problems and the application of what students have learned.

In this connection, the tasks submitted by the students reveal that many of them cannot apply their prior knowledge from the previous courses to a new one and cannot integrate what they have learned to new tasks. For example, the incorrect use of modal verbs such as “can + infinitive without to” still reoccur persistently in a more advanced course. Some students still

pronounce inaccurately, showing no application of the pronunciation they have learned from previous courses. Thus, the linkage of knowledge in all courses must be noted and implemented. This may be because we do not have prerequisite courses; students can register at their preference, even though guidelines are existing. However, this issue is based on the observation of the instructors and must be researched comprehensively.

#### 4.7 The adoption of electronic tests for mass classes and assessment

At present, electronic tests have been developed and advertised and many are in the process of improving. These tests are useful in formative assessment and for large numbers of students. They can be drill exercise for students to practice and for the final examination in a form of

simple objective tests, it can be accomplished effectively. Vanijdee (2008, 2011) developed an English test via electronic media for reading but only for practice. And in 2016, STOU-EPT (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University English Performance Test) was implemented.

The emergence of a variety of electronic tests is a possibility not only for receptive skills or in a form of multiple choices. Now electronic tests can be employed to measure speaking and writing. Versant standard test, which can accommodate speaking and writing, has been proved by Morishita, M. and Harada, Y. (2018) to be effective and useful

## 5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the online assessment and evaluation need to be refreshed in terms of quality, and adapted to multimodal texts and multiliteracies and new concepts of the new and changing context. 21st English competencies skills, specifically multiliteracies and multimodal texts, and electronic tests are keywords for the quality improvement of online curricula. Also self-assessment must be value added. The evaluation of the outcomes of students learning English should be in portfolio form giving way to further learning and lifelong learning.

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