Trends in Choosing EFL Research Topics:
A Case Study of Thai Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe emerging trends in EFL research topics chosen by Thai undergraduate students. The participants were 469 fourth-year English major students from the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Education at Naresuan University during the academic years 2022 to 2024, with 156, 158, and 155 students, respectively. The data consisted of research studies conducted by these students as part of their final project for the Research Report Writing course offered during the academic years 2022-2024 (140 studies in total). These 140 research studies were categorized into two main types based on the type of research conducted: quantitative and qualitative research. As for quantitative research, six subcategories were identified: 1) language input (listening and reading), 2) language output (speaking and writing), 3) language form, 4) language proficiency, 5) affective needs, and 6) language strategies. Regarding qualitative research, only one subcategory (i.e., literature) was identified, as the students' qualitative research focused solely on this area. The data were analyzed using percentages, and the research categories were ranked accordingly. It was found that the majority of the students chose quantitative research to conduct rather than qualitative research, and research on affective needs was the most chosen subtheme for their research project topics. It was followed by language strategies, language form, and language output, especially speaking, respectively. Results, discussion, limitations, and pedagogical implications of the study in response to the findings are also discussed.

Keywords: Trends, Literature, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Thai Undergraduate Students, Thai Context

Introduction

Research plays a crucial role in education, serving as a vital tool for addressing various challenges within the field. By employing scientific approaches and methodologies, the research aims to comprehensively identify, explore, and elucidate interested issues. Fundamentally, research is a methodical and logical endeavor to uncover, refine, and verify knowledge. It systematically seeks to discover truths and validate findings, contributing to a deeper understanding of educational phenomena. Through rigorous methodologies, research uncovers and validates knowledge, providing solutions to educational problems and fostering continuous innovation in the field (Fadhila & Gustira, 2021). Through this process, educational practices and policies can evolve, leading to more effective teaching and learning outcome.

Incorporating research into the undergraduate curriculum is a fundamental component of higher education that supports pedagogical, professional, and personal development. Conducting research allows students to actively engage in inquiry, encouraging critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills essential for both academic success and real-world application. Through hands-on experience—formulating research questions, designing studies, collecting and analyzing data, and drawing evidence-based conclusions—students deepen their understanding of theoretical concepts and cultivate the ability to address complex issues methodically and creatively.

Moreover, undergraduate research fosters intellectual independence and initiative. It equips students with the confidence to investigate topics of interest, manage projects from inception to completion, and communicate their findings effectively. These skills are not only valuable for graduate-level study but are also critical for career readiness. The research process also helps students develop resilience and adaptability, as they learn to navigate the uncertainties inherent in scholarly inquiry, thereby reinforcing the importance of perseverance and methodological rigor.

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), research is particularly dynamic, continually shaped by evolving pedagogical approaches, technological innovations, and socio-cultural contexts. In the globalized world, learners' perspectives are increasingly recognized as crucial to refining and adapting language teaching practices. Scholars such as Benson (2001) and Nunan (2012) have emphasized the importance of learner perspectives in EFL, highlighting how student insights can inform more relevant and responsive pedagogical strategies.

EFL is a multidisciplinary field that intersects with language education, linguistic analysis, and cultural studies. Within this context, the academic work of undergraduate students provides a unique window into contemporary issues and innovations influencing language education. According to Liu (2015), undertaking an undergraduate thesis allows students to adopt a rigorous research mindset, equipping them with methodological competence and fostering originality. However, much of the existing EFL research has focused on the work of established scholars, often overlooking the valuable contributions made by undergraduate researchers.

This study aimed to explore emerging trends in EFL research topics by analyzing the academic output of Thai undergraduate students. By examining the topics they choose to investigate, the study seeks to highlight their academic interests and areas of concern within the context of EFL education in Thai higher education. This approach offers insight into how English language education is perceived and approached at the undergraduate level, reflecting current academic and pedagogical priorities from the student perspective. To guide this analysis, the study adapts the analytical framework proposed by Amini Farsani et al. (2021), which provides a structured and validated method for categorizing trends in language education research. The findings may inform the development of more relevant and supportive teaching practices and help educators and curriculum designers promote student-centered research engagement in EFL contexts in Thailand.

Research Objective

The researchers aimed to achieve the following goal:

– To identify and describe emerging trends in EFL research topics chosen by Thai undergraduate students.

Research Question

What are the emerging trends in EFL research topics chosen by Thai undergraduate students?

Literature Review

ELT in the Context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

English Language Teaching (ELT) within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) extends beyond the narrow goal of achieving fluency. Instead, it emphasizes developing overall language proficiency and equipping learners with a broad set of skills that enable them to use English effectively in both academic and everyday contexts. A key focus is the integration of English into the academic curriculum, which involves fostering students'

ability to engage with English across disciplines and communicative settings. Rather than aiming for complete mastery, EFL instruction prioritizes the acquisition of practical competencies that allow learners to navigate real-world and academic tasks with confidence and effectiveness (Fadhila & Gustira, 2021).

In EFL settings, learners study English for diverse purposes, including passing examinations, advancing professional goals, or pursuing higher education opportunities. In Thailand, for example, English is a required subject throughout primary and secondary education. EFL refers to the teaching of English to individuals whose first language is not English, particularly in countries where English is not the primary language of communication. In these contexts, English may hold an official or institutional role, yet it is not used widely in everyday life or as a dominant medium of instruction (Nunan, 2012). Therefore, EFL teaching is tailored to meet the distinct linguistic, academic, and professional needs of learners from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

The Scope of Teaching in EFL Context

The scope of teaching English as a foreign language includes all areas of English language studies, such as language skills, components, and factors that influence teaching and learning in a foreign context. It covers aspects like lesson planning, assessment, and how teachers deliver lessons to students. Additionally, teaching English as a foreign language is shaped by factors like age, psychology, sociocultural influences, and linguistic considerations (Brown, 2007).

The development of various teaching and learning theories and innovative practices in the EFL classroom depends on a deep understanding of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This knowledge is essential for grasping the cognitive, social, and linguistic demands of specific academic fields (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). EAP serves two primary purposes: enhancing learners' English proficiency and equipping them with the communicative skills needed for academic tasks such as research article writing, oral presentations, and participation in academic discussions and seminars (Gao & Bartlett, 2014). EAP plays a significant role in language education, especially in countries where English is the medium of instruction.

Research Trends in International Publications

Many research studies aim to investigate trends in international publications by scholars, while research trends among undergraduate students have been much less explored. Amini Farsani et al. (2021) conducted a study on trends in research methods in ELT by analyzing data from 18 leading ELT journals with an index of at least 2.5, including System, TESOL Quarterly, and others, covering the years 2009 to 2018. They found that 95.5% of the articles were empirical, with 42.6% using quantitative methods, 25.9% using mixed-methods, and 24.9% using qualitative methods. Although systematic reviews made up only 2.2% of the total, they were the most cited. The findings indicate a shift toward increased collaboration within and outside of applied linguistics, particularly on L2 issues, involving disciplines like education, life sciences, and the arts.

To conduct their analysis, Amini Farsani et al. (2021) employed a rigorous coding procedure using a research synthesis methodology. This involved the iterative development of a coding sheet, including conceptualizing key themes (e.g., research orientations, authorship, and collaboration), identifying characteristics based on the literature, designing and pilot-testing the coding sheet, consulting with experts, and revising based on feedback. In the current study, their analytical framework and coding approach will be adapted to examine the methodological trends in undergraduate EFL research projects, offering a structured lens to interpret the types and orientations of student-driven research.

In Thailand, studies have been conducted on ELT research trends within the context of Thai publications. Phoocharoensil (2022) explored these trends in his recent study on English education in Thailand. His research shows that the most popular topic was second/foreign language learning and teaching (44.98%), with vocabulary being the most studied skill, followed by writing, reading, and grammar. The second most frequent topic was applied linguistics (18.32%), with discourse analysis being the most common, followed by phonetics, pronunciation, pragmatics, and intercultural communication. Teaching methodology (11.7%) and learner-related research (10%) were also prominent, with Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) emerging in methodology and motivation in L2 learning gaining popularity in learner studies. According Phoocharoensil (2022), ESP research accounted for the lowest percentage (1.67%) among the three Scopus-indexed ELT/AL journals in Thailand.

Trends in ELT Undergraduate Studies

More specifically, research on trends in ELT has also been conducted in the context of EFL undergraduate students. These studies focus on examining the types of research methods, topics, and areas of interest that are prevalent among EFL undergraduates, offering insights into the evolving priorities and methodologies in ELT within this educational context. A study by Fadhila and Gustira (2021) in Indonesia focused on undergraduate theses in ELT. By analyzing 162 undergraduate thesis abstracts, they found that descriptive quantitative research was the most commonly used method (42.01%). The second most common was experimental research (26.03%), followed by descriptive qualitative (21.89%), correlation (5.91%), and R&D (Research and Development), action research, and content analysis (1.18%). The least common method was comparative research, at just 0.59%.

Fadhila and Gustira (2021) further reported findings on research trends in terms of topic. The results revealed that "style or strategy and course design planning" was the most popular research topic in TEFL (24.85%) from 2015 to 2017. The second most common topic was "approach and methodology" and "teaching technique studies" (10.05%), followed by "classroom management" (8.87%). This was followed by "CALL/Multimedia" (8.24%), "linguistic factors" (7.10%), and "personality factors" as the least chosen topic (5.91%). Target language skills were analyzed under eight subcategories: listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and integrated skills. The researchers found that writing had the highest percentage of focus in TEFL research (19.52%), followed by speaking and reading (18.93%). Integrated skills ranked third (14.79%), followed by grammar (12.42%), vocabulary (11.83%), and listening (2.95%), with pronunciation being the least studied (0.59%).

Ghofur (2023) conducted a research study on trends in EFL undergraduate thesis topics in higher education. This study was conducted at UIN Walisongo Semarang in Indonesia aiming at analyzing the sentiment and trend of the undergraduate topic thesis done by students of UIN Walisongo Semarang. The purpose of this study was to explore the research trends and the reasons why these students chose to conduct these research topics. The questionnaires for students were used a main research method. The documented data in the form of text mining taken from Walisongo Eprint Library were collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics. It was revealed that there were positive results indicating that they would like to complete their research immediately. In addition, it was found that there was a significant change in the trend pattern, so this needed to be taken into account for university policies makers to better suit the needs of students.

Despite extensive research on ELT trends, there has been a notable lack of studies conducted among undergraduate Thai students majoring in English or English education. Based on the findings from previous research, the researchers aimed to examine trends in EFL undergraduate research within the English Department,

Faculty of Humanities at Naresuan University, between 2022 and 2024. The results of this study are expected to offer new insights into EFL research trends and assess how comprehensively the research addresses various aspects of English language teaching.

Research Method

Participants

This study aimed to explore emerging trends in EFL research topics by analyzing the academic output of Thai undergraduate students. The data were collected from the research topics chosen by students enrolled in a research report writing course. The participants consisted of 469 fourth-year English major students from the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Education at Naresuan University during the academic years 2022 to 2024, with 156, 158, and 155 students, respectively.

Data Source

The data consisted of research studies conducted by these students as part of their final project for the research report writing course, which required students to carry out research and write their research reports in a group of 3 to 4 members. In the academic year 2022, there were 45 research studies, followed by 50 and 45 research studies in the subsequent years (140 studies in total).

Data Analysis

The research studies were analyzed by adapting the frameworks from Amini Farsani et al. (2021) and Phoocharoensil (2022). Amini Farsani et al.'s analytical framework, developed through an iterative coding process and expert validation, provides a structured approach for categorizing research trends by research orientation, methodology, and thematic focus. This framework guided our systematic classification of student research topics and methods. The analytical framework included three methodological categories: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. However, no student studies employing mixed-method research were identified in the dataset. Therefore, the 140 research studies were categorized into two main types based on the types of research conducted: quantitative and qualitative. These categories were further divided into relevant subcategories focusing on different aspects of language learning and acquisition.

For quantitative research, six subcategories were identified: language input (listening and reading), language output (speaking and writing), language form, language proficiency, affective needs, and language strategies. For qualitative research, only one subcategory, literature, was identified, as the students' qualitative research focused solely on this area.

The researchers of this current study categorized all the studies according to the established themes. The totals were calculated as percentages, and the research categories were ranked accordingly. During the categorization process, any disagreements regarding the classification of research studies were discussed and resolved until a consensus was reached.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion of this research are presented according to the research question of this study. Table 1 below shows the results of the trends in the research studies conducted by undergraduate students in Thailand.

Table 1 The Trends in the Research Studies Conducted by Undergraduate Students in Thailand

Subthemes		Academic Year 2022	Academic Year 2023	Academic Year 2024	Total	Ranking
Quantitative Research (Survey)	Language Input — Listening	0 (0 %)	4 (5.55%)	5 (7.24%)	9	7
	Language Input — Reading	1 (1.61%)	3 (4.16%)	4 (5.79%)	8	8
	Language Output — Speaking	3 (4.83%)	6 (8.33%)	10 (14.49%)	19	4*
	Language Output — Writing	1 (1.61%)	1 (1.38%)	0 (0%)	2	9
	Language Form	10 (16.12%)	5 (6.94%)	6 (8.69%)	21	3*
	Language Proficiency	9 (14.51%)	5 (6.94%)	0 (0%)	14	5
	Affective Needs	24 (38.70%)	27 (37.5%)	26 (37.68%)	77	1*
	Language Strategies	9 (14.51%)	16 (22.22%)	15 (21.73%)	40	2*
Qualitative Research	Literature	5 (8.06%)	5 (6.94%)	3 (4.34%)	13	6
Total		62 (100%)	72 (100%)	69 (100%)	203	

Note: *Most Chosen Topics

As Table 1 shows, quantitative research is the most popular kind of research that the students conducted. Particularly, the research on affective needs was the most chosen subtheme for their research project (77 topics). It was followed by language strategies (40 topics), language form (21 topics), and language output, especially speaking (19 topics), respectively. Interestingly, the research on affective needs had been equally chosen for three consecutive years. The examples of these research projects are as follows.

– Attitudes of first and second-year science major students at the Faculty of Education, Naresuan University towards learning English.

– The factors affecting anxiety and the level of anxiety in speaking English of second-year students in the Faculty of Humanities, English program, towards a foreign teacher.

– A study of students' satisfaction towards teaching and learning management in English for the 21st century for a communication course.

– Exploring first and third-year English major students at Naresuan University's attitudes towards the use of mobile applications for language learning.

– A study of attitudes towards online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results of this present study are in line with the studies conducted by Fadhila and Gustira (2021) focusing on undergraduate theses in ELT and Ramadhana and Fatima (2021) exploring trends in EFL Students' theses from 2014 to 2018. The findings revealed that descriptive quantitative research was the most commonly used method. However, as found in Amaliawati et al. (2024); Almuhaimeed (2022) and Albiladi (2019), although quantitative research was not the most common research method found, the main focus of these research studies was on learning English as a foreign language. With regard to this finding, the result of this present study is also similar in that the main research topics mainly focus on EFL learning and teaching. Also, this supports the results found in Phoocharoensil (2022), who studied the trends of conducting research on English education in Thailand, revealing that the most popular topic was second/foreign language learning and teaching.

As quantitative research was found to be the most commonly used method, the reasons for the occurrence of this might be that, firstly, the purpose of this course focused on both research and research report writing skills. In addition, if full-scale research were required, it would take a very long time. Besides, most students had not studied research methodology before, which resulted in time constraints if they had to study full-scale research.

Therefore, finding previous research studies and/or articles as an example of research was an option that students thought would help them learn about research and provide good research examples that they could follow effectively since many research studies present research instruments (e.g., questionnaire), data collection, data analysis, and presentation of research results. This was consistent with the time constraints since students had only one semester to study and conduct research, and write research reports.

As for the research on language strategies, this is similar to conducting the research on affective needs, mentioned above, because students had time constraints. Therefore, studying language strategies with examples of research to follow as models could help them do research more easily and could complete their research and write their research report in time for this course. Moreover, students thought that their language ability, language skills, and strategies for learning English were not very good, so they were interested in studying in these areas. Examples of research that students study include topics such as motivation and translation. Also, students' limited experience in designing complex research studies constrained the methodological variety in their work. Many students in the writing course lacked a strong foundation in research methodology and often struggled with academic writing, particularly when producing research papers. As a result, students gravitated toward simpler and more familiar methodologies, which limited the diversity of research approaches in their projects. These constraints collectively impacted the depth and generalizability of their research outcomes.

Regarding the research on language form and language output, especially speaking, students thought these were very important, and they still had problems in learning, for example, grammar, speaking, and writing, so they were interested and would like to study these areas. This is consistent with the study conducted by Phoocharoensil (2022), showing that research topics regarding vocabulary, writing, reading, grammar, listening, speaking, culture, and thinking skills were chosen the most. This indicates that students are interested and would like to deal with learning and teaching different language skills. As found in a number of studies (e.g., Bailey & Corrales, 2020; Mohsen, 2021; Özmen et al., 2016), the research topics focusing on ESL/EFL learning and teaching, especially those focusing on language skills, were found most frequently. This suggests that language skill instruction should be taken into account in Asian ELT contexts.

Although the research on language output, especially speaking, was one of the four subthemes that the students chose the most, writing was chosen the least. This might be because writing skills were very difficult, students might have difficulty in analyzing the obtained data, and they themselves did not have good writing skills. Also, time constraints and the difficulty of data collection may cause problems in completing the research within the given time.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

The present study aimed at identifying and describing trends in the research studies conducted by undergraduate students in Thailand. According to the findings, the research on affective needs was the most chosen subtheme for their research project topics. This is possibly because these students have time constraints, and they can follow many research studies that present research instruments (e.g., questionnaire), data collection, data analysis, and presentation of research results. These can be the same reasons why they chose the research topics on language strategies in the second place. The research projects on language form and language output, especially speaking, were chosen respectively. This might be because they thought that these areas of study were very important, and they still lacked these language skills and abilities. As a result, they were interested in conducting these research projects.

There were certain limitations apparent in this study that future research could address. Firstly, since students were taking the writing course, they paid less attention to research methodology. In addition, many students struggled with writing in general and writing research papers in particular. This could be one of the causes that students did not have enough methodological knowledge. As a result, one type of research methodology was preferable to the others. Besides, some types of research, such as experimental research/classroom research, could not be carried out or possible because of time constraints. Secondly, students conducting their research faced several significant constraints that influenced the scope and methodology of their studies. For example, the entire research process had to be completed within a limited timeframe of only four months. This short duration presented challenges in planning, executing, and analyzing their studies comprehensively. It particularly restricted the feasibility of employing more complex methodologies, such as experimental or classroom-based research. Thirdly, there are factors that could affect the interpretation and generalizability of the study's findings, for example, methodological constraints, sampling issues, and data collection challenges. Finally, since this present study is limited to the research conducted by undergraduate students at Naresuan University, the trends of choosing research topics are influenced by the rise of information technology, especially Artificial Intelligence (AI). It should be noted that this present study had collected data regarding the trends in EFL research of Thai undergraduate students in the three consecutive academic years (2022-2024), the new trend in researching learning and teaching might include Artificial Intelligence (AI) more, as found in several recent studies. For example, a study conducted by Boonchom et al. (2024) indicates that there are five most popular research topics using AI-technology in research studies of English language learning and teaching, namely, AI-technology-based pedagogies, the AI-technology-based English writing, the AI-technology-based English vocabulary, the AI-technology-based English speaking, and the AI-technology-based English grammar. Additionally, there is another recent study by Huang et al. (2023) revealing the increase in conducting studies on AI-enhanced language education. The examples of the most popular topics are automated writing evaluation, Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS) for reading and writing, personalized systems for language learning, ITS for writing in English for specific purposes, and affective states and emotions. Therefore, this can be useful for those who are planning to conduct or find the appropriate AI for studies in the field of English language acquisition and pedagogical skills.

As for pedagogical implications, instructors should raise awareness of the data collection process because it is a time-consuming step with uncontrollable factors. To be more precise, if students are required to contribute questionnaires in their studies, instructors should encourage them to distribute the questionnaires to many participants before the midterm examination. Although the questionnaires are one of the best ways to collect information from a lot of people at once, the number of replies is uncontrollable. As a result, the more and earlier the questionnaires are distributed, the higher the rate of replies they will get. Also, instructors should introduce different types of research to have students get a broad picture of research studies. It can be in the form of journal research articles or studies on YouTube channels, namely "the researcher" by Thailand Science Research and Innovation (TSRI).

For further research, firstly, the researchers would like to recommend classifying subthemes precisely, especially when themes might overlap or lack clear boundaries. Also, their classification criteria should be explicitly described. Secondly, it is recommended to collect qualitative data from interviews and observations regarding students' perceptions towards the course and how they coped with their anxiety or any difficulties in completing their reports, since these findings could be very helpful and valuable. Thirdly, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of trends, strengthen analytical depth, and enhance the overall impact of the study, reporting other

aspects of conducting research studies, such as common objectives, data sources, findings, and implications, is recommended. Finally, the researchers would like to recommend conducting research on the comparison and discussion of the findings with prior studies, similarities and differences across research contexts, and the study's limitations. These would provide worthy avenues for future research.

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