Understanding English Course Withdrawals in Higher Education: A Mixed-Method Study[1]

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Abstract

The recurring phenomenon of course withdrawal, students discontinuing their enrollment in one or multiple courses due to various voluntary or compelled circumstances, poses a significant challenge for university students worldwide. However, the empirical research on this matter remains scarce, particularly concerning English courses. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study collected and analyzed data from 103 students who had previously discontinued English classes at a public university in Thailand. Both survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect pertinent data, which was subsequently analyzed using quantitative statistics and content analysis methods. The findings disclosed that students' withdrawal was not primarily driven by their attitudes towards English. Rather, they exhibited a favorable perspective towards the language, recognizing its value in their academic progression and potential career enhancement. The decision to withdraw was predominantly shaped by three key factors: (1) their educational backgrounds which posed a significant barrier, as their limited English proficiency impeded their ability to understand, interact, and engage with the course content and lecturers; (2) institutional factors, including pedagogical strategies, course difficulty, unsatisfactory grading methodologies, and unfavorable instructor attitudes, which fostered a fear of failure or low grades amongst students. These fears, compounded by harsh course restrictions and the demanding nature of the general English courses, were instrumental in the students' decision to withdraw; (3) economic constraints and excessive class sizes that were also highlighted as contributing factors to their discontinuation. The findings illuminate the underlying influences that instigate students' course withdrawal, thereby providing guidance for administrators, lecturers, and curriculum designers to reconsider their course structures and evaluation methods.

Resumen

El fenómeno recurrente del abandono de cursos, es decir, la interrupción de la matrícula de estudiantes en uno o varios cursos por diversas circunstancias, voluntarias o forzadas, plantea un desafío significativo para los estudiantes universitarios de todo el mundo. Sin embargo, la investigación empírica sobre este tema sigue siendo escasa, en particular en lo que respecta a los cursos de inglés. Mediante un enfoque de métodos mixtos, este estudio recopiló y analizó datos de 103 estudiantes que habían abandonado previamente las clases de inglés en una universidad pública de Tailandia. Se utilizaron cuestionarios de encuesta y entrevistas semiestructuradas para recopilar datos pertinentes, que posteriormente se analizaron mediante estadística cuantitativa y métodos de análisis de contenido. Los hallazgos revelaron que el abandono de los estudiantes no se debió principalmente a sus actitudes hacia el inglés. Más bien, mostraron una perspectiva favorable hacia el idioma, reconociendo su valor en su progreso académico y su potencial desarrollo profesional. La decisión de abandonar se debió principalmente a tres factores clave: (1) sus antecedentes educativos, que representaban una barrera significativa, ya que su limitado dominio del inglés impedía su capacidad para comprender, interactuar y relacionarse con el contenido del curso y los profesores; (2) factores institucionales, incluyendo estrategias pedagógicas, dificultad del curso, metodologías de calificación insatisfactorias y actitudes desfavorables del profesorado, que fomentaron el miedo al fracaso o a las bajas calificaciones entre los estudiantes. Estos miedos, agravados por las estrictas restricciones del curso y la exigencia de los cursos de inglés general, fueron decisivos para la decisión de los estudiantes de abandonar el curso; (3) las limitaciones económicas y el exceso de alumnos por clase, que también se destacaron como factores que contribuyeron a su abandono. Los hallazgos esclarecen las influencias subyacentes que incitan al abandono del curso por parte de los estudiantes, ofreciendo así orientación a administradores, profesores y diseñadores curriculares para que reconsideren la estructura de sus cursos y sus métodos de evaluación.

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Introduction

Withdrawal and attrition

This study is centered around comprehending the factors causing student withdrawal and attrition within English courses at tertiary education levels. This phenomenon, a student's formal discontinuation of enrollment in a particular course prior to completion, is a common concern, triggering instances of course abandonment globally due to a multitude of voluntary or necessary circumstances. While attrition, the cessation of course enrollment, may initially appear simplistic, it embodies a multifaceted process caused by a large number of factors (Crosling et al., 2008). It is a complex, individual-centric process, embodying the mixture of personal, institutional, financial, and societal factors. Its primary causes demonstrate variability across institutions, course types, instructors, students' age, gender, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, fostering challenges for both students and universities alike (Akos & James, 2020; Boldt, 2017; Crosling et al., 2008). Attrition amplifies student debts, hampers educational progression, and delays graduation timelines for students. For universities, it fuels disparity, creating a consequential learning gap that negatively impacts student achievements (Boldt, 2017). Additionally, it limits the enrollment of new students into courses, as precedence is given to students who previously withdrawn retaking courses (Hall et al., 2003). The effects of attrition on both students and universities have suggested the foundation for the examination of attrition's underlying factors within this study.

The term ‘course withdrawal’ is used to describe a complex interaction between student, instructor, and the course of study that results in students' attrition. Withdrawl from courses will affect students’ records and students will be asked to pay the tuition fee. The action will be indicated with ‘W’ which "suggests institutional failure, changing personal circumstances, a lack of academic integration, or a combination of these challenges" (Akos & James, 2020, p. 80). The present study utilizes the terms attrition and course withdrawal interchangeably to describe the situation where students withdraw from a particular course due to some reasons (McQueen, 2009). Course withdrawal can be explained in three situations: 1) signing up for the course but not attending any classes, 2) registering and starting the course, but withdrawing after a few weeks, and 3) withdrawing in the middle of the term or before the course ends. In contrast, ‘retention’ refers to students’ continuation of study until completion (Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2016).

The issues of course withdrawal in higher education have been studied since the 1970s with the emergence of an interactionist model attributing to students' course withdrawals to be due to the lack of social and academic integrations (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). Their theorization was backed Bean (1985) who found that students’ attrition was influenced by their academic, personal, and/or social factors. He supported Spady and Tinto’s hypotheses that "students’ academic performance, social and structural integrations were the most important factors that influenced students’ attrition" (Kerby, 2015, p. 15). Course withdrawal is a complicated individualized process that is engendered by the interplay of different factors including: the course time, schedule conflicts, the fear of failing, dislike of teachers’ teaching method, the difficulty of the course and other personal reasons experienced by the students during the course (Wheland et al., 2012). Nevertheless, no one can be precise about the factors of withdrawal due to the diversity of courses and contexts (Crosling et al., 2008).

Course withdrawal critically affects students as it increases their debts, delays their degree completion, and negatively affects their educational progress (Akos & Jame 2020). For universities, students’ withdrawal "makes it more difficult to accommodate students’ demands for seats in particular courses" (Boldt et al., 2017, p. 2). It reduces the opportunity for new students to join and it negatively impacts the metrics that are used to evaluate universities, such as fail, pass, and withdrawal rates. Considering these concerns, the current study investigates students' affective reasoning (influential factors) behind their withdrawal from English courses and the circumstances that led to their dropout, which include personal, institutional, and/or societal variables. While English course withdrawals are occurring in higher education, there is still a paucity of research studies in this topic, especially in Thailand. The findings of this study can help university administrators and instructors exert some control over some of the identified factors and lessen the impact on students’ withdrawal. The research questions include:

1. What factors caused students' withdrawals from English courses in Thai higher education?
2. How do the identified factors interact with each other in influencing students’ decision to withdraw from English courses in Thai higher education?

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Literature Review

Students' perceptions of course withdrawals

Students' perceptions about the withdrawals played an important role in their retention or attrition (Dunwoody & Frank, 1995). Nevertheless, students nowadays in different countries, including Thailand, hold positive perceptions about English as it has become an essential tool for economic, social, and technological development (Imsa-ard, 2020). Students with a high English proficiency are at an advantage when it comes to competing for jobs in the labor market. Choomthong (2014) found that "employers seek more and more Thai with 'good command of English'" (p. 45). The advent of ASEAN placed English in the Thai context, not just as a subject that is learned and taught in the classroom, but as a skill to be used for communication and in the workplace (Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018). Therefore, students who "perceived that they were not doing well in a course were more likely to withdraw. They possibly would stay in a course that they found to be 'interesting' or if they found the instructor to be 'likable' or 'helpful' (Dunwoody & Frank, 1995). Hall et al. (2003) found that students were motivated to withdraw as they perceived that "they could not understand the teacher due to the language problem" (p. 6).

Factors causing English courses withdrawal in higher education

Personal issues

Financial difficulty is the most personal factor given for students' course withdrawal. Students' socio-economic background played a crucial role in their retention or attrition (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Students who came from "low socio-economic backgrounds tended to attribute less value to higher education and the potential gains from a university degree" (Clague, 2014, p. 15) and hence, were most likely to withdraw from courses, especially when they had part-time jobs (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). Those who worked longer part-time hours and spent less time on campus were at a higher risk of withdrawing from courses (Yorke & Longden, 2004). Students whose part-time job was the only source of income may be compelled to skip some classes to protect the income that helps them to meet life's necessities. They encounter the difficulty of balancing between working and studying, which ends with their course withdrawal (Haverila et al., 2020). However, some other students continue their studies by taking out loans to pay their tuition fees as they have the self-motivation to learn and the capability to manage their time.

Poor time management is another factor that underlies students' course withdrawal. Hall et al. (2003) discovered that students withdrew from courses in which they had less attendance. Universities have different regulations about students' attendance. For example, at the university this research was carried out, students must have at least 70% of total attendance to be able to take the final exam. Attendance is important as there is a "positive correlation between attendance and academic performance" (Bevitt et al., 2010, p. 2). Students sought to justify their low attendance by saying "it took place in an inconvenient day and/or time" (Hall, 2003, p. 6). Kaplan and Luck (1977) attributed students' low attendance to their failure of social and academic integration, which Tinto (1975) considered as a key factor for students' attrition. Clague (2014) comparably asserted that "a low attendance rate indicated a lack of sense of belonging and this feeling of belonging is a crucial part in their retention" (p. 78).

Students' educational background is a crucial factor in withdrawal (Evans & Tragant, 2020). In the context of English courses, students with limited English proficiency may withdraw from courses as they cannot catch up with their peers (Kuama & Intharaksa, 2016). Hall et al. (2003) found that students with low English proficiency were most likely to withdraw as they could not understand the lecturer. In our context, students may withdraw from General English (GE) courses and study other languages like Chinese, Japanese or Korean. They are pushed to change their courses for reasons such as courses being difficult or not as they had expected, not fitting their future career, and/or having a lot of tasks and assignments (Mapou, 2008). These factors are interconnected with other academic and institutional factors (e.g., teaching strategies, teaching materials, and class size) which ultimately compelled students to withdraw (Crosling et al., 2008).

Institutional factors

The actions of educational institutions and other related possible causes are held accountable for students' withdrawals (Lobo, 2012). Teachers' traditional teaching strategies and students' lack of attendance were also identified as causative factors (Hall et al., 2003). According to Hadar and Brody (2016), supportive and

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engaging teaching activities promoted students' sense of attachment and enhanced their retention. To reduce students' likelihood of withdrawal, Jessup-Anger (2011) suggested that teachers should connect students' learning to their real lives, give formative feedback, and adopt the student-centered approach in their teaching process (Osterman, 2010). This idea was also expressed by Richardson (2011) who said that students who experienced help and sympathy from their teachers were more likely to continue their studies. Similarly, Clague (2014) asserted that "the quality of student-tutor contact is an important factor influencing students' decision to remain on a course" (p. 18).

However, teachers' sustained and meaningful one-to-one contact and support may not be possible "where large classes are the norm" (Clague, 2014, p. 18). Students often choose to withdraw from large classes as the size can negatively affect the quality of learning, complicate students' assessment process, and lessen teachers' endeavors to pay specific attention to the low-level students (Yelkpieri, 2021). Large groups forced the teachers to adopt the lecturing method of teaching, which was "woefully inadequate" (Richardson, 2011, p. 10). One-to-one assistance approach in large classes became implausible due to the classes' limited time. It impaired student understanding, affected their educational achievement, and created a gap with the students who teachers failed to reach using traditional teaching strategies (Hall et al, 2003).

Additionally, students' course withdrawal was also caused by their course itself (Hall et al., 2003; Aldridge & Rowley, 2001). Some students withdrew because English was not needed to study or was not their major. Lobo (2012) found that students were moved to withdraw by their concerns about grades, especially if they felt the course was hard and/or required an excessive amount of work. They preferred to withdraw rather than to get a low grade. Similarly, Woods et al. (2019) found that "the fear of failure in the course or getting unsatisfactory grades was the primary reason for the students' withdrawal" (p. 11). Another issue is the course's schedule conflicting with other courses. Students withdrew from General English (GE) courses as they prioritized the major courses (Lee & Choi, 2011).. In addition, registering for courses with more credits than allowed is also one of the reasons that compels students to withdraw (Hall et al., 2003; Lobo, 2012).

Social factors

Social factors refer to the external reasons (e.g., family issues, health problems, travel difficulties, and financial obligations) that push students to abandon courses (Redmond et al., 2011). These vary by community, students, and institutions, and they are intertwined with other social, personal, or academic issues (Christo & Oyinlade, 2015). Social problem such as a "marriage breakdown can create a domino effect, triggering a series of consequences, financial difficulties, employment and health" (Crosling et al., 2008, p. 18) that can be detrimental to academic success. Another example is "competing obligations in terms of friends, family, social lives and work" (Murphy & Button, 2019, p. 2) that may force some students to withdraw from courses, especially when they fail to balance between work, family commitments, and study (Crosling et al., 2008). In addition, other social issues such as health problems, parents' separation, and pregnancy might lead some abandonment from some or sometimes all courses (Christo & Oyinlade, 2015; Lobo, 2012). However, there is no conclusive evidence concerning the effects of these factors on students' withdrawal.

Method

Context and participants

This case study focused on undergraduate students at Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University (NSTRU) in Thailand who had withdrawn from General English (GE) courses. Case study research was employed in this study not only to explore or describe the phenomenon of withdrawal from GE courses, but also to explain the complexities and factors that forced the students to withdraw which may not be captured through experimental or survey research (Zainal, 2007). Therefore, it was decided to adopt a mixed–methods design to answer the research questions about the students' withdrawal that cannot be answered by the quantitative data alone (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Regarding informed consent, the researchers were given official unwritten permission from the five faculty deans and the university registration office to collect data from the students in different programs because this research was conducted based on the actual persistent problems known by the university members. The registration office provided the contact details for the students as they were from different programs and years of study. The faculty deans cooperated with the researchers by contacting the students to respond to the questionnaire. After that, those students were contacted individually to explain the purpose of the study and the way to receive and fill in the survey. The

link was sent via *Facebook, LINE*, and e-mail. Participation in the research was voluntary. The survey link was shared with 137 students, but in the end, only 74 responses from students in five different faculties were received. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old. Table 1 presents the detailed information of the participants. Data were not collected from teachers and administrators because they had only assumptions and no clear ideas about the factors that provoked the students' withdrawal.

		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	23	31.1
	Female	49	66.2
	Other	2	2.7
Year of study	2nd year	26	35.1
	3rd year	38	51.4
	4th year	10	13.5
Faculty	Faculty of Education	6	8.1
	Faculty of Humanities	35	47.3
	Faculty of Management	19	25.7
	Faculty of Science	3	4.1
	Faculty of Technology	11	14.9
Age	20	19	25.7
	21	28	37.8
	22	12	16.2
	23	10	13.5
	24	4	5.4
	25	1	1.4
Parent's income per month	Less than 10.000	23	31.1
	10.000 - 20.000	37	50
	20.000 - 30.000	11	14.9
	30.000 or more	3	4.1

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Instruments

Survey

The questionnaire with 42 items was designed using a 5-point Likert scale with response range (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-agree, and 5-strongly agree) to get reliable findings that would answer the research questions. The Likert scale is widely used in education, sociology, and other fields as it contributes to the advancement of knowledge (Willits et al., 2016). It is used to assess affectual responses through indication of a level of approval or disapproval on a scale of responses on issues that can often be divisive, sensitive, or controversial (Aarons, 2020). It was specifically employed in this study to reach out to students who withdrew from GE courses and find out the factors that provoked their withdrawal. The questionnaire was prepared in sequential steps: first, the questionnaire was adapted from Aldridge and Rowley (2001), Hall et al. (2003), Clague (2014), and Christo and Oyinlade (2015). Second, the questionnaire was piloted with non-target participants and Cronbach's alpha was employed to check the items' reliability and internal consistency. The Cronbach's Alpha was .955, indicating a very high internal consistency among the survey items. Third, the questionnaire was translated into Thai to assist Thai students fully comprehend the meaning of each item. The survey was divided into two unequal sections to answer the research questions. Fourth, the survey was adjusted in a *Google Forms* and finally shared with participants through *Facebook, LINE,* and e-mail.

Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured individual interview was employed to find the factors that provoked students to withdraw from GE courses. It was specifically used in this study as its approach suited the research purpose and gave the participants a chance to articulate their perceptions and expose the factors that particularly instigated

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their withdrawal (Fylan, 2005). It helped in disclosing complicated issues about the students' withdrawal as it enabled reciprocity between the participants and the researchers (Kallio et al., 2016). Its flexible design helped the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the research questions by exploring contradictions in the respondents' accounts (Fylan, 2005). It is a powerful primary tool of data collection as it has the potential to elaborate on a particular topic in-depth and increase the probability of gathering rich data about the phenomenon under study (Kythreotis & Antoniou, 2015).

The participants were asked individually if they were willing to participate in the interviews. Ten students, two from each faculty, volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews for qualitative data. Due to the mandatory measures of social distance during the pandemic, the interviews were conducted with *Google Meet* for 15–20 minutes each session. Table 2 displays the interview questions.

	Predetermined Questions	References
Questions on the students' perception of General English withdrawal		
1	What do you think about General English courses withdrawal?	
2	Do you think studying English is beneficial for you in the future?	
3	Why do you think some students withdraw from General English courses?	
4	Do you like the English class, why and why not?	
Questions on factors that provoked students to withdraw		Akos & Jame, 2020 Aldridge & Rowley, 2001 Boldt et al., 2015 Christo & Oyinlade, 2015 Clague, 2014 Hall et al., 2003 Lobo, 2012
1	Do you have any financial challenges, who supports you while studying?	
2	Were there any problems with General English courses, e.g., the class time?	
3	How many students were there in General English courses?	
4	Did you experience any gap between you and your classmates in English ability?	
5	Do you think the teachers were the reason for your withdrawal?	
6	Were there any issues related to the English course?	
7	Did you have any family problems while studying?	
8	What are the factors that instigated you to withdraw from the General English course?	

Table 2: Examples of semi-structured interview predetermined questions

Data Analysis

Quantitative data

These data were checked, cleaned, and computed using a statistical software. The results of the reliability analysis displayed that all the sub-scales had Cronbach's Alpha higher than .70: Students' perceptions about course withdrawal (α=.839), Personal factors (α=.914), Institutional factors (α=.928), and Social factors (α=.859). Hence, all the sub-scales were included in the data analysis. Afterwards, the study used statistics including mean, standard deviation, percentage and frequency, independent t-test, bivariate correlation, and ANOVA to complete the analysis.

Qualitative data

Qualitative content analysis was utilized "to interpret the contextual meaning of qualitative data through a systematic process of coding and identifying themes and patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). It was used for "making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts, and a practical guide to action" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 108). The researchers followed systematic steps to obtain a broad and condensed description of the phenomenon under study. First, the audio files were transcribed and then sent back to the interviewees for their input to enhance the data validity and accuracy. After receiving the transcripts back from the participants, the researchers began reading the transcripts repeatedly and thoroughly "to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005 p. 1278). While carefully reading the transcripts, the researchers started highlighting the codes that would attempt to answer the research questions. Then the codes were categorized into meaningful clusters. The researchers added titles and selected the themes which effectively contributed to answering the research questions. Finally, definitions for each category were developed to report the findings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

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Results

Factors causing Thai students to withdraw from English courses

To answer the first research question, the quantitative findings revealed that the Thai students withdrew from GE courses due to some factors including their educational background, the teachers' teaching method, and the fear of getting low score or failing the course. They did not agree that social factors were the reasons for their withdrawal.

Statements	*M* / *SD*	Level
1. Personal Factors (**α**=.914)	2.252/0.762	Moderately low
1.1. Financial Aspects	2.0495/0.84702	Moderately low
1.2. Time management	2.1453/0.82865	Moderately low
1.3. Integration in Classroom	2.2252/0.93488	Moderately low
1.4. Educational Background	2.5901/0.97229	Moderate
2. Institutional Factors (**α** = .928)	2.4958/0.77583	Moderately low
2.1. Teacher Aspects	2.7449/0.83953	Moderate
Students fear getting low overall scores or may not pass with particular teachers.	3.57/1.304	High
2.2 Course Aspects	2.2466/0.87829	Moderately low
3. Social factors (**α** = .859)	1.7748/0.66634	Moderately low
3.1. Family Aspects	1.7432/0.72264	Moderately low
3.2. Others	1.8063/0.71727	Moderately low

Table 3: Statements on the factors causing Thai students to withdraw from English courses

Table 3 reveals that the students had a relatively low level of perception about the personal causative factors, but the stated categories under personal factors indicate that, the students regarded their educational background to be a moderately important factor that led them to withdraw from English courses. For the institutional factors, the students considered the teacher to be at a moderate level as a cause of their withdrawal. Students apparently felt that getting low scores or failure in the course was the most influential issues within the teacher aspect. Course aspects were considered to have a moderate level of influence. Regarding the social factors, students disagreed that social factors, e.g., family aspects and others to be the reason to have contributed to their withdrawal from the General English (GE) courses.

Withdrawal Factors	Gender	Across Faculties	Across Financial Backgrounds
	Independent t-test *T*	One-way ANOVA *F*	One-way ANOVA *F*
Personal Factors	1.265	1.229	1.737
Institutional Factors	1.847	1.66	0.396
Social factors	2.903*	1.842	1.772

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4: Overview of the effects of gender, faculty, and financial background on the factors causing Thai students to withdraw from General English (GE) courses.

In the analysis of the effect of gender the student profiles were used. Using an independent t-test, the results revealed that there was no significant difference between genders in terms of personal factors (t=1.27, p=.21) and institutional factors (t=1.85, p=.07). There was, however, a statistically significant difference in social factors (t=2.90, p=.01). Furthermore, the one-way ANOVA findings revealed that there were no significant variations in students' opinions about faculty or financial background in terms of personal, institutional, and social factors (all *p-value*s=ns, as seen in Table 4).

The qualitative findings revealed that the students' withdrawal was caused by three underlying factors: personal, and social. The findings below (translated from the student's native language) present issues related to each factor that significantly caused the students withdrawal. To acquire these the qualitative

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findings were matched with the quantitative results. This analysis revealed that the students withdrew from GE classes for a variety of reasons. One of which was the students' educational backgrounds. Several respondents stated that their limited English proficiency and the inability to learn, understand, and communicate with English lecturers prompted them to withdraw from GE courses:

I like English but my basic knowledge is quite poor. (IX2)

I could not understand what the teacher said and I was afraid I would have to speak in front if the class every time. (IX4)

It was too fast for me and teacher used to speak in English all the time. (IX7)

I withdrew because it was too hard for me to keep up with my classmates in the class. (IX2)

The institutional factor includes issues such as the lecturers and their teaching methods, and the difficulty of the General English (GE) courses which were inciting factors for the students' withdrawal.

Several students withdrew due to the lecturers' disengaging teaching style. The teacher taught from the book, nothing special but he would give a lot of assignments. It was boring because the teacher kept teaching the same piece of conversation repeatedly. (IX1)

I felt bored and tensed when I studied with that teacher. She liked to ask students randomly. I did not like her teaching style. I like supportive teachers, who understand and don't pressure on the students. (IX8)

Others withdrew because they were unhappy with lecturers' grading and attitudes.

I withdrew because teacher did not accept my homework and my friends told me my score was very low. (IX10)

She assigned us to do a video clip for 30 points but we just got 6 to 8, none reached 15. One day I had to stay with my mom in the hospital, I texted the teacher asking to submit assignment late, but she did not accept". (IX10)

Students' withdrawal was also caused by their concerns about getting low grades from specific lecturers, which would have had an impact on their grade point averages.

After I finished two quizzes and my mid-term my score was very low so I decided to withdraw. (IX2)

From my major everybody withdrew because they were afraid to fail. Teachers should be aware that giving 'E' grade would affect the grades of other subjects. In the future it would be difficult to find a job if the grades were not good. My advisor told me to withdraw if I got low grades in some subjects because it would affect my grade point average. (IX10)

Additionally, as a number of interviewees indicated, one of the causes that drove some students to withdraw from GE classes were the lecturers' negative and unsupportive feedback when students requested or attempted to utilize the language.

I like English but when I asked the teacher that I did not understand the homework she said you didn't listen to me. (IX6)

She used to scold my friends to study harder by saying something quite harsh to us. (IX2)

She was unfriendly and fierce, so I did not dare to ask her for help. (IX3)

Teachers' strict class regulations were also considered to have contributed to the students' withdrawal.

The teachers' personality was strict and she looked cruel. If any student would come or submit assignment late, she would deduct points. (IX10)

I could remember food and phone were forbidden in class. (IX3).

When students would go to the toilet and stay long the teacher would scold them. (IX1)

The teachers told us that she would give a zero to those who did not have boo. (IX5)

In addition, the findings showed that some students withdrew from GE because they were difficult and required a lot of online (*MyELT*) and offline work.

The book was difficult and had a lot of content. (IX9)

I withdrew from the course because teacher said any student who did not do 'MyELT' would automatically get an 'I' grade. (IX3)

The teacher gave a lot of homework and I had work to do with my major. (IX7)

Owing to additional factors such as high-class sizes and financial hardship, the qualitative findings indicated that several students withdrew from GE courses because they needed to work part-time during class hours to fund their education.

I withdrew because I was absent in many classes as I had a part-time job. (IX4)

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My parents used to give me money, but it was not enough because my younger brother was studying too, so, I had to get a job. (IX9)

I paid my tuition fee by getting loan from the Students Loan Fund. (IX9)

In my work, I deliver goods in the night shift because I have to study in the morning. Usually, I must deliver orders to other provinces which makes it difficult for me to wake up and attend the English class. (IX9)

The students' withdrawal was often attributed to class size and the teachers' inability to bridge the gap among the students' different levels. It negatively affected students' understanding and thus compelled them to withdraw.

The huge number of students is another issue that made me withdraw. (IX10)

I decided to withdraw because there were more than 100 students. Too many students and they were from different majors and years of study. It's quite chaotic. There were not enough tables and chairs. We had to bring them from other rooms. (IX5)

Interactions of the identified factors

To answer the second research question, the quantitative findings indicated that there were interactions between the personal factors, the institutional factors, and social factors that all led to the students' withdrawal from the GE course.

	Personal Factors	Institutional Factors	Social factors
Personal Factors	1	.713**	.626**
Institutional Factors	.713**	1	.561**
Social factors	.626**	.561**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5: Factor interactions

Personal factors were positively correlated with institutional factors (r=.71, p<.001) and social factors (r=.63, p< 001). Institutional factors were also positively correlated with social factors (r=.56, p<.001). These results indicate that the three factors had substantial influence in students' decisions to withdraw from English courses. In other words, when one factor was engaged, the other two factors could intensify, leading to a decision to withdraw from an English course.

Discussion

This study investigated students' affective reasoning behind their withdrawal from English courses and the circumstances that led to their course withdrawal decisions. The causative findings revealed that the students' withdrawal from General English courses was caused by three main factors and some other related issues. One critical factor identified in this study was the students' educational background, specifically limited English proficiency. This factor was found to be a significant cause of their withdrawal from the course, as they struggled to keep up with their peers. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Kuama & Intharaksa (2016), who also linked the students' withdrawal to their limited English proficiency. The students' dissimilar English proficiency level created a gap that the teachers' failed to bridge with their traditional teaching strategies (Maddix et al., 2012). At Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University (NSTRU), the gap was caused by mixing students from different faculties and majors which resulted in heterogeneous English classes in terms of English proficiency level. Therefore, students with high English proficiency had good attitudes and continued their studies, whilst students with low English proficiency withdrew as they felt they were being ignored by the teachers. They developed what Evans and Tragant (2020) found as "negative attitudes toward the language, teacher, materials, and group members" (p. 3). Hall et al. (2003) comparably accounted for the students' withdrawal as they could not study, understand and communicate with the English teachers. This resulted in either changing the course or discontinuing their study (Mapou, 2008).

Another cause of withdrawl was the institutional. The findings exposed that the students withdraw due to the teachers' disengaging teaching style. Hall et al. (2003) comparably found that students' withdrawal from courses would likely be caused by the teachers' traditional teaching strategies and disengaging classroom environment. In English language classroom, Hadar and Brody (2016) suggested that teachers should include supportive games and engaging teaching activities in order to promote students' sense of attachment

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and enhance their retention. Jessup-Anger (2011) also viewed that students' retention can be improved by adopting modern teaching approaches (active learning and students'-centered approach) and connecting their learning to their real lives. Besides, the students' dissatisfaction with the teachers' attitudes and style of grading was found to be a causative factor of their withdrawal. In line with this finding, Christo and Oyinlade (2015) and Hall et al. (2003) reported that the students' withdrawal was caused by their perceptual dissatisfaction about the teachers which included teachers, teaching approaches, grading style, attitudes and/or behavior towards the students. To improve students' retention, Dunwoody and Frank (1995) and Crosling et al. (2008) suggested that teachers should be helpful and supportive, particularly in their feedback.

In addition, the findings revealed that teachers' discouraging, and unsupportive feedback was one of the reasons for the students' withdrawal. Like any other EFL learners, Thai students lack language exposure and hence need supportive feedback when they attempt to use the language. Richardson (2011) agreed that students who received assistance and sympathy from their teachers were more likely to continue their studies. In contrast, when students' queries were ignored and/or provided with negative feedback, they developed what Osterman (2010) called "disengagement and more aggressive behavior directed at the teacher and peers" (p. 248). This lack of attention and negative responses by the teacher contributed effectively to the students' withdrawal.

The findings also uncovered that some students withdrew from GE courses due to their fear of getting low grades which would affect their grade point average. They perceived withdrawal as a strategy for success instead of failing or getting low grades. Akos and Jame (2020) found out that the students' withdrawal was beneficial, particularly when their performance was poor and they were convinced they would fail. In our context, students were allowed to withdraw from GE courses due to the flexibility in the registration system. In other words, the students could withdraw and re-register in any course without an impact on their GPA (Boldt et al., 2017). For Thai students, their GPA is important as it determines their eligibility for scholarships, financial aid, and job vacancies. Additionally, students' withdrawal was attributed to teachers' strict classroom rules. The rules included the percentage of attendance, assignment submission, and class participation. Hall et al., (2003) similarly found that the students withdrew from courses due to their low attendance. Lecturers at NSTRU emphasized the necessity of students' attendance as it directly affected their performance and achievement. Bevitt et al., (2010) upheld the same stance as they believed that there was an interrelationship between students' attendance and academic performance. Therefore, at NSTRU students must get more than 70% of the total attendance to be able to take the final exams.

Moreover, the difficulty of the course was found to be a factor in students' withdrawal. They withdrew as they found GE courses difficult and required a lot of online and offline work. They justify their withdrawal by saying that these GE courses would affect their performance in courses in their major. In the same way, Lobo (2012) accounted for the students' withdrawal by explaining that they withdrew due to their concern about grades in other subjects. Woods et al. (2019) similarly found that concern about getting unsatisfactory grades was the primary reason why students chose to withdraw. Another issue related to the GE course was scheduling two courses at the same time. In such cases, they prioritize their major subjects for the GE courses. The students also were impelled to withdraw from the GE courses if they registered in courses with more than 21 credits per semester.

Besides, the students' withdrawal was also attributed to the challenge of large classes as it affected their learning and educational achievement. Mixing students with different English proficiency levels from different majors created a gap that the teachers failed to bridge with their traditional teaching strategies (Hall et al., 2003). Yelkpieri (2021) similarly found that the students opted to withdraw from large classes as it negatively affected the quality of learning, disturbed students' assessment process, and reduced teachers' efforts to pay specific attention to the low-level students.

The findings of the present reseacg also suggest that students' withdrawal from GE courses could be caused by their financial difficulty. Students' socioeconomic background played a critical role in their withdrawal. Many studies (Crosling et al., 2008; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Yorke & Longden, 2008) also found that students who came from low-income families were most likely to withdraw as they needed to find outside sources of income such as part-time jobs to support their education. Once their work became the only source of income, they could not turn assignments in on time and/or skip some classes, especially those who worked the night shift. Other studies (Haverila et al., 2020; Murphy & Button, 2019) also found that students withdraw from courses because they could not afford a required textbook required or pay the tuition fee.

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The second research question was related to the circumstances that led up to the withdrawl. Akos and Jame (2020) pointed out that, course withdrawal is a complicated process which normally involves interactions between some factors including teacher, family, institution, course material and other personal or familial issues. The findings of this study showed that personal factors were positively correlated with institutional factors and institutional factors were also positively correlated with social factors. These three factors influenced the students' decisions to withdraw from GE courses. However, Scoggin and Styron (2006) reported that college students' withdrawal in their context was due to the interactions between gender and race factors. They further elaborated that women cited personal reasons, while men often cited work as a factor for their withdrawal. Besides, African-American students frequently mentioned financial factors as the reason for their withdrawal. Other studies found the students' withdrawal was caused by some interactions such as financial obligations and gender reasons (Davies & Elias, 2003), or personal and home factors (Meeuwisse et al., 2010).

Implications

The implications of this study accentuated the necessity to enhance student retention and mitigate the heterogeneity and magnitude of General English (GE) classes, elements that are likely the causes of student attrition. The primary objective of this investigation was to unravel the catalysts inciting student withdrawal from GE courses. Prior research corroborated that course withdrawal engendered persistent obstacles, detrimentally impacting both students' educational journeys and the university's admission strategies (Boldt et al., 2017; Matheson et al., 2018; Smith, 2018). From a student's perspective, it can cause delays in their graduation and compromise their academic success. Meanwhile, from an institutional viewpoint, student withdrawal significantly impairs the university's ability to admit new students and can lead to a scholastic chasm that conventional pedagogical approaches fail to bridge (Akos & Jame 2020).

Therefore, dissecting the underlying triggers and addressing this issue can open opportunities for incoming students and reduce the size and diversity of GE classes. In light of these revelations, it is recommended that educators reassess their classroom policies along with their strategies for providing feedback and assessing student tasks and learning outcomes. This recommendation is intended to guide administrators and curriculum designers in recalibrating their syllabi and evaluation methodologies in a manner that bolsters student retention and fosters a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore affective reasoning and the circumstances behind the students' withdrawal from GE courses. The findings of the study were enlightening as they dispelled several assumptions that administrators and teachers had about the Thai students' withdrawal from GE courses. For instance, administrators and teachers usually speculated that the students withdraw from GE courses due to their negative attitudes towards English. In contrast, the quantitative and qualitative analyses in the present study revealed that the Thai students had a positive perception of English because they believed English would increase their chances of getting better jobs in the future.

Overall, the findings of the present study concluded that the students' withdrawal from GE courses was caused by three factors: the students limited English proficiency, the teachers' disengaging teaching and grading strategies, and the students' financial difficulties. These findings shed light on the controversy of the teachers' monolingual teaching approach and the university's educational policy that emphasizes English medium of instruction (EMI). Implementing EMI creates a challenge for the students who came from remote high schools where their first language is always used even in English classes. Therefore, most of them find it difficult to understand and communicate in English with their foreign or Thai English teachers due to their limited English proficiency. As a consequence, the study findings support the adoption of the bilingual teaching approach. Another misconception about students' withdrawal is that the students register in GE courses and then withdraw as they have exceeded the number of credits that they are allowed to take in every semester. Conversely, the findings suggested that the students withdrew due to teachers' disengaging teaching and grading strategies, teachers' unconstructive feedback, and strict class regulations. To account for this finding, some teachers adapt a teacher-centered approach due to the large class size, the time constraints, and the commercial teaching and learning materials used in the classroom. Regarding unconstructive feedback, the study findings inform administrators that some teachers need training to improve their pedagogical practices especially in issues like feedback and assessment.

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Additionally, some students also asserted that they withdrew due to their fear of failing or receiving lower grades which could negatively affect their grade point average. In fact, some students withdraw as they were concerned about their future job possibilities in relation to their GPA. Besides, most of the teachers assumed that the students withdraw due to their low attendance. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the students withdraw more often due to their financial difficulties. The qualitative data indicate that, some students may have low attendance especially in late afternoon classes because they skip classes to work at part time jobs to pay the tuition fees and support their education. The data for this study were exclusively collected from the students' perspectives. Therefore, a follow-up study comparing both student and teacher perspectives is recommended to better understand the implications of this study's findings.

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