



## Thai Students' Experiences of Learning English With a Non-Thai Teacher: a Phenomenological Study

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### ABSTRACT

This study looks into Thai students' experiences of learning English with non-Thai teachers in primary and secondary schools in Thailand. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study seeks to understand how students perceive, feel, and interpret their English learning experiences in communication-focused classrooms led by non-Thai teachers. The primary data source consisted of five interview participants aged 9-17, while a preliminary questionnaire administered to 21 students was used solely for contextual and screening. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted in English, each lasting around ten minutes. This was supported by a preliminary questionnaire given to a larger group of students for additional context. The researchers analyzed the data manually, following the steps set by Moustakas, which include bracketing, horizontalization, thematic clustering, and essence synthesis, while also drawing on van Manen's interpretations. The findings highlight key themes regarding students' emotional experiences, including enjoyment, excitement, fear of making mistakes, and shyness during speaking activities. While students typically reported feeling more motivated and comfortable when learning with non-Thai teachers, they also faced significant challenges, like anxiety and fear of judgment from their peers in speaking-centered classrooms. This study adds to the limited research on primary and secondary EFL learners' experiences with non-Thai teachers in Thailand and emphasizes the significance of emotional factors in English language teaching settings.

### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received

20 February 2026

Revised

08 March 2026

Accepted

18 March 2026

### Key Word

*Phenomenological Study, Thai Students, Non-Thai Teachers, English Language Learning, Students' Lived Experiences, Affective Factors*

### How to cite

<https://pusdikra-publishing.com/index.php/josr>



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## INTRODUCTION

English Language Teaching (ELT) has become a central component of educational systems worldwide, particularly in contexts where English is learned as a foreign language. In the current global landscape, English is no longer viewed merely as an academic subject, but as a vital tool for international communication, academic mobility, and participation in the global

economy (Henny, 2025). Educational frameworks across Asia and other non-English-speaking regions increasingly emphasize communicative competence, positioning English proficiency as essential for learners' future academic and professional engagement (Sun, 2024). Consequently, contemporary ELT approaches prioritize meaningful interaction, authentic language use, and learner engagement, recognizing that successful language learning extends beyond linguistic mastery to include social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of communication (Octaberlina, 2024).

Alongside this pedagogical shift, Thailand is case in point. Previous research in second language acquisition (SLA) and ELT has revealed that learners' affective experiences play a crucial role in shaping language learning outcomes. A substantial body of studies has examined variables such as foreign language anxiety, enjoyment, motivation, and willingness to communicate, demonstrating that emotional factors strongly influence learners' participation and performance in EFL classrooms (Dewaele, 2023). However, much of this research has relied on quantitative or survey-based designs and has predominantly focused on higher education contexts (Marry, 2024). Globally, limited attention has been given to how young learners at the primary and secondary levels subjectively experience and interpret their emotions during English learning through qualitative or phenomenological inquiry (Kuzairi, 2025). Moreover, studies involving non-local or non-native teachers often emphasize teaching effectiveness or student perceptions, leaving learners' lived emotional experiences in cross-cultural classrooms underexplored (Lemana, 2025).

This gap is particularly evident in the Thai EFL context, where English is primarily learned within formal school settings and learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Existing research in Thailand has largely concentrated on higher education students, teacher beliefs, and institutional practices, while studies addressing primary and secondary learners' emotional engagement remain scarce (Harven, 2023). Although the presence of non-Thai teachers has become increasingly common in Thai schools, research has seldom explored how young learners emotionally experience English learning with non-Thai instructors (Putri, 2020). Studies that do address emotions in Thai EFL classrooms often treat affective variables such as anxiety or motivation as measurable constructs, rather than exploring how learners themselves experience and make meaning of these emotions in real classroom interactions (Shaden, 2025).

To address this gap, the present study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Thai primary

and secondary school students learning English with non-Thai teachers in Thailand. Phenomenology is particularly suitable for examining subjective experiences and emotional meaning-making processes that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods (Moustakas, 2023). Using semi-structured interviews, this study focuses on how students experience and interpret their emotional engagement in communication-oriented English classrooms, with particular attention to feelings of enjoyment, excitement, fear, and shyness. By foregrounding students' voices, the phenomenological lens enables an in-depth understanding of how emotions are constructed and negotiated through classroom interaction in cross-cultural ELT contexts (Manen, 2017).

This study contributes to the field of English Language Teaching in several important ways. Theoretically, it extends affective perspectives in second language acquisition by adopting a phenomenological focus on learners' lived emotional experiences rather than treating emotions as isolated variables (Dewaele, 2023). Empirically, it provides insight into Thai primary and secondary EFL learners, a population that remains underrepresented in existing ELT research (Lemana, 2025). Pedagogically, the findings offer implications for non-Thai teachers and ELT practitioners by highlighting the importance of emotionally responsive teaching practices in fostering enjoyment and reducing anxiety in cross-cultural classrooms (Shaden, 2025). By integrating phenomenology, affective factors, and cross-cultural ELT, this study offers a novel and holistic perspective on English language learning in the Thai educational context.

Beyond addressing the identified research gap, this study is conducted in response to the increasing presence of non-Thai teachers in Thai classrooms, which creates unique cross-cultural learning environments that may shape students' emotional experiences in complex ways. While English instruction continues to evolve toward communicative and interaction-based approaches, there remains limited understanding of how these pedagogical practices are emotionally received by young learners, particularly when mediated by teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Without such understanding, teaching practices risk overlooking the emotional dimensions that significantly influence students' willingness to participate and communicate. Therefore, this study is essential to uncover how students navigate their feelings in these contexts, ensuring that English language teaching not only promotes linguistic competence but also supports learners' emotional well-being and engagement in the classroom.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore Thai students' lived emotional experiences in English classes taught by a non-Thai teacher. Phenomenology was selected because the focus of this inquiry is not to measure affective variables statistically, but to understand how learners subjectively experience and interpret emotions such as anxiety, enjoyment, shyness, and motivation in authentic classroom interaction (Manen, 2017). Methodologically, the study primarily adopted a transcendental phenomenological orientation as articulated by (Moustakas, 2023), emphasizing bracketing (*epoché*), horizontalization, and essence synthesis, while also drawing on interpretive insights from van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology to situate lived experiences within pedagogical and sociocultural contexts (Manen, 2017). This dual orientation is consistent with contemporary phenomenological applications in ELT research (Bonyadi A. , 2023).

The research was conducted in primary and secondary school settings in Thailand where English instruction is predominantly delivered by non-Thai teachers. This context represents a meaningful English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment in which classroom interaction becomes the primary site of language exposure and communicative practice (Özge, 2022). Sociocultural norms such as respect for authority, avoidance of public error, and learner reticence shape students' participation patterns and emotional engagement (Vincent, 2021). When these norms intersect with communicative teaching approaches often associated with non-Thai teachers (Putri, 2020), students may experience complex affective responses, making the setting particularly appropriate for phenomenological inquiry (Bonyadi A. , 2023).

The population consisted of primary and secondary students who had direct experience learning English with non-Thai teachers. Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich cases capable of providing detailed descriptions of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). A preliminary questionnaire was administered to 21 students to contextualize classroom experiences and identify potential participants. From this group, five Thai students aged 9–17 were selected as interview participants based on their sustained exposure to English classes taught by non-Thai teachers and their willingness to articulate their experiences. This sampling strategy aligns with phenomenological principles that prioritize depth over breadth and seek participants who have directly encountered the phenomenon under investigation (Rizka, 2024).

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 15 open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of students'

emotional experiences, perceptions of classroom interaction, and interpretations of learning with non-Thai teachers. The questions were informed by theoretical perspectives on foreign language anxiety (Shaden, 2025), affective filter theory, foreign language enjoyment (Dewaele, 2023), and willingness to communicate (Marry, 2024). Semi-structured interviews are widely recommended in phenomenological research because they allow participants to describe lived experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to probe emerging meanings (Bonyadi A. , 2023). The interview protocol was pilot-tested to ensure clarity and age appropriateness. Interviews were conducted in English, consistent with the language of instruction in participants' classrooms, lasted approximately ten minutes each, and were audio-recorded with consent. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face, while others were conducted via Zoom to accommodate scheduling needs.

Data collection procedures followed ethical and methodological rigor appropriate for qualitative inquiry. After obtaining informed consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' original expressions. To enhance credibility and reliability, the researcher engaged in reflexive bracketing to consciously set aside prior assumptions regarding non-Thai teachers and emotional engagement (Moustakas, 2023). Verbatim transcription, careful documentation of analytic decisions, and alignment between research questions and thematic development contributed to methodological transparency. Although phenomenological research does not rely on statistical reliability in a quantitative sense, trustworthiness was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, iterative reading, and systematic theme validation (Manen, 2017).

Data analysis followed the phenomenological procedures outlined by Moustakas (2023). First, interview transcripts were read multiple times to obtain a holistic sense of participants' experiences. Second, horizontalization was conducted by identifying significant statements related to emotional engagement and classroom interaction, treating each statement with equal value. Third, meaning units were clustered into thematic categories reflecting shared aspects of lived experience, such as enjoyment, anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and motivation. Fourth, textural descriptions were developed to portray what participants experienced, followed by structural descriptions explaining how those experiences occurred within the sociocultural and pedagogical context. Finally, an essence synthesis was constructed to articulate the fundamental structure of Thai students' lived emotional experiences in ELT classrooms with non-Thai teachers. This analytic framework is consistent with

recent phenomenological research in language education (Bonyadi A. , 2023) (Rizka, 2024).

Because this study is qualitative and exploratory, no statistical tests were employed. The purpose was not hypothesis testing but in-depth understanding of subjective meaning-making processes. Nevertheless, the preliminary questionnaire provided contextual descriptive support and assisted in participant selection. The methodological scope of the study is limited by the small sample size and the focus on a specific school context; therefore, findings are not intended for statistical generalization but for analytical and theoretical transferability to similar EFL contexts (Creswell, 2007). Despite these limitations, the detailed procedural description and systematic analytic framework enable methodological transparency and potential replication in comparable educational settings.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore Thai primary and secondary students' lived emotional experiences when learning English with a non-Thai teacher. The findings reveal that students' experiences were characterized by four interrelated affective themes: enjoyment and excitement, fear of making mistakes, shyness during speaking activities, and increased motivation toward English learning. These themes reflect both positive and challenging emotional dimensions that coexist within communicative, cross-cultural classroom contexts.

### 1. Enjoyment and Excitement

Most participants expressed positive emotions, particularly enjoyment and excitement during English classes. These feelings were mainly associated with interactive and communicative activities conducted by the teacher. Several students described the class atmosphere as engaging and different from their usual learning experience. For example, one participant stated, *"I feel happy because the class is fun and we can play games while learning English."* Another student mentioned, *"It is exciting because the teacher asks us to speak and do activities, not only listen."*

These responses indicate that students experienced enjoyment when they were actively involved in classroom interaction rather than passively receiving instruction. The expressions "fun," "happy," and "exciting" appeared repeatedly across the interview data, suggesting that positive emotional engagement was a dominant experience.

2. Fear of Making Mistakes

Despite the positive experiences, many students also reported feeling afraid of making mistakes, especially when speaking English in front of others. One participant explained, *“I am afraid to speak because I think my English is wrong.”* Another student stated, *“Sometimes I feel nervous because my friends will laugh if I say something wrong.”* These responses show that fear was closely related to students’ concern about accuracy and peer judgment. The feeling of fear often emerged during activities that required public speaking, particularly in whole-class situations.

3. Shyness During Speaking Activities

Shyness was another significant emotional experience reported by participants. This feeling was often connected to students’ hesitation to speak English, even when they understood the material. For instance, one student said, *“I want to speak, but I feel shy with my friend.”* Another participant mentioned, *“I feel shy because I am not confident with my pronunciation.”* The data suggest that shyness was not necessarily caused by a lack of knowledge, but rather by low self-confidence and discomfort in speaking publicly. Some students preferred to remain silent or wait for others to speak first.

4. Increased Motivation Toward English Learning

In addition to emotional challenges, several participants reported increased motivation to learn English when interacting with a non-Thai teacher. One student expressed, *“I want to learn English more because I can talk directly with the teacher.”* Another participant stated, *“It makes me more interested because the teacher uses English every time.”* These responses indicate that students perceived the learning experience as more meaningful and authentic, which encouraged them to engage more actively in learning English.

**Table 1.**  
**Thematic Structure of Thai Students’ Lived Emotional Experiences**  
**in ELT with a Non-Thai Teacher**

Major Theme	Core Meaning	Illustrative Experience (Condensed from Participants’ Narratives)	Theoretical Connection
Enjoyment and Excitement	Students experience English classes as	Lessons described as “fun,” “active,” and different from regular	Foreign Language Enjoyment (Dewaele, 2023); Communicative

Major Theme	Core Meaning	Illustrative Experience (Condensed from Participants' Narratives)	Theoretical Connection
	engaging, interactive, and emotionally stimulating	classes; increased participation during speaking activities	ELT (Lei, 2024)
Fear of Making Mistakes	Anxiety emerges from fear of negative peer evaluation during oral performance	Hesitation to speak in front of classmates; concern about being laughed at or corrected publicly	Foreign Language Anxiety (Horwitz, 1986); Affective Filter (Krashen, 1982)
Shyness in Public Interaction	Emotional restraint shaped by sociocultural norms and classroom dynamics	Reluctance to volunteer answers; preference for small-group speaking	Thai classroom reticence (Vincent, 2021); Cross-cultural interaction (Putri, 2020)
Increased Motivation	Authentic exposure to English enhances perceived relevance and effort	Students report stronger desire to improve speaking ability after interacting with non-Thai teacher	Willingness to Communicate (MacIntyre, 2023); Teacher perception studies (Lemana, 2025)

This table summarizes the essential thematic structure derived from phenomenological analysis, illustrating the interconnected emotional dimensions experienced by Thai primary and secondary students in communicative English classrooms led by a non-Thai teacher.

### Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Thai students' emotional experiences in learning English with a non-Thai teacher are inherently complex, involving the simultaneous presence of both positive and negative affective states. Rather than functioning as isolated variables, these emotions are dynamically interconnected and shaped by classroom interaction as well as sociocultural context. This indicates that affective engagement in language learning should be understood as a holistic and context-dependent process.

First, the prominence of enjoyment and excitement among participants reflects what has been conceptualized as Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), defined as positive emotions emerging from engaging, meaningful, and socially interactive learning experiences (Dewaele, 2023). In the present study, enjoyment was not merely expressed as a general feeling of happiness, but was reflected in students' active participation, their willingness to speak, and their perception of classroom activities as "fun" and "different." This suggests that enjoyment in this context is socially constructed through interaction and engagement rather than being an individual emotional state alone. These findings support previous research indicating that FLE tends to emerge in environments where learners feel both challenged and supported (Dewaele, 2023). Furthermore, the results extend prior studies by demonstrating that the novelty of communicative teaching practices, often introduced by non-Thai teachers, may play a significant role in fostering such positive emotional experiences.

However, despite the presence of enjoyment, the findings also reveal that fear of making mistakes remains a significant emotional barrier. This fear was primarily associated with concerns about negative peer evaluation and linguistic inaccuracy. Such experiences align with the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety, which refers to feelings of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts (Dewaele, 2023). From the perspective of Affective Filter Hypothesis, such negative emotions may raise the affective filter, thereby limiting learners' ability to process language input and reducing opportunities for acquisition (Mogesse, 2025). In this study, fear was particularly evident during speaking activities, suggesting that communicative tasks, while beneficial, may also heighten emotional vulnerability. This finding extends existing literature by showing that anxiety does not necessarily diminish in interactive classrooms; instead, it coexists with enjoyment, highlighting the need for emotionally supportive teaching strategies alongside communicative approaches (Bonyadi A. , 2023).

Furthermore, the emergence of shyness as a recurring theme indicates that students' emotional experiences are deeply embedded in sociocultural norms. The data suggest that students' reluctance to speak is not solely due to linguistic limitations but is strongly influenced by concerns about maintaining social harmony and avoiding public embarrassment. In this sense, shyness can be understood as a culturally mediated emotional response rather than merely an individual personality trait. This finding is consistent with sociocultural perspectives that emphasize the role of cultural values in shaping classroom behavior, particularly in contexts where preserving face and avoiding mistakes

in public are highly valued (Vincent, 2021). The presence of a non-Thai teacher may intensify this dynamic, as students are required to adjust to more direct and communicative interaction styles (Putri, 2020). However, the findings also indicate that sustained exposure to such environments can gradually reduce shyness and foster confidence, suggesting that emotional adaptation develops over time through repeated interaction.

In terms of motivation, the findings indicate that interaction with a non-Thai teacher can enhance students' willingness to engage in English learning. This aligns with perspectives on language learning motivation that emphasize the importance of meaningful communication and authentic language use (Dewaele, 2023). In this study, motivation was reflected in students' increased interest in participating, their desire to communicate directly with the teacher, and their perception of English as a useful tool rather than merely a school subject. This suggests that motivation is not only internally driven but is also shaped by contextual factors such as teaching approach and classroom environment. While previous studies have highlighted the role of exposure to diverse linguistic input in enhancing motivation, the present findings extend this understanding by showing that the perceived authenticity of interaction plays a crucial role in sustaining learners' engagement.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the growing body of research that challenges the traditional separation of affective variables in second language acquisition. While many previous studies have examined enjoyment, anxiety, and motivation as independent constructs, this study demonstrates that these emotions are experienced simultaneously and interactively within real classroom settings (Mogesse, 2025). By adopting a phenomenological perspective, this study extends existing literature by illustrating how learners actively interpret and negotiate their emotional experiences in situ. This provides a more nuanced and holistic understanding of affective engagement, particularly in cross-cultural EFL classrooms involving non-local teachers.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that effective English language teaching requires not only the implementation of communicative approaches but also careful attention to students' emotional experiences. While interactive activities may enhance enjoyment and motivation, they may simultaneously increase anxiety if not appropriately scaffolded. Therefore, teachers should adopt emotionally responsive strategies, such as gradual participation, supportive feedback, and small-group interaction, to reduce fear of negative evaluation. For non-Thai teachers, sensitivity to local cultural norms related to classroom participation and error correction is essential in fostering a balanced and emotionally supportive learning environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that Thai students' experiences of learning English with a non-Thai teacher are emotionally complex, shaped by the intersection of excitement, anxiety, shyness, and growing motivation within a cross-cultural classroom context. Rather than positioning the non-Thai teacher as either advantageous or problematic, the findings reveal a dynamic emotional landscape in which initial uncertainty gradually coexists with increased engagement and confidence. These emotional dimensions do not operate in isolation but form a layered experience that influences how students participate, respond, and construct meaning in English classrooms.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the ongoing discourse on cross-cultural English instruction by foregrounding students' lived experiences rather than institutional assumptions about teacher identity. Consistent with prior discussions in ELT scholarship regarding non-native English-speaking teachers and classroom legitimacy, the findings suggest that effectiveness is mediated not only by linguistic competence but also by relational interaction and emotional negotiation in the classroom. By illuminating how students interpret and adapt to a non-Thai teacher's presence, this study advances understanding of cross-cultural pedagogy from the learner's perspective and underscores the importance of emotional awareness in English instruction.

Although limited to one educational context and a specific group of participants, the study offers a grounded account that may inform future qualitative inquiries into learner experience in multicultural settings. Further research involving diverse school environments or comparative contexts may deepen understanding of how emotional responses evolve across different cultural and instructional conditions.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The author sincerely acknowledges the participating schools in Thailand for granting permission and institutional support for this study. Deep appreciation is extended to the students who willingly shared their lived experiences, which formed the foundation of this research. The author is also grateful to her academic supervisors for their insightful guidance and constructive feedback throughout the research process.

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