VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY-HANOI

**UNIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

**FACULTY OF POST-GRADUATE STUDIES**

**NGUYỄN THỊ THẮNG**

**NON-MAJOR EFL LEARNERS’ ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE LEARNING IN A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH.**

**(Nghiên cứu trần thuật về sự tham kết trong việc học trực tuyến của sinh viên không chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học ở Việt nam)**

**Major: English Language Teaching Methodology**

**Code: 9140231.01**

**SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS**

**HA NOI, 2025**

The study was conducted at

**University of Languages and International Studies, VNU**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Supervisors** | **:** | **1. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Le Van Canh**  **2. Dr. Vu Thi Thanh Nha** |
|  |  |  |

Reviewer 1: ……………………………………………

Reviewer 2: ……………………………………………

Reviewer 3: ……………………………………………

Luận án sẽ được bảo vệ trước Hội đồng chấm luận án tiến sĩ họp tại:

Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội

vào hồi giờ ngày tháng năm 2025

**Có thể tìm hiểu luận án tại:**

Thư viện Quốc gia Việt Nam

Trung tâm Thông tin - Thư viện, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

* 1. Rationale of the study

Engagement ensures meaningful learning through active involvement in both classroom and school activities. Many language teaching experts would concur that achieving proficiency in communicative language skills cannot happen without significant participation in communicative practice. This necessitates the learners' enthusiastic engagement: students must step out of their comfort zones and actively participate in what is often a challenging and stressful experience. However, engagement has been under-researched in the field of L2 learning and teaching, particularly learner engagement in online learning during emergency remote teaching (ERT) as a response to the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. This gap inspired me to conduct research on this concept, particularly in the context of urgent shift of English Language Teaching (ELT) to online during the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam.

* 1. Statement of the problem

Methodologically, most of the studies on learner engagement employed methods such as survey questionnaires, observations and interviews. In addition to the inherent limitations of these methods in investigating learner engagement, there are other problems with using these methods in exploring learner engagement in online EFL learning during emergency remote teaching during the time of social distancing and lockout due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In such a context, narrative inquiry – a method in which the researcher uses people’s life stories as research data, a tool for data analysis or presentation of results was adopted in this study. This research approach, I believe, is more appropriate to the objectives of this study, which is aimed to gain insights into learners’ experience in learning English as a compulsory subject online during emergency remote teaching.

* 1. Aims and objectives

The study was conducted to achieve the following specific aims:

+ To investigate the level of engagement as a multi-faceted and context-dependent construct among students in online learning in an EFL online learning course in a university in Vietnam.

+ To explore in depth the underlying factors that affect EFL non-major students in virtual environment in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

+ To recommend implications for EFL online teaching and learning in the context of higher education in Vietnam where English is taught as a non-major subject.

* 1. Research questions

1. How were the students behaviourally, cognitively, and affectively engaged in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic as indicated in their narratives?
2. What are the underlying factors that shape the students’ behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement as demonstrated in their narratives?
   1. Scope of the study

The focus of this study is learner engagement, which is theoretically framed in three dimensions of behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement, in compulsory online learning and how their engagement was shaped by both personal and contextual factors through their narratives. According to Bakhuizen and Wette (2008), narratives are stories that participants tell in their own voices to make sense of their experiences. Therefore, narratives are the window through which the researcher gains an understanding of the participants’ subjective experiences. The study was carried out when there was a brokeout of Covid-19 pandemic, which led to many changes in EFL learning teaching. The main focus of the researh was on investigating engagement level among non-major EFL students in a Vietnamese university. Therefore, the thesis does not address the outcomes of student engagement in online learning. Additionally, examining the interrelation among dimensions of engagement is beyond the scope of this study. Consequently, the research cannot fully capture the complexity and dynamic nature of engagement.

1.6. Significance of the study

This study contributes to the knowledge of online engagement among non-major EFL learners in Vietnam's higher education in several key areas.

Firstly, it contributes to the understanding of the context-dependent nature of engagement in the context of ELT/EFL in online learning. By employing narratives, the research sheds light on this emerging field and aims to expand current knowledge in the area.

As an exploratory qualitative study, this research provides valuable insights into learner engagement in online learning, particularly relevant for EFL teachers navigating virtual environments. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of engagement among non-major EFL students in Vietnam, thereby enriching ELT/EFL engagement theory in online learning and guiding future research endeavors.

1.7. Research methodology

The study was conducted in a Vietnamese university where English is a minor and compulsory subject. The study focused on exploring engagement as a multi-dimensional and context-dependent construct and underlying factors that shape students’ engagement in this specific context. The research method employed in the research is Narrative Inquiry. The tool for collecting qualitative data is a written narrative frame which is a written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths. It is structured as a story in a skeletal form. The aim is for respondents to produce a coherent story by filling in the spaces according to their own experiences and their reflections on these. Thematic analysis with combination of deductive and inductive coding is chosen as a data analysis tool in the study to find out the answer to the research questions. In addition, follow-up interviews were utilized as member-checking to validate the in-depth meanings of their experiences, ensure that the interpretation of these meanings was correctly interpreted and applied by the researcher, and provide opportunities for the participants to expand on their responses. Despite its limitation as exploratory qualitative research, the study contributes significantly to the knowledge of online engagement among non-major EFL learners in Vietnam's higher education.

1.8. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is systematically organized into six chapters, including Chapter 1 (Introduction), Chapter 2 (Literature Review), Chapter 3 (Research Methodology), Chapter 4 (The Findings), Chapter 5 (Discussion of the Findings), Chapter 6 (Conclusions). The parts followed by Chapter 6 include List of Published Studies, References and Appendices.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 offers a critical review of literature on engagement aspects (e.g., concepts of key terminologies, overview of previous theoretical frameworks and previous studies).

2.1. Conceptualization of learner engagement

The term ‘engagement’ has been addressed in different ways throughout the literature. This variation is due to the way in which engagement is viewed in specific contexts, as well as the way that it can be affected by and relates to the educational environment. The present study is a narrative inquiry into a group of Vietnamese EFL university students’ engagement in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the three dimensions of learner engagement, which are behavioural, cognitive, and affective were explored as distinctly though their interrelationship was not ignored in discussing the findings.

2.2. Online learning environment

Smith et al. (2016, p. 4) defined online teaching and learning as the mode of instructing students who are separated from their lecturers using one or more technologies. Smith et al. (2016, p. 4) further described online teaching and learning as a formal activity given entirely through the Internet, with some support from auxiliary technology and it occurs when students and their lecturers are separated by terrestrial distance or by circumstances. Similarly, Finch and Jacobs (2012) defined online teaching and learning as a kind of teaching and learning in which the students and lecturers are separated. Whereas Zu et al., (2003) defined online teaching and learning as the way of delivering instruction using web-based technologies that allow students to participate in learning activities outside of the classroom, from both their homes and other locations. Based on these different concepts, online teaching and learning can simply be defined as a kind of education in which students and lecturers are separated and therefore, all the schedules and learning materials can only be accessed individually using the help of technology devices and the internet.

2.3. Engagement

*Characteristics of learner engagement*

According to Helena et al., (2021), the concept of engagement is transactional. That is, the characteristics of the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions related to each subject vary by individual and context. In other words, the engagement varies according to the learning environment and the quality of the students’ experience (Shernoff et al., 2017). As Fedrick et al., (2004) suggested, engagement is malleable; that is, it develops in line with the social, contextual and cultural influences exerted upon it can therefore be changed by means of interventions planned for this purpose. This is despite the fact that many details of how context may influence the dimensions of engagement remain controversial and need more research.

**2.4. Engagement as a multi-dimensional construct**

Engagement can be seen as a two, three, or four-dimension construct depending on researchers’ purposes. In the context of the study, the three-dimension engagement including behavioral, cognitive, and emotional (affective) is employed. Mercer (2019, p4) proposes that “true engagement necessitates all three components”. In real-life learning, it is possible that students are only partially engaged in learning (e.g. they are behaviorally engaged and on-task but are merely going through motions to look busy), whereas they lack cognitive and emotional involvement in the learning.

**2.5. Indicators of learner engagement in EFL**

Another area of confusion about the conceptualization of student engagement is related to the distinction between the indicators versus the facilitators of student engagement. Indicators refer to the features that define student engagement, whereas facilitators are contextual factors that exert influence on student engagement (Skinner et al., 2008). It is important to have a clear distinction between the two. In other words, indicators are markers or descriptive parts inside a target construct, whereas facilitators are explanatory causal factors, outside the target construct, that have the potential to influence the target which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In summary, in this study, engagement is operationalized as a multidimensional construct composed of three mutually dependent components: behavior, emotion, cognition. Behavioral engagement refers to the student’s attention, effort, and persistence when involved in the learning activity. Emotional involvement refers to the presence of positive emotions (e.g. interest) and the absence of negative emotions (e.g. anxiety) during task involvement. Cognitive engagement refers to the use of deep learning strategies such as elaboration instead of superficial learning strategies such as memorization when the student tries to learn.

**2.6. Factors influencing online engagement**

The existing literature outlined a variety of factors affecting student engagement in learning in general and in online learning in particular. These factors can be broadly classified into intrinsic factors (i.e. factors that are related to the learner as a psychological individual) and extrinsic factors (i.e., factors that are outside the individual learner that are situated in the learning context but influence the learner in diverse manners).

**2.7. Factors that caused students’ disengagagement in online EFL classes**

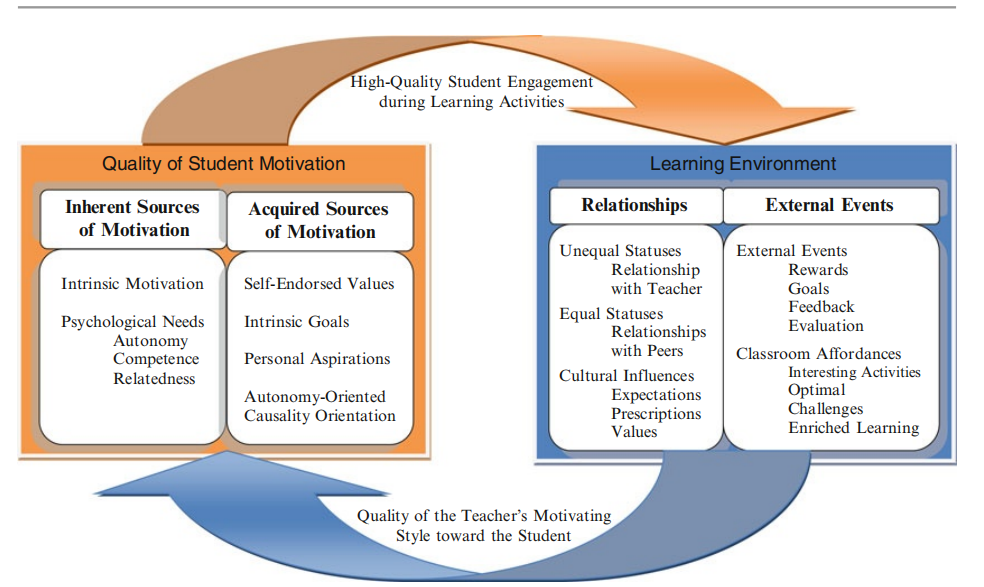
Understanding factors causing students’ disengagement is essential in realizing and identifying the reasons to explain engagement level in the research. Disengagement is also associated with passive participation in doing the responsibility in learning tasks, hesitation in attaining achievement, and reluctance to interact with others (Egbert et al., 2021). Students’ disengagement which happens frequently could lead to an increase of behavioral problems such as isolation and dropout issues (Banna et al., 2015; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004), academic failure (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012), and learner absenteeism (i.e., the regular habit of being absent from certain activity) and “disciplinary infractions” (or the practice of violating regulations on discipline) (Flores & Brown, 2019, p. 63). Those emotional disengagement and behavioural disengagement lead the students into poor academic performance (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). For example, when a student does not come to English class regularly and not pay attention to the lesson, he/she will fall behind his/her classmates.

2.8. Theoretical Framework for engagement in online learning: Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-determination theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), is a macro-level theory of human motivation that aims to explain the dynamics of human need, motivation, and well-being within a social context. The theory suggests that all individuals possess three universal and psychological needs—autonomy (feeling self-governed and self-endorsed), competence (feeling competent and effective), and relatedness (feeling connected, loved, interacted)—that move them to act or not to act. Individuals experience greater psychological well-being through the satisfaction of these three psychological needs and conversely feel highly fragmented, isolated, and reactive when their needs are not met. When pedagogical design adequately addresses these psychological needs, students are actively motivated to engage in learning tasks (Hsu et al., 2019). Classrooms that support these three psychological needs are more likely to engage students in learning (Reeve, 2013). Accordingly, this theory can explain the effects of needs-based support on student motivation, engagement, and learning. In learner engagement research, “SDT addresses how students’ inner resources interact with classroom conditions to result in varying levels of students’ engagement.” (Reeve 2012, p. 152).

SDT has been recognized as a widely accepted theoretical framework that was used for studying and explaining the complex interrelationships between environment, individuals’ motivation and behaviors in different settings including education context (Azila-Gbettor & Abiemo, 2020). SDT addresses how students’ inner resources interact with classroom conditions to result in varying levels of students’ engagement (Reeve, 2013).

According to Reeve (2013), the relationship between students’ inner motivational resources and the affordances in the learning context is two-way relationship. This relationship is demonstrated below:



# *Figure 2.1. Students’ motivational resources and their learning environment (Reeve, 2013, p. 158)*

**2.9. Previous related studies**

***2.9.1. Language learner engagement in face- to- face classrooms***

Zhang (2020) adopted a case study approach to look at an individual language learner’s engagement in the acquisition of a second language – Cantonese - to examine the relation of learner engagement with language learning success. The analysis of the learners’ narratives showed that the dynamic interrelationship of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement with language learning tasks, context, and goals had a positive impact on learners’ learning success.

Another narrative inquiry was undertaken by Hiver al., (2020) using autobiographical narratives provided by 41 college learners of foreign languages (Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish) through interviews. The authors reported that the emotional, motivational, and cognitive aspects of learners’ episodic narratives were associated with important characteristic adaptations to the learning environment.

***2.9.2. Studies on EFL learner engagement in online learning***

In the online setting, student engagement is concerned with the time and energy paid by the students in the process of online learning (Ma et al., 2015). Zheng et al. (2018) pointed out that EFL learners need to depend on a series of behavioral, cognitive, and affective skills in order to persist with and then complete the learning tasks of the target language while taking online courses. In online learning environments, behavioral engagement refers to learning behaviors such as asking questions and engaging in online communications; cognitive engagement is concerned with the cognitive efforts that learners have paid to acquire complex knowledge or develop specific skills in the course of online learning, while emotional engagement focuses on students’ positive emotional feelings about their teachers, student peers, and/or the online courses (Jung & Lee, 2018: Jeongju Lee et al., 2019).

***2.9.3. Online Language Learner Engagement Research in Vietnam***

Following the broke out of the Covid-19 pandemic, the topic of learner engagement has captured the attention of some researchers in Vietnam. These researchers were keen to find out instructional strategies that can enhance online learner engagement. For example, Thuy Linh Le (2020) employed E-journals and interviews to explore how gamification affected students’ engagement in online learning. The results indicated that ESL learners achieved a deeper engagement in a gamified blended classroom, behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively.

Regarding engagement among non-English major students in virtual environment, some empirical studies have evoked a part of the picture of engagement in the context, which is somewhat similar to a face-to-face environment. Trang Nguyen (2022) conducted a survey research in which non-English major students were found not drastically interested in online learning classes. The overall results suggested that the engagement (behavioral, cognitive, and emotional) was not high. More sadly, the cognitive domain is gently low. As known, in higher education, students are expected to use their brains actively and cognitively. Students were able to comprehend the lessons, but they did not relish the challenges. The students admitted that they had low participation in class activities and had problems focusing on the lessons.

The literature review presented here demonstrated that research on EFL learner engagement in online learning is so thin, particularly in Vietnamese higher education. As online learning is becoming increasingly popular in the age of digital technologies, this research gap should be filled. Regarding the methodology, most of the reported studies on learner engagement used survey methods with questionnaires and interviews being the main instruments of data collection. While the value of these instruments cannot be denied, they have their own limitations, the most obvious one being the failure in capturing in-depth information about the students’ lived experiences. The adoption of narrative inquiry in this study is an attempt to fill this methodological gap.

**Chapter Summary**

The chapter has reviewed previous research on engagement, particularly within the context of online learning. It has highlighted a gap, noting that discussions on engagement in L2 have been limited, as pointed out by Mercer and Dörnyei (2020). Regarding research methodology, this literature review reveals the dominance of the questionnaire as a research instrument in researching EFL learner engagement both in the face-to-face context and in the online context. While the questionnaire is a useful method that can be used to gain necessary information from the research participants’ self-reports, it fails to provide valid information about how the participants make sense of their lived experiences. Therefore, this study employed students’ narratives as the main source of information about how they engaged in their learning of English as a compulsory subject in the context of a sudden shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Theoretically, this study used the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which is rarely used in studies on learner engagement, as the theoretical framework for the study. Ryan and Deci (2020), the authors of this theory, have suggested that future SDT research should look more closely at how technologies in e-learning and remote classrooms motivate student engagement and learning. Capitalizing on this theory, the contribution of this paper is to provide exploratory insights into how students were engaged in online learning during the pandemic and factors, both personal and contextual, that affected their engagement through their own stories.

# CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

# 3.1. Research context

**3.1.1. Course Description**

The English language course that was related to this study was designed and delivered by a Vietnamese university. The course is at the A2 level and is aimed to help students, who were studying English as a compulsory minor subject in the university’s curriculum, to the B1 level (CEFR) of English proficiency before graduation.

**3.1.2. Institutional and social context**

***Characteristics of students in the institution***

The students at the university are non-language majors. As a result, at the time they were admitted into the university, their English proficiency was limited. Most of students when entering the university are between A1 and A2 (CEFR) level.

***Social context***

The study was conducted when there was a broke out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not long after the 2019 novel coronavirus emerged and went from epidemic to global pandemic, the second academic term in the university has just started. The abrupt shift to ‘forced’ online teaching has consequently caused some shocks among teachers and students especially when both teachers and students had little or no experience of online learning.

## 3.2. Research participants

In this study, thirteen participants, who majored in Telecommunication, Logistic, Automation and Industrial Equipment Control, Power System, Business Administration, Audit, Automation Power System were purposefully invited to participate in collecting data for this study. These participants were among the students who enrolled in a mandatory English course (GE) as part of the university curriculum. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002).

**3.3. Research Design**

***3.3.1. Research paradigm***

Based on the discussion about different reach paradigms, the social constructivist paradigm with its focus on “the socially constructed nature of reality” and “how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.8) is appropriate for the current study. Engagement is not only a multi-dimensional and context-dependent construct but also bears the characteristics of malleability and complexity (Christenson et al, 2012; Pianta et al, 2012; Shernoff, 2013). Therefore, in order to understand engagement level among students in virtual environment and offer an explanation for this phenomenon as the main aim of the research, the researcher must endorse constructivism to understand the complex nature of a social world from multiple perspectives and multiple methodological lenses, each of which offers partial, yet valuable insight (Creswell, 2014).

**It is necessary to discuss about the following points in a qualitative study like the current research:**

-*Trustworthiness* refers to the reporting of research, which must be explicit and transparent regarding the research purpose, research procedures, and data collection and analysis. In other words, the qualitative researcher is expected to provide adequate description, explanation and justification of the methodology and methods (Kitto et al., 2008). In this study, details of the research procedures including the justification of the research methodology and methods of data collection as well the process of data analysis and interpretation are provided.

*-Credibility* is the criterion for evaluating the truth value or internal validity of qualitative research. A qualitative study is credible when its results, presented with adequate descriptions of context, are recognizable to people who share the experience and those who care for or treat them. In an attempt to achieve credibility, this study provides relevant contextual information that is used to inform the data interpretation. To maximize the credibility of the research, member checking is included in the process of data analysis of the study. According to Merriam (2019), the purpose of member checks is to take your initial analysis back to some participants and inquire whether your interpretation "rings true" (p. 217). The interviews that followed up after the data collection in this study aimed to clarify any uncertainties that participants may have caused for the researcher and to verify the consistency of their responses over time. This ensures the research's validity and the reliability of the data, as participants may provide different responses to the same questions at different times.

*-Applicability or generalizability* refers to the transferability of the research findings to other similar contexts outside the research context. In quantitative research this criterion is called external validity. As stated before, in this study, I described in detail the research participants and the research context so as to enable readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the results of this study can be transferred because of shared characteristics (Creswell, 1998).

-*Dependability* of the results is the criterion for assessing reliability. This does not mean that the same result would necessarily be found in other contexts but that, given the same data, other researchers would find similar patterns (Morse & Richards, 2002) . Dependability means reliability in quantitative research. Although the findings of this study are not intended for generalization, similarities can be found in similar contexts.

**3.4. Narrative inquiry in second language education research**

What makes a narrative inquiry different from other qualitative research approaches? In answering this question, Barkhuizen and Wette (2008, p. 374) state that it is “the nature of the data collected (i.e. the stories) and their analysis”. In narrative research, “narratives are texts which tell stories of *lived experience* (storied experience)” (p. 374) as stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008), which constitutes ‘‘recursive chain of events” (Labov, 2006, p. 39). This chain of events generates the complicating *action* leading to a *resolution* (Labov, 2006, p. 39) or an action directed at achieving a particular *goal* (Bruner, 2006). Thus, a story is framed within the interrelation of three dimensions: time, interactions, and places (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is within this context that the story is understood, by both the teller of the story and the narrative researcher” (Barkhuizen & Wette 2008, p. 374). This study is research with narratives in the sense that student participants’ narratives were used to gain understanding of their engagement in online learning according to their memory.

**3.5. Narrative inquiry as the main approach of the study**

An exploratory qualitative research design was applied to this current study. This research design allows for exploring a phenomenon in-depth and measuring its prevalence due to its inherent simplicity, flexibility, and utility. It was best suited for providing a broad insight into particular phenomena and the comprehensive summarization of specific events experienced by the participants since the focus of this study was to explore and describe the existing issue in the real-life context, i.e., students’ engagement in their online learning process for two reasons. The first reason lies in the nature of narrative inquiry, which positions the research participants in space and time to make sense of what happened, i.e. their online learning experience during the pandemic. The second reason is that learner engagement in learning is complex, dynamic and contextually-bound with great variation among individuals. In a nutshell, narrative methods reveal how psychological processes are influenced by the sociocultural structures within which they unfold (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2013). As such, simple narratives can provide relevant information to the focus questions of this study, which is about learner engagement in online learning during the in the emergency remote learning environment with COVID-19.

**3.6. Methods of data collection: Narrative frames**

In this study, data was collected mainly via narrative frames. Introduced by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008), narrative frames (NFs) have become an increasingly popular data collection instrument in research on language learning and teaching. A NF is “a written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths. It is structured as a story in skeletal form. The aim is for participants to produce a coherent story by filling in the spaces according to their own experiences and their reflections on these” (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 402). A NF is composed of ‘‘starters, connectives and sentence modifiers which gives children a structure within which they can concentrate on communicating what they want to say whilst scaffolding them in the use of a particular generic form” (Wray and Lewis, 1997 , p. 122). NFs have been used in a wide range of contexts to better understand the beliefs, experiences, and identities of language learners and teachers (Barkhuizen, 2014). Shelley et al. (2013) used narrative frames to find out the challenges teachers encountered as the result of the shift from face-to-face to distance and then to blended language teaching and how individual teachers responded to those challenges.

In order to elicit students’ experience in EFL online learning and unveil factors affecting their engagement, a narrative frame is seen as the most useful and convenient guidance for the target participants despite its limitations which would be minimized by researchers’ strategies in collecting data (like building rapport with students, provide clear and comprehensive guides, designing NF in such a logical structure…).

**3.7. Research procedures**

**The research procedures include stages as follows**

***a. Designing the narrative frame:*** In this stage, to minimize the limitations of NF, the researcher kept in mind the points like: *purposes* (What is it trying to achieve? What data does the researcher need for the project and how will these data integrate with any other data collected by other means? What research puzzle is the frame trying to solve? Does it have value beyond data collection?); *Topic(*The researcher explained carefully the specific topic of the frame to her participants); *Experience(*The topic of the frame is always about the experiences of the respondents. In the current study, it is about their experience in an EFL online learning course). *Reflection(*It is about how they make sense of these experiences. The frame was designed to provide opportunities for respondents to reflect on the experiences described in the frames, what Labov (1997) calls evaluation).

***b. Piloting***

After finalizing the design of the NF with consultants from experts in the field, I invited five students to volunteer as participants to complete the NF. The researcher provided clear instructions on how to fill out the NF and explained the purpose of the study. All participants were seated at a distance from each other while completing their NFs. They were also informed that they could ask any questions if they found any part of the NF confusing. By gathering these questions from participants during this stage, the researcher made adjustments to the NF, such as refining wording and structure, to ensure it was as coherent and comprehensive as possible, thereby enhancing the credibility of the data.

***c. Collecting data:***

In this stage, to maximize the credibility of the data, the researcher organized a meeting with students before collecting the data to make them fully capture about how and what to do in the data-collecting session they would take part in. The setting was also chosen to offer the best conditions for their concentration and focus. In this study, to ensure the authenticity of students' narratives, participants were encouraged and reminded to share their experiences and stories truthfully. They were reassured that their honesty would not harm their reputation or academic standing in any way and that their contributions would be highly valued.

**3.8. Data analysis**

This current study will adopt the analysis of narratives as a way to have deeper insight into the nature of student engagement, the underlying reasons for engagement level among students as well as possible constraints or affordances, and their willingness for online learning.

***3.8.1. Coding***

When deciding which type of coding method to adopt, the primary consideration should be the research questions. In this study a hybrid approach to coding is adopted with the deductive approach being the dominant method as the concept of online learning engagement is so complex Regarding the deductive coding, three common codes of learner engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and affective were used in the data analysis. However, inductive coding was used to analyze the contextual factors that contribute to learner engagement.

***3.8.2. Data analysis process***

***Stage 1: Immersion in the data***

After receiving the participants' narratives, I dedicated considerable time to thoroughly examining the data, reading their stories at least four times. This process is referred to as data "immersion," which Wallis (2010) describes as "a process in which the researcher becomes familiar with the data" (p. 413).

**Stage 2: Coding data and data reduction**

After initially reading all the participants' narratives multiple times, the next step was to begin the coding process. This study employed a combination of both coding types. Deductive coding was applied in analyzing the data related to learner engagement, using the pre-determined codes of behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement, and affective engagement while inductive coding was applied to data related to factors that affected learner engagement.

**Stage 3: Analysing data and developing themes**

As previously mentioned, this study focuses on the "analysis of narratives" approach, with the primary emphasis on the "content" of the narratives. Two analytic methods were employed in the analysis of narratives in this study. The first method was content analysis, which is defined as "a research method that detects, records, and analyzes the presence of specified words or concepts in a sample of communication forms" (Sproule, 2010, p.324). In this study, the communication forms, often referred to as "texts," were the students' written narratives and their interview transcripts.

# 3.9. The researcher’s position in the study

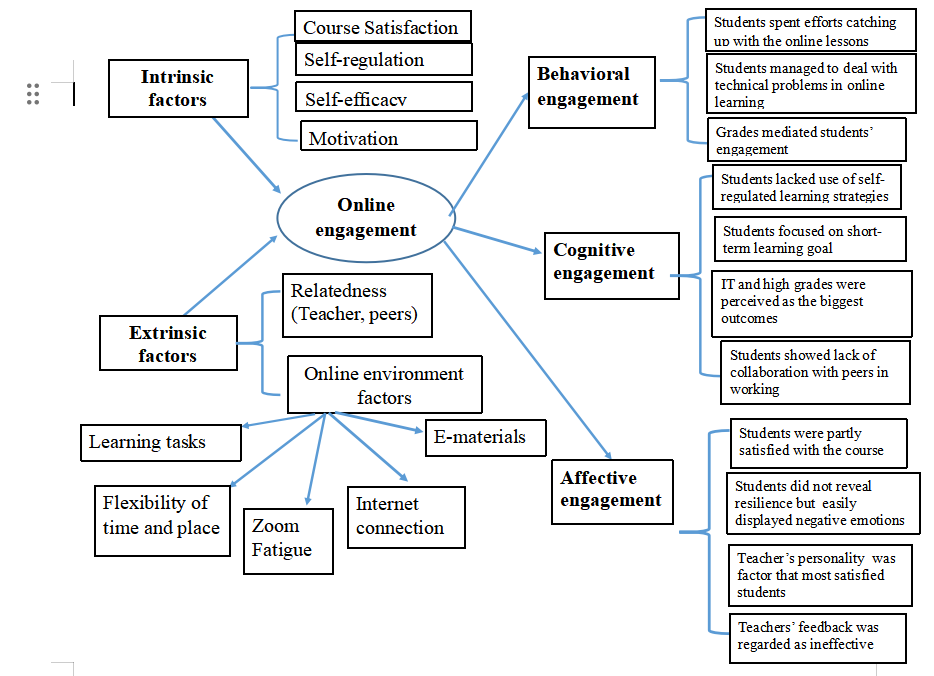
Since this research was conducted in a setting where I have a direct connection, I was considered an insider. The term "insider research" refers to studies conducted by researchers who are members of the populations, communities, or identity groups they are studying (Kanuha, 2000, p.439). To gain in-depth knowledge within insider research, the researcher must become an "insider," which involves collaborating with and spending time in the field with participants (Creswell, 2007, p.17). While conducting insider research can offer many advantages, such as quicker access to the research site and valuable knowledge of the processes within the research setting (Asselin, 2003), there are also various challenges that insider researchers need to be mindful of like assumptions about phenomenon studied, role duality, perceptions and expectations that the participants have about the researchers.

**3.10. Research Ethics**

Because narrative inquiry is a relational research methodology, ethical issues are central throughout the inquiry. Ethical requirements move beyond institutional requirements of privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent. Attending to the way participation in a narrative inquiry shapes each participant's life, the negotiations of entry, exit, and representations of experience are central ethical concerns. Issues of informed consent bring forth questions of who has the right to give consent, how one maintains informed consent throughout the inquiry, and how participants consent to final research texts that reveal personal experiences and place those experiences within a larger context.

# CHAPTER IV: THE FINDINGS

The key findings of the study is shown in the diagram 4.1, which will presented in the chapter

**

*Figure 4.1: Diagram of the key findings*

**4.1. Behavioral engagement**

***4.1.1. Making efforts***

In this study, it is revealed in the students’ narratives that they tried to find ways to cope with numerous unexpected challenges in an attempt to complete the course even though the learning experience in the online environment during the pandemic was not only alien but also challenging to them. Positive behaviours such as seeking support from peers and teachers despite social isolation, and dealing with technical problems like poor internet connection, and the lack of online learning experience.

For example, one student (S4) described her action in such as situation as follows:

When I had something I felt confused in the lesson, I *asked my teacher for help* because because I find it the fastest way to solve problem (S4, WN).

It is interesting to find that the motivation behind the students’ behavioural engagement is the grade, that is used normatively to certify their completion of the course. For example, S3 and S1 narrated that

The task that I spent most of my effort on is *doing home assignments*. The reason for my effort is to get high marks. (S3, WN).

Another indicator of their behavioural engagement is their effort in dealing with technical problems so that they could participate in online lessons. Specifically, the majority of them sought out locations with a more stable internet connection or invested in a better 4G Wi-Fi service to avoid missing any real-time lessons, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the course.

***4.1.2. Collaboration***

Collaboration is also a strategy some students employed to achieve better learning outcomes. As stated by S8 and S1, collaborative work and group interaction helped them to achieve good grades.

What *I spent most my effort* in was how to divide the work in my group in the most effective way so that we *could get high grades*.(S8, WN).

***4.1.3. Participation***

Behaviours of shallow-learning are also indicated in what the students told about their participation in learning.

We were doing a small project and making presentations, asking other classmates questions. I felt so engaged because the *lesson felt like a meeting with everyone*, not as a normal lesson in class. (S1, WN)

## 4.2. Cognitive engagement

***4.2.1. Use of self-regulated learning strategies***

To ensure timely completion of their assignments, some of the participants utilized various self-regulated learning strategies such as searching for information and language resources (grammar and vocabulary) online, as well as seeking assistance from peers and teachers. Group activities, such as presentations and collaborative reading, also consumed considerable time. They actively organized online forums, like Zalo groups, to facilitate peer interaction, assigned tasks among group members, conducted online searches for information, and dedicated significant time to practicing pronunciation. For instance, S10 used the online materials that were available and accessible as a strategy to complete the assignment.

To complete the learning tasks assigned by the teacher, I *go online to search for materials* and practice a lot before presenting with my classmates. *We watch videos on YouTube* to get more information for our presentation.) (S10, WN).

However, for the majority of participants, cognitive engagement appeared to be weak. This was evidenced in their unwillingness to find appropriate strategies to compensate for the lack of group collaboration. The participants honestly stated that their classmates did not want to work with them to complete the learning tasks. This made them greatly depressed and reduced their engagement.

When working in group to solve problems assigned by my teacher, I found out that nearly *all my friends were hesitant to collaborate*. It seemed that they did not want to work with me (S11, WN)

In this case, limited cognitive engagement coupled with a lack of collaboration with teachers or peers in learning activities. In virtual environment, the connection might be much more difficult to keep and participants might feel so strange to one another. But if they have had a high cognitive engagement in the course, they would have tried their best to cooperate with one another to fulfill the tasks.

***4.2.2. Short-term learning goal***

The students in this study emphasized that completing assignments given by their teachers was a key priority as they believed this task was essential for achieving high marks in the course. They focused on the task to secure the best possible outcomes, reflecting a short-term rather than a long-term learning goal. Only two participants mentioned that their commitment to assignments stemmed from a desire to solidify their knowledge and enhance their language skills.

The task I spent most of my time and effort on was completing home assignments to *get high marks*. (S9, WN)

**4.3. Affective/ Emotional Engagement**

***4.3.1. Course satisfaction***

Affective engagement, on the other hand, encompasses students’ emotions towards the learning process, context, peers and teachers, whether negative or positive, as well as their sense of belonging (see Chapter II). Based on the narratives of student participants in this study, it was evident that their experiences with the online English course evoked both positive and negative emotions. Approximately two-thirds of the students expressed partial satisfaction with the course, noting improvements in their English knowledge and language skills.

As for me, the course has *partly provided* what I need to improve my language. Prior to the course, I expected to improve my speaking skill. However, all lessons focused too much on reading and vocabulary(S5, WN).

***4.3.2. Lack of resilience when coping with challenges***

Over half of the participants reported feeling frustrated when faced with unexpected issues in the online learning environment, such as unstable Internet connections, challenging materials, and lack of interaction. Their narratives reflected emotions of anger, irritation, disengagement, and demotivation stemming from these unfavorable conditions. For instance, S1 and S3 articulated their negative feelings in the following ways:

*I felt so bored*, no longer wanted to learn and I was afraid of learning English at that time.(S1, WN).

Due to the late provision of materials in online learning in LMS, it seemed to me that *I was not engaged* as in the initial stage of learning. (S3, WN)

In the study, affective engagement among respondents included both positive and negative emotional experiences during the online learning process. Positive emotions were mainly derived from their teacher's personality and the course partially meeting their expectations. Conversely, negative emotions stemmed from the challenges presented by the virtual environment, particularly since it was their first time encountering these issues. Dissatisfaction also arose from delayed feedback from teachers when guidance was urgently needed.

***4.3.3. Perception of course value***

Cognitive engagement is also reflected in participants' perceptions of the course's value. In this study, their narratives revealed that most participants viewed digital skill enhancement and high grades, rather than language skills, as the most significant outcomes of the course. They attributed these achievements to the self-study process in an online environment, where they had to overcome various technical challenges. As narrated by S7:

As for me, the biggest outcome I got after the course was my IT skill improved much thanks to online learning requirements. In addition, I could get high marks at the end of the course (S7, WN).

**4.4. Underlying factors that shape student engagement**

***4.4.1. Intrinsic factors***

***a. Motivation***

Motivation, as discussed in the literature review (2.9), is closely tied to engagement, reflecting learners’ willingness to participate in the language learning process. Participants largely indicated that their primary motivation for studying English was to pass the final test required for graduation. They viewed the EFL course as obligatory rather than something they chose voluntarily within the curriculum. In other words, extrinsic motivation appeared to be most influential to the students’ engagement in learning.

What drove me most when taking part in the course was that it was a *compulsory part* of my training program at the university (S8, WN).

***b. Course satisfaction***

The domination of extrinsic motivation among the students in this study influenced their satisfaction with the course. As stated in their narratives, what satisfied them the most upon completing the course was the high grades or passing the B1 test in order to be eligible for graduation since the B1 level of proficiency on the CEFR is benchmarked as a requirement to all Vietnamese university students who do not major in English. For example, S10 told, “The course was not really effective” to her in her effort to develop her English knowledge and skills, and what she gained from the course was *“not e*nough to pass the final test” (S10, WN). While two students stated that they did make slight improvement in their English skills, it is not clear whether that improvement is true or perceived.

**c. Lack of sense of self-efficacy and self-regulated learning skills**

The majority of participants in the study initially had low confidence in their language proficiency at the beginning of the course.

I was not really confident about my language proficiency; I thought I was *quite bad at English* and I *was afraid* I could not catch up with my classmates (S8, WN).

Though they believed that their English was not good enough, they did not seem to be agentic in investing more in their learning. These are evidenced in their narratives.

I *just learned before the exams* but not every day; sometimes, I reviewed a little before the test because I need to *get high grades*. (S6, WN).

The lack of self-regulated learning skills also weakened the students’ engagement in learning in the online context where social interaction was limited or even absent. This can be illustrated in S7’s story:

What made me most dissatisfied with the course was *lack of direct interaction*, which led to many bad consequences and barriers in getting the language knowledge. (S7, WN)

***4.4.2. Extrinsic factors***

***a.Teachers***

In spite of everything else, the students in this study seemed to appreciate what their teachers did to support their learning. The majority of participants explicitly stated that their emotional engagement stemmed from their teachers' personalities, characterized as friendly, outgoing, helpful, and dedicated to teaching. The way teachers communicated during synchronous learning sessions left a positive impression on them S1 expressed this appreciation quite clearly:

What makes me most satisfied with the course was that my teacher was *so dedicated and friendly*. (S1, WN)

Teachers’ pedagogy is also a factor that affecting students’ engagement, an issue mentioned in many students’ narratives. The teachers seemed to follow the regular pedagogy they used in the traditional face-to-face classrooms without thinking that online learning is not similar to face-to-face learning. They did not seem to streamline the teaching content. Instead, they tried to cover everything in the coursebook. This made the students physically, cognitively, and emotionally fatigued, as S11 described:

Online lessons *badly affected my focu*s and I felt distracted sometimes. Thus, I would *need a break* from time to time to avoid spacing out (S13, WN).

***b. Lack of sense of belonging in the online learning environment***

The overnight shift from the regular face-to-face course to online seemed to be a trauma to most of the students in this study. They felt isolated in the online environment. S6 told:

I felt *uncontended to the course* in which there was *little interaction with teacher and peers*. I remembered that once we were assigned to work in group but my classmates in the group ignored each other and I did not know what to do (S6, WN).

***c. Online environmental factors***

***Flexibility and Convenience***

The students who took part in this study expressed satisfaction with the convenient and flexible educational environment provided by distance learning. They cited reasons such as the ability to reduce travel time to school and use that time for other activities.

One participant (S6), for example, stated that:

Online learning really s*aved time and money* because I did not have to travel a long way to school (S6, WN)

***Online learning tasks***

According to two-thirds of participants, what made a difference in online learning compared with traditional learning environments was that they were involved in group work. Especially, all discussions and communications with their peers or teacher during such learning activities were carried out through Zoom or social networking sites like Zalo or Facebook. This was the first time they had chance to join in such working environment. Some were so fascinated by the way they could play games online with platforms like Quizzes or Kahoot, which really made them feel fun and excited.

E-materials

The EFL online course materials were generally perceived as useful and diverse by most participants. However, several obstacles were encountered while using these materials. Many students faced difficulties with blurry printed letters, which hindered their ability to read and complete exercises. Some materials also contained mechanical errors such as repeated sentences, which made learning tedious for students.

I was *overloaded with materials* provided by my teacher. I did not how to use it without clear instructions from her. Some of them, I think, were not really necessary for us. This made me really *bored and disengaged*. (S11, WN)

***Internet connection***

The primary obstacle encountered by most participants in online learning was unstable or intermittent Internet connection, identified as the predominant theme in the data analysis. Participants frequently described how networking issues during distance learning led to frustration and distractions, making it difficult for them to focus on lessons.

I remembered that in a lesson, due to *unstable Internet connection*, I was out many times though I struggled to find a better place with stronger Wi-Fi. At the end, I could not get anything from the lesson. (S9, WN).

***Learning tasks***

Online learning tasks are pivotal in driving student engagement, as they serve as the primary means through which learners interact with course content and demonstrate understanding. Engaging tasks are those that challenge students intellectually, encourage active participation, and foster a sense of relevance and connection to their goals.The narratives of the study reveals that students felt most engaged when they had chance to participate in games like Quizzes or Kahoot which require competition and brought excitement.

***Chapter summary***

The findings from the analysis of students’ narratives reveal that learner engagement is closely related to their motivation, which can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. As reported in the chapter, most of the students in this study appeared to be extrinsically motivated, primarily concerned with obtaining the required grades to complete the course. Few found the learning tasks interesting, useful, or important. There is almost no evidence from the students’ narratives that they applied deep learning strategies while completing the course. Instead, most of the strategies they reported were shallow learning strategies, such as finding the correct answers to grammar exercises or comprehension questions. Because of this, behavioural engagement, both passive and active, is most significantly present in the students’ narratives while their cognitive and affective engagement seemed weak.

Learner engagement, as shown in this study, was shaped by multiple factors, both psychological and environmental. Of these factors, student motivation appears to be the most influential. Second to student motivation is teacher pedagogy. As the shift from the traditional face-to-face course to online was so rapid, not all teachers were professionally and psychologically ready for online teaching and this is likely to affect negatively the students’ engagement. These findings will be discussed in more depth in Chapter V.

**CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

**5.1. Behavioral engagement – the most significantly present dimension**

While the three components of learner engagement: behavioural, cognitive, and affective, are interrelated, in this study, behavioral engagement indicators were stronger as compared to cognitive and affective engagement. They were obliged to complete the course and achieve at least satisfactory grades to be certified as being eligible for graduation. They described efforts to complete assignments on time and to find better internet connectivity for online lessons. However, they often expressed negative emotions such as frustration, boredom, and a lack of resilience when facing challenges in online learning. Many felt that the course did not effectively enhance their language skills. This discrepancy suggests that their recollections of actions taken were clearer than their feelings and thoughts during the process.

As compared with behavioural engagement, students’ cognitive and affective engagement appeared to be weaker. Cognitive engagement is established when students exert an amount of mental effort to engage with the learning material (Richardson & Newby, 2006; Walker, Greene & Mansell, 2006). In this regard, the students' narratives in this study indicate that they demonstrated some capability in employing self-regulated learning strategies to manage their learning tasks. For instance, they sought help from friends and worked on enhancing their computer skills to complete the course. However, the findings of the study also reveal that the students in this study did not possess the necessary self-regulated learning skills, which are so important to effective online learning.

**5.2. Factors affecting students’ engagement**

As indicated in the findings, teachers’ pedagogy was the most influential contextual factor to the students’ engagement. The online course in this study was delivered at the first stage of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) due to the social distance caused by the pandemic. This means that most teachers were not trained in online pedagogy; neither did they have the materials designed specifically for online learning environments (Leli Efriana, 2021). This is evidenced in the students’ complaints that they were overloaded with assignments and that they felt bored and unattended during the lesson due to lack of student-teacher interaction.

It is possible to say that the teachers were not fully aware that E-learning was determined as classes conveying through the web to other places other than face-to-face classrooms where the teachers can teach in a virtual meeting and students can speak and interact with lecturers or other students (Farrah & Bakry, 2020).

Another factor that affects the students’ engagement as shown in this study is the students’ self-efficacy. Empirical studies have suggested that self-efficacy is predictive of students’ online learning satisfaction (Alqurashi et al., 2019).

**5.3. Implications for EFL online teaching and learning in higher education**

***5.3.1. Role of engagement in online learning***

The findings of this study suggest that it may be a good idea to start an online language course with a focus on behavioral engagement where learners invest time and energy in language learning tasks and goals that are within their zone of development. This may be helpful in developing student’s positive attitudes and emotions in modifying these in different stages of learning so that they become more affectively engaged in learning.

***5.3.2. Teacher’s role in enhancing leaners’ engagement***

***a. Material Adaptation***

From the findings, its is crucial that teachers should be aware of their role in adapting e-materials. They have to adapt materials designed to be delivered face-to-face to make them more appropriate to the online learning environment. Materials used for virtual environment should be simplified into smaller and manageable chunks with clear instructions and explanations.

***b.Learning tasks Design***

Participants in the study highlighted their interest in online learning tasks that were fun and activated their collaboration in online learning. They also prefer tasks related to real-life situations (Chapter IV-Section 4.5.1). On the basis of the findings, it is recommended that teachers should select tasks that mimic real-life scenarios, such as writing emails, making presentations, or engaging in dialogues that they might encounter in English-speaking environments.

***c. Leaner-centered feedback***

Effective feedback is a cornerstone of successful EFL online learning. It not only guides students in their language development but also motivates them, fosters autonomy, and builds a supportive learning environment. When feedback is timely, personalized, and constructive, it can significantly enhance the learning experience and outcomes for EFL students in an online setting.

***d. Training learners***

In the context of the study where students were shifted suddenly to online learning due to the Pandemic of COVID-19 without much preparation. Consequently, they lack the necessary online learning skills and they were alien to this learning mode. However, even in normal time, not all of them are qualified enough to have such skills in the virtual environment. Therefore, training learners in online learning skills is essential to help them succeed in learning.

**Chapter Summary**

The chapter has summarized the present study’s findings and discussed them in reference to each research question. The results have also been considered in relation to relevant previous studies. The chapter has evaluated the contributions of the study theoretically and methodologically to research in online engagement.

**CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION**

**6.1. An overview of the study**

The primary aim of the current study is to investigate learners' engagement in an online course at a Vietnamese university where English is taught as a non-major subject, as well as to identify the factors influencing their engagement. The research also seeks to uncover the reasons behind EFL online engagement at the university. To answer the research questions established for this study, a narrative inquiry was adopted, using a narrative frame as the data collection tool, supplemented by follow-up interviews for participant checks.

**6.2. Pedagogical Implications**

***6.2.1.Focusing on learner engagement***

The findings of this study highlight the reciprocal effects of motivation and engagement. It is revealed in the study that leaners appeared to be more concerned about satisfactory grades as evidence of the course completion. This made them more behaviourally than cognitively and affectively engaged. Towards the enhancement of engagement as a multi-dimensional construct, engaging tasks and teacher support should be emphasized. Teachers need to design tasks that are engaging to their learners on the basis of their knowledge and provide more learner-centered feedback as a form of learning support.

***6.2.2. Role of teacher in online learning environment: positioning in a new context***

The study's data indicated that students lacked adequate scaffolding in the online learning process, particularly concerning materials and assignments, which led to diminished engagement. In this case, lack of previous preparation and training for teaching online is one of the main causes. In the virtual environment, teachers should be fully aware of the following points to effectively engage their students:

***Teacher's support***

In online classrooms, teachers must adapt their content scaffolding strategies to cater to the unique forms of interaction available to students compared to traditional offline classes. For less experienced language learners, such as young students with limited prior knowledge, effective content scaffolding in online environments may differ significantly from what is typical in face-to-face settings (Azevedo & Jacobson, 2008).

***Teachers’ training***

According to Albrahim (2020, p. 9), in order to conduct online courses effectively, teachers need to possess such skills as “(a) pedagogical skills, (b) content skills, (c) design skills, (d) technological skills, (e) management and institutional skills, and (f) social and communication skills”.

**6.3. Limitations of the study and implications for future research**

Firstly, as this study adopted a qualitative approach, it cannot be generalized, as generalizability is not the usual intention of this form of inquiry (Creswell, 2014).

Secondly, there is also a limitation in how engagement of the students in this study was examined and interpreted.

Finally, the study was conducted at a single university and focused on a small cohort of students who transitioned to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future research could broaden its scope by examining student engagement with a more diverse participant group and employing alternative data collection methods, such as student diaries. Longitudinal studies on student engagement patterns are also relatively scarce, suggesting a need for future investigations into how engagement evolves over time. Furthermore, the current study did not explore the interplay among different dimensions of engagement, indicating a potential area for future research to examine the interconnected relationships between various aspects of engagement.

**LIST OF PUBLISHED STUDIES**

Nguyen Thi Thang (2020). Investigating students’ perception of Kahoot in improving their engagement and collaboration. *Journal of Inquiry into Languages and Cultures,* 420-431. University of Foreign Languages, Hue University: Hue University Press.

Nguyen Thi Thang (2020). Exploring EFL college students’ attitudes towards the effectiveness of mobile learning. *2020 International Graduate Research Symposium & 10th East Asia Chinese Teaching Forum,* 541-550. University of Languages and International Studies, VNU: Vietnam National University Press, Hanoi.

Nguyen Thi Thang (2021). Using Learning Management System (LMS) in a EFL blended learning course at a university: An investigation into students’ perceptions. *2021 International Graduate Research Symposium,* 218-228. University of Languages and International Studies, VNU: Vietnam National University Press, Hanoi.

Nguyen Thi Thang (2022). Promoting engagement in emergency remote teaching context in a university in Vietnam. *2022 International Graduate Research Symposium,* 563-574. University of Languages and International Studies, VNU: Vietnam National University Press, Hanoi.

Nguyen Thi Thang, Pham Thi Thanh Thuy (2022). Unplanned transition to EFL online learning: an analysis of students ‘perceptions in a Vietnamese University. *The 19th AsiaCALL International Conference Proceedings*- AsiaCALL Press-5243 Birch Falls Ln, Sugar Land, Texas, USA, 77479.

Nguyen Thi Thang (2023). An exploratory case study of learner engagement in EFL online learning as a multi-dimensional construct in higher education in Vietnam. *Proceedings of the 11th OPENTESOL International Hybrid Conference 2023*. HoChiMinh Open University Press, HoChiMinh city.

Nguyen Thi Thang (2023). Exploring factors affecting student engagement in online learning during the crisis of Pandemic of Covid 19 in students’ perception. *2023 International Graduate Research Symposium,* 580-593. University of Languages and International Studies, VNU: Vietnam National University Press, Hanoi.

Nguyen Thi Thang (2024). Engaging learners in an emergency remote teaching context in a university in Vietnam during the pandemic of Covid-19.*YMER, 23*, 823-840. University of Stockholm.

Nguyen Thi Thang, Melissa Barnes. Sociality and Student Engagement in Online Learning: Engagement Stories of First-Year University Students in Vietnam. *English Language Teacher Education* (Contract Announcement: published in November 2024). Palgrave-Macmillan.