

## Perceptions of EFL tertiary students towards the correlation between e-learning and learning engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

It is true that education is one of the fields affected by the spread of COVID-19. Many countries, including Vietnam, have implemented online learning at a national scale to every level of education to adapt to the circumstance. In teaching English at university, the implementation's efficacy remains debatable since it may intensify the challenges that are already problematic in traditional English schooling. Among those arduous problems, student engagement is the focus of this qualitative study. Specifically, the paper examines how Vietnamese non-English major undergraduates perceive the influence of e-learning on their engagement in studying the language. Regarding the literature, online learning with its benefits and shortcomings is firstly reviewed, which is followed by the scrutiny of student engagement in general and in English learning. The review is then concluded by inspecting several relevant studies.

A focus group interview is applied to collect data, which is also considered a gap of this study since the groups of interviewees only come from one university in Ho Chi Minh city. The findings are expected to provide more insights into the degree of student engagement in English online learning in higher education, thus calling for more effort to be exerted in seeking appropriate strategies to promote Vietnamese EFL graduates' engagement in their e-learning.

#### Keywords:

perceptions, EFL, tertiary, e-learning, learning engagement, COVID-19 pandemic

### Introduction

Since the arrival of COVID-19, the Ministry Of Education And Training (MOET) in Vietnam has been applying numerous strategies to prevent the virus spread while sustaining the teaching and learning of every education system. Regarding the situation of higher education in Vietnam, MOET's most recent measure is to force a halt in all on-campus teaching activities (Huong, 2020). All classes, regardless of their levels, are to be delivered online with the support of many applications. At the Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry (HUPI), every online

educational activity has been conducted via Zoom even since the beginning of 2020. Regarding the context of teaching English online at the institution, every student joins a Zoom class that lasts two hours and fifteen minutes once a week. Two teachers, a Vietnamese and a foreigner, are in charge of each class on alternating weeks.

Up until now, there have been many opinions from the English teachers at HUFU related to the efficacy of this adaptation. Among those common concerns is the doubt about low student engagement in learning the language via the Internet. This, however, has already been the center of attention in a traditional EFL setting prior to the COVID-19 outbreak (Schmidt, 2001; Gass, 2003; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Sinatra et al (2015) even indicate the notion as the main determiner of successful learning. As for how online learning can affect student engagement, this relationship is confirmed in numerous studies carried out in similar contexts to the one in Vietnam (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Famularsih, 2020; Gao & Zhang, 2020). Unfortunately, there appears to be a scarcity of in-depth researches on how Vietnamese EFL undergraduates' engagement can be affected due to e-learning, which may drive any stakeholders' attention away from where it should be and thus contributes to the prolonged inefficiency in English education at tertiary level in Vietnam.

The significance of engagement in learners' improvement in English, the effects of e-learning on it, and how little has been done to examine this relationship in the EFL context at higher education in Vietnam are the major drivers of this study.

## Literature review

### *A. Online learning*

#### *1. Definitions and classifications*

E-learning can be defined in various ways by different researchers. Sutherland (1999) refers to this concept as learning which takes place in "invisible classrooms," while the term is understood as learning being made possible due to electronic aid (Abbad et al., 2009). In their understanding, Liu and Wang (2009) suggest that e-learning relates significantly to the vast role of the Internet where resources or knowledge is shared worldwide, which is a solution to the geographical and timing issues.

In an attempt to classify the types of online learning, Algahtani (2011) categorizes it into computer-based and internet-based e-learning. While the former relates strictly to any computer hardware or software that supports learning interactively. The latter taps into the power of the virtual world to facilitate learning regardless of places or time. Under this second form are the two modes of learning interaction. The first is "synchronous," referring to the instantaneous communication between teachers and students thanks to many online tools. The second is "asynchronous," which also enables a teacher-learner online interaction, but such discussions do not take place at one specific point in time (Algahtani, 2011).

## *2. Online learning in tertiary education*

As for e-learning in higher education, various scholars are emphatic about the growing significance this way of acquiring knowledge has in universities (Dublin, 2003; Maeroff, 2004; Love & Fry, 2006). There are several ways in which online learning can benefit higher education, while its shortcomings are also worth mentioning. The following briefly summarizes how this method is perceived by both tertiary educators and students (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015; Hulse, 2021; Fedynich et al., 2015; Pham & Tran, 2020; Song et al., 2004; Laili & Nashir, 2021). There are several rationales for choosing these papers. Firstly, they share a common objective to explore the perceptions of tertiary students and lecturers towards e-learning. In addition, despite being done in various contexts, the papers manage to deliver very similar results. Specifically, factors that can facilitate and impede the e-learning experience will be reviewed. These factors, however, are not separate elements but are rather correlated with each other to influence undergraduates' viewpoints of their online learning.

### *a) Technological aspects*

It is concluded by all these works that e-learning benefits undergraduates with its instantaneous accessibility. In other words, students can study online without arriving at their institutions. However, the study by Laili and Nashir (2021) suggests that living in remote areas of a country can have a negative impact on students' e-learning since such places do not often have a stable Internet connection. Moreover, students who are "stuttering in using technology" may not prefer learning online (Laili & Nashir, 2021, p. 691). The second aspect is aligned with the work of Song et al. (2004) and Pham and Tran (2020). Their findings reveal that students will be more welcome to study online when they have familiarized themselves with the use of technological tools or platforms.

### *b) Interactions*

The students in these studies are satisfied with online learning when they have positive interaction experiences with their classmates and instructors. Fedynich et al. (2015) state their student participants are not content with virtual learning if their teachers give inadequate feedback. Likewise, "lack of community" is listed as one of the unsatisfactory factors (Song et al., 2004, p. 66). The interviewees in this study also suggest the situation can be improved with the presence of face-to-face interactive activities built by teachers. Similar results are found in Pham and Tran (2020) and Laili and Nashir (2021). These two recent studies discover that communication failures cause college students to have less interest in learning online. They argue such breakdowns occur due to several reasons, including poor connection, distractions, insufficient instructions from teachers.

### *c) Motivation and engagement*

The third contributor is motivation (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015; Song et al., 2004; Fedynich et al., 2015; Hulse, 2021; Laili & Nashir, 2021). In general, the participants agree they need to be highly motivated to succeed in studying online. This can be achieved if the Internet connection

remains undisrupted, the high quality of interactions is guaranteed, and effective teacher support must be constantly provided. Otherwise, students will feel "bored and unmotivated" thus become less engaged with e-learning (Hulse, 2021, p. 34).

The above arguably demonstrates that e-learning in higher education is a complex matter despite its true potentials. Among the reviewed influencing factors, the last one about motivation and engagement is directly linked with this paper's focus. It is suggested that engagement plays a key role in pushing students to learn, and it can be influenced by a range of factors (Christenson et al., 2012). The importance of engagement is also demonstrated in numerous attempts from schools or institutions in altering their educating environment as well as programs with an intention to raise student engagement, which will lead to positive outcomes such as improved academic performance or reduced dropouts (Fredricks et al., 2004). Nevertheless, with reference to the English education realm, how to make learners engaged in learning this language is already a challenging task that attracts enormous research effort (Hiver et al., 2021; Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Svalberg, 2009). This matter is made even more complicated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when all learning activities must be organized online. The paper now moves on to examine the literature relevant to student engagement in EFL and the current situation of this notion in e-learning contexts.

## *B. Student engagement in EFL and online learning*

### *1. Definitions*

It is agreed among many practitioners that student engagement is a multifaceted concept (Appleton et al., 2006; Finn, 1989; F. Newmann et al., 1992). According to Mahdikhani and Rezaei (2015), the concept can be generally understood as students being motivated to take actions to learn. The writers explain further that these actions contain “emotions, attention, goals, and other psychological processes along with persistent and effortful behavior“ (Mahdikhani & Rezaei, 2015, p. 110). This is identical to Fredricks et al. (2004) with their effort to categorize learning engagement into different types, which are examined below.

### *2. Classifications*

#### *a) Behavioral engagement*

This dimension of engagement is said to have a pivotal impact on a student's academic performance (Fredricks et al., 2004). In their summary, the authors point out three signs to identify behaviorally engaged students. The first sign is whether students obey their school's obligations or norms such as being punctual, not causing trouble while studying, etc. The second sign is more academic-related. An engaged student participates intensely in their learning by focusing, persevering, dedicating to any learning activities. The last sign of behavioral engagement is when students engage themselves in non-academic activities held by their school. In learning a foreign language, behavioral engagement is shown when learners willingly join a conversation by facilitating and maintaining interactions in the target language irrespective of any forms of support (Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

### *b) Cognitive Engagement*

A student is engaging cognitively when there is an existence of “psychological investment in learning” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 63). Wehlage et al. (1989) state that students will become strategic learners by applying various ways in order to “comprehend and master knowledge or skills” (p. 17). In foreign language acquisition, students may demonstrate their cognitive engagement in many ways (Svalberg, 2009). Firstly, when working in pairs and provided that teacher support is given implicitly, students have a tendency to focus solely on their discussion to perform the given task. Secondly, recognizing that they do not possess a specific grammar point and asking for support from teachers is also an indicator of cognitively engaged language learners. Furthermore, Philp and Duchesne (2016) argue that non-verbal expressions, including body language or facial expressions, can also be considered a form of cognitive engagement.

### *c) Emotional engagement*

When students react in a specific context by showing their feelings, they are affectively engaged (Fredricks et al., 2004). It can be how students feel about their connection with their schools (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). Additionally, students may have positive or negative feelings towards a given task, their classmates, or teachers (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In the context of language learning, emotionally engaged or disengaged students will express their emotions towards designed activities whose objectives are to help them practice the language (Hiver et al., 2021).

### *d) Social engagement*

This dimension is usually found in studies about engagement in foreign language learning for its distinctive nature (Svalberg, 2009; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In particular, social engagement refers to whether one will make an effort to interact with others. A language learner is considered socially engaged when they pay attention and respond to what is being communicated (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In her work, Svalberg (2009) points out that a learner with great social engagement will be ready to interact and strive to keep their conversation going regardless of facing difficulties in terms of linguistic competence.

## *3. The correlation among the dimensions of student engagement*

In their review of engagement in language learning, Hiver et al. (2021) propose that emotional engagement can influence the other dimensions since it can affect how students behave or perceive their language learning experience, thus determining the degree to which they participate in learning. This can be traced back to Fredricks et al. (2004). Specifically, the three types of learning engagement are "dynamically interrelated" within a learner in a real-life context (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 61). Svalberg (2009) also shares a similar view by arguing the dimensions can "encroach on each other" (p. 255). For instance, a student's contextual emotional state can impact their use of learning strategies related to cognitive engagement. Another example by Svalberg (2009) is that feeling we can be in control of a conversation can raise our readiness to interact with others.

#### *4. Factors affecting the dimensions*

So far in this paper, the importance of student engagement from a theoretical perspective has been demonstrated through its various definitions, classifications, and multidimensional nature. However, it is inadequate if the practicality of understanding the notion is not taken into account. Therefore, this part is dedicated to examining both positive and negative influences of learning engagement. Since this study takes place in an EFL context, the focus will be on what affects engagement in learning a foreign language.

Firstly, Svalberg (2009) argue that learning environment such as noise or temperature can affect how strategic students can be in learning. Secondly, how a learning task is designed has a significant role in “facilitating” or “impeding” a student’s cognitive engagement (Svalberg, 2009, p. 255). She suggests a task should be designed in a way it can be matched with students’ different levels and learning styles. In addition, a task should aim at motivating students trivially by being purposeful, attainable, but competitive. Newmann (1992) also points out the needed characteristics of an ideal learning task, some of which are overlapped with Svalberg’s (2009). Specifically, a task must be enjoyable, authenticated, and provide students with opportunities for interactions, self-reflection of their academic performance. Additionally, topics with high relevance and interest are beneficial in helping language learners become more emotionally engaged (Svalberg, 2009). Thirdly, the role of a teacher is highly significant in impacting different dimensions of student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). They argue that students’ adherence to school or classroom rules when they receive great teacher support is a sign of increased behavioral engagement. Moreover, emotional engagement is also affected due to the fact that students’ attitude becomes more positive when teachers are being closed to them (Fredricks et al., 2004). This connection is reported by Svalberg (2009) when she claims such social relationships can influence language students to become more socially engaged by being more ready to interact with their classmates to fulfill a given task.

Another crucial point related to teacher support is made by Fredricks et al. (2004). They propose that teachers can be at risk of dampening either social, cognitive, or emotional engagement if they cannot manage to design activities that foster academic and social outcomes since these outcomes can help students process appropriate learning approaches and increase their sense of belonging. This is also found in Svalberg’s argument, which claims teachers must be precisely consistent in instructing students to perform a task (Svalberg, 2009).

#### *C. Studies about tertiary student engagement in learning English online during the pandemic*

The last part of the literature review examines four studies whose focus is on how English learning engagement at higher education is perceived in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the causal factors behind it. These studies are selected as they share several similarities. First of all, they all have an identical purpose. Secondly, the participants from each study are all undergraduates who learn English merely as a subject. Most importantly, they are all conducted during the pandemic where e-learning at universities becomes mandatory where both teachers and students are, to a certain degree, forced to adapt to study online.

The first study by Khattala Asma and Houichi Asma (2021) was conducted in Algeria to investigate 29 teachers' and 46 students' points of view about e-learning and how it can be fostered. In addition, online questionnaires and interviews are used to collect data. Regarding the findings, the student participants generally demonstrate a poor level of engagement in learning English online due to a range of causes. Specifically, they are emotionally disengaged with this learning type due to technical problems, including them being inadequately equipped with a stable connection, modern devices, or the necessary skills to use them. Moreover, they also admit to lacking the essential strategies to study online efficiently, which explains their low cognitive engagement. Finally, these participants' social engagement also suffers. They claim that Algerian students have been "isolated" from communicating with their teachers and classmates since most of their virtual interactions are with their screens or online documents.

The second study was done in Indonesia by Yunik Susanti to analyze her students' engagement in learning English online (2020). In this qualitative research, 120 students from one university complete a closed-ended questionnaire, and the results are slightly different from the first research. The participants hold their neutral opinion about how cognitively engaged they are. Despite not having any major difficulties in understanding their EFL teachers, not all of them manage to learn effectively by answering their teachers' questions or expressing their points of view about their lessons. As for their degree of emotional engagement, more than 50% of the participants choose silence as a response to their teacher's request for interaction out of fear that they may make mistakes. However, their level of interest in an online EFL class remains the same as when they study offline. Behavioral engagement is the only dimension that is rated completely positive. Specifically, most of the participants claim to be responsible for their e-learning by logging in and submitting their assigned work on time, as well as remaining active during their lessons.

A mixture of positive and negative undergraduates' perceptions towards engagement in learning English via the Internet is captured in the next paper, which is also carried out in Indonesia (Laili & Nashir, 2021). The participants are 103 students majoring in medical-related fields, and their contributions were collected through questionnaires and interviews via Google Form and Zoom. The results show that the respondents tend to have great behavioral engagement. Although the majority of them admit poor Internet connection and expensive Internet quota are evident obstacles in learning English online, they mostly claim to have a "high spirit" in studying the language by trying to reach a place with better connection or submitting their assignments online to avoid violating the course rules (Laili & Nashir, 2021, p. 693). However, this is not the case for the learners' cognitive, emotional and social engagement, which influence each other. In particular, more than two-thirds of the participants experienced communication breakdowns in their online English class due to bad connections and ineffective teaching and learning methods. This and the fact they must look at their device's screen for too long has led to their boredom in e-learning, which also results in most of them lacking the enthusiasm to practice speaking English online.

The last study also examines the engagement of English students in higher education in

Indonesia (Sari Famularsih, 2020). In addition to a questionnaire and Zoom interviews, the study also applies observation as its third tool to collect data from 165 undergraduates at Teknokrat Indonesia University. The findings from this study are more positive than the other two Indonesian investigations. Firstly, the participants state they enjoy participating in several online learning activities, which indicates they are emotionally engaged. Their positive social engagement is also recorded since most of them are willing to engage in online interactive tasks and apply them to their real life. Most significantly, these affectively and socially engaged students are driven to study English online since they can use the learning materials very efficiently, which even motivates them to seek different “learning ways to make the course interesting to them” (p. 354). In other words, these students are cognitively engaged. This is shown even more clearly through online observation. Specifically, the students take on an active role to learn from raising questions, replying to their peers' answers, asking for teacher support, and seeking extra sources to complete their online tasks.

In summary, the above studies can be argued to precisely reflect the complex nature of student engagement: its contextual dependence. While one engagement dimension may strongly emerge in one context, the same dimension is reported to be poorly low in another. This aligns with Janosz (2012), arguing that contextual factors should receive the utmost attention to comprehend learning engagement truly.

### *Research Questions*

The paper expects to fulfill its purpose by aiming to answer the following research questions:

1. How do undergraduates at HUFU think about their engagement in studying English virtually due to the pandemic?
2. What are the factors that influence their engagement?

## **Methods**

### *Pedagogical Setting & Participants*

This study takes place in the Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry (HUFU), and the participants are four focus groups of students from different majors but English. As a non-English major student at this college, one needs to complete four English courses, including Elementary English, English 1, English 2, and English 3. During the COVID-19 outbreak, all their English classes were done online via the application called Zoom. In addition, an online English class at HUFU lasts the same length as an offline class, which is two hours and fifteen minutes a week.

### *Design of the Study*

The study applies an exploratory design for the following reasons. Firstly, the type of design is for exploring "unknown areas of research," although the studied problems may have been in



existence for a while (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006, p. 44). This is true for the paper since there has been little effort in investigating EFL student engagement in higher education during the pandemic in Vietnam. Moreover, its open and inductive nature is expected to help the writer have a more in-depth look at what is being investigated (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006).

### *Data collection & analysis*

The data is collected through two research tools. Firstly, a demographic questionnaire is issued to the participants individually on Google Form. The questionnaire contains two parts, including both closed-ended and open-ended items. While the first part aims to gather the background information of each respondent, the second part focuses on the participants' general views about their e-learning experience. Secondly, four group interviews with five to six members in each are initiated on Zoom to gather their insights about how they evaluate their engagement in learning English online and what may influence it. This type of interview is chosen since it possesses certain characteristics which are identical to the ones of this project. Firstly, focus groups are suitable for creating comfort for any participants to express their emotions, beliefs, or perceptions (Anderson, 1996). Secondly, respondents are not constrained in terms of waiting for their turn to speak, which is encouraging to every member as they can exercise freedom of speech (Birmingham, 2014). Also, according to Birmingham (2014), a group interview proves more advantageous than an individual interview because the former can initiate a snowball effect. Specifically, an in-depth discussion can start with one member sharing his thoughts which are responded to by other members. This can give rise to a great deal of information regarding the respondents' perspectives about a topic.

The information gathered from the questionnaire, especially from its second part, is expected to help the writer better understand the participants' perceptions of their English e-learning experience. These perceptions can support the design of the questions used in the focus group to effectively capture the groups' beliefs about their engagement in English e-learning.

It should be noted that since the participants are non-major English students whose proficiency may not be insufficient to communicate in English with ease, both the questionnaire and focus-group interviews are conducted in Vietnamese then translated into English by the author.

## **Results/Findings and discussion**

This part presents the findings from the questionnaire via Google Form and four group interviews conducted on Zoom.

### *A. Questionnaire*

There is a total of five items. Table 1 reveals the findings from the first four closed-ended questions aiming to gather demographic information.

**Table 1: Demographic information**

Question	Results (%)
1. What is your current academic year at HUFU? ➤ First-year ➤ Second-year ➤ Third-year ➤ Fourth-year	8.7 69.6 13 8.7
2. What is the current English course you are enrolling in at HUFU? ➤ Basic English ➤ English 1 ➤ English 2 ➤ English 3	13 30.4 30.4 26.1
3. What type of device are you using to study English online at HUFU? ➤ A laptop or a personal computer ➤ A tablet ➤ A smartphone ➤ Others	56.5 0 43.5 0
4. How do you rate your English e-learning experience at HUFU? ➤ Positive ➤ Negative ➤ Neutral	34.8 0 65.2

As can be seen from the table, most of the participants are in their second year at HUFU, which also explains the English course they are taking. In terms of their means of learning online, slightly more than half of the respondents claim they own a laptop or a desktop computer, while the remaining use a smartphone to study. The responses to the fourth item suggest that the participants tend to hold a neutral position regarding their online English learning experience. These are illustrated further through the last item, which requests the respondents to clarify their choice in the fourth item.

Regarding the fifth item, eight out of twenty-three respondents claim to be satisfied with their e-learning reveal several reasons. Firstly, three of them suggest they receive great support from their teachers. Secondly, the other two claims that online learning can ease their nerves interacting with their lessons or teachers. The remaining three believe e-learning helps them save time traveling to school. Below are some of the responses supporting English e-learning due to positive teacher support, interaction, and accessibility, respectively.

*My teacher is very supportive. She always observes the class to provide help.*

*The lecture always pays attention to my answers and helps me correct my grammar errors.*

*I feel comfortable when talking to my teacher.*

*I can send messages to my teacher privately to ask for help without disrupting the class.*

*I can save time traveling to the campus and back to my place.*

The remaining fifteen participants, however, have mixed opinions about their experience. Although they still admit the benefits of this learning method, such as helping them avoid the risk of being infected by the virus or instantaneous access, the same survey takers raise their concerns about the drawbacks, including unstable connection, insufficient teacher aid, and infrequent poor interaction. The typical comments can be found below.

*The good thing about e-learning is it prevents me from getting the virus, but I find it very hard to practice speaking and listening.*

*I can stay safe during the pandemic, but I sometimes lose track of learning due to my poor wifi connection.*

*I think everything is boring because my teacher is just trying to finish a lesson. It's particularly hard to communicate with a foreign teacher because I don't always understand everything, and there is little support from my Vietnamese teacher.*

Moreover, there is one response relating to the matter of task design, which should encourage interactions.

*I think there should be some fun activities added to a lesson. For example, I would prefer the type of game that raises interactions among students.*

### *B. Focus-group interviews*

After all the respondents complete the questionnaire, they are formed into four groups with a different schedule to conduct a group interview via Zoom. While two groups contain six members, the other two have five. This meets the condition to carry out group interviews which is "...though fewer than four may jeopardize the valuable group dynamic you seek, and more than twelve may make the group unwieldy." (Birmingham, 2014, p. 98). In each focus group, six questions will be raised to gather insights from the participants. While the first item aims to investigate how each group comprehends the concept of student engagement, the next four questions are designed to measure each dimension of student engagement among the participants. Finally, the third item is to collect the participants' comments on what can determine their engagement in learning English online. All the items have been translated and they can be found in Table 2 below.

**Table 2. Students' perceptions towards engagement in English e-learning**

Question	Content
1	In your own understanding, what is student engagement?
2	What do you think about the following when you study English online? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your focus</li> <li>• Your effort</li> <li>• Your responsibility</li> </ul>
3	What do you think about the following when you study English online? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your feelings about the English language</li> <li>• Your feelings about your English lecturers</li> </ul>
4	What do you think about your readiness to interact with your lecturers and classmates in any learning activities during an online English lesson?
5	What do you think about your learning strategies when you study English online?
6	In your opinion, what can influence your engagement in learning English online?

As Table 2 shows, items number 2, 3, 4, and 5 focus on exploring how the respondents evaluate their own engagement in their virtual English class. In particular, behavioral, emotional, social, and cognitive engagement are brought to the discussion, respectively. In addition, the design of these items is inspired by the work of Fredricks et al. (2004) in summarizing how behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement can be measured. As for the item related to social engagement, it is based on what Svalberg (2009) suggests how this dimension can emerge.

The next section is for analyzing the responses from each group interview through which certain themes are expected to emerge.

### *1. The participants' definitions of student engagement*

Regarding the first item, there are several overlaps about how the participants define student engagement. Specifically, the answers from all the groups demonstrate that learning engagement is a complex concept, which agrees with the previous literature (Finn, 1989; F. Newmann et al., 1992; Fredricks et al., 2004; Appleton et al., 2006; Mahdikhani & Rezaei, 2015). It can be concluded from the responses that student engagement, for these participants, emerges not only in a classroom but also before and even after it. These are shown in some of the most typical responses below.

*For me, student engagement is the idea of a student paying all of his attention to a lesson. (Group 1 – Speaker 1)*

*Before coming to school, and the engaged student will prepare for a new lesson by reading materials in advance. (Group 2 – Speaker 1)*

*An engaged student always focuses on a lesson without doing any other irrelevant things. (Group 3 – Speaker 1)*

*An engaged student is ready to join any activities of a lesson. When having trouble, they*

*will ask their teacher for support. (Group 3 – Speaker 3)*

*If a student is engaged, he will spend extra time exploring further what is related to his subject. For example, I prefer playing video games because I can always learn more English vocabulary from them. (Group 4 – Speaker 2)*

## *2. Measuring behavioral engagement*

The second item aims to study how the participants perceive their degree of behavioral engagement. In particular, they are asked to evaluate their own degree of focus, effort, and responsibility when learning English online. These three categories are suggested by Fredricks et al. (2004) in their effort to summarize how to measure behavioral engagement. The findings suggest that these participants' behavioral engagement fluctuates depending on several reasons.

As for the level of focus, some participants claim to be very focused while the others do not. Below are some of the responses with their explanations

*There are days when it rains heavily, I cannot hear anything my teacher is saying, so I cannot focus effectively. (Group 1 – Speaker 4)*

*I would say I am highly focused when my foreign teacher is in charge. He has many activities that encourage us to speak English and he also teaches at an appropriate pace. However, my Vietnamese teacher is very boring. (Group 2 – Speaker 3)*

*My Vietnamese teacher does not really create an interest for us to study, so I barely pay attention to his lesson.*

*I know learning English is about interacting, but this is missing in my online lessons, so I lack my focus. (Group 3 – Speaker 4)*

*In my online classes, there are always chances for my friends and me to interact. Therefore, I am usually focused on these tasks. (Group 4 – Speaker 1)*

*Sometimes, the connection from my teacher's device is not good. It really bothers me. (Group 2 – Speaker 1)*

For the second category, about half of the participants in each group state they have been putting a great deal of effort into online learning.

*I think my effort is high because I want good results from this subject to boost my overall GPA. (Group 1 – Speaker 3)*

*I must take a TOEIC test in the near future, so I think I have to work hard on studying English. (Group 1 – Speaker 6)*

*I figure I can try more when learning online since I can interact without showing my face. (Group 2 – Speaker 2)*

*My friends' good English also pushes me to try more. (Group 3 – Speaker 5)*

*I can try to study English more when doing it online because I have more freedom to*

*learn by instantly using Google or an online dictionary to help me answer a teacher's question, which is something I cannot do in a traditional class. (Group 4 – Speaker 5)*

However, the remaining interviewees admit they have not tried enough to learn English online because of some common causes. They are not having an interest in the language, missing learning materials, being distracted, and experiencing interrupted connection.

*As a student majoring in natural science, I don't have much interest in English. That's why I have little effort in learning it. (Group 1 – Speaker 2)*

*I used to study this subject very hard in my real classroom. But when we do it online, it's not the same anymore since I am easily distracted by my surroundings. (Group 1 - Speaker 5)*

*I left my English coursebook in the city during the lockdown period, so it's really difficult to try to learn online without having a book next to me. (Group 2 – Speaker 3)*

*The unstable connection in my place reduces my effort in learning the subject. (Group 3 -Speaker 1)*

When asked to rate their responsibility in learning English online, most members of the first two groups state they are highly accountable for this subject. Meanwhile, the same response also emerges from the other groups but with a lower frequency. The common responses admitting being highly responsible are below.

*I believe I have great responsibility for my English learning since I will need to use English for my major, which is International Business. Besides, I don't want to disappoint my parents. (Group 1 – Speaker 3)*

*I can see that my teacher is trying very hard to teach us online, and my parents really have high expectations for me. Therefore, I must be responsible for my learning. (Group 3 – Speaker 5)*

*I'm never late for my English Zoom class and always turn on my microphone to answer my teacher's questions. (Group 1 – Speaker 5)*

*I think I and my friends are responsible especially during e-learning. We usually remind each other to complete our assignments, or we can support each other to answer a difficult question.*

*I realize that my English is not good enough, so I must be more responsible for improving it. (Group 1 – Speaker 4)*

*I understand there are many problems with e-learning, so I think I must be more accountable for myself. (Group 4 – Speaker 4)*

*It doesn't matter if I'm learning English online or offline. I take responsibility for my studies since I want to be as good as my two sisters, who use English very well. (Group 4 – Speaker 2)*

Moreover, some members state that they can maintain their responsibility during e-learning better than traditional learning. The reasons for that are:

*When I must study English at school, being late for class sometimes causes me to sit at the end of the room, and I cannot see anything my teacher is showing. But when it comes to e-learning, I can ask the teacher to rewind the parts that I have missed. (Group 2 – Speaker 5)*

*I admit I had become more responsible when I learned English online because back then, when I studied offline at school, I was distracted by my part-time job. However, due to the lockdown, the only thing I do is study, which doesn't scatter my responsibility. (Group 2 – Speaker 1)*

The rest of the interviewees state they are less responsible for studying English during their e-learning. Moreover, some of them argue they cannot maintain the same level of responsibility.

*I feel more responsible during my offline class because I can be influenced by my friends. When knowing they have finished their tasks, I am urged to do the same. It's different when I study online since there is no one around to push me. (Group 1 – Speaker 6)*

*I agree. This is the same way I learn. I usually want to study with friends. (Group 1 – Speaker 1)*

*I do try to take note of my lessons but rarely go back and see the notes. (Group 3 – Speaker 3).*

*I agree I take pictures of the lesson slides, but I don't always revisit them on my phone, only when there's a test coming. (Group 3 – Speaker 4)*

*I understand that English is important for both the short and long term, and I also want to make my parents happy about my study. However, I must admit I don't really have high responsibility for learning it since I am not interested in the language. (Group 4 – Speaker 1)*

### *3. Measuring emotional engagement*

#### *a) Feelings towards English*

Regarding emotions towards the English language, most of the participants from the four groups have a positive standpoint for various reasons, including the interactive power of English or its instrumental values.

*I admit I haven't tried my best in learning English, but I always like the language. I used to serve at a restaurant, and knowing some English helps me communicate with the foreign diners there. (Group 1 – Speaker 5)*

*I like English because it can help me find a better future job. In addition, I can be a part of many communities, such as some clubs at our university or a group of freelancers.*

(Group 1 – Speaker 6)

*I love English when it comes to its communicative advantage. However, I find its grammar extremely hard. (Group 2 – Speaker 1)*

*Because I like English, I think the documents written in English are better than the ones in Vietnamese. (Group 3 – Speaker 4)*

*I have used my smartphone more often recently, and I discover there is a great Vietnamese person who speaks English very well. I think she makes me like the language more. Since then, I bought a notebook and started writing down new English vocabulary. (Group 4 – Speaker 3)*

Nevertheless, few participants still have a neutral position against this language. Specifically, despite saying they like English, they also have negative feelings such as worry, tiredness, or disappointment.

*I really like English, but I also feel discouraged since I haven't improved much after studying it for a long time. (Group 1 – Speaker 4)*

*I like English because it's fun, but I'm scared of its grammar rules. In addition, the Vietnamese people around me may think I am weird if I try to speak English. (Group 2 – Speaker 4)*

*I'm very concerned about my poor English vocabulary. (Group 3 – Speaker 5)*

#### *b) Feelings towards English lecturers during e-learning*

The overall feeling from the groups is also positive about their English teachers during e-learning. Specifically, the participants have commented positively about their teachers' attitudes and support.

*I agree, my teachers are so nice and funny. They always try to interact with us. (Group 1 – Speaker 5)*

*My teachers are friendly, and they make me feel safe when talking to them. (Group 2 – Speaker 5)*

*My teacher even took pictures of our coursebook and sent them to our Zalo group since some of us were unable to buy the book due to the lockdown. (Group 2 – Speaker 5)*

*My teacher often helps me correct my pronunciation mistakes. (Group 4 – Speaker 5)*

#### *c) Feelings towards online English lessons*

Under this aspect, the participants are mostly satisfied with their online English lessons and their things.

*There are some teachers usually trying to help students depending on what they need. For example, if they wish to speak English, then they can speak English. Or the teacher will help them to write in English if they need help in writing. (Group 1 – Speaker 6)*



*I sometimes prefer studying with a foreign teacher because he often includes games in his lesson, which is fun for me. (Group 2 – Speaker 4)*

*During my online lessons, my teacher usually tries to remind the students of important grammar points, which is different from my previous teachers. (Group 3 – Speaker 3)*

*I am satisfied with my online lessons since my teacher usually applies different techniques to make them more attractive. (Group 3 – Speaker 5)*

*I feel like my online lessons are more active than the traditional ones because my teacher usually involves games and interactive activities for us. (Group 4 – Speaker 3)*

#### *4. Measuring social engagement*

Upon reflecting on their own social engagement in learning English online, while all members of the second group admit they are highly engaged in any interactive activities, the remaining have mixed opinions on how ready they are to interact in an online English lesson.

*Because nobody can see my face, I feel more comfortable interacting. I don't have to feel embarrassed when making mistakes or criticized when volunteering to speak. (Group 2 – Speaker 1)*

*I think my readiness to interact depends on how difficult a task is. If it is not too hard, then I can use Google to help me seek answers and vice versa. (Group 1 – Speaker 2)*

*I only try to interact when knowing I may gain a bonus. (Group 1 – Speaker 1)*

*I have almost no problems interacting with my teacher, but it's not the same for my friends. Inside a break-out room on Zoom, they barely talk, although I try to support them, which really affects my mood. (Group 3 - Speaker 3)*

*I am less confident to interact with my foreign teachers because I'm afraid they don't understand me for my poor English vocabulary and pronunciation. (Group 4 – Speaker 4)*

#### *5. Measuring cognitive engagement*

The last dimension to be measured from the groups relates to how the participants invested in their learning psychologically. While most of the responses from the first three groups indicate a low level of cognitive engagement in learning English online, the members of the last group appear to be more cognitively engaged.

*I don't think I have an effective way to study English online. Everything is just boring since I have to keep staring at my screen. (Group 1 – Speaker 1)*

*I agree, I hesitate to ask my teacher during an online class while I don't have the same problem in a real classroom. (Group 1 – Speaker 6)*

*I feel very sleepy if my teacher is boring and I don't even know how to note my lessons properly though I have already prepared my notebook and pen. (Group 2 – Speaker –*

Speaker 1)

*I mostly sit still in my online lessons. There are times that I try to interact, but the poor internet connection stops me. I usually take pictures of the slides but rarely reexamine them. (Group 2 – Speaker 4)*

*I also figure online lessons can be recorded, which I can benefit from by being able to go back to study pronunciation. However, sometimes it does not matter how many times I revisit a recording. I still don't understand my foreign teacher since she spoke English all the time. (Group 2 – Speaker 3)*

*It depends a lot on my mood. On the day that I feel good, I can be very focused and take note of everything very effectively without needing any support. However, the same thing doesn't happen when I'm irritated by something. (Group 3 – Speaker 1)*

*I do know how to use technology to help my learning such as an online dictionary or lesson recording. However, I don't always review them. (Group 3 – Speaker 3)*

Although most of the respondents from the first three groups have problems with their English e-learning, it is worth noting that the remaining ones have an opposite experience, which is identical to the findings from the fourth group.

*I believe my e-learning experience is fairly effective since I always read the materials in terms of grammar and vocabulary prior to joining the class. Furthermore, I even review my lessons. (Group 3 – Speaker 5)*

*My teacher usually informs us of the upcoming lesson via Zalo. Therefore, I'm more well-prepared for it. (Group 4 – Speaker 1)*

*I usually preview my lessons and attempt to understand them more by using social networks or Google. (Group 4 – Speaker 3)*

*Whenever I don't understand a word from my lesson, I can quickly use an online dictionary to check for its meaning and pronunciation. (Group 4 – Speaker 4)*

## *6. Factors affecting student engagement*

Though the reasons for the participants' engagement in their English e-learning have been revealed through the previous four questions, the last question is still raised with the intention of summarizing and identifying more causal factors (if any) determining how engaged each participant is. In summary, there are five emerging themes from the group discussion, which are demonstrated in Table 3.

**Table 3. Contributing factors to student engagement in English e-learning**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Sub-factors</b>	<b>Typical responses</b>
1. Surroundings	Weather	<i>It sometimes rains heavily for a long time in my place. I cannot hear anything my teacher is saying, which is frustrating. (Group 3 – Speaker 1)</i>
	Internet connection	<i>I am very focused on the lesson until my internet connection is disrupted. (Group 1 – Speaker 2)</i> <i>Once I was marked absent because the teacher was checking attendance and my connect was unstable. (Group 2 – Speaker 5)</i> <i>There is no discount on my school fee, and I even have to pay for using the Internet which is sometimes very unstable. I feel very discouraged. (Group 1 – Speaker 5)</i>
	Family	<i>Sometimes while I am studying, my parents need me to do something for them, thus I become distracted. (Group 1 – Speaker 2)</i> <i>I am living in a big family and there is almost no privacy for me to study on Zoom. The noise makes it hard for me to focus. (Group 1 – Speaker 5)</i>
	Neighbors	<i>My neighbor is building his new house at the moment, and it is undoubtedly too noisy. (Group 2 – Speaker 3)</i> <i>My neighbors keep singing karaoke and I have to hear everything. (Group 3 – Speaker 3)</i>
2. Teacher	Teaching methods	<i>My teacher sometimes goes too fast in the lesson. I cannot catch up with it. (Group 2 – Speaker 3)</i> <i>My Vietnamese teacher sometimes speaks English during the whole lesson, and I cannot understand everything she says because of my poor English. (Group 3 – Speaker 3)</i>
	Interactions	<i>If my teacher can interact with me more, then my learning spirit is very high. (Group 3 – Speaker 2)</i> <i>When I can understand what my teacher is saying, I feel very positive. (Group 3 – Speaker 4)</i>
	Attitudes	<i>My teacher is just trying to finish his lesson as quickly as possible. (Group 3 – Speaker 2)</i> <i>My teacher's enthusiasm in a lesson can affect my learning. (Group 4 – Speaker 4)</i>
3. Feelings		<i>I am sometimes easily distracted during an online lesson since there's nobody there to supervise me. (Group 1 – Speaker 6)</i> <i>My emotions matter very much. If I am interested in a lesson or a task is within my capability, I will be more ready to study. (Group 3 – Speaker 1)</i>

4. Inefficient strategies to study online	<p><i>I think that many students, including me are not used to this new way of learning since we have been in a traditional classroom for a decade. (Group 2 – Speaker 4)</i></p> <p><i>A lot of my friends are from the center of Vietnam, and they have never studied via Zoom, so it is quite a challenge for them to adapt. (Group 2 – Speaker 3)</i></p>
5. Student role	<p><i>I think it depends a lot on a student himself. If he truly knows the subject is important, he will try his best to participate. (Group 1 – Speaker 4)</i></p> <p><i>One of the factors influencing a student’s engagement is the student’s motivation to learn. (Group 2 – Speaker 1)</i></p> <p><i>I believe the factors can be from the outside and from the inside of students to help them engage. (Group 3 – Speaker 5)</i></p>

## Discussion

Overall, there are two common themes arising from the group interviews’ findings. Firstly, different participants possess a different degree of engagement in their online English class. Secondly, even though several other interviewees claim to have the same engagement level, the reasons for such claims also vary. Among the contributors to the respondents’ engagement in studying English online, some of them are also the same determinants to whether these participants have a positive or negative e-learning experience, which is explored in the questionnaire. Specifically, positive teacher support, having chances to interact, appropriate task design, and stable Internet connection should be guaranteed to foster students’ e-learning experience, through which their engagement can also be benefited. These findings corresponded to the work of Le (2021) and Nguyen and Nguyen (2021). The two studies are also conducted in Vietnam to explore the current situation of online learning at the tertiary level. When being asked to reflect upon their experience in learning English online during the COVID-19 outbreak, the participants’ responses are overlapped with what is discovered in this paper. As for the research by Nguyen and Nguyen (2021), the students’ constant unstable Internet connection, along with their insufficient technical skills, can dampen their e-learning experience. Regarding Le (2021), her findings are similar to this paper about the role of teachers in affecting undergraduates’ engagement in learning English online. More specifically, a teacher’s teaching methods, his lesson design as well as the motivation he gives to students play a major role in making them more or less engaged in learning English virtually (Le, 2021). Moreover, the respondents in Le’s study (2021) also show more engagement if they are given more chances to interact with their teachers and their classmates during an online lesson, which is one of the discoveries from the paper. Furthermore, other factors are also revealed through the last question of the group discussion.

Regarding the participants’ behavioral engagement, their participation in a virtual English lesson is determined by the role of their teachers, having opportunities to interact, and external factors, including internet connection or weather. As for their great effort and responsibility in

learning English online, the respondents are driven by meeting the academic needs of the school or parents as well as being inspired by their peers. Meanwhile, those who state they have not tried their best explain their low interest in English, not having enough materials, and an unstable internet connection are the causes. These findings are in alignment with the previously reviewed studies (Fredricks et al., 2004; Susanti, 2020 and Laili & Nashir, 2021). For example, the students in Laili and Nashir's study try to comply with their institution's rules by attempting to find another place with a better connection since the one in their house is broken. Moreover, Fredricks et al. (2004) confirm both teachers and peers have certain impacts on a student's behavioral engagement.

The findings in terms of emotional engagement reflect what Svalberg (2009) argues. Firstly, it can be high once students recognize "the immediate relevance" of their target language, which relates to the practical benefits of being fluent at it (p. 253). Secondly, the same driver can also make learners more autonomous in terms of their language learning. Thirdly, how a learning task is designed can also determine how emotionally engaged learners are. Furthermore, the work by Fredricks et al. (2004) also emphasizes the significance of teacher support. They propose that students may "experience emotional disengagement" if their teacher focuses on academic performances (p. 75). Fortunately, this is not the case for the groups in this study since they appear to have friendly and considerate teachers.

From the typical responses to the question about social engagement, it can be argued that feelings and affiliation have a crucial role in a student's level of social engagement. This has been confirmed by Phild and Duchesne (2016), with their argument being "Social engagement is closely linked to emotional engagement, particularly among child and adolescent learners where affiliation is powerful, at a period when peers provide a unique context for learning." (pp. 9-10). Furthermore, these results are identical to the studies by Laili and Nashir (2021) and Sari Famularsih (2020), in which students' boredom can stop them from interacting.

The low and high sense of cognitive engagement and the rationales behind it are similar to the findings from different scholars. Specifically, the responses admitting not having an effective way of learning English online indicate these participants possess a low level of self-efficacy, which is a determinant of low cognitive engagement (Greene, 2015; Asma & Asma, 2021). Moreover, the interviewees who have negative feelings such as boredom or sleepiness are bound to be poorly engaged. This is confirmed in the work of Svalberg (2009) and Greene (2015), when they conclude emotions or attitudes can enhance or diminish cognitive engagement. In addition, the fact that some participants state they do try to record the online lessons but seldom revisit them or only do that prior to a test reveals they are not persistent in learning. Meanwhile, being persistent is one of the indicators of deep cognitive engagement in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Greene, 2015). As for the participants with a higher degree of cognitive engagement, it can be understood from their responses that they possess a high sense of control in learning. In other words, it is "mastery goals" that make them more engaged (Green, 2015, p. 21).

## Conclusion

The paper has reflected precisely how complex the concept of student engagement is. What form of engagement in learning English is being demonstrated by a student and what drives or impedes such demonstrations are challenging to explore. This is made even more troublesome during the coronavirus epidemic when all teaching and learning activities must be performed online, which poses several more challenges. According to the findings, a student may engage behaviorally and emotionally due to their high sense of compliance as well as a positive experience with their teachers. It can be implied from the results that teachers hold an even more pivotal role in the online learning context. If one can be more proficient in using the advantages of the Internet to create more intriguing online lessons, their students' interest in learning is likely to grow. In other words, the students become more effectively engaged in virtual learning. This can be accomplished by teachers receiving more trainings related to how to enhance their online teaching experience. However, the findings also reveal the participants are struggling with how to learn English online efficiently and such struggles can put their initial positive behaviors and emotions in jeopardy. This is also a gap from the study because it does not manage to investigate more in-depth why the participants have such a low degree of cognitive engagement. Therefore, the stakes are raised for future studies which should be aiming at discovering what is problematic to tertiary students' English online learning strategies and how to better the situation since e-learning has become an option rather than a solution in higher education.

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