

# **STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE ON LEARNING ENGLISH ESSAY WRITING WITH TEACHER'S APPLICATION OF ONLINE TOOLS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recently, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic which has broadly initiated the rise of digital literacy and teaching has inevitably been taking place on online platform. Converted from the conventional teaching mode to the online mode, both teachers and students certainly faced difficulties, especially in the area of EFL. Teaching and learning English essay writing has always been a challenging task for EFL teachers and learners. This paper aims to examine the non-English major third-year students' experience on learning an English Essay Writing course with teacher's application of online tools at University of Foreign Language Studies-The University of Da Nang (UFLS-UD). 22 Oriental Studies major third-year students attending the course Viet luan tieng Anh-01 DPH (English Essay Writing course-01 DPH) in academic year 2021-2022 were surveyed with questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Data analysis shows that students experienced many difficulties in learning English Essay Writing virtually, among which the most difficult one is "Lacking face-to-face communication in solving group tasks...." Their feedback on the efficiency of the online tools applied in the course was also detected. Some suggestions for improving the quality of teaching and learning English Essay Writing with the help of online tools were also proposed.

**Keyword:** English essay writing, experience, online tools, feedback, virtual

## **INTRODUCTION**

The industrial revolution version 4.0 has globally influenced and obviously is leading to the digital transformation in all aspects of human life, education included. Recently, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has broadly initiated the rise of digital literacy and teaching has inevitably been taking place on online platform. Conventional teaching was switched to online mode. Both teachers and students faced, especially in the area of EFL which, in nature, is a process of face-to-face communication. Also, in TEFL it is said teaching writing has always been a challenging task for EFL teachers and learners. Among genres to teach, English essay is thought to be the most challenging. To cope with the online challenge in teaching the English essay the teachers have applied many online tools to enhance students' efficiency for their learning of English essay writing. This study aims at examining the student experience on learning an English Essay Writing course with teacher's application of online tools at University of Foreign Language Studies-The University of Da Nang (UFLS-UD) to find out their difficulties and feedback on the effectiveness of these tools for their learning of the course.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### ***Previous studies related to the research topic***

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been many studies on the utility of online tools to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on teaching in general, TEFL in particular. However, the research on teaching writing online is not much. Mehlenbacher et al. (2000) highlighted the complexity of effective teaching and the difficulty of making comparisons between the online and the classroom environments. Selvarasu et al. (2021) investigated the use of internet tools such as Knoword, H5P dialogue cards, 'H5P Free Writing Tool, 'Microsoft Teams Assignment' in teaching writing in general at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Oman. Nguyen Van Long, Nguyen Nu Thuy Uyen (2021) introduced basic principles and practice of CALL. In this course book they provided some tools applicable to different writing process stages such as Mind Meister, Thesaurus, and Blogs. Unlike the previous studies just mentioned, the current case study focused on the third-year non-English major students' experience on learning English essay writing with the application of online tools like Zalo the breakout room function of the Microsoft Teams platform, Jam board, Padlet, and Paragraph Punch by the teacher at University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang, Vietnam and propose some suggestions to improve the quality of their learning of the course.

### ***Some background concepts***

#### *English essay*

At university, students learn various writing genres such as personal letters, business letters, memos, advertisements, instructions, paragraphs and essays. Among which, writing the English essay is thought to be the most challenging task for EFL students because an essay is "a piece of writing several paragraphs long instead of just one or two paragraphs. It is written about one topic, just as a paragraph is. However, the topic of an essay is too complex to discuss in one paragraph. Therefore, you must divide the topic into several paragraphs, one for each major point. Then you must tie all of the separate paragraphs together by adding an introduction and a conclusion." (Oshima, 1998: 100). It has become more problematic when the teaching and learning occurred in the virtual environment.

#### *Virtual environment*

Virtual environment is a networked co-working space which allows users to interact with both the computing environment and the work of other users. Email, chat, and web-based document sharing applications are all examples of virtual environments.

#### *Online tools applied to teaching English essay writing: Zalo*

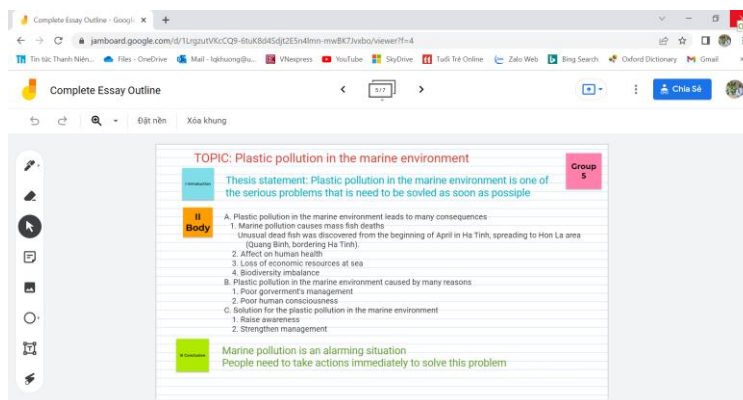
Zalo is an OTT service (short for over the top - a term that refers to the data provided on the Internet platform but not a network provider or any other organization can interfere). Like Facebook, Zalo allows users to send messages, call and chat with friends for free everywhere. Especially this application is created by Vietnamese people and developed by Vinagame. In the essay lesson, handouts of tasks designed for students were sent to them via the class zalo. Comments to group work were also provided for students through this platform.

#### *Breakout room function of the Microsoft Teams platform*

A feature of Microsoft Team meeting room division helps to divide and separate the number of meeting attendees into small groups for private discussion in the meeting. The host has the right to arrange each participant in the meeting or classroom randomly or at will. In the English essay lessons, this application is frequently used whenever the students were asked to work in small groups, for example, to brainstorm for ideas to narrow down a general theme to a specific topic, to generate ideas for the plan of an essay and many other activities in the process of writing. Anyway, according to Harmer, "in language classes teachers and students can take advantage of the presence of others to make writing a cooperative activity, with great benefits to all those involved." (2001: 260). Breakout room, in fact, is an essential catalyst for the implementation of other online tools in the essay writing class in this case study.

### *Jam board*

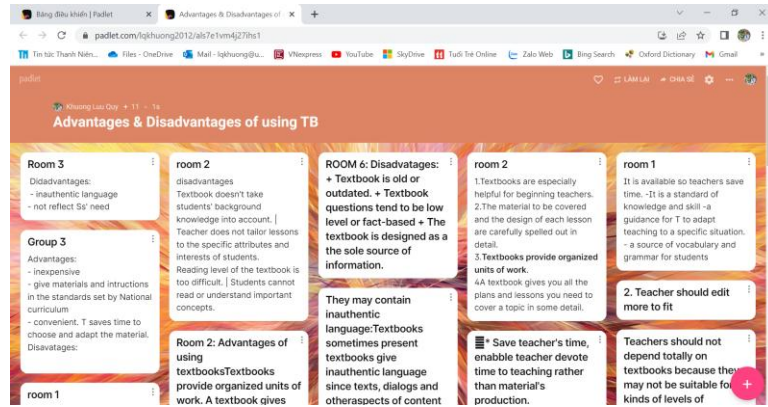
Jam board is a web-based online interactive whiteboard tool designed for cross-platform collaboration. It is created in Google Jam board. Users can search for images or drag and drop an image across the screen, add notes and emotion icons. One prominent advantage of Jam board is the sheet is spacious and teachers can add up to 20 pages and share them with students. That is, in principle, 20 small groups can work at the same time although in there are not more than 30 students in a language class at UFLS-UD. This application can be used in all group activities relating to writing English essay thanks to its multi-features such as brainstorming, essay outlining, writing body paragraph, peer correction of essay drafts, etc.



**Figure 1:** An example of applying jam board in writing

### *Padlet*

Padlet is an application that allows users to share and introduce an idea or topic. To put it simply, it is likened to a whiteboard in the classroom. More specifically, Padlet allows users to share media files such as adding videos, images, documents, documents, website links ... on this whiteboard and sharing to classes, groups. Like Jam board, this tool can be usable for demonstrating students' individual or group writing. Also, it allows the teacher correction on the work.



**Figure 2:** An example of applying Padlet in writing

### *Paragraph punch*

Paragraph Punch is an application that can be extensively used for teaching paragraph writing skills. It provides students with writing steps such as pre-writing, writing, organizing, editing, rewriting, and publishing. (Handayani and Handayani, 2020)

## **METHOD AND SAMPLING**

This study was conducted as a case study and tried to find the answers to two research questions, namely:

1. What are the difficulties students face when learning English essays in the virtual environment?
2. How efficient is the application of the internet tools to your learning of English essays writing course?

The data were collected with a questionnaire designed with the Likert scale and the feedback of the participants would be analyzed to find out the efficiency of the Internet tools used in the English essay lessons from the participants' viewpoints. Besides, to gain more information, in-depth interviews with some informants were implemented. The term during which this course was taught was chiefly implemented online. However, there was one week of offline learning. Thus, the researcher made use of the chance to interview some of the participants randomly chosen. Time of survey was in February 2022.

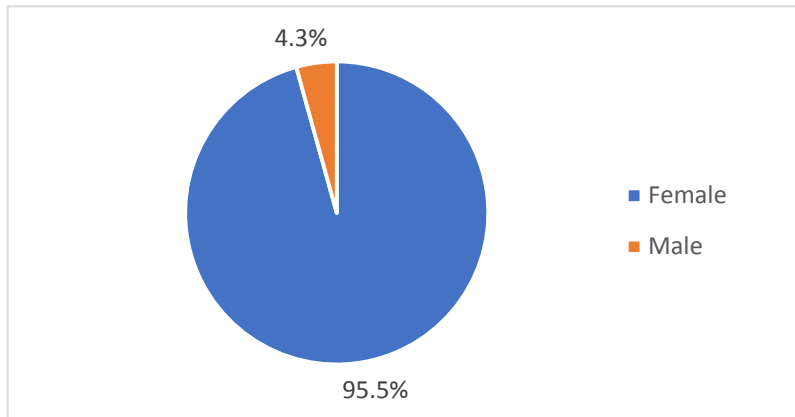
To get the participants' opinions on the difficulties they faced when learning English essays virtually and their feedbacks on the efficiency of the teacher's application of the internet tools to teaching English essay writing, a questionnaire was designed in the Google form and the link was sent to the participants for responses. The questionnaire includes 3 parts. The first part is about the general information related to the participants including their gender, and records of their course attendance. The second part related to the students' difficulties in learning English essay writing online consist of 6 questions designed with 5-level Likert scale ranging from "strongly agreed" to "strongly disagreed". The last part including 5 question items focuses on the students' feedbacks on the efficiency of internet tools applied by the teacher in teaching English essays writing online. All the questions in the questionnaire are designed with 5-level Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Moreover, a list of 3 questions was utilized to get more information to confirm the data revealed by the analysis of the informants' responses to the questionnaire.

This case study was carried out at Faculty of International Studies, University of Foreign Language Studies-the University of Da Nang where the English Essay Writing course was taught in term 5 of the BA training programme of Oriental Studies. The participants consisted of 22 Oriental Studies major third-year students attending the course Viet luan tieng Anh-01 DPH (English Essay course-01 DPH) in academic year 2021-2022.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### ***Informants' general information***

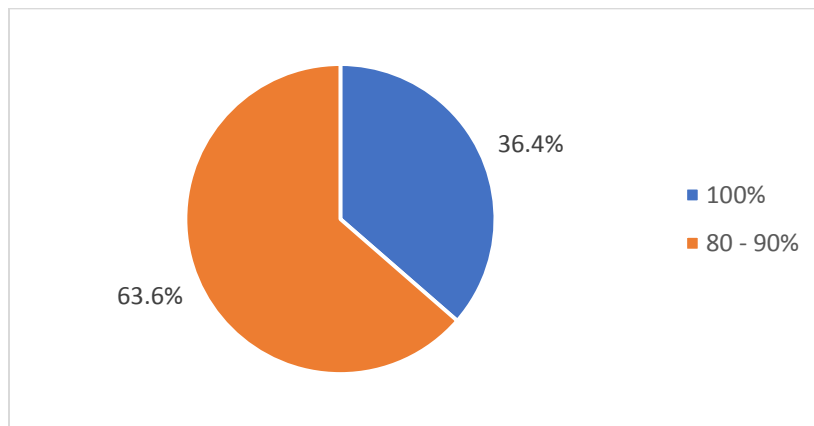
*Gender*



**Figure 3:** Percentage of male and female participants

Figure 1 shows that most of the participants are female: 95.5% compared with 4.3% of male students. The majority of female students may slightly influence the feedback because females tend to be reserved in their comments. Additionally, they might be less interested in information technology than their male peers. However, thanks to this majority, the number of course attendees would be large because it is often thought that girls are more studious than boys.

*Participants' lesson attendance*



**Figure 4:** Percentage of participants' lesson attendance

According to Figure 4, the percentage of students attending all lessons during the course is 36.4%, and the remaining percentage is for students with 80% to 90% of class time attendance. This statistic coincides with the one recorded in the list of checking attendance made by the researcher (also the lecturer of the course) during the course. Nowadays university students enjoy more freedom and autonomy in their learning. Moreover, the fact that they do part-time jobs and are absent from some lessons in the class is a popular trend. Therefore, their such high level of class attendance proves that they were fairly interested in learning the course despite difficulties caused by virtual learning as reflected in their feedback in the questionnaire and in-depth interviews analysed below. And, it can be said that the application of the internet tools created some positive influence on their motivation. When

asked to comment on the internet tools applied in the writing course, one interviewee shared "Generally, all of them are useful although the effectiveness level of each of them is different."

**Students' difficulties in learning English essay writing online**

As can be seen from Table 1 below, the most difficulty for the participants when learning English essay writing online is "Lacking face-to-face communication in solving group tasks...". This obstacle makes up 59.1% of "Strongly agree" and 31.8% of "Agree." The difficulty ranking second in the list is "Unstable internet connection slows down the writing speed which is very important in practice writing under time pressure." The percentage for "Strongly agree" and "Agree" accounted for 63.7%. As for this difficulty, there are still some percentages of "Strongly disagree" (13.6%) because the Wi-Fi connection stability might depend on the participants' resident area.

**Table 1:** Students' difficulties in learning English essay writing online

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lacking face-to-face communication in solving group tasks such as brainstorming, planning essay outlines, deciding appropriate transition signals to create coherence in an essay.	59.1%	31.8%	9.1%	0%	0%
The traditional writing textbook was converted to virtual teaching one; therefore, some tasks are inappropriate.	14.1%	13.7 %	8.4%	33.2 %	30.6 %
Limited materials for learning English essay writing virtually.	13.6%	28.2%	13.2%	18.2%	26.8%
Insufficient interaction between the teacher and students, between student and student.	9.0%	10.6%	11%	40.6 %	28.8%
Unstable internet connection slows down the writing speed which is very important in practice writing under time pressure.	41. %	22.7%	18.2%	4.5%	13.6%
Teacher's and peers' correction of individual writing in the class is limited.	10.0%	11.5%	9.7%	37.5%	31.3%

As for the interview, no interviewee said "Yes" to question 1, so all proceeded to question 2. The responses from interviews also confirmed what revealed in the Table above about the obstacles participants faced in learning English essay writing online. Replying to the interview question 2, one informant said, "I say I do not like this form of learning English essay writing because it prevents me from direct communication with my peers whenever we were asked to work in a small group to generate ideas for our writing topic or to work out a detailed essay plan". Another interviewee even stated, "The writing course book, to some extent, is not very suitable for virtual learning because originally it was compiled for the conventional classes, not for online ones." However, one interviewee shared that "Actually I don't like learning English essay writing virtually, but in the time of Covid-19 pandemic breakout, this type of

learning can help ensure the continuity of my learning". For the other difficulties, there can be seen a discrepancy in the participant feedback. There are still some levels of disagreement on the difficulty. For example, for the idea of "Insufficient interaction between the teacher and students, between student and student," the percentage of "strongly disagree" is larger than that of "strongly agree": (28.8% for the former, 9.0% for the latter). This may be explained by the fact that the application of the internet tools may mitigate the drawbacks caused by the virtual learning.

***Students' feedback on the efficiency of online tools applied by the teacher in the English essay writing course***

During the English essay writing course, the teacher has applied 5 virtual tools which are Zalo, the function Breakout room of the MS Team platform, Jam board, Padlet and Paragraph punch to help increase interaction in the class. The questionnaire results show that most of the participants supported the application of these tools and agreed that they all brought positive effects on their essay writing learning with no percent of "strongly disagree" for all questionnaire items. However, there are still some learners revealed their hesitation of the efficiency of the tools in helping them to learn through the statistics of "neutral." Fortunately, the percentage of this side is not so large: 12.0% for the effectiveness of Jam board, 10.2% for the Paragraph punch. The percentage of "neutral" for the other three items is below 10 percent. The tool receiving the highest percentage of "strongly agree" of 52.7% is Zalo with the idea that "Zalo is very useful in getting teacher's tasks designed for students in the process of teaching essay writing in the virtual environment." This explains for 33.2 % of "disagree" and 30.6 % of "strongly disagree" for the difficulty "The traditional writing textbook was converted to virtual teaching one; therefore, some tasks are inappropriate..." The participants might think that this problem was to some extent overcome by the tasks designed by the teacher and sent to them through Zalo. The function Breakout room of the MS Team platform ranks second in the level of participants' appreciation manifested in Figure 2. In fact, before showing the results of any writing tasks in Padlet or Jam board the students had to discuss in small groups via this tool. In addition, it is this tool that makes the virtual English essay writing class interactive. As for Paragraph punch, 81.8% of participants strongly agreed and agreed with the idea that Paragraph punch is an effective aid to students in such steps as pre-writing, writing, organizing, editing, and rewriting. Students' feedbacks on the efficiency of internet tools are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Students' feedback on the efficiency of online tools applied by the teacher in the English essay writing course

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
Zalo is very useful in getting teacher's tasks designed for students in the process of teaching essay writing in the virtual environment.	52.7%	38.2 %	9.1%	0%	0%
Breakout room is extremely useful for conducting collaborative essay writing tasks.	42.4%	47.8%	5.5%	4.3%	0%
Jam board is very effective in all group activities relating to writing English essay such as brainstorming, essay outlining,	37.1%	46.2%	12.0%	4.7%	0%



writing body paragraph, peer correction of essay drafts , etc...					
Padlet is very helpful in displaying students' individual or group writing for the teacher's correction or feedback.	37.5 %	50.8%	9.3%	2.4 %	0%
Paragraph punch is an effective aid to students in such steps as pre-writing, writing, organizing, editing, and rewriting.	40.0%	41.8%	10.2%	8%	0%

## CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated the UFLS-UD non-English major third-year students' experience on learning an English Essay Writing course with teacher's application of online tools. The questionnaire results and the in-depth interviews show their difficulties and their feedback on the efficiency of the internet tools the teacher applied in teaching the course. The data analysis reveals that most of the participants have positive feedback on the tools used and some difficulties they faced might be partly overcome by the application of these tools in the English essay writing course. However, to improve the quality of their learning of the course in the virtual environment, the university can follow some of the following suggestions:

1. The e-course book of English essay writing should be used to replace the current conventional course book so that the activities would be more appropriate with the new teaching and learning environment.
2. Technical solutions relating to the Wi-Fi connection should be provided by the University to make the connection more stable to create favourable conditions for students 'practice writing under time pressure.
3. Beside the online tools already applied, more tools should be used to vary the class activities to make students more motivated in their writing learning.

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## APPENDICES A: Questionnaire on the student experience on learning English essay writing with teacher’s application of online tools

This questionnaire aims to investigate the third-year non-English major students’ experience on learning English essay writing with teacher’s application of online tools at Faculty of International Studies, UFLS-UD. Your contribution is of great value to the research. The data collected will serve the study purpose only, not for any others. Please answer the questions by putting a tick (√) in the option you choose.

### Part 1. Informants’ general information

1. Gender:           · Male · Female
2. Percentage of your lesson attendance during the Course:
  - 100%            ·
  - 80 – 90%       ·
  - Below 80%     ·

### Part 2. Feedback on Student difficulties in learning English essay writing online

Please put a tick (√) in the option showing your opinions on difficulties in learning English essay writing online.

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Lacking face-to-face communication in solving group tasks such as brainstorming, planning essay outlines, deciding appropriate transition signals to create coherence in an essay.					
The traditional writing textbook was converted to virtual teaching one; therefore, some tasks are inappropriate.					
Limited materials for learning English essay writing virtually.					
Insufficient interaction between the teacher and students, between student and student.					
Unstable internet connection slows down the writing speed which is very important in practice writing under time pressure.					
Teacher’s and peers’ correction of individual writing in the class is limited.					

### Part 3. Students’ Feedback on the efficiency of online tools applied in the English essay writing course.

Please put a tick (√) in the option showing your opinion on the efficiency of online tools applied in the English essay writing course.

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
Zalo is very useful in getting teacher's tasks designed for students in the process of teaching essay writing in the virtual environment.					
Breakout room is extremely useful for conducting collaborative essay writing tasks.					
Jam board is very effective in all group activities relating to writing English essay such as brainstorming, essay outlining, writing body paragraph, peer correction of essay drafts , etc...					
Padlet is very helpful in displaying students' individual or group writing for the teacher's correction or feedback.					
Paragraph punch is an effective aid to students in such steps as pre-writing, writing, organizing, editing, and rewriting.					

Thank you for your kind cooperation!

## **APPENDICES B: List of in-depth interview questions**

1. Do you like learning English essay writing online?

2. If your answer is "No," what are the reasons?

To mitigate the inconvenience of your learning English essay writing in virtual environment, teacher has applied such online tools as Zalo, Breakout room function of the MS Team platform, Jam board, Padlet and Paragraph punch in writing classes. What do you think about the efficiency of these tools?