EXPLORING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN ZALO-BASED CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF ENGLISH MAJORS AT A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

Tran Ngoc Minh [1]

(1) Faculty of Foreign Languages, Thu Dau Mot University
Corresponding author's email: minhtn@tdmu.edu.vn

Article Info

Abstract

This mixed-methods study examines how fourth-year English majors at Thu Dau Mot University engage in Zalo-based classroom discussions. Using a convergent parallel design, data were collected through a questionnaire (N = 112) and semi-structured interviews (N = 8) to explore behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement. Findings reveal that Zalo is primarily used for task coordination and passive monitoring, with limited proactive discussion. Students value its functions for planning and language accuracy but perceive discussions as low in intellectual depth. Emotionally, Zalo fosters social connection and comfort in interacting with peers and lecturers but also introduces pressure to keep up and reluctance to express dissent. The study highlights Zalo's dual role as a facilitator of convenience and a constraint on deeper learning, suggesting the need for intentional instructional design to promote critical thinking and inclusive dialogue.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

The integration of digital communication tools into education has reshaped how students and teachers interact, collaborate, and engage with learning content. Messaging platforms, learning management systems (LMS), and mobile applications have become essential components of modern classrooms, enabling both synchronous and asynchronous communication. These tools offer flexibility, accessibility, and personalization, particularly in language education, where they support authentic interaction, peer feedback, and scaffolded writing tasks (Greenhow et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital platforms, highlighting their role in maintaining instructional continuity and student engagement during periods of disruption (Zou et al., 2025). However, the use of digital tools in education is not without challenges. Teachers often face barriers such as insufficient training, lack of technical

support, and difficulty adapting pedagogical strategies to online environments (Bećirović, 2023; Johnson et al., 2016). Students, meanwhile, may struggle with digital literacy, motivation, and the pressure to remain constantly connected, which can lead to cognitive overload and emotional fatigue (Greenhow et al., 2022).

In Vietnam, the digital transformation of higher education is driven by national policies and institutional initiatives aimed at improving quality and global competitiveness. Despite this progress, Vietnamese universities continue to face challenges, including limited funding for digital infrastructure, uneven access to technology, and gaps in digital pedagogy (Nguyen et al., 2023; Parajuli et al., 2020). These issues are particularly pronounced in regional institutions, where resources and training opportunities may be more constrained. Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU), formerly located in Binh Duong province, exemplifies both the promise and the complexity of digital innovation in Vietnamese higher education. Established in 2009, TDMU has positioned itself as a key player in the Binh Duong Smart City initiative, aiming to become a "smart university" through the adoption of technology-enhanced teaching and learning models (Nguyen, 2023). From the researcher's experience, the university has invested in modern facilities and research partnerships, yet it continues to grapple with challenges such as uneven digital literacy among faculty and students, limited integration of digital tools into curriculum design, and the need to balance innovation with accessibility.

This study investigates how undergraduate students at TDMU, specifically fourth-year English majors, engage in classroom discussions using Zalo, which is a locally developed messaging app widely used in Vietnam. The study aims to explore behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of student engagement on Zalo, offering insights into how digital platforms can support or constrain meaningful academic interaction.

1.2. Research Question

The study seeks to answer the following research question:

How do fourth-year English majors at Thu Dau Mot University engage in classroom discussions on Zalo?

1.3. Rationale for Examining Zalo-Based Discussion

Although classroom discussion is traditionally conceptualized as an in-person activity, the present study focuses on Zalo-based discussion because it represents a distinct and increasingly common communicative environment within Vietnamese higher education. At TDMU, as in many regional universities, instructors frequently rely on Zalo not as a substitute for face-to-face interaction, but as an extension of classroom discourse for coordinating tasks, sharing resources, and facilitating ongoing communication outside scheduled class time. This practice has become common due to students' near-universal adoption of Zalo, its integration into daily academic routines, and infrastructural constraints that limit the feasibility of maintaining continuous in-person dialogue. Accordingly, the pedagogical problem addressed in this study is not how Zalo replaces classroom discussion, but how students actually engage in the kind of discussion that already occurs on Zalo in practice, and how this engagement differs from expectations associated with traditional face-to-face dialogue.

1.4. Zalo as a Discussion Space

Theoretically, Zalo can be conceptualized as a meaningful discussion space because digital platforms constitute legitimate learning environments where interactional norms, participation structures, and cognitive processes differ from physical classrooms. Research on mobile-assisted learning and social-media-based communication shows that text-based interaction affords unique pedagogical opportunities, such as extended planning time, reduced performance pressure, and persistent access to written exchanges, but also introduces constraints, including reduced spontaneity and limited non-verbal support. These affordances and limitations make Zalo an important site for examining how students negotiate engagement.

1.5. Research Gap

By focusing on this widely used yet understudied environment, the study responds to a gap in the literature: despite Zalo's important role in Vietnamese higher education, little is known about how students actually participate in academic dialogue on the platform or how its interactional constraints shape the quality and depth of engagement. Thus, the choice to examine Zalo-based discussion is grounded in both real classroom practice and the need to understand how digital communication platforms contribute to or constrain student engagement within academic contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Engagement on Digital Platforms

Undergraduate students' engagement in digital classroom discussions has become a central focus in higher education research, especially in the wake of increased online learning adoption. Engagement is typically understood through behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Deng and Yang (2025) argue that these dimensions are interdependent, with teacher support playing a critical role in enhancing behavioral engagement. Wang et al. (2025) propose a five-dimensional framework (e.g., participation, concentration, interaction, challenge, and self-monitoring) to assess behavioral engagement, finding strong correlations between these factors and academic performance. Baliram and Henrikson (2025) further emphasize that students value personalized feedback, instructor presence, and autonomy in choosing discussion materials, although peer-to-peer interactions are sometimes perceived as less beneficial depending on course design.

The topics discussed by undergraduate students on digital platforms are diverse and often reflect both academic and social dimensions of learning. Smith and Storrs (2023) found that students frequently use social media and learning management systems to collaborate on assignments, clarify lecture content, and explore real-world applications of theoretical concepts. Frederickson and Cooper (2025) highlight that students particularly appreciate empathetic faculty engagement and flexible learning environments, which foster deeper discussions and a sense of community. Yorganci (2025) demonstrated that synchronous online discussions within flipped learning environments significantly enhance both engagement and self-regulation, especially among first-year students navigating the transition to university-level learning.

2.2. Levels of Engagement

Levels of engagement in online discussions vary widely and are influenced by a range of factors, including platform design, instructor involvement, and student motivation. Akpen et al. (2024) report that while digital platforms offer flexibility and accessibility, they can also lead to reduced peer interaction and feelings of isolation. Liu et al. (2022) explored students' social-cognitive engagement in online discussions and found that students' positions within discussion networks and their cognitive levels significantly influenced participation patterns. Engagement typically evolves through phases of creation, growth, maturity, and decline, with the maturity phase being the most active. Bergdahl et al. (2024) critique the overreliance on behavioral metrics, such as click counts and time spent on platforms, arguing that such measures fail to capture the emotional and cognitive aspects of engagement, which are equally important for meaningful learning.

2.3. Zalo as a Popular Classroom Discussion Platform in Vietnamese Context

In the context of Vietnamese higher education, Zalo, which is a locally developed messaging application, has emerged as a prominent tool for classroom communication and engagement. Its widespread use is attributed to its user-friendly interface, and integration with daily life (VNG Annual Report, 2024). Zalo is commonly used by students and instructors for group discussions, sharing multimedia content, real-time updates on class schedules, and supporting project-based learning. Hoa (2025) describes how Zalo was integrated with Google Classroom at Kien Giang University to facilitate project-based teaching in mathematics pedagogy, enhancing flexibility and collaboration among students. Vu (2025) found that mobile-assisted learning tools like Zalo improved convenience and mobility for students, although the depth of interaction sometimes remained superficial. Trang et al. (2023) explored the use of AI-integrated Zalo chatbots for onboarding new students, demonstrating improved engagement and reduced confusion during transitional periods.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to explore undergraduate students' academic-related communication on Zalo. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then integrated during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of student engagement. The quantitative strand consisted of a structured questionnaire administered to 112 fourth-year (33 males and 79 females) English majors at Thu Dau Mot University, while the qualitative strand involved semi-structured interviews with eight students from the same cohort. This design allowed the researcher to triangulate behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement, capturing both general patterns and individual experiences.

3.2. Sampling

Participants were selected using convenience sampling, a non-probability method appropriate for exploratory studies in educational settings where access to participants

is limited. While this approach limits generalizability, it enabled the researcher to gather timely insights from a relevant and accessible population.

3.3. Data Analysis

The questionnaire included Likert-scale items and demographic questions, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions). Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, with codes developed inductively to capture recurring patterns in students' use of Zalo for academic communication. Themes were then aligned with quantitative findings to deepen interpretation and highlight convergences and divergences across data sources.

The six-step analysis includes:

a. Familiarization with the data
b. Generating initial codes
c. Generating themes
d. Reviewing themes
e. Defining and naming themes
f. Producing the report

4. Results

This section presents findings from both the quantitative and qualitative strands of the study. Background data are first reported to contextualize students' habits of using Zalo. These are followed by detailed analyses of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, based on questionnaire responses and thematic insights from interviews.

4.1. Background Data

To contextualize students' engagement with Zalo, background data were collected on their frequency of use, preferred access devices, and confidence in using the platform for academic communication (Table 1).

Table 1. Background Information

Category		Count	Percent
Frequency of using Zalo for academic purposes	Daily	68	60.7%
	Several times a week	30	26.8%
	Occasionally	10	8.9%
	Rarely	4	3.6%
Primary device used to access Zalo for learning	Smartphone	88	78.6%
	Laptop	20	17.9%
	Tablet	3	2.7%
	Desktop	1	0.9%
Confidence using Zalo for academic communication	Very confidence	40	35.7%
	Somewhat confidence	52	46.4%
	Neutral	12	10.7%
	Not very confident	7	6.2%
	Not confident at all	1	0.9%

Source: Author's survey, 2025

In term of frequency of use, a majority report frequent engagement: 60.7% use Zalo daily, and 26.8% several times a week, leaving only 12.5% in the occasional or rare category. This pattern underscores that Zalo functions as a core, everyday channel for academic communication and task management rather than a peripheral tool.

Regarding device preference, usage is predominantly mobile-centric: 78.6% rely on smartphones, followed by 17.9% on laptops, while tablets and desktops remain negligible ($\leq 2.7\%$). This trend indicates that students typically access and respond to course-related messages on the move, favoring quick, app-native interactions such as reading announcements, reacting to prompts, or posting brief questions and files.

Finally, confidence is generally strong: 35.7% feel very confident and 46.4% somewhat confident, totaling 82.1% overall. Only a small proportion report neutrality (10.7%) or low confidence (7.1%). These figures suggest that most students perceive themselves as both technically and socially prepared to engage via Zalo.

4.2. Behavioral Engagement

To explore how students interact with Zalo in academic contexts, this section presents findings on behavioral engagement.

Table 2. Students' Engagement in Terms of Behaviours

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD
I initiate discussions in my Zalo class groups.	20 17.9%	28 25.0%	34 30.4%	22 19.6%	8 7.1%	2.86	1.14
I ask course-related questions in my Zalo class groups.	6 5.4%	11 9.8%	28 25.0%	50 44.6%	17 15.2%	3.54	1.04
I actively share relevant articles, videos, or other resources with my classmates on Zalo.	11 9.8%	22 19.6%	45 40.2%	28 25.0%	6 5.4%	3.02	1.03
I tend to read but not post in my Zalo class groups.	1 0.9%	6 5.4%	17 15.2%	50 44.6%	38 33.9%	4.08	0.87
I use Zalo to coordinate tasks with my group members.	0 0.0%	2 1.8%	11 9.8%	45 40.2%	54 48.2%	4.38	0.74
Using Zalo makes it easy for me to participate in class discussions.	1 0.9%	4 3.6%	17 15.2%	56 50.0%	34 30.4%	4.05	0.83

Source: Author's survey, 2025

The analysis of behavioral engagement among 112 undergraduate students indicates that Zalo is most heavily used for group coordination and passive information consumption. The highest levels of agreement were for using Zalo to coordinate group tasks (M = 4.38, SD = 0.74) and a strong tendency to "read but not post" (M = 4.08, SD = 0.87), with a combined 88.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the former and 78.5% with the latter. Students also agreed that Zalo makes participation easy (M = 4.05, SD = 0.83). In contrast, more proactive and voluntary engagement was less common. Students were largely neutral about actively sharing resources (M = 3.02, SD = 1.03) and tended to slightly disagree with initiating discussions (M = 2.86, SD = 1.14). Asking course-related questions (M = 3.54, SD = 1.04) was the most common form of active engagement,

though still moderate. This suggests Zalo serves more as a vital tool for organization and passive "lurking" rather than a vibrant platform for proactive academic discourse.

Across interviews, the students frequently described Zalo as a tool for organizing group work rather than engaging in academic discourse. The platform's familiarity made it ideal for coordinating tasks, confirming deadlines, and sharing progress updates. This behaviour reflects the highest-rated item in the survey (I use Zalo to coordinate tasks with my group members.).

We mostly use Zalo to decide who's doing which part of the assignment. It's fast and everyone checks it often, so it works well for that. (Participant 2)

I don't really discuss ideas there. It's more like: 'I'll do the intro, you do the conclusion,' and then we just send our parts. (Participant 6)

These quotes suggest that behavioural engagement on Zalo is largely instrumental, meaning that students are active, but their activity is focused on task execution rather than idea exchange. For English majors, who often work on collaborative writing and presentations, Zalo serves as a workflow manager rather than a space for intellectual exploration. This explains the low mean score for initiating discussions (M = 2.86), as students rarely use Zalo to explore or debate course content.

Another prominent theme was selective participation, suggesting that students frequently read messages and monitor group activity but hesitate to post unless necessary. This behaviour is reflected in the high agreement with "I tend to read but not post in my Zalo class groups" (M = 4.08, SD = 0.87). For English majors, language confidence plays a significant role in shaping this pattern.

I read everything, especially when the teacher posts something. But I don't reply unless I'm sure my English is correct. (Participant 1)

Sometimes I want to comment, but I'm afraid I'll make a mistake or sound unclear. So, I just follow the conversation. (Participant 5)

These responses highlight a low-risk engagement strategy. Students stay informed and absorb information but avoid posting due to concerns about language accuracy or social perception. This behaviour is particularly relevant for English majors, who may feel pressure to demonstrate proficiency. It also explains why asking course-related questions is more common than initiating discussions: students are more comfortable seeking clarification than leading conversations.

4.3. Cognitive Engagement

This section offer insight into students' participation patterns through cognitive engagement for coursework-related communication.

Table 3. Students' Cognitive Engagement

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD
Discussions on Zalo help me understand complex topics from my courses more deeply.	8 7.1%	20 17.9%	38 33.9%	36 32.1%	10 8.9%	3.18	1.06
Questions and prompts from my lecturers on Zalo encourage me to think critically about the subject matter.	12 10.7%	25 22.3%	35 31.3%	30 26.8%	10 8.9%	3.01	1.12

The ability to reply later on Zalo gives me time to formulate better-quality responses.	1 0.9%	5 4.5%	15 13.4%	60 53.6%	31 27.7%	4.03	0.86
The academic discussions in Zalo groups are intellectually stimulating.	18 16.1%	30 26.8%	45 40.2%	15 13.4%	4 3.6%	2.62	1.02
The academic discussions in Zalo groups are high-quality.	15 13.4%	28 25.0%	40 35.7%	24 21.4%	5 4.5%	2.80	1.06
The feedback I receive from peers on Zalo helps me improve my own work.	5 4.5%	15 13.4%	35 31.3%	45 40.2%	12 10.7%	3.39	1.01

Source: Author's survey, 2025

The analysis of the cognitive engagement items (Table 3) reveals a mixed but pragmatic view of Zalo's academic role. The most significant perceived benefit was procedural: students overwhelmingly agreed (81.3%) that Zalo's asynchronous nature allows them time to formulate better-quality responses (M = 4.03, SD = 0.86). This practical benefit, however, did not translate into high-level intellectual satisfaction. In fact, students tended to disagree that Zalo discussions were intellectually stimulating (M = 2.62, SD = 1.02) or of high quality (M = 2.80, SD = 1.06), with 42.9% and 38.4% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with these items, respectively.

Other items showed moderate neutrality; students were ambivalent about Zalo discussions helping them understand complex topics (M = 3.18, SD = 1.06), and the impact of lecturer prompts (M = 3.01, SD = 1.12) and peer feedback (M = 3.39, SD = 1.01) was seen as only mildly positive. This suggests that while students value Zalo as a tool for cognitive processing (i.e., giving them time to think), they do not perceive the resulting discussions themselves as being particularly high-quality or stimulating.

The qualitative findings indicate a consistent theme among fourth-year English majors was the value of Zalo's asynchronous format, which allowed students time to reflect and compose thoughtful responses. This aligns with the highest-rated cognitive engagement item in the survey (The ability to reply later on Zalo gives me time to formulate better-quality responses.).

I like that I don't have to answer immediately. I can think about the question, look up examples, and write a better reply. (Participant 4)

Sometimes I draft my response first in Word, check grammar, and then post it. It helps me feel more confident and clearer. (Participant 7)

These quotes suggest that Zalo's asynchronous nature supports cognitive processing, especially for English majors who are conscious of language accuracy and clarity. The platform gives students space to plan, revise, and reflect, which enhances the quality of their contributions. This behaviour reflects deeper engagement with course content, even if the discussions themselves are not perceived as highly stimulating. It also highlights how digital tools can scaffold academic writing and critical thinking when used flexibly.

Despite the benefits of asynchronous participation, students expressed that discussions on Zalo often lacked depth and academic rigor. This is reflected in the low mean scores for "The academic discussions in Zalo groups are intellectually stimulating" and "The academic discussions in Zalo groups are high-quality".

Most of the time, the posts are just reminders or short answers. There's not much debate or analysis. (Participant 2)

I don't feel challenged by the discussions. It's more about finishing tasks than exploring ideas. (Participant 6)

These responses indicate that while students engage cognitively in preparing their posts, the content of the discussions often remains superficial. For fourth-year English majors, who are capable of higher-order thinking and nuanced analysis, the lack of intellectual stimulation may lead to disengagement or a preference for other platforms. There is a need for intentional instructional design: lecturers could pose open-ended questions, encourage peer critique, or assign roles to deepen the quality of discourse.

4.4. Emotional Engagement

This section presents findings related to students' emotional engagement when using Zalo for academic communication. It explores how students experience comfort, connection, and pressure in their interactions.

Table 4. Students' Emotional Engagement

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD
I feel more connected to my classmates because of our class group chats.	5 4.5%	10 8.9%	25 22.3%	50 44.6%	22 19.6%	3.66	1.05
The informal nature of Zalo makes me feel more comfortable interacting with my lecturers.	6 5.4%	15 13.4%	30 26.8%	48 42.9%	13 11.6%	3.42	1.01
I feel part of a supportive learning community.	4 3.6%	12 10.7%	40 35.7%	44 39.3%	12 10.7%	3.43	0.98
I feel anxious or pressured to keep up with the conversations.	8 7.1%	20 17.9%	30 26.8%	40 35.7%	14 12.5%	3.29	1.10
I feel comfortable expressing a dissenting opinion or disagreeing with a classmate.	30 26.8%	40 35.7%	28 25.0%	10 8.9%	4 3.6%	2.27	1.02
I feel excluded or left out of conversations.	45 40.2%	35 31.3%	20 17.9%	10 8.9%	2 1.8%	2.01	0.95

Source: Author's survey, 2025

The analysis of emotional engagement reveals that Zalo primarily functions as a tool for social cohesion, though this comes with certain pressures and limitations. Students reported a strong positive impact on peer relationships, with a majority (64.2%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they "feel more connected to classmates" (M = 3.66, SD = 1.05) and a general sense of being "part of a supportive community" (M = 3.43, SD = 0.98). This positive sentiment extended moderately to faculty, with 54.5% feeling "more comfortable interacting with lecturers" (M = 3.42, SD = 1.01). However, this connectivity is not without drawbacks, as a significant minority (48.2%) reported feeling "anxious or pressured to keep up" with conversations (M = 3.29, SD = 1.10). Furthermore, this supportive environment does not appear to foster open debate; students overwhelmingly disagreed (62.5%) with feeling "comfortable expressing a dissenting opinion" (M = 2.27,

SD = 1.02). On a positive note, feelings of social exclusion were very low, with 71.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with "feeling left out" (M = 2.01, SD = 0.95).

In the interviews, the participants consistently described Zalo as a space that fosters a sense of closeness and comfort in their academic relationships. The informal nature of the platform, combined with its ubiquity in Vietnamese digital life, made it easier for students to interact with both peers and lecturers. This is reflected in the survey findings: *"I feel more connected to my classmates because of our class group chats"* (M = 3.66) and *"The informal nature of Zalo makes me feel more comfortable interacting with my lecturers"* (M = 3.42).

Zalo feels like a casual space. I can message my classmates anytime, even just to ask something small. It's not as formal as email. (Participant 3)

I used to be nervous about asking lecturers questions, but on Zalo it feels more natural. I just send a quick message and they reply fast. (Participant 6)

These quotes suggest that Zalo lowers the emotional barrier to communication, especially for students who may feel intimidated by formal academic channels. For English majors, who often engage in language-heavy tasks, this informality can reduce anxiety and promote spontaneous interaction. The platform helps build a supportive learning atmosphere, where students feel part of a community and are more likely to seek help or clarification.

Despite the sense of connection, students also reported emotional strain related to the volume and pace of Zalo conversations. Many felt pressured to stay updated, especially when group chats became active outside of class hours. Additionally, students expressed discomfort with expressing disagreement, preferring to maintain harmony. These sentiments are reflected in the survey items: *"I feel anxious or pressured to keep up with the conversations"* (M = 3.29) and *"I feel comfortable expressing a dissenting opinion or disagreeing with a classmate"* (M = 2.27).

Sometimes the group chat is busy late at night. I feel like I have to check it or I'll miss something important. (Participant 1)

Even if I don't agree with someone's idea, I usually stay quiet. I don't want to cause tension in the group. (Participant 7)

These responses highlight the emotional cost of constant connectivity and the cultural preference for maintaining group harmony. For fourth-year English majors, who are often involved in collaborative projects and presentations, the pressure to conform and avoid conflict may limit open dialogue. While Zalo facilitates connection, it also introduces emotional labour. Students must manage their presence, tone, and timing to avoid misunderstandings or exclusion.

5. Discussion

5.1. Behavioural Engagement

Quantitatively, students reported very high use of Zalo for task coordination and a strong tendency to read rather than post. In contrast, initiating discussions was relatively low, while asking course-related questions sat at a moderate level. These patterns converged with the qualitative theme that students use Zalo pragmatically to divide work and

confirm deadlines, not to debate ideas. A second theme (passive monitoring and selective posting) explained the high "read-but-not-post" scores; students purposely lurked to stay informed and only posted when necessary.

The evidence suggests a coordination-first engagement in which Zalo functions as a workflow tool more than a discursive space. This resonates with work showing that LMS and messaging platforms often capture behavioural traces of access and timing rather than dialogic depth (Bergdahl et al., 2024). It also mirrors Wang et al.'s (2025) behavioural framework (participation, interaction, self-monitoring) in which participation can be instrumental (e.g., checking deadlines) without necessarily extending to initiative and elaboration.

The finding is consistent with reports that students favour low-risk, utilitarian participation online (Smith & Storrs, 2023) and may be more comfortable asking clarifying questions than leading threads (Hollister et al., 2022). Moreover, the study's data echo post-pandemic syntheses noting that online environments increase procedural efficiency but can dampen peer-to-peer interaction when prompts are not deliberately dialogic (Akpen et al., 2024; Deng & Yang, 2025).

5.2. Cognitive Engagement

On the cognitive dimension, students strongly endorsed the value of asynchronicity: "reply later" enabled better-quality responses. Interviews revealed the same mechanism. For fourth-year English majors, this affordance appears to scaffold language planning, reduce performance pressure, and support form-focused accuracy before posting. Such findings align with research on delayed production benefiting L2 planning, and with studies that show synchronous tools boost immediacy, while asynchronous tools support reflection (Yorganci, 2025; Deng & Yang, 2025).

However, students rated Zalo discussions as not particularly stimulating. This suggests the platform helps students prepare cognitively (plan, revise) but does not automatically produce higher-order thinking unless instructional design requires it. The pattern is consistent with the literature: learning analytics often capture observable behaviours (clicks, durations) and miss elaborative indicators, which must be intentionally elicited (Bergdahl et al., 2024).

Studies of digital literacies similarly note that students value platforms for information finding and practice but receive limited support for deeper academic discourse across the curriculum (Smith & Storrs, 2023). In Vietnamese higher-education settings, pairing Zalo with an LMS (learning management system) discussion board for graded, criterion-referenced posts can leverage Zalo's planning affordance while relocating deep analysis to a space designed for it (Hoa, 2025; Vu, 2025).

5.3. Emotional Engagement

Emotionally, students reported feeling more connected to classmates and more comfortable interacting with lecturers. Qualitative data reinforced this informal comfort. Prior work similarly notes that online tools can lower social barriers and increase perceived instructor presence (Hollister et al., 2022; Baliram & Henrikson, 2025). Such informality can reduce anxiety around real-time interaction that sustains learners' willingness to communicate.

However, the same setting produced affective costs. A sizable minority felt anxious or pressured to keep up, and students expressed reluctance to voice dissent. This tension between community comfort and harmony maintenance is widely reported in online higher education: platforms intensify availability expectations and can discourage open debate without clear netiquette and role modelling (Akpen et al., 2024; Deng & Yang, 2025). Liu et al. (2022) similarly show that social-network positions and cognitive levels shape interaction patterns; when dissent is culturally or socially costly, engagement tends to cluster around agreement and logistics rather than critique.

5.4. A Conceptual Interpretation of the Findings

Building on the descriptive patterns reported earlier, the researcher theorizes an engagement profile on Zalo characterized by three higher-level constructs that integrate behavioural, cognitive, and emotional indicators from the data:

Coordination-First Engagement

Students use Zalo primarily to organize work and monitor information rather than to initiate or sustain dialogic exchange. This explains high agreement for "coordinate tasks" and "read but not post," moderate levels for asking clarifying questions, and low rates of initiating threads. In other words, Zalo functions as a workflow and surveillance channel rather than a deliberative forum. This construct unifies these behaviours under a single orientation toward procedural efficiency.

Affective Safety with Restraint

Zalo lowers barriers (students feel more connected; more comfortable messaging lecturers) but simultaneously discourages dissent and risk-taking. Students hesitate to express disagreement and prefer low-risk clarification over critical challenge. The researcher conceptualizes this as a safety-restraint trade-off: where high levels of interpersonal belonging and emotional security come at the expense of intellectual risk-taking and critical dissent.

Planning Advantage

Students value the ability to respond later, draft in Word, check accuracy, and then post. This planning affordance supports language form and clarity, yet does not automatically yield intellectually stimulating dialogue, hence the low ratings for discussion quality and stimulation.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Major Findings

This study explored fourth-year English majors' engagement at Thu Dau Mot University in Zalo-based classroom discussions using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative results showed that students were highly behaviorally engaged in task coordination and passive monitoring, but less likely to initiate discussions. Cognitive engagement was supported by Zalo's asynchronous format, which allowed students to plan and revise responses, though discussions were perceived as low in intellectual stimulation. Emotionally, students felt socially connected and comfortable interacting with peers and lecturers, but also experienced pressure to keep up with conversations and hesitated to express dissent. Qualitative data reinforced these patterns, revealing themes

of pragmatic coordination, reflective planning, and emotional tension around group harmony and notification overload.

6.2. Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

The study was limited by its small sample size (8 participants for interviews), which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among English majors or students in other disciplines. All participants were from a single institution and year level, which restricts generalizability. Additionally, the study focused solely on Zalo, excluding comparisons with other platforms such as Facebook groups that may offer different engagement dynamics.

Future studies should include a larger and more diverse sample across multiple institutions and disciplines to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal designs could explore how engagement evolves over time or across different academic years. Comparative studies between Zalo and other digital platforms could reveal platform-specific affordances and constraints. Researchers may also investigate how instructional strategies and prompt design influence the depth and quality of online discussions.

6.3. Implications

The study's findings have several implications for stakeholders. Lecturers should consider designing Zalo-based activities that go beyond coordination, incorporating structured prompts and peer roles to foster deeper interaction. Curriculum designers should embed digital literacy training that includes platform-specific communication strategies and etiquette. Institutional leaders should support blended learning environments that combine Zalo's accessibility with more academically rigorous platforms, and implement policies to manage notification overload and protect student wellbeing.

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