LLT Journal, e-ISSN 2579-9533, p-ISSN 1410-7201, Vol. 29, No. 1, April 2026, pp. 355-380

LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching
http://ejournal.usd.ac.id/index.php/LLT
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

BEHIND THE SCREEN: EFL TEACHERS' EMOTIONS AND AGENCY IN TEACHING WRITING FOR ADULT LEARNERS

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https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v29i1.473
received 30 January 2026; accepted 02 April 2026

Abstract
The present study explores the emotions of EFL teachers and how they exercised agency to implement online L2 writing instruction for adult learners. Seventeen Vietnamese EFL teachers with prior experience teaching online L2 writing for distance English bachelor classes were recruited on a voluntary basis. Each was interviewed twice in a semi-structured format to probe into their experienced emotions and enacted agency in online L2 writing instruction. The results revealed a wide spectrum of (un)pleasant emotions that the teachers experienced and particularly, the interdependent relationship between teacher emotions and their enacted agency in different manifestations. Acting upon their emotions, the teachers agentively reshaped learner engagement beyond the verbal channel, and found contentment and joy through technological affordances, multimodal feedback giving, and '*star*' learner engagement. However, learners' misaligned and plagiarised texts featured as a plaguing issue that evoked intense emotional distress despite the (un)critical agency enacted. Interestingly, teachers' "enlightened" agency in *seeking meaning* through the rich life stories and viewpoints conveyed in their adult learners' writings were reported as *bright moments* amidst limited verbal interaction, a lack of social presence, and plagiarism. Pedagogical implications for L2 writing instruction for adult learners as well as research suggestions are discussed.

Keywords: adult learners, agency, EFL teachers, emotions, online writing instruction

Introduction
The role of emotions in language education has received growing attention and teacher emotions have been found instrumental in initiating change and shaping classroom practices (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Nazari et al., 2025; Song, 2016). Despite the increasing body of research on language teacher emotions and their teaching practices, studies focusing specifically on the emotions of L2 writing teachers remain scarce (Geng & Yu, 2024). As language teaching is inherently emotional, L2 writing teachers may also be exposed to additional emotional experiences that

may differ from those encountered by teachers of other skills. For example, teachers experience annoyance, anger, anxiety as well as contentment and cheerfulness when it comes to giving feedback on students' writing (e.g., Yao et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2021). Similarly, uncertainty was a common felt emotion by teachers regarding how writing assessments should be conducted (Geng et al., 2023). In addition, certain aspects of L2 writing instruction (e.g., assessments and risks of plagiarism) may become even more difficult to deliver effectively in virtual teaching environments than in the face-to-face mode, making online L2 writing teaching particularly emotion-laden. Research on teacher emotions in online instruction has largely focused on emergency and disrupted teaching situations, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2020; Pham & Phan, 2023). While there is growing research on teachers' emotions in general L2 writing instruction in the post-Covid 19 period (e.g., Geng et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2025), studies specifically addressing the emotions of teachers and their agency in teaching L2 writing online for adult learners are still limited. With the rise of digital communication, online instruction has gained traction as a practical option in many educational contexts. It is therefore important to understand teachers' emotions and their agentic actions in teaching L2 writing online in order to provide significant insights that enhance instructional effectiveness. This will contribute to the development of L2 writing as one of the four core language skills in language teaching and learning.

Recent literature has indicated a close link between teacher emotions and agency (e.g., Nazari et al., 2025; Weng, 2025). In particular, teacher emotions are not merely about how teachers feel, but also about how their emotions shape perceptions and behaviours, and in some cases, motivate them to transform their teaching practices and even influence school policies (Benesch, 2018). From this perspective, teacher emotions are regarded as a resource that informs both their practices and agency. However, limited research has addressed this interplay between L2 teacher emotions and agency in online teaching. In the online context, Nazari et al. (2025) examined the interdependent dynamics between writing teacher emotions and agency, but in a course for professional development. No research has yet investigated teacher emotions and their enacted agency in teaching L2 writing online for working adult learners pursuing a second bachelor's degree in English in tertiary settings. Given the increasing demands of adults learning English for their different career purposes in Vietnam and other educational settings of the world, the present research is significant in unraveling teachers' emotional experiences and how their emotions shape their online instructional agency, thus informing L2 writing pedagogies for adult learners.

Within the context of Vietnam, English has been taught primarily in public institutions as a foreign language. The Vietnamese government has undertaken various efforts to improve the quality of English teaching and learning across its general education system, most notably through the large-scale, long-term National Foreign Languages Project spanning the period 2008-2025. Most recently, the government announced a new language policy designating English as a second language in schools from 2025 to 2035, with a vision extending to 2045. This increased emphasis on English has, in turn, heightened the social demand for learning English through diverse modes, ranging from full-time regular programs to distance learning, thereby accelerating the popularity of online language

education programs. This context offers a timely opportunity to explore the emotions and agency of teachers engaged in online writing instruction. The present research emphasises the urgency of examining teachers' emotions and agency in teaching L2 writing online for adult learners in Vietnam, an area that remains barely researched. If neglected, the challenges and emotional strain that teachers experience may undermine teacher motivation, compromise teaching quality, and limit meaningful online learning engagement, thus affecting learning outcomes and threatening teachers' professional identity. Timely inquiry may yield useful implications not only for English distance education in Vietnam but also worldwide, given the scarcity of research in this area. The following research questions are then formulated.

1. What emotions do Vietnamese EFL teachers experience in teaching L2 writing for distance English bachelor classes?
2. What forms of agency do they exercise to navigate their emotions and online writing instruction?

Online language teachers' emotions

Online teaching differs markedly from that of traditional classroom instruction (Song, 2022; Taghizadeh & Amirkhani, 2022), suggesting that expertise and experience in face-to-face settings may not automatically translate into success in virtual environments. Online teaching increasingly requires teachers to acquire additional skills and competencies to "prepare for the unknown" (Taghizadeh & Amirkhani, 2022, p. 1) and deliver lessons effectively. Virtual classrooms thus create a distinct teaching culture that imposes new conditions and expectations on teachers (Gao, 2008), thus charging them emotionally and leading them to experience vulnerability (Song, 2016, 2022). Indeed, teachers experienced anxiety, isolation, and loneliness, often stemming from limited opportunities for social presence and interaction (Alger & Eyckmans, 2022; Harsch et al., 2021). Establishing and maintaining social, cognitive, and teaching presence, elements considered essential for effective learning (Garrison et al., 2010), is far from straightforward in the virtual space. Focusing on Iranian EFL teachers in a private school setting, Nazari et al. (2024) identified three main factors, namely the mismatch between school expectations and their own views of effective student engagement, the discrepancy between school demands and their own beliefs about materials coverage, and the constraints in implementing effective online assessment, which shape their emotional labour in online teaching. In the non-emergency phase of the post-Covid-19 pandemic, teachers might face increasing demands to develop new pedagogical strategies and professional competencies needed to teach online. Thus, the practices and emotional regulation that online instruction entails may diverge significantly from those associated with physical classroom teaching (Nazari et al., 2024).

The online environment as a distinctive societal and ideological space might uniquely shape the emotional experiences of its participants, including language teachers. Teaching L2 writing online is characterized by its unique features such as technology-mediated writing, digital feedback giving and multimodal communication, to name a few. These special features might incline L2 writing teachers to experience different emotions and exercise different forms of agency that need to be understood for the benefit of L2 writing learning and teaching. Given

the inherently emotional nature of language teaching (Frenzel et al., 2021), together with the global expansion of online language education (Nazari et al., 2024), further research into the emotional challenges of L2 writing teachers in virtual classrooms is highly warranted.

Language teachers' emotions and agency

Agency has been viewed as "active efforts to make choices and intentional action in a way that make a significant difference" (Toom et al., 2015, p. 615) or the "capacity to act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63). Shared in these views are the potential of the individual to take action, implement decision-making and initiate change. Indeed, agency has been approached from multiple perspectives, including socio-cognitive, socio-cultural, and post-structural orientations (see Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Tao & Gao, 2021), each with its own emphasis on how agency is conceptualised. Evaluating and building on agency from these three perspectives, Kayi-Aydar (2019) redefined language teacher agency (LTA) as the "intentional authority to make choices and act accordingly in his or her local context" (p. 15).

Firstly, LTA could be in both individual and collective forms. Individual agency recognises the important contribution of language teachers' beliefs, experiences, expectations, goals, aspirations and needs to their agency to perform the agentic actions. Yet, Kayi-Aydar (2019) argues that agency is not enacted individually but also collectively through teachers interacting with others and drawing on others' resources and support. In this regard, collective agency resonates with relational agency, referred to as "recognizing that another person may be a resource and that work needs to be done to elicit, recognize and negotiate the use of that resource in order to align oneself in joint action on the object" (Edwards, 2005, p. 172). That said, relational agency does not necessarily cause dependence, rather it can cultivate independent professional development (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005).

Secondly, LTA is context-dependent, meaning that teachers are able to exercise agency in certain environments, but they may be constrained from doing so in others. This highlights the critical role of context in (dis)enabling LTA. Thirdly, LTA is contingent upon language teachers' self-conceptions of their pedagogical and linguistic competences. How they perceive these competences affects the level of agency enacted, which makes LTA "fluid" and subject to contextual factors including the persons with whom language teachers interact. Finally, LTA is enacted through emotions and identities, underscoring the significance of emotions in shaping LTA. In Kayi-Aydar's (2019) words, "fear, anxiety, pride and other emotions contribute to and shape language teachers' decision-making, and agentic actions" (p. 16). This suggests the close relationship between emotions and LTA. This is directly relevant to the present research which examines language teachers' emotions and their enactment of agency in a specific Vietnamese online environment of L2 writing instruction for working adult learners.

In the present study, emotions are conceptualized as not only physical manifestations, but socially-mediated experiences that are shaped by individual, social and contextual factors (Richards, 2022). This post-structural view does not divide emotions into binary concepts of negative and positive emotions, but view them as important guides for classroom transformation (Benesch, 2018). Given that

"emotions do *things*, and work to align individuals with collectives or bodily space with social space" (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 26–27, italics in original), teachers' emotional experiences are widely acknowledged as a construct closely intertwined with agency (Benesch, 2018; Karaca & Uysal, 2023; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Nazari et al., 2025). The agency role of teacher emotions (Tao et al., 2024) including "emotions as agency" (Benesch, 2018, p. 60) and "performative emotions" (Karnovsky & Kelly, 2025, p. 5) further emphasises teachers' ability to act upon their emotions and to view emotions not only as indicators but also as enablers of agency, thereby positioning them as tools for professional activism (Yang & Sato, 2025). In this perspective, language teacher emotions as "sites of resistance and self-transformation" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 213) provide an important window into teachers' process of making agentic decisions. It is thus relevant and even imperative to conduct further research on teacher emotions that can be "tapped for agency" (Tao et al., 2024, p. 2).

A growing body of research has demonstrated the interconnectedness between language teachers' emotions and their enactment of agency (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Dovchin et al., 2025; Janfada et al., 2025; Nazari et al., 2024, 2025). For instance, teachers' emotions motivated them to resist and reform school policies (Benesch, 2018) and resolve conflicts (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023). More recently, research has shown the transformative potential of teacher emotions in fostering agency through acts of solidarity and resistance (Dovchin et al., 2025; Janfada et al., 2025). Song's (2021) case study of an EFL teacher illustrates how her emotions shaped her pedagogical strategies and student engagement, while self-reflection enabled her to recognize the influence of her emotions on practice. This reflective process, in turn, supported both pedagogical improvement and professional growth. Similarly, Nazari et al. (2024) demonstrated that, provided with professional development opportunities, teachers draw on their online emotions "as a site of reframing agency" (p. 465). In doing so, teachers not only strengthen their sense of agency but also cultivate more positive emotions. Building on this line of research, Tao et al. (2024) found the dynamic interplay between teachers' emotions and their enactment of agency in online contexts. Despite these insights into teacher emotions as valuable spaces for agentic actions (Tao et al., 2024), the relationship between language teacher emotions and the enactment of agency in online L2 writing instruction remains underexplored.

Teacher emotions in (online) L2 writing instruction and agency

Teaching L2 writing is particularly emotionally charged, as teachers experience complex emotions across the different and unique stages of writing instruction (Yu et al., 2021). Nevertheless, their emotional experiences remain underexplored (Geng & Yu, 2024). Studies available on writing teachers' emotions are predominantly situated in Chinese EFL writing instruction contexts (e.g., Geng et al., 2023; Geng & Yu, 2024; Yu et al., 2021). For instance, by interviewing and observing 20 EFL writing teachers in a university setting, Geng et al. (2023) investigated how these teachers employed different strategies to navigate their emotions in writing instruction and how both implicit and explicit institutional rules shaped their emotional labour. Also in a tertiary setting, Geng and Yu (2024) examined the complex interplay between writing teachers' emotional experiences and contextual factors operating at different levels. Both Geng et al. (2023) and Yu

et al. (2021) found L2 writing teachers are exposed to fluctuations in their emotions, which impact their teaching practices. These China-based studies demonstrate that teacher emotions influence their classroom practices and that their emotional experiences are dynamic rather than fixed. This underscores the need to understand the interplay between teacher emotions and their agentic actions in diverse contexts.

With regard to the relationship between writing teachers' emotions and agency, very little is currently known (Nazari et al., 2025). Only a handful of studies have examined this link in the context of L2 writing teachers, including Goldsmith (2023), Jensen (2019), and Nazari et al. (2025). Among these, Nazari et al. (2025) is the rare study that has investigated L2 writing teachers' emotions and agency within virtual classrooms, yet in a teacher education context. Via multiple data sources (e.g., semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, classroom observations), their findings show that agency shaped multiple aspects of L2 writing instruction, from delivering instructions to evaluating student work and providing feedback. As Nazari et al. (2025) emphasise, the interconnection between teacher emotions and agency remains underexplored, particularly in the case of writing teachers. Moreover, the complexity of how emotions influence agency enactment has not been fully examined, and the reciprocal question of how teachers' emotions shape their agency also remains insufficiently researched (Tao et al., 2024). In the specific context of online L2 writing instruction, the need to investigate this relationship becomes even more urgent. Investigating emotions and agency in online L2 writing settings contributes pedagogically and theoretically to a richer understanding of how L2 writing teachers make decisions, adapt to contexts, and shape their instructional practice (regarding feedback giving, engaging students in learning to write, and handling plagiarism, etc.). In particular, in virtual contexts, teacher agency could be not only intentional and emotionally driven, but also technologically mediated. Exploring all this the complexity will further advance our understanding of theoretical constructs of agency and emotions in different online instructional settings.

Method

Context

In Vietnam, distance English Bachelor classes (*Lớp Bằng 2 Tiếng Anh Từ xa*) for adult learners have gained massive popularity, especially when English proficiency is required for their varied educational and career purposes. Learners enrolled in these classes typically come from diverse geographic, socio-economic and educational backgrounds. They are often professionals such as medical practitioners, university lecturers, school teachers, postgraduate students, military officers, etc. They seek a second bachelor's degree in English to secure evidence of their English proficiency in place of other standardised tests for their varied career or educational purposes. English writing classes for these learners are quite often oversized and scheduled in a distance/online teaching mode. Against this backdrop, the present study investigated Vietnamese teachers' emotions in teaching EFL writing for the above adult learners, an underrepresented group in research on emotions in L2 writing and their enacted agency.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants for the present study. In-service EFL teachers who had at least six months of prior experience teaching online L2 writing for distance English Bachelor classes at a Vietnamese university were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. The minimum six-month teaching experience was appropriate for investigating teachers' emotional experiences for two main reasons. Firstly, a writing course in the current Vietnamese context is about four months, plus one or two subsequent months for teachers to grade students' work. This means the teacher participants had completed teaching at least one online L2 writing course, thus accumulating experiences to recount. The minimum teaching experience of six months or a course is also used in other studies on teachers' perceptions (e.g., Li, 2025; Taghizadeh & Basirat, 2024). For general online writing instruction, the teachers all had considerable experience (from one to five years).

Ethics approval granted by the institution as the research site and the participants' consent were obtained prior to data collection. In total, 17 were willing to share their emotional experiences teaching L2 writing online for the target adult learners and how their enacted agency. A majority of the teachers (14/17) obtained a master's degree in TESOL and three earned a doctoral degree in the same field. Except one male teacher, all were female with diverse online teaching experiences from one to five years. Thirteen were aged from 30 onwards, and four were between 26 and 29 years old. Each teacher was assigned a name code (T1-T17) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Table 1 presents the participants' demographics.

Table 1. The teachers' demographic information

Teacher code	Years of teaching experience	Years of teaching L2 writing online	Years of teaching distance English Bachelor classes	Gender	Age	Qualifications
T1	11	2	1.5	Female	35	Master
T2	4	3	1	Female	28	Master
T3	15	4	3	Female	38	Master
T4	12	5	1	Female	34	Master
T5	14	5	3	Female	37	PhD
T6	4	4	1	Female	45	PhD
T7	3	3	1	Female	30	Master
T8	3	2	1	Female	33	Master
T9	1	1	1	Female	26	Master
T10	16	5	0.5	Female	38	Master
T11	14	2	0.5	Female	37	PhD
T12	25	3	1	Female	50	Master

Teacher code	Years of teaching experience	Years of teaching L2 writing online	Years of teaching distance English Bachelor classes	Gender	Age	Qualifications
T13	27	4	1	Female	52	Master
T14	7	3	1	Female	29	Master
T15	5	4	2	Male	29	Master
T16	3	4	1	Female	36	Master
T17	22	4	1.5	Female	47	Master

Data collection

Data were collected from 17 online writing teachers of English at a university in Vietnam. Each teacher was interviewed in a semi-structured format in two rounds to probe into their experienced emotions and enacted agency in teaching EFL writing online. The questions were open-ended for the teachers to elaborate on their answers (see the interview questions in the Appendix). For the sake of convenience, all the participants opted to be interviewed and recorded via Zoom meetings. The language of the interviews was Vietnamese so that the teachers could easily report their emotions and their agentic actions to operate online writing instruction. The duration of each first-round interview was 70 minutes on average. Follow-up interviews were conducted to further seek clarification and elaboration on the teachers' shared narratives in the first interviews. Each second-round interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Data analysis

The interviews were fully transcribed and reviewed for accuracy before analysis. The data were analysed in Vietnamese - the source language of the interviews, to retain semantic integrity. Multiple-stage thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was adopted. Firstly, the authors read through each interview transcript and then assigned codes to segments of the text. Then we re-examined the assigned codes for redundancy before aggregating them into themes. This was an open inductive and deductive coding process to derive themes that emerged, followed by axial coding to identify patterns and categories of themes and subthemes and the links between them (See Appendix 2 for a coding example). Finally, we narrated the emotions of the teachers and their agency in navigating emotional experiences and actualizing their instruction in tandem, considering the contextual and personal factors that impacted upon teacher emotions in the target distance classes. Kayi-Aydar's (2019) reconceptualisations of LTA and the post-structural view of emotions as described in the literature review guided the analysis. Attention was drawn to how context gives rise to emotions and teacher agency (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Miller & Gkonou, 2018). In particular, emotions as socially mediated experiences (Richards, 2022) were first identified. Given that language teacher agency is enacted both individually and collectively (Kayi-Aydar, 2019), and emotions could lead to change (Benesch, 2018), how the teachers'

emotional experiences prompted different forms of agency was then documented. For further understanding of the reciprocal relationship between emotions and agency, teachers' emotional experiences subsequent to agentic actions or decision making, as narrated by the teachers were additionally explored (see Appendix 3 for a brief summary of the teachers' emotional experiences, sources, agentic practices and outcomes).

Member checking was applied to both data analysis and interpretation to ensure the accuracy of the data. Differences were resolved through follow-up discussion between the authors. After constant cross-checking, iterative engagement in data analysis and repeated refining, five core themes were finalised and reported in the next section. The selected interview quotes were translated into English for illustration in the present paper by the first author, and translation accuracy was rechecked and confirmed by the other authors.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The results revealed that the teachers experienced a wide spectrum of both positive and negative emotions in operating online writing instruction. Above all, teacher emotions and their enacted agency informed each other, leading to agentic pedagogies in teaching EFL writing for working adult learners.

Emotions and individual agency in engaging adult learners

The teachers recounted that in the initial stages of online writing teaching, they experienced strong feelings of sadness, loneliness and disrespect that negatively impacted their professional identity. This originated from the predominant silence, a lack of social presence, and minimal learner engagement. These issues conflict with teachers' beliefs and cultural expectations that students should respond to their teaching as evidence of learning and as a sign of respect. Thus, emotional frustration ensued when fear of "teaching into the void", "monologic talk", and "isolation" predominated, which threatened the teachers' professional accountability. One of the teachers said:

> *Before that, I was afraid of talking to myself and worried that my teaching was not helpful. I felt like a mere 'teaching worker' as if I were simply selling my talk. However, when my learners found the lessons useful, I felt genuinely happy.* (Interview 1, T5)

Feelings of isolation and loneliness were felt as *constrained agency* to shift attention to those who were active or rely on "*star"* engagement (e.g., the engagement of just a few individuals) and embrace empathy to continue teaching. One teacher explained:

> *I felt lonely, because I was just talking to myself the whole time, asking questions again and again but no one answering. Most of them are doctors, they are busy. Some are postgraduate students. I don't really care much about the silent ones anymore. I just rely on the active ones, the stars of the class. Keeping my expectations low makes things easier.* (Interview 1, T6)

Yet, recognizing limited engagement as contradicting their teaching principle of "helping students to learn", all the teachers started to redefine engagement in other forms via "novel" pedagogies. For example, one teacher reported engaging students in responding *iconically,* thus creating a joyful visual atmosphere, and finding happiness. She said:

> *To change the atmosphere, I let them send icons of their favourite food. It made the class more fun, so I felt good and had a really positive experience.* (Interview 1-T13)

All the teachers reported satisfaction and fulfilment in utilizing the chat function in Zoom to engage students *textually* as a pedagogical solution to counter reduced verbal interaction. For them, textual communication is effective and dialogic. One of them said:

> *When communicating through chat, I find it quite satisfactory. They send me messages, and I can read all of them. I can also ask them questions clearly there.* (Interview 1, T9)

In response to students' limited engagement which induced disappointment and displeasure, thirteen teachers reported agentively seeking ways to foster engagement *multimodally* through additional technologies such as *Menti* and *Padlet*, though in non-verbal forms. One of them explained:

> *With Menti, I can create word clouds from the learners' answers, and they really like seeing their responses appear and update right away. With Padlet, they can write, add images and sounds, and show their personalities through their writing, which makes them excited too. […] The best part is that it increases their interaction and attention, keeping them more engaged in the learning activities. Through that, I can see how well most of the class is keeping up with the lesson.* (Interview 2-T4)

Acting upon their experienced emotions embedded in online classroom realities and by agency, the teachers overtly elected not to use breakout sessions in Zoom. Instead, they preferred Google Docs to engage students in the writing process. They emphasised the need to prepare clear tasks and worksheets in Google Docs, and assign specific roles to each group member. One teacher described a step-by-step implementation procedure as follows:

> *Step 1, I create a template in Google Docs that includes the topic, instructions (in case students missed the preceding part), and a table for each group. For distance classes, I place all the tables in a single tab [Google Docs allows users to open multiple tabs within one document], since many students are not very familiar with technology; Step 2, I explain to the students what each section of the document means and how they will carry out the activity; Step 3, I assign the tasks to the students, label their names in the corresponding sections, and*

> *guide them to discuss or ask questions with their group members directly on the document; Step 4, I send the link to the students so they can start working; Step 5, I observe their writing process on Google Docs and provide support when needed, for example, by offering vocabulary or pointing out ideas that don't support the topic sentence; Step 6, after the assigned time is over, or once all groups have completed their tasks, I review each piece of writing (usually I assign about five groups if the text is short). I point out the strengths and weaknesses and suggest revisions.* (Interview 2-T3)

These comments showcase the teachers' "intentional authority" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019, p.15), and planned efforts to transform classroom practice to help students learn. This in turn evoked pleasant emotions of delight, satisfaction and fulfilment, as they found evidence of learning through textual interaction. The above teacher continued:

> *For example, for one group activity on writing a paragraph to describe a family member, one student suggested "Father?" and others responded. Instead of speaking, they used writing. They asked each other questions and corrected themselves. When they got stuck, I gave some hints. The interaction within the group was very lovely. It made me feel happy and that all the effort I put into preparing the lesson was truly worth it. I felt fulfilled.* (Interview 2-T3)

Clearly, teacher emotions and agency informed each other, thus revealing an interdependent relationship.

Emotions and individual agency in utilizing a multimodal approach to giving feedback

Regarding providing feedback on students' work online, all the teachers found contentment and pleasure, since the learners' written texts were readily accessible for online feedback giving. This allowed direct, immediate correction on students' work, as a great advantage over the face-to-face mode of L2 writing teaching, as in the following excerpts:

> *I prefer teaching writing online because I get their written work, whether it is a short answer or full paragraph, it is easier to correct right there on the spot.* (Interview 1-T10)

> *I can show their work directly on screen. In face-to-face classes, it is challenging to display many pieces at once, and it is difficult for everyone to focus on one text together. This advantage makes me feel more satisfied with the feedback process online.* (Interview 2-T15)

Notably, direct instant viewing of the students *who* are typing their corrections/ comments and the *unfolding changes* made to the text added motivation, delight and happiness. One of the teachers admitted:

> *I can see students writing in real time and feel time just flies, and I can give feedback right away and they revise immediately. That is motivating. Watching it happen live makes me happy and excited.* (Interview 1-T4)

Clearly, the reciprocal relationship between emotions and agency is featured through teachers' emotions guiding their agency in using multimodality as a critical feedback tool, which in turn fostered positive sentiments. The teachers also emphasised the advantage of visualising the corrections/edits for greater clarity and effectiveness than mere verbal conferencing. One of them said:

> *Using markers or highlighters helps students easily see where the feedback is, because it is visualised more clearly than just oral comments. And they focus better too. Seeing is believing!* (Interview 2-T14)

Clearly, in the teachers' experiences, real-time commenting and annotation, interactive multimodal editing served the purpose of online writing instruction effectively, thus cultivating feelings of fulfilment and contentment.

Emotions and (un)critical agency in handling misaligned and plagiarised texts

In the teachers' experiences, with the growing accessibility of online technologies and AI tools, it has become increasingly difficult for them to evaluate the authenticity of students' work. All of them reported intense distressing emotions of hurtfulness, indignation, disrespect, and frustration that arose from students' various forms of misconduct. These include submitting Chat-GPT-produced texts, copied or rushed work that misaligned with task requirements. Regarding AI-generated texts and copied work, one teacher lamented:

> *Some students don't put in any real effort, even though I have reminded them many times. They just copy from each other, take things from all kinds of sources, even use ChatGPT. It is really frustrating, It feels like they do not respect the teacher at all.* (Interview 1-T6)

The "heavy", "perfect" language was intentionally revealing of copying acts, and evoked intense negative emotions among the teachers. One teacher said:

> *When I see a piece of writing that's too perfect, I feel like they're just trying to deal with the task, probably using ChatGPT. It feels disrespectful to the teacher. My emotions drop, and I feel sad.* (Interview 1-T8)

The teachers further reported negative emotions, originating from all sorts of misaligned work, because this indicates that students did not take the lessons seriously, as exemplified in the following excerpts:

> *I asked them to write just a topic sentence, but they copied the whole task into ChatGPT and submitted t its output. I was really annoyed. I*

> *couldn't hide it; I frowned and raised my voice to show them that I was upset and angry because they didn't follow such a basic instruction.* (Interview 1-T8)

> *There was another task where they were supposed to write a paragraph, but they didn't read the instructions carefully and just copied something advanced from somewhere and submitted a whole essay. I felt really irritated.* (Interview 1-T12)

All these "misbehaviours" contradicted the ideologies and values the teachers sought through teaching. Accordingly, acting upon felt emotions of annoyance, irritation, frustration and anger, 12 (out of 17) teachers proactively performed *critical agency* by electing not to comment on language use (which they evaluated as "error-free, "advanced" and "perfect"). Rather they focused on the global aspects of the writing, namely how the task has been achieved, or how the requirements have been met. Some teachers narrated:

> *I gave them a small task to write topic sentences, but they couldn't do it, while their final essays were just too perfect. I didn't correct their errors; instead, I asked them to analyse and explain how the information in their writing was organised.* (Interview 1-T16)

> *I tried to reduce misaligned work by asking them to show exactly what I taught, for example, asking them to be more critical and to highlight their topic sentences in yellow.* (Interview 1-T5)

Some intentionally enacted uncritical agency is also found in the data. For example, one teacher gently conveyed her felt emotions as a public warning when encountering plagiarism, without further actions. The teacher said:

> *I just told them, "This piece was written with ChatGPT. You shouldn't do that. This is your chance to really practise writing, there's no need to just deal with it that way." I was really upset.* (Interview 1-T6)

Five teachers chose not to focus on originality but adopted a *surface coping* mechanism by lowering expectations, recognizing students' efforts, plus disseminating cautionary notices. Below is what one of them shared:

> *I realised that plagiarism is something beyond the teacher's control, so I changed my perspective on teaching writing. I lowered my expectations and gave students more warnings.* (Interview 1-T1)

When it comes to grading plagiarised texts, it is worth noting that all the teachers adopted a preventive approach to plagiarism in the first encounter, for example, clarifying expectations for plagiarism, and warning different forms of retribution. For repeated work detected to be written by AI, the teachers experimented with different punitive methods such as rejecting (giving a zero score) or lowing the grade. The following teacher adopted a strong punitive approach:

> *When I come across plagiarised work, I don't grade it, I just remove it. Expressing anger seemed pointless because some students just study for the sake of getting a degree, not for genuine learning.* (Interview 1-T10)

Yet, they scored high on those texts that they sensed were written by students themselves and felt happy. Two teachers said:

> *There were some papers where I could sense they wrote it themselves. I gave those higher marks.* (Interview 1-T6)

> *When the writing was just enough, and I could tell it was really their own work, not AI-generated, I felt satisfied.* (Interview 1-T17)

One teacher recounted "resentment", "stress" and "shock" when emailing students to justify the graded scores that the learners filed complaints for. By agency, she purposefully chose to delay responding in order to regain composure and reply with good and firm justifications, saying:

> *I felt irritated and tense when replying. Once, a student wrote a very arrogant email questioning their grade, even though they had used ChatGPT to write the paper. I was shocked. I didn't reply right away. I took some time to calm down first, then responded quite firmly. Replying to such emails from students is really stressful.* (Interview 1-T3)

In the teachers' experiences, plagiarised and unoriginal work engendered a strong sense of being "devalued", threatening their professional accountability. One of them said:

> *But sometimes my mood drops when their writing shows that they haven't learned anything from my lessons. […] At times, it feels like my teaching skills and passion are gradually wearing down.* (Interview 1-T11)

Overall, the teachers chose "to act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63) of online L2 writing instruction. Yet, for them, intense emotional distress remained in coping with plagiarised texts.

Emotions and relational agency in seeking support/resources

Faced with emotional burden (e.g., loneliness, disappointment, disrespect, anger), beside individual agency, all the teachers recounted actively seeking support and assistance from their colleagues who had prior experience teaching EFL writing online. They mutually learnt the shared tips on a plethora of issues including different pedagogies to engage students in learning, detect and handle plagiarism. Two teachers explained:

> *I often take the initiative to ask for useful tips, suitable methods, or any suggestions that could make my lessons more effective. For example, I learned from Ms. […] that to prevent students from overusing AI, besides writing the paragraph, she asks them to underline the topic sentence, the linking words, and the concluding sentence.* (Interview 2-T8)

> *Before teaching, I often ask other teachers who have taught similar online classes for advice. For instance, how to organise the midterm writing task via Google Docs and how to check for AI-generated writing using several steps, such as AI-checking websites.* (Interview 2-T9)

The comments have demonstrated the teachers exercised relational agency (Edwards, 2005) by pooling resources from others to assist their instructional practices. For them, relational agency also means reaching out to attend workshops and training sessions to amass technological tools and pedagogical skills for online instruction. One of them said:

> *Right from the early days of teaching online, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to join various training sessions, both organised by my university and by others, such as VietTESOL and several other universities, as well as some courses I enrolled in myself. I also learned a lot from colleagues' sharing. When applying what I learned to my own classes, I made adjustments to suit the actual teaching situation.* (Interview 1-T4)

Some teachers acknowledged uncertainty about classroom application until prior success was shared by a colleague. One teacher commented:

> *I first learned about this activity from a training workshop, but it wasn't until later-when I saw a colleague confidently applying it in their online lessons and finding it effective-that I decided to try it out myself.* (Interview 2-T16)

In other words, these online writing teachers agentively created a small community of practice for themselves to share emotional experiences and pedagogical solutions. In return, they reported growing more confident and skilful about teaching L2 writing online, thus enjoying more positive emotional experiences.

Emotions and "enlightened" agency in seeking meaning in adult learners' texts

Amidst negative emotions stemming from predominant silence and other issues such as plagiarism associated with online L2 writing instruction, the teachers personally sought *meaning* and *interest* in the insights voiced by their special cohort of adult learners. They newly found this form of agency to sustain online L2 writing teaching. In particular, the teachers related to this distinctive learner group with diverse background knowledge, disciplinary expertise and life experiences as an appeal to teach, and found contentment and delight. One of them said:

> *Sometimes their writings are really interesting. I learn more about their lives and professions, and they share their thoughts while writing. It makes me feel happy.* (Interview 1-T10)

The teachers (14/17) expressed "excitement," "enlightenment" and "amazement" to even learn from the learners themselves, through their multiple career perspectives, expertise, and life experiences. One teacher explained:

> *I feel excited and kind of enlightened sometimes. There are aspects I have never thought about before. I sometimes find myself surprised by how much I can learn from their professions, expertise, and life experiences. I actually feel like I am learning from them.* (Interview 1-T8)

The above aspects of positivity were narrated as *bright moments* in the "dark" of negative emotions (e.g., sadness, resentment, disrespect, frustration, self-doubt) stemming from limited verbal engagement, rushed work and plagiarism. While these enlightenments could be found in the face-to-face teaching mode, they may seem normal and go unnoticed. Yet, in an online environment, the enlightened agency has become a lifeline that eased emotional strain for teachers. It is evident that the teachers demonstrated themselves as significant agents in *learning through teaching.*

In sum, all the themes have shown that teacher emotions were context-bound, shifting and evolving, and teachers' emotional experiences drove their agency to be enacted in different forms, thus reshaping their emotions.

Discussion

The current research explored the emotions of Vietnamese teachers and their enacted agency in teaching EFL writing online for second-bachelor's degree adult learners. The results uncovered a mixture of emotional experiences that were contingent upon how teachers viewed constraints and affordances of teaching EFL writing online for this distinctive cohort of learners. Above all, the teachers exercised different forms of agency in coping with a plethora of issues associated with online writing instruction and pertinent to working adult learners of diverse backgrounds.

The teachers experienced a mixture of intense unpleasant emotions that were induced from students' limited verbal engagement, predominant silence, and plagiarism. This finding generally agreed with studies investigating teachers' emotional responses in general online teaching (e.g., Harsch et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Pham & Phan, 2023; Song, 2022, 2025; Weng, 2025; Xu et al., 2024), and virtual writing instruction (e.g., Weng, 2024). It is important to note that the teachers developed heightened awareness of these problems and the circumstances of their adult learners, while embracing empathy, and exercising agency in "helping students learn." The teachers' emotional experiences enabled enacted agency, manifested in different forms, namely individual/relational agency, constrained/critical agency and enlightened agency in addressing the issues peculiar to teaching online L2 writing, for example, limited interaction, silence and

plagiarism. In response, teachers' emotional experiences prompted change and agentic efforts in operating online writing instruction, further underscoring the close relationship between teacher emotions and their agency (Benesch, 2018; Dovchin et al., 2025; Janfada et al., 2025; Nazari et al., 2024, 2025). We can see the teachers exercised "agency through making choices" (Ruan & Zheng, 2019, p. 349). They agentively made deliberate choices to foster learner engagement in different forms that evidenced learning. Multimodality was leveraged in teaching and feedback giving, which returned positive emotions of contentment, fulfilment and happiness. Regarding plagiarism, intense emotional distress drove the teachers to employ both preventive and punitive strategies as well as critical agency to direct intentional tactics to the extent to which students fulfilled the task and demonstrated evidence of learning. This further confirms a teacher's agency as the intentional capacity to make decisions and act appropriately within one's local context (Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

It is worth noting that the teachers agentively harnessed the semiotic potential of Google Docs and multiple modalities for synchronous online teaching and feedback giving, thus reaping emotional positivity. This result is refreshingly intriguing and telling of teachers' agency and emotions as co-constitutive and interactive, thus confirming findings in other studies (e.g., Benesch 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Nazari et al., 2024, 2025). Unpleasant emotions, namely distress, indignation, disrespect and hurtfulness drove the teachers to enact agency to pursue their teaching values and beliefs. In this regard, teachers' emotions are therefore, "not merely something that [they] 'have' but something that [they] 'do'" (Richards, 2022, p. 226). They "did" agentively as driven by the emotions they experienced and importantly, by their professional accountability, corroborating emotions as action (Song, 2016) and as agency (Benesch, 2018; Dovchin et al., 2025; Janfada et al., 2025; Uştuk et al., 2025).

It is of note that the different forms of agency the teachers asserted (though driven by similar emotions) did not automatically arrive, but they were coalesced by numerous factors including the experienced emotions, professional accountability and instructional repertoire that they had developed over time via individual efforts and peer exchanges of pedagogical practices. Above all, the results of the present study have demonstrated that teacher agency is essentially contingent upon teachers' beliefs, pedagogical knowledge and digital literacy. Indeed, teacher agency is "a dynamic process inflected by teachers' beliefs" (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 347) that can have a bearing on their agentic actions and commitment to pedagogical change (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). The results also highlight that contextuality influences teachers' agentic behaviours (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Nazari et al., 2025). In this particular online teaching context with full-time working adult learners, teacher agency was called upon as "the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors" (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137).

Emotional rewards were also transcended beyond teaching and learning of the two respective key players, teachers and students. The teachers newly found "interest", "joy", "enlightenment" and "meaning" through learners' rich life stories and career perspectives and *learn from them*. This is a compelling finding that indicates a new form of "enlightened" teacher agency amidst the "darkness" of reduced verbal engagement and plagiarised work. Unlike individual agency and relational agency that refer to teachers' capacities to take pedagogic actions to

influence students' learning outcomes (e.g., enhancing student engagement), enlightened agency, in the teachers' accounts, is not pedagogical, but rather emotional. It provided teachers with emotional comfort and served as new lights that sustained their teaching motivation. In this way, the study has made a significant theoretical contribution to existing scholarship by adding new forms of agency. Concurrently it reveals teachers as complex "emotional beings" (Mac Fadden, 2005, p. 83) and their agency needs to be unravelled through exploring teacher emotions, and their pursuing values. Agency to enact might unfold as teachers navigate the online writing instruction that is bound within all the complexities of its format, teachers' own beliefs, professional learning and learner-related factors. In other words, it depends on the 'relational nature' between teachers and their social setting (Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Golombek & Doran, 2014). By asserting individual, (un)critical), relational and enlightened agency, the teachers have demonstrated their autonomy and self-efficacy in virtual writing instruction in special circumstances. In this regard, "agency can perhaps be viewed as a point of origin for the development of autonomy" (Benson, 2007, p. 30) that is needed to operate virtual L2 writing teaching.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study has important implications for teaching L2 writing online for working adult learners. Firstly, it is crucial to equip writing teachers with technological tools and multimodal feedback literacy to assist them in operating virtual writing classes. To that end, training teachers to "select, adapt and utilize" a plurality of modes (Chang et al., 2018, p. 421) for teaching as well as feedback practice would enhance effective remote instruction. While this could be achieved through individual agency and teachers' continuous self-directed learning, training workshops and (in)formal communities of practices are additionally useful platforms for teachers to leverage mutual resources and exercise relational agency for emotional resilience and professional development. Accordingly, "intentional mentoring" (Park et al., 2024, p. 5) particularly tailored for online instruction as shared by online writing practitioner insiders can be orchestrated to enhance LTA. It is also important to bear in mind that teaching writing online can be emotionally draining as it requires additional technological handling and digital literacy. In that trajectory, creating "the conditions necessary for supporting and extending teachers' agency" (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63) is of critical importance to help teachers manage constraints effectively.

The findings suggest it is crucial to assist teachers in attending to mediating factors that constrain or enable their agency, and empower them with pedagogical knowledge and tools to refine teaching practices. Furthermore, since teacher emotions and agency informed each other, "the co-constitutive effects of agency and emotion" (Miller & Gkonou, 2018, p. 49) should be brought to teachers' attention as a path for professional development. In particular, it is recommended that they attend to their experienced emotions, reflect and act upon them to develop agency in enhancing instructional practices and make sense of it as "ongoing, fluid, multidimensional, and context-bound process" (Yazan, 2018, p. 143).

Next, while strong social presence arguably needs to be replicated for successful online learning, it needs to be redefined in different other forms to tailor online instruction for different groups of learners, at least for teaching L2 writing.

The results of the present study suggest that textual, visual, or multimodal engagement could well be indicators of good learning to counter well-documented issues such as unresponsiveness in online education. This shift in viewing learner engagement is urgently necessary for teachers to maintain teaching commitment, while allowing the needed incorporation of multimodality in the burgeoning era of technological advancement. Furthermore, plagiarism was found as a poignant, plaguing issue that evoked strong negative emotions among teachers, including indignation, disrespect and resentment. While these feelings are truly confrontational, a new perspective might be needed to operate online writing teaching. As ChatGPT and other AI tools can be used at learners' volitional disposal, it might require teacher agency to act beyond a preventive, punitive approach to handling plagiarism via more nuanced pedagogies to engage and document learning. This necessitates teachers' agentic efforts co-developed alongside their pedagogical skills, knowledge, assessment literacy, identity and beliefs. At the same time, guiding students through using AI tools to assist their learning rather than copying would also help in the long run. This will enhance student accountability and academic integrity in virtual EFL writing education.

Despite the original insights into writing teachers' emotions and agency in teaching writing in the virtual format, the limitations of the present study should be noted. Firstly, it focused on the emotions teachers experienced and the reported agency they enacted in teaching online writing classes for working adult learners of diverse career backgrounds. Future research could explore the actual online classroom practices of these teachers, together with learners' experiences to obtain richer insights. Next, examining how teachers enact agency in longitudinal studies would further our understanding of the reciprocal relationship between emotions, agency and teaching values to inform teacher training. It would also be valuable for further research to explore how individual differences (e.g., teachers' educational backgrounds, teaching experiences, language proficiency) shape their emotional responses and enactment of agency. Finally, with a modest sample size (17 teachers) from one single university, the study has limited generalizability, thus requiring more research to explore writing teachers' emotions and their agency in online teaching in other educational contexts. Notwithstanding the limitations, the study has presented itself as a novel addition to the dearth of existing scholarship on teachers' emotions and agency in online L2 writing instruction, with its valuable pedagogical implications to optimise online teaching outcomes.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the Vietnamese teachers for their voluntary participation in this research.

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Appendix 1

Interview 1

1. Could you tell me your age and years of teaching writing, both offline and online?
2. Which Writing courses have you taught / have you been teaching online?
3. How do you feel about teaching Writing online? What emotions have you experienced while teaching Writing online? Why did you experience those emotions?
4. What special features of online Writing classes have affected your emotions?
5. In your opinion, are your emotions in teaching Writing online different from teaching other skills online? Why?
6. How do you feel about their writings? How do you usually correct them online? What emotions do you have when giving feedback or correcting students' work in online writing classes? What factors may affect your emotional experiences?
7. Could you share some cases or events that gave you positive or negative emotions while teaching Writing online? Why did you feel that way? How did you deal with negative emotions?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your emotions in online Writing classes and their impacts on your teaching?

Interview 2

1. You mentioned using Google Docs, Mentimeter, Padlet, etc. to teach writing online. Did you learn how to use these tools by yourself, from colleagues, or from another source? How long have you used them? How often did you use them in your online writing classes? Why? How effective were they?
2. I have noticed you implemented these practices (e.g., attendance-checking methods, engagement techniques, the chat function, etc.), how did you learn them? By yourself or did you consult your colleagues?
3. How did you correct students' writings? At this point, you mentioned using Google Docs for feedback giving, could you elaborate on your process of correcting their writing? Why so?
4. Did teachers who taught online writing classes share their experiences with each other? If yes, could you share some examples of practices you learned from other teachers and applied in your own classes?
5. When correcting your learners' writing, which aspects did you focus on the most (e.g., grammar, structure, content, style), and why? Did you use markers, highlighting tools, or other techniques when giving feedback on students' writing? Why?

Appendix 2

An example of data coding

Themes	**Definition**	**Codes**	**Examples from the interviews**
Emotions	Teacher mentions of emotional manifestations (e.g., sad, frustrated, lonely)	Sad Disappointed Lonely	*"I ask questions, but there was just silence, they are hiding behind the screen. I was **sad** and **disappointed.**" (T9)*
Sources	What triggered the emotions that the teachers experienced	Limited verbal engagement	*"I felt **lonely,** because I was just talking to myself the whole time, asking questions again and again but no one answering" (T6)* *"The **saddest** thing when teaching online is that students didn't respond"* (T4)
Agency in redefining learner engagement	Agentic actions that teachers performed to enhance learner engagement (e.g., participate more in classroom activities, respond more to teachers' questions) in myriad ways that are not necessarily verbal.	Communicating textually through the chat function	*When communicating t**hrough chat,** I find it quite satisfactory. They **send me messages**, and I can read all of them. I can also **ask them questions clearly there.*** (Interview 1, T9)
		Designing activities in multiple modes of communication rather than verbally	*With Menti, I can create **word clouds** from the learners' answers, and they really like **seeing** their responses appear and update right away. With Padlet, they can **write**, add **images and sounds**, and show their personalities through their writing, which makes them excited too.* (T4) *I changed my mind, they [students] didn't need to speak if they were not willing. They can **respond in icons, emojis**, etc. It was delightful as well."* (T6)

Appendix 3

A brief summary of emotions, sources, agentic practices and outcomes

Emotions	Sources	Agentic practices	Outcomes
Sadness Isolation Loneliness Disrespect	Limited interaction Silence Unresponsiveness	Individual agency in redefining engagement (non-verbal: iconic, textual, multimodal)	Enhancing student engagement Fostering positive emotions (e.g. Fulfilment, satisfaction, happiness delight)
Disappointment Frustration Loneliness	Limited learner engagement Lack of evidence for learning	Individual agency in multimodal feedback giving	Visualizing writing as a process Enhancing learner engagement in writing Efficient, synchronous feedback Happiness Fulfilment Delight
Frustration Anger Disrespect	Plagiarism Rushed work	(Un)Critical agency Preventive/punitive approaches Accepting and lowering expectations	Reducing plagiarism Lessening negative emotions
Emotional burden (e.g. loneliness, disappointment, disrespect, anger)	Uncertainty about how to engage adult learners in online writing Plagiarism Rushed work	Relational agency in seeking support/resources from colleagues, Attending training workshops	Acquiring pedagogical tips to engage students in learning, and handling plagiarism; Becoming more confident and skilled about teaching L2 writing online Enjoying more positive emotional experiences
Sadness Resentment Disrespect Frustration Self-doubt	Limited interaction Silence Plagiarism	Enlightened agency Seeking meaning through reading students' narratives	Learning from students Emotional comfort Enlightenment Happiness Contentment Joy/Interest Excitement Amazement