

 Research Article

Vietnamese EFL Majors' Emotional Experiences in Thesis Writing: A PERMA-Informed Qualitative Multiple-Case Study

Phan Nhat Hao¹ 

¹School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Can Tho City, Vietnam

Abstract

Emotions constitute a central dimension of students' academic development in higher and continuing education. While the body of literature has examined affective experiences in learning contexts, emotional trajectories embedded in extended academic tasks remain insufficiently theorized. In language education programs, the graduation thesis is deemed an academically demanding task that intertwines cognitive challenges, relational dynamics, and identity development, warranting a further systematic investigation. Addressing this gap, the current study examined how Vietnamese English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) majors experienced emotions during the thesis-writing process in the Mekong Delta region. Using a PERMA-informed qualitative multiple-case design, the study involved six students at a public university. Data were qualitatively generated by their in-depth semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and documentary artifacts. Analysis followed a hybrid data-coding approach integrating theory-informed and inductive procedures, with within- and cross-case comparisons strengthening interpretive depth. Findings revealed multidimensional emotional experiences organized around five elements. "Positive Emotion" encompassed anticipatory hope, progress-related joy, and earned pride at thesis completion. "Engagement" was reflected in sustained cognitive immersion and disciplined self-regulation. "Relationships" with thesis supervisors and peers contributed to relational validation and academic belonging. "Meaning" developed through intellectual growth and identity repositioning toward emerging researcherhood. "Accomplishment" consolidated competence, strengthened self-efficacy, and generated forward-oriented aspirations. The study contributed a contextually grounded account of emotional experiences in thesis writing, through which it advanced current understandings of English language education in Vietnam and beyond. Implications highlighted the importance of supportive supervision and research training that cultivate well-being alongside academic rigor. The study concluded with limitations and offered methodological recommendations for future investigations.

Keywords: Emotional Experiences, PERMA Model, Qualitative Multiple-Case Study, Thesis Writing, EFL Majors

✉ Correspondence
Phan Nhat Hao
phanhathao85@gmail.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of deepening globalization and digital transformation, foreign language education has been strategically repositioned within Vietnam's national development agenda (Nguyen & Hall, 2017). The Government of Vietnam has promulgated a vital series of landmark policy decisions to strengthen English proficiency and international integration. Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg (2008), for example, initiated the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 (NFLP 2008), aiming to enhance foreign language teaching and learning across all educational levels (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2008). Subsequently, Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg (2017) extended this initiative for the period 2017-2025 (NFLP 2017-2025), with a stronger emphasis on communicative competence, teacher capacity, and educational quality (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2017). Most recently, Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg in 2025 promulgated the Project on repositioning English as a second language in schools for the period 2025-2035, with a vision toward 2045.

These strategic directions advance the ambition to elevate English to a functional second language within the country, strengthening national competitiveness and global integration.

Within this policy-driven ecosystem, the training of undergraduate EFL majors has evolved toward a competency-based and internationally oriented model (Phan et al., 2025). EFL programs typically span four years and integrate foundational linguistic knowledge (phonetics, phonology, discourse analysis), applied linguistics (second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, pragmatics), and specialized tracks entailing English language teaching (ELT), translation and interpreting, or even business Englishes. In alignment with national qualification frameworks and outcome-based education principles (Trinh & Mai, 2018), these programs themselves articulate explicit learning outcomes, including language proficiency, research literacy, critical thinking, and professional skills, benchmarked against internationally aligned standards (Dang & Ha, 2021; Trinh, 2024).

A distinctive feature of many EFL bachelor programs is the requirement to complete a graduation thesis or equivalent graduation project (Trinh, 2024). Students who pursue the thesis pathway engage in supervised independent research involving literature review, empirical data collection, data analysis, and academic writing in English. This endeavor calls for advanced linguistic competence, methodological precision, academic integrity, and disciplined self-regulation. Via coursework, micro-teaching, internships, and research training, programs cultivate graduates prepared to function as new teachers, translators, researchers, and language professionals in an increasingly internationalized labor market (Nguyen, 2024).

Against the backdrop of Vietnam's elevation of English as a second language and the consolidation of foreign language education reforms, examining EFL majors' emotional experiences during the thesis-writing process is both timely and pedagogically consequential. The undergraduate thesis constitutes an intensive academic milestone through which students consolidate disciplinary expertise while navigating complex cognitive and affective demands. Tracing how Vietnamese EFL majors experience emotional trajectories during this process offers critical insights into the human dimension of research training in contemporary higher education. Informed by the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), this study seeks to portray multidimensional contours of emotional experiences throughout the thesis-writing journey in the Mekong Delta region.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. EFL Majors' Emotional Experiences

Emotion is commonly conceptualized as a complex, multidimensional psychological state involving affective, cognitive, physiological, and behavioral components. It also represents individuals' evaluative responses to internal or external stimuli, shaped by personal beliefs, prior experiences, and sociocultural contexts (Huang, 2022). In educational settings, emotions are socially mediated processes emerging from interactions with tasks, peers, teachers, and institutional expectations (Reilly, 2021; Guo & Wang, 2025). Hence, emotional experiences themselves refer to the lived unfolding of affective states, encompassing how individuals perceive, interpret, express, and regulate their emotions within particular contexts.

In this conceptualization, Vietnamese EFL majors' emotional experiences during thesis writing can be defined as affective trajectories that students undergo while engaging in a high-stakes academic milestone. Thesis writing requires in-depth cognitive effort, linguistic precision, independent inquiry, and continuous interaction with supervisors and institutional evaluation systems. As a result, students often move through a range of emotions, from curiosity, pride, and accomplishment to anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt (Huang, 2022; Zhang & Yusof, 2024). For Vietnamese EFL majors in particular, conducting research in English and negotiating academic identity in an educational culture may further intensify the emotional complexity of the thesis journey (Phan & Truong, 2025). Understanding how these emotions emerge and evolve during thesis writing, therefore, provides important insights into the more significant academic and developmental trajectories of EFL students.

1.1.2. Related Studies on EFL Majors' Emotional Experiences

Recent scholarship has progressively deepened and diversified the investigation of emotions in second and foreign language education. Reilly (2021) challenged the traditional dominance of anxiety-focused research by demonstrating that learners experience a broad spectrum of achievement emotions during pedagogical tasks, including those triggered by mindfulness activities, growth mindset reflections, and extensive reading. This study highlighted the pedagogical potential of intentionally fostering pleasant emotions in language classrooms. Building on the rise of "Positive Psychology", Huang (2022) examined skill-specific emotions, centering on English listening among Chinese EFL majors. Through longitudinal qualitative data, the study proposed a refined categorization of listening-related emotions and emphasized their diversity, intensity, and frequency.

Attention subsequently expanded to teachers' emotional worlds. Drawing on Ecological Systems Theory, Zhang and Yusof (2024) traced novice EFL teachers' emotional experiences across multiple contextual layers from classroom interactions to their institutional systems and sociocultural influences, revealing emotions (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, and joy) as dynamically shaped over time. In the Vietnamese context, Phan and Truong (2025) explored pre-service EFL teachers' practicum experiences through the lens of resilience theory, uncovering emotional fluctuations, identity tensions, and the strategic usage of emotion regulation. Most recently, Guo and Wang (2025) explored AI-integrated EFL instruction, finding that learners' emotional experiences were abundant, dynamic, and closely intertwined with cognitive, social, and emotional engagement.

Unquestionably, these studies share a recognition that emotions are multifaceted, context-sensitive, and changing over time. However, they differ in focus and theoretical orientation: earlier work centered on broadening emotional categories (Reilly, 2021) and skill-specific affect (Huang, 2022), whereas later studies increasingly situated emotions within ecological (Zhang & Yusof, 2024), resilience-based (Phan & Truong, 2025), and technology-mediated (Guo & Wang, 2025) frameworks. This progression reflects a shift from examining isolated emotional constructs toward understanding emotions as embedded within complex professional, institutional, and technological systems.

1.1.3. Seligman's (2011) PERMA Model for Understanding Positive Psychology

The PERMA model, developed by Seligman (2011), sees well-being as a multidimensional and dynamic construct grounded in the principles of "positive psychology". The acronym PERMA represents five interrelated pillars of human flourishing: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Esmacilee et al., 2025). "Positive Emotion" encompasses affective experiences such as joy, gratitude, hope, and pride that enrich people's subjective well-being. "Engagement" refers to psychological involvement in some activities that generate concentration, intrinsic interest, and absorption. "Relationships" highlight the role of supportive interpersonal connections in shaping emotional stability and growth. "Meaning" concerns the perception that people's actions are purposeful and aligned with external values or aspirations. Last but not least, "Accomplishment" reflects one's pursuit and attainment of personally significant goals, fostering a sense of competence and mastery.

The PERMA model offers a conceptually robust lens for examining Vietnamese EFL majors' emotional experiences in thesis writing. The thesis journey entails intellectual investment, supervisory interactions, identity (re)formation, and the pursuit of a culminating academic milestone. Each of these dimensions resonates with PERMA pillars: emotional highs and lows correspond with "Positive Emotion"; sustained research immersion aligns with "Engagement"; supervisory and peer interactions embody "Relationships"; reflections on academic and professional aspirations illuminate "Meaning"; and thesis completion crystallizes "Accomplishment". The multidimensional architecture of PERMA enables a nuanced exploration of how these elements are enacted within students' lived experiences. By situating emotional trajectories within a comprehensive framework, the model itself provides theoretically coherent and contextually grounded interpretations of students' developmental processes in the thesis endeavor.

1.1.4. Research Gaps and Questions

Although emotions in higher education have received increasing scholarly attention, existing research has largely centered on classroom-based learning, language anxiety, motivation, and general academic stress. Studies focusing specifically on EFL contexts tend to examine discrete emotional variables rather than the emotional vicissitudes embedded in academic projects. The undergraduate thesis, however, is referred to as a crucial high-stakes endeavor intertwining intellectual challenge, supervisory interaction, identity construction, and future-oriented aspirations. Within the Vietnamese setting, where thesis completion marks a symbolic transition from university student to emerging graduate, this process carries substantial significance. Yet, limited research has explored how Vietnamese EFL majors live through and interpret emotional journeys across the full trajectory of thesis writing.

To address this gap, this study, guided by the PERMA model, strives to give answers to a single question: How do Vietnamese EFL majors experience emotions throughout the thesis-doing process?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study was designated as a PERMA-based qualitative multiple-case study. Drawing from an interpretivist epistemological stance, the study itself defines emotional experiences as socially constructed and contextually embedded phenomena (re)shaped by people's interactions with academic environments. Furthermore, a case study is particularly suitable for examining experiences and the meanings participants attribute to them (Creswell, 2014). A multiple-case study design facilitates an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within real-life contexts, especially when boundaries between phenomenon and context are intertwined (Yin, 2003), capturing both unique and shared experiences.

Adopting a multiple-case design, the study treated each participant as a distinct case bounded by a shared disciplinary context, namely, enrollment in an undergraduate EFL program and active engagement in thesis writing. Conceptualizing each participant as an individual case allows for detailed within-case analysis to trace personal emotional trajectories, followed by cross-case comparison to identify recurring patterns (Stake, 2013). This design boosts analytic rigor by balancing idiographic depth with comparative insights, thereby generating theoretically meaningful interpretations of students' emotional experiences in the Vietnamese higher education context.

2.2. Participants

The study was conducted at a public university in the Mekong Delta region. As a regional higher education institution, the university plays a significant role in preparing EFL majors and prospective teachers for the surrounding provinces. The selected program was the undergraduate English Language (EFL) major (Ngon ngu Anh), in which the completion of a graduation thesis constitutes a capstone academic requirement. This shared institutional and curricular structure provided a bounded context for tracing students' emotional experiences during the thesis-writing process. All participants were drawn from the same English Language program within this institutional context. This choice ensured comparability in their academic training, thesis requirements, and supervisory structures.

A total of six EFL majors participated in the study (see Table 1). These participants represented diverse gender identities and academic backgrounds, enabling variation in experiential perspectives while maintaining contextual coherence. Purposive case sampling was employed to ensure that the participants were either completing or had recently completed their thesis, (re)positioning them as information-rich cases capable of offering reflective insights into the phenomenon. The recruitment process followed a systematic eight-step procedure to enhance the methodological rigor: (1) identification of eligible students with program coordination; (2) dissemination of a formal invitation outlining the study's aims; (3) voluntary expression of interests; (4) eligibility screening based on current thesis status; (5) clarification of research expectations and time commitments; (6) provision of information sheets; (7) informed consent; and (8) confirmation and scheduling of interviews. This structured process strengthened transparency, ethical integrity, and credibility of participant selection.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Six Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Thesis Status	Research Topic
Lan	Female	22	Completed	ELT Methodology
Minh	Male	23	Completed	Second Language Acquisition
An	Female	22	In progress (defense stage)	Intercultural communication
Khoa	Male	23	Completed	ELT Methodology
Linh	Female	22	In progress (revision stage)	Intercultural communication
Phúc	Male	23	Completed	Learner Motivation

Including participants at slightly different stages of thesis completion allowed for a richer depiction of emotional trajectories across the culmination phases of undergraduate study. Conceptualizing each participant as a distinct case enabled in-depth within-case analysis while facilitating cross-case comparison to identify shared patterns and contextual variations in emotional experiences. Given the case-oriented nature of the study, the research aim was to obtain detailed accounts of students' experiences. Of interest, in qualitative multiple-case studies, a small number of information-rich cases is considered sufficient to illuminate the experiential patterns (Stake, 2013). The six cases allowed both in-depth within-case analysis and meaningful cross-case comparison. Besides, within this bounded institutional context, six participants provided sufficient depth to illuminate the emotional contours of the thesis journey while still allowing meaningful cross-case comparison.

2.3. Research Instruments

Data were generated primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews guided by an interview protocol developed by the PERMA model. It was conceptually organized around five elements to trace how each dimension manifested throughout the thesis-writing process. Rather than functioning as rigid categories, these elements served as sensitizing constructs informing the formulation of open-ended questions. In fact, all participants were invited to recount emotionally significant moments (Positive Emotion), describe periods of deep involvement or difficulty sustaining focus (Engagement), reflect on supervisory and peer interactions (Relationships), articulate the personal significance of their thesis work (Meaning), and evaluate the sense of achievement upon completion (Accomplishment). Recognizably, the semi-structured format enabled both the conceptual consistency across all cases and flexibility to pursue emergent themes during interviews (Belina, 2023).

To enrich data depth and enhance data triangulation, reflective journals were incorporated as a supplementary instrument. Participants were invited to share written reflections produced during their thesis journey or compose retrospective accounts prior to interviews. Reflective writing facilitates access to internal cognitive-emotional processes and supports the layered narrative construction of lived experiences. In addition, relevant documentary artifacts (e.g., supervisor feedback excerpts or revision records) were collected when available to contextualize emotional responses within authentic academic interactions. The integration of interviews, reflective texts, and documentary materials strengthened data richness and methodological coherence within the multiple-case design.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period during the final semester of participants' undergraduate study. Eligible students were contacted via email and provided with an information sheet detailing the study's aims, procedures, and ethical assurances. After informed consent was obtained, individual interviews were scheduled at times convenient for all participants. Each participant engaged in two rounds of semi-structured interviews to capture retrospective reflections and interpretations.

The first interview (60-78 minutes) focused on reconstructing the overall thesis journey guided by the interview protocol. The interview protocol consisted of eight guiding questions organized into four sections addressing stages of the thesis process: (1) initial expectations and motivations for undertaking the thesis, (2) emotionally significant moments encountered during the research journey, (3) experiences of supervisory interaction and feedback, and (4) perceived personal and academic development throughout

the thesis process. The first section entailed the questions tracing participants' initial expectations and motivations for undertaking the thesis (e.g., reasons for choosing the topic, anticipated challenges, and personal aspirations). The second section invited them to recount emotionally significant moments encountered during the thesis journey (e.g., difficulties in conducting research, moments of achievement, or turning points in their learning process). The third section concentrated on supervisory interactions, prompting participants to reflect on their experiences of receiving feedback, negotiating revisions, and communicating with their supervisors. The final section asked participants to reflect on their perceived personal and academic development throughout the thesis process (e.g., changes in research competence, confidence, and emotional outlook toward academic work).

The second interview (10-15 minutes), conducted approximately three to four weeks later, invited elaboration, clarification, and reflection on emerging themes identified during preliminary analysis. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure emotional nuance and expressive depth, audio-recorded with permission, and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

In addition to these interviews, participants were kindly invited to submit their reflective journal excerpts, which document emotionally significant moments during their thesis process. Where available, relevant documentary artifacts such as supervisor feedback comments or revision notes were collected to contextualize emotional responses within the actual academic interactions. Field notes were maintained throughout the data collection phase to document contextual observations and interview dynamics.

2.5. Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed a two-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining within-case and cross-case analysis. Transcribed interviews, reflective texts, and documentary artifacts were first organized systematically. This helped ensure that all data sources could be examined together during analysis. The analysis began with several rounds of close reading to gain familiarity with the data and to develop a holistic understanding of each participant's experiences.

During the within-case phase, coding was conducted using a hybrid approach. Theory-informed coding was applied based on the PERMA model. At the same time, inductive coding was used to capture themes that emerged from the data beyond the predefined categories. This abductive strategy allowed the analysis to remain theoretically grounded while still being responsive to participants' lived experiences.

The coding process was conducted collaboratively by the author and an experienced qualitative researcher. At the initial stages of analysis, each researcher independently read interview transcripts and related documents and generated preliminary codes based on recurring patterns in the data. The researchers then compared their coding to examine similarities and differences in how data had been interpreted. The instances of disagreement were discussed in several rounds of discussion. In these discussions, code meanings were clarified and refined until a shared understanding was reached. This collaborative process strengthened the credibility of the analysis and reduced the possibility that the interpretation relied on a single researcher's perspectives. After the initial coding stage, related codes were grouped into the thematic patterns representing emotional trajectories across different stages of the thesis process. Narrative summaries were then written for each participant. These summaries helped preserve the chronological flow and contextual details of each case.

Following the within-case analysis, cross-case comparison was conducted to identify similarities, differences, and variations in how emotional experiences unfolded across participants. Pattern matching and thematic synthesis were used to refine the emerging interpretations and to explore relationships among emotional dimensions. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison techniques were applied to maintain consistency and conceptual clarity across data sources. Analytic memos were written to record interpretive decisions and emerging insights, helping enhance the transparency and rigor of findings.

2.6. Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical principles governing research with human participants were strictly observed throughout the study. Their participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained in writing after

participants were provided with detailed information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any point without academic consequences. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants, and identifying information was removed during transcription and reporting. Digital recordings, transcripts, and related documents were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. Given the reflective and potentially sensitive nature of emotional experiences, interviews were all conducted in a supportive, respectful manner, with participants retaining full control over the depth and scope of disclosure.

The study's trustworthiness was addressed with four criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through the use of multiple sources of data, which allowed patterns to be examined across different forms of evidence. In addition, participants were invited to review summaries of interviews and the researchers' interpretations. Transferability was facilitated by providing a detailed description of the institutional setting and disciplinary background in which the study was conducted, allowing readers to judge the relevance of the findings to other contexts. To enhance dependability, researchers maintained an audit trail that recorded key stages of the research process, including participant recruitment, the development of coding categories, and major analytical decisions. Finally, confirmability was addressed through ongoing reflexive journaling, which enabled researchers to consider their positionality and how their perspectives might shape the interpretation of the data.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Positive Emotion: Emotional Peaks Across the Thesis Journey

Participants described positive emotions as meaningful highlights throughout their thesis-writing experiences. These emotions appeared in three forms: anticipatory hope at the initial stage, moments of joy during academic progress, and a sense of pride at thesis completion. Each stage contributed to fueling motivation and reshaping participants' academic self-concept.

3.1.1. Anticipatory Hope: Excitement at the Threshold

At the initial stages of thesis development, selecting a topic created a sense of excitement mixed with seriousness. For participants, this moment symbolized autonomy and intellectual responsibility.

Lan shared:

"When I finally chose my topic, I felt excited because it was something I genuinely cared about. It made me feel like I was stepping into a more mature stage of my academic life. I also wondered whether I was capable enough to complete it, so the excitement came with a sense of responsibility."

Minh expressed a similar perspective, describing the thesis as an opportunity to engage deeply with a subject that mattered to him: *"I think this is the first time I'm doing something very academic"*. Across cases, anticipatory hope infused the early stage with energy and personal significance. The thesis was associated with growth, seriousness, and forward movement toward professional goals.

3.1.2. Micro-Joy During Academic Progress

As participants worked through the literature review, data collection, and revision, positive emotions appeared in specific moments tied to progress and validation. These lived experiences often followed conceptual clarity or encouraging supervisory feedback.

Khoa recalled a brief yet powerful comment from his supervisor:

"You did this part well."

Although concise, the comment strengthened his confidence and reinforced his effort. Similar short affirmations created emotional reinforcement during demanding phases of writing.

An described a breakthrough while revising her methodology chapter:

"I spent many days trying to reorganize my methodology because I felt confused about the structure. I kept reading the comments and adjusting the sections. One evening, after rewriting it again, everything suddenly connected logically. I felt relieved and happy. It was not a dramatic achievement, but it showed me that I was developing real research skills. That moment gave me the confidence to continue working with more clarity."

Across participants, such moments of clarity and affirmation strengthened perseverance. Positive emotion during this stage substantially reinforced a sense of self-competence and supported sustained engagement with complex academic tasks.

3.1.3. Earned Pride at Thesis Completion

The most intense expressions of positive emotion occurred at the completion stage. Defense and final submission represented achievement, resilience, and self-recognition. Phức reflected on his defense experience:

"When the committee confirmed that I had passed, I felt a deep sense of relief. I remembered all the nights of revision and the pressure I had carried for months. Standing there, I felt proud in a quiet and personal way. It was the realization that I had persisted and grown through the process. I saw myself as more capable and confident than before."

Across cases, pride was associated with endurance, growth, and personal validation. Completion marked a significant academic milestone and strengthened participants' belief in intellectual capability.

Notably, positive emotion appeared as emotionally significant peaks distributed across the thesis-writing process. Anticipatory hope energized early commitment, moments of joy reinforced progress, and pride consolidated accomplishment and meaning. Within the PERMA model, such emotion contributed to motivation, resilience, and the consolidation of academic identity. In lived experiences, participants strengthened confidence and developed a deeper appreciation of their scholarly capacity.

3.2. Engagement: Immersion, Cognitive Intensity, and Emotional Strain

Engagement occupied its position in participants' thesis experiences. It manifested as sustained cognitive immersion, heightened concentration, and emotional investment in academic tasks. At the same time, intensive involvement carried psychological weight, producing exhaustion, pressure, and moments of depletion. Across cases, engagement appeared as a dynamic state characterized by both intellectual absorption and emotional cost.

3.2.1. Deep Immersion and Temporal Compression

Several participants described periods of intense concentration during literature review and data analysis. These moments were marked by narrowed attention and an altered perception of time.

Minh reflected:

"When I was analyzing my data, I could sit for hours without realizing how much time had passed. I felt completely absorbed in the patterns and interpretations. It was demanding. I also felt intellectually alive."

This sense of absorption provided cognitive satisfaction and reinforced commitment to the project. Participants associated such immersion with personal seriousness and academic maturity. Sustained focus contributed to a perception of competence and scholarly legitimacy.

An described a similar experience during data coding:

"There were days when I focused entirely on coding interviews. I turned off my phone, closed social media, and concentrated only on identifying themes. I felt mentally stretched, but at the same time, I sensed that I was engaging in authentic research work. That intensity made me feel like a real researcher rather than just a student completing a requirement."

Across cases, in-depth engagement strengthened participants' identification with the research role. Concentrated effort enhanced their perception of intellectual growth and professional readiness.

3.2.2. Emotional Strain and Cognitive Saturation

Intensive engagement also generated emotional strain. Extended periods of concentration were accompanied by fatigue, self-pressure, and cognitive saturation.

Linh summarized this experience concisely:

"I felt mentally drained."

For Linh and others, sustained involvement required constant self-regulation. Revising chapters repeatedly, responding to feedback, and maintaining academic rigor demanded psychological endurance.

Khoa explained:

"During the revision stage, I pushed myself to refine every sentence because I wanted the thesis to meet academic standards. I sometimes felt overwhelmed by the level of detail required. Even small comments from my supervisor led me to rethink entire sections. The pressure to meet expectations increased my stress, but it also pushed me to develop stronger analytical thinking."

Across participants, engagement intensified emotional responses to feedback. Academic standards and supervisory expectations heightened sensitivity and self-scrutiny. Cognitive immersion, therefore intertwined with vulnerability and pressure.

3.2.3. Sustained Commitment and Self-Discipline

Despite their emotional strain, participants demonstrated strong persistence. Engagement required structured routines, time management, and internal discipline.

Phúc described organizing his daily schedule around thesis writing:

"I created a timetable and allocated specific hours each day for reading and writing. Some days I felt tired, but maintaining a routine helped me stay connected to the project. Gradually, the discipline itself strengthened my sense of responsibility."

This commitment reflected internal motivation linked to personal goals and academic identity. Across cases, engagement supported the development of self-regulation skills and long-term perseverance.

"Engagement" was a state of personal investment accompanied by emotional intensity. Periods of immersion enhanced participants' sense of competence and scholarly identity, while sustained cognitive effort generated fatigue and psychological pressure. Within the PERMA model, "Engagement" interacted with "Meaning" and "Accomplishment", through which it strengthened participants' own commitment to academic goals and reinforced perceptions of growth.

3.3. Relationships: Supervisory Authority, Emotional Safety, and Academic Belonging

"Relationships" greatly affected participants' emotional experiences. Interactions with supervisors and peers influenced confidence, anxiety levels, motivation, and sense of academic belonging. Across cases, supervisory communication carried particular emotional weight, as it embodied both institutional authority and academic validation.

3.3.1. Supervisory Feedback and Emotional Sensitivity

Participants described supervisory feedback as a central emotional trigger. Comments on drafts shaped how they (re)interpreted their own competence and progress. Even subtle wording influenced emotional responses.

Lan reflected:

"When my supervisor provided detailed comments, I felt guided. Even if there were many corrections, I sensed that she cared about the quality of my work. That made me more willing to revise and improve."

In contrast, ambiguous feedback generated tension and self-doubt. Minh shared:

"There were times when I received short comments like 'revise this section' without further explanation. I kept wondering what exactly needed to change. I read the paragraph repeatedly and felt increasingly uncertain. I questioned whether my understanding was inadequate."

Across all cases, clarity in feedback contributed to emotional stability, while vagueness intensified cognitive pressure. The supervisory authority amplified the emotional impact of the evaluation. Participants associated supervisors with expertise, judgment, and academic legitimacy. As a result, feedback influenced both task performance and self-perception.

3.3.2. Power, Validation, and Vulnerability

The hierarchical structure of supervision heightened participants' emotional sensitivity. Meetings were often described as moments of anticipation.

An explained:

"Before each meeting, I prepared carefully and rehearsed what I wanted to say. I hoped my supervisor would acknowledge my effort. When she nodded or expressed agreement, I felt relieved and reassured. Those small gestures meant a lot to me because they signaled acceptance within the academic community."

For others, silence or limited interaction intensified vulnerability. Linh described waiting for email responses:

"After submitting my draft, I checked my email repeatedly. The waiting period made me anxious. I kept imagining different possible reactions. As I finally received feedback, my mood shifted immediately depending on the tone of the message."

These accounts demonstrate how supervisory relationships regulated emotional states. Approval reinforced confidence, while uncertainty heightened anxiety. Participants' academic identity development was closely tied to perceived recognition from authority figures.

3.3.3. Peer Support and Emotional Containment

Beyond thesis supervision, peer relationships provided emotional containment and normalization. Sharing struggles with classmates reduced feelings of isolation.

Phúc gave his explanation:

"Talking with my friends who were also writing their theses helped me realize that everyone faced similar challenges. We exchanged drafts, discussed feedback, and sometimes simply complained together. That sharing reduced my stress and made the process feel more manageable."

Peers created a space of solidarity distinct from the hierarchical supervision. Through discussion, participants redefined difficulties as shared academic experiences rather than personal inadequacies.

In the PERMA model, "Relationships" are linked with "Engagement" and "Meaning". Constructive supervision boosted motivation and academic identification, while supportive peers sustained emotional equilibrium during demanding phases. Relational dynamics played a decisive role in shaping participants' emotional trajectories and consolidating a sense of belonging within the academic community.

3.4. Meaning: Thesis Writing as Academic Identity Construction

Beyond task completion and performance outcomes, participants attached personal significance to the thesis experience. Meaning was constructed with effort, struggle, reflection, and recognition of growth.

Across cases, the thesis shifted from being a graduation requirement to becoming a formative academic milestone that reshaped participants' understanding of themselves.

3.4.1. From Academic Requirement to Personal Commitment

At the outset, participants associated the thesis primarily with institutional obligation. However, as they invested time and intellectual energy, their orientation shifted toward personal commitment.

Linh commented:

"At first, I saw the thesis as something I had to complete in order to graduate. But after months of working on it, I started to see it differently. It became something that represented my own effort and intellectual development. I felt attached to it."

This shift in perception signaled deeper meaning-making. The thesis gradually embodied personal investment, persistence, and self-respect. The worth-doing process of researching, revising, and refining fostered a sense of ownership in this case.

3.4.2. Intellectual Growth and Self-Recognition

Participants frequently linked meaning to self-growth. Engaging in research methods, theoretical frameworks, and data interpretation expanded their understanding of academic inquiry.

Minh explained:

"Through writing my thesis, I realized how complex research actually is. Before this experience, I thought research was mainly about collecting data and writing results. Now I understand the importance of theoretical grounding, methodological rigor, and critical interpretation. I feel more aware of how knowledge is constructed."

This awareness extended beyond procedural skills. It influenced how participants perceived their intellectual capacity.

An described a similar realization:

"There were moments when I struggled with analysis and felt overwhelmed. But after working through those difficulties, I noticed that my thinking became more structured and critical. I started to trust my own reasoning. That gave me a sense of academic maturity."

Across cases, meaning was closely associated with cognitive transformation and increased self-trust. Participants recognized shifts in analytical thinking, independence, and confidence.

3.4.3. Repositioning the Self: From Student to Emerging Graduate

The thesis experience contributed to a redefinition of identity. Phúc articulated this transformation:

"Completing the thesis changed how I see myself. I no longer view myself only as a student completing assignments. I see myself as someone capable of conducting research, analyzing problems, and contributing ideas. It gave me a new sense of direction for my future."

This repositioning reflected more than acquiring academic competence. It signified alignment between personal aspirations and scholarly identity. Participants connected their thesis topics to career goals, teaching philosophy, or potential postgraduate study.

Across cases, meaning crystallizes through relational validation and eventual accomplishment. The thesis served as a symbolic bridge between undergraduate study and professional or academic futures.

"Meaning" was closely related to "Engagement" and "Accomplishment" across cases. Cognitive investment fostered deeper significance, while successful completion reinforced participants' belief in their evolving academic selves. Through this process, the thesis was a formative experience that reshaped how participants understood their capabilities, goals, and place within the academic community.

3.5. Accomplishment: Consolidation of Competence and Academic Agency

Accomplishment represented a culminating psychological state in which sustained intellectual effort, emotional regulation, and relational validation converged into a strengthened sense of capability. Participants described completion as a moment when months of uncertainty, revision, and perseverance crystallized into confidence and stability.

3.5.1. Accumulated Effort and Emotional Integration

Participants consistently connected accomplishment with the long trajectory of drafting, feedback, and refinement. Completion carried emotional depth precisely because it contained the memory of earlier challenges.

Lan reflected:

"When I submitted the final version, I felt calm and proud. I thought about all the earlier drafts and how much I had revised."

Her reflection highlights her temporal integration. The present sense of achievement incorporated prior struggle into a coherent narrative of growth. Emotional steadiness at submission indicated that earlier tension had been processed and transformed into confidence.

Minh described a similar experience during his defense:

"Answering the committee's questions gave me a strong sense of certainty. I realized that I truly understood my topic. Speaking about my research clearly made me trust my own knowledge."

Recognizably, accomplishment in this case was tied to a demonstration of mastery. Articulating arguments in a formal academic setting reinforced thesis ownership. The successful defense consolidated both competence and self-recognition.

3.5.2. Tangible Evidence of Intellectual Labor

The thesis document itself carried symbolic weight wherein participants' labor was reflected. They referred to the completed manuscript as a representation of disciplined thinking, methodological rigor, and sustained focus.

Phúc explained:

"Holding the printed thesis felt meaningful. Every chapter reflected careful analysis and revision. It showed me that I could complete something complex and demanding."

The physical artifact transformed abstract effort into visible achievement. Through this material confirmation, participants internalized their academic capability more deeply. The thesis served as proof of long-term commitment and structured reasoning.

3.5.3. Reinforcement of Self-Efficacy and Forward Orientation

Accomplishment went beyond personal satisfaction. Completing a comprehensive independent project recalibrated participants' confidence in handling future academic tasks.

An shared:

"After finishing my thesis, I approach other assignments differently. I feel more prepared because I have already experienced an entire research process from beginning to end."

This statement reveals strengthened academic agency. The thesis experience expanded participants' belief in their ability to initiate, sustain, and finalize intellectually demanding work. Confidence became grounded in lived experience rather than abstract optimism.

Linh connected accomplishment to long-term aspirations:

“Completing the thesis made postgraduate study feel realistic. I can imagine myself continuing research because I have already proven that I can do it.”

Notably, “Accomplishment” in this case further supported forward-looking ambition. It linked past perseverance with future possibility.

Across cases, accomplishment consolidated competence, stabilized academic identity, and activated future-oriented motivation. It brought coherence to preceding dimensions. Positive emotions sustained momentum, engagement, cognitive investment, relationships provided affirmation, and meaning anchored commitment. These elements accumulated across the research journey and culminated in strengthened self-efficacy and clearer academic direction.

4. DISCUSSION

Interpreted through the lens of the PERMA model, the findings portrayed thesis writing as a complex emotional trajectory through which participants negotiated their developing academic identities. As Seligman (2011) conceptualized well-being as a combination of positive states, personal attributes, and behavioral tendencies that enable individuals to thrive, the findings illustrated how interwoven emotional states shaped motivation, resilience, and self-perception across stages of the thesis process.

First and foremost, positive emotions punctuated transitions across the thesis journey, beginning with anticipatory hope at topic selection, where excitement intertwined with a sense of responsibility. As the process advanced, joy arising from conceptual clarity or affirming supervisory feedback generated relief and strengthened confidence, while pride at completion condensed months of revision and uncertainty into a coherent sense of intellectual growth. These affective experiences sustained persistence and reinforced belief in scholarly competence, echoing Esmaeilee et al. (2025), who note that positive emotions in educational contexts cultivate resilience and maintain engagement in demanding academic work. At the same time, engagement intensified the emotional landscape. Immersion in data analysis and writing brought intellectual vitality, whereas the extended revision heightened pressure and sharpened sensitivity to evaluation. As articulated in the PERMA model, engagement refers to being deeply involved in activities that use one's strengths (Seligman, 2011), a description reflected in participants' absorption and the emotional fluctuations accompanying serious scholarly investment. Relational dynamics further shaped how progress and difficulty were interpreted: supervisory feedback elicited reassurance or anxiety depending on tone and clarity, brief acknowledgment strengthened confidence, delayed or ambiguous responses heightened anticipation and self-doubt, and peer exchanges reduced isolation by (re)framing tension as shared experience. Consistent with Seligman's (2011) assertion that “other people matter” and with Esmaeilee et al. (2025) emphasizing the motivational value of supportive educational relationships, interactions influenced emotional balance and academic self-understanding. As emotional investment deepened, meaning was intertwined with personal identity; the thesis changed from institutional requirement to personal milestone marked by greater intellectual awareness, stronger critical capacity, and clearer professional direction. Accomplishment integrated earlier strain into a stable sense of capability, as relief, composed pride, and strengthened self-trust in defense and submission extended into confidence toward future academic pursuits.

These findings converge with and extend the prior scholarship on emotions in language education. Similar to Reilly (2021) and Huang (2022), this study reconfirms that emotional experiences in academic tasks entail a very broad spectrum beyond anxiety, including hope, joy, pride, and strain. In alignment with Zhang and Yusof (2024) and Phan and Truong (2025), emotions were shown to be dynamic and affected by contextual interactions, particularly supervisory authority and peer support. These findings also resonate with those of Guo and Wang (2025), highlighting the interconnection between emotions and engagement, as participants' affective states in this study were interwoven with cognitive immersion and relational validation. At the same time, this study offers several contributions. Firstly, rather than focusing on classroom instructions, teaching practicums, or technology-mediated contexts, it centers on the thesis as a high-stakes and identity-defining academic milestone. Secondly, by drawing on the PERMA model, it integrates discrete emotional experiences into a well-being-oriented framework, illuminating how positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment shape an emotional arc of becoming.

In sum, the study conceptualizes thesis writing as an emotionally intensive developmental journey in which interconnected affective experiences shape self-trust and academic orientation. By situating these experiences within a PERMA model, it underscores the centrality of emotion in understanding how EFL majors navigate, interpret, and ultimately transform through the stages of their undergraduate education.

5. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study positions undergraduate thesis writing as an emotional experience that shapes students' academic maturation. Across stages, hope energized initial commitment, strain heightened awareness of responsibility, reassurance restored confidence, and pride at completion consolidated months of effort into a strengthened sense of capability. These emotional experiences guided how participants interpreted feedback, navigated uncertainty, and made an in-depth investment in their work. Traced via a well-being-informed perspective, the thesis itself represents an affective turning point in which accumulated feelings of tension, affirmation, and achievement crystallized into a clearer future orientation.

The findings suggest several pedagogical implications. To begin with, thesis supervision should be viewed not only as a process of methodological guidance but also as a form of relational mentorship. When supervisors provide clear, constructive feedback, students tend to feel more emotionally stable and develop a greater sense of legitimacy as emerging academics. For this reason, institutions might consider offering professional development activities that raise supervisors' awareness of the emotional dimensions of thesis writing, encouraging more supportive and transparent communication.

In addition, research training modules could incorporate reflective elements that allow students to acknowledge and discuss emotional challenges alongside methodological issues. Activities such as guided reflection, peer-sharing sessions, or research writing circles may help normalize emotional struggles and foster a sense of collective resilience. These spaces can also strengthen students' sense of belonging and reduce the isolation often experienced during extended periods of independent research.

From a curriculum perspective, principles associated with the PERMA framework may be useful in balancing academic rigor with student well-being. For instance, encouraging incremental goal setting can support students' sense of accomplishment, while collaborative discussion is more likely to strengthen peer relationships. Likewise, allowing room for intellectual autonomy may deepen students' engagement with their projects and help them find greater meaning in the research process. In this way, English language programs can nurture both academic competence and emotional sustainability.

Finally, at the policy level, as Vietnam continues to promote English language education and strengthen research capacity, greater attention to students' emotional development could further enhance the quality of undergraduate research training. Viewing thesis writing as an affective as well as intellectual journey highlights the value of cultivating resilient, reflective, and confident graduates who are prepared to pursue future academic work domestically and internationally.

6. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study involved a very small group of Vietnamese EFL majors within one institutional context, which affects the transferability of findings. The reliance on retrospective self-reports reflects participants' interpretations of their emotional experiences. In addition, the focus centered on students' perspectives during the thesis period, leaving stakeholders' viewpoints and longer-term emotional development less examined. For these reasons, future research may include diverse institutional and disciplinary contexts to deepen understanding of emotional experiences in thesis writing. Longitudinal approaches could trace how these emotions influence academic identity beyond graduation. Incorporating multiple data sources, such as supervisors' perspectives or reflective journals, may further enrich insight into the relational and contextual shaping of students' emotional development.

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