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Enhancing students' L2 writing skills online: a case study of an introductory English literature course for ESL students

Abstract: This research paper is based on a case study of an introductory English literature course that is being offered at a community college in Hong Kong, China. The 2020–2021 cohort was unique as it had the entire course online using Zoom without any face-to-face or hybrid teaching, which was considered the "new normal" of higher education under the pandemic. This study employs narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen, G. (2014). Revisiting narrative frames: An instrument for investigating language teaching and learning. *System*, 47, 12–27; Clandinin, D. J. (2016). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge), semi-structured interviews, and analysis of student essays to demonstrate that online essay consultations and collaborative writing are useful for enhancing the essay writing skills of second language learners. The paper specifically reports and highlights how individual Zoom essay consultations, together with collaborative writing on Padlet, scaffold and enhance students' essay writing and critical thinking skills. Essentially, the paper argues that online technologies expand the dimension of literature education and empower it as a form of content-based ESL instruction for long-term use.

Keywords: L2 writing; online essay consultation; online collaborative writing; narrative inquiry; computer-assisted language learning; English literature

1 Introduction

Language teaching and learning in higher education, as with other humanities subjects, have incorporated advanced forms of learning that are machine-based,

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AI-assisted, and instrumental, as well as favoring linguistic approaches over literary training.[1] Understandably, English literature and literary studies are marginalized in the English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum in Chinese Hong Kong as English literature is often associated with British canonical works that are to be downplayed in the English language curriculum in the Special Administrative Region[2] and a more pragmatic, instrumental attitude towards the language is favored, viewing it as a lingua franca, or a convenient tool of communication. Secondly, the study of English literature in-depth is predominantly confined to students from elite local and international schools, resulting in a comparatively narrow audience at the tertiary level. This is even more pronounced in associate degree programs and self-financed institutions, which predominantly enroll students from Chinese-medium instruction secondary schools (Rogers & Ho, 2014). Finally, most ESL teachers nowadays have their scholarly training in linguistics. For instance, in the institution where this study takes place, there are currently 52 full-time English language lecturers, with only 5 of them having a background in literary studies, comprising less than 10 % of the entire English discipline team. Despite such marginalization, the value of teaching English literature should not be undermined as it has an irreplaceable role in creative use of the language and higher order thinking. The case study presented in this paper also demonstrates how an English literature course, when planned and executed using appropriate Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) tools, can improve L2 students' writing and criticality in the post-secondary setting. Essentially, through this case study, we wish to stress that teaching English literature is of vital importance as it fosters creative expression and advanced cognitive abilities, both of which are crucial competencies within the context of higher education.

As is well established, the pedagogical benefits of using imaginative literature in ESL instruction are widely recognized among scholars. Gaskins (2015), through a case study, advocates adding literary essays to the usual choices of the short story, novel,

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1 To illustrate, two prestigious comprehensive universities, the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), have both established English teaching centers to serve undergraduate students across all programmes of all faculties. CUHK's English Language Teaching Unit offers 41 English courses, out of which only one course is on literature (ELTU2011: *English Through Literary Analysis*). Similarly, HKU's Centre for Applied English Studies offers 32 core courses, among which only one course is on literary studies (CAES9202 *Academic English: Literary Studies*).
2 In general, former colonies of Britain have kept English for pragmatic purposes, while making a distinction between those purposes and more creative expression, which was understood by many to be an aspect of assimilation. As Ashcroft et al. (2003) write in their famous *The Empire Writes Back*: "As post-colonial societies sought to establish their difference from Britain, the response of those who recognized this complicity between language, education, and cultural incorporation was to break the link between language and literary study by dividing 'English' departments in universities into separate schools of Linguistics and of Literature, both of which tended to view their project within a national or international context" (p.4).

poem and play in the ESL curriculum. McKay (1982) believes that literature can provide a key to motivating students to read in English. Costello (1990) considers literature an invaluable adjunct to ESL composition because students do not simply gather information in the target language. Instead, "they are asked to analyze the literary selection not only for its content but also for its aesthetic qualities and relevance to their own lives" (Costello, 1990, p. 22).

When considering the adoption of CALL, literature educators are notably hesitant to embrace technological integration, often opting for traditional approaches over digital innovation. This resistance is partly rooted in the discipline's historical reverence for physical books, which are seen as timeless classics, and partly rooted in the well-established, low-tech methodologies of literary studies. For example, many literary scholars maintain that the nuanced practice of close reading and a personal engagement with texts cannot be adequately substituted by data-driven approaches like big data analysis (Wang, 2022) or "distant reading" methods (Moretti, 2013). Furthermore, the pedagogical nature of literature courses, which differ from the more skill-centric English language courses, is another factor. Literature is often taught as content-based second language instruction (Byrnes, 2005), where traditional, teacher-centered lectures prevail. In such settings, the use of technology is not deemed crucial for content delivery, as the conventional methods are considered more than sufficient. As Porter puts it (2000), though "computers have so clearly proved their value for language teaching, fuel is added to the anti-technology stance common in some of the other areas of specialization" (p. 312). English literature is certainly an area of such specialization.

However, the recent pandemic impacted the higher education sector significantly and forced institutions to transition from physical and traditional education to online education (Tafazoli & Meihami, 2022), and literary educators were no exception. Indeed, CALL necessitated teaching in the most critical moments (2020–2021), and teachers had to adjust quickly to the "new norm" and become competent CALL practitioners despite various challenges such as technological support, online management, and online teacher interactional competence (Moorhouse et al., 2023). Hence, it also became an important opportunity for literature teachers to incorporate CALL in their virtual classrooms.

The introductory English literature course investigated in this paper adopted CALL throughout the course in 2020–2021. The lecturer transformed the course into an online teaching mode, employing innovative digital pedagogical tools like Google Forms, Padlet, and Zoom to actively engage students and support the development of their critical thinking skills in essay writing that critiques literature. Although literature of online feedback and essay writing during the pandemic is abundant (Brudermann et al., 2021; Ennis et al., 2021; Lee, 2021; Noroozi et al., 2023), relatively little has been done to investigate the use of online tools and online feedback-giving

in the context of Chinese Hong Kong's tertiary institutions during that period, let alone the area of CALL and English literary education at a post-secondary level. The existing scarce research also highlights the students' needs for feedback in the online setting (Yeung & Yau, 2022). Furthermore, Chinese Hong Kong is a valuable research site on CALL not only because of its swift adaptation to full implementation of online teaching during the pandemic (Wu & Shi, 2021; Yeung & Yau, 2022), but also because its experiences can serve as a useful benchmark for other Chinese and Asian regions who wish to further extend L2 education beyond the traditional classroom in the post pandemic era.

This case study focuses on the 2020–2021 cohort for the following reasons: First of all, the course was conducted solely online using Zoom, making it an exclusive period to collect valuable data on CALL. Secondly, it was the third time the subject lecturer (first author) taught the course, so the course content had been stabilized. Yet, it was the first time for the lecturer to move the content entirely online, having to adapt to a completely different teaching mode. She was experimental with her online pedagogical instruments and implemented various online tools. Such first-hand experience is worth investigating. Finally, throughout the semester, students' literary criticism essays on three different literary genres (fiction, poetry, drama) demonstrated recognizable changes in terms of lexical and structural improvements, as well as argumentative and rhetorical effectiveness in English, proving the efficacy of CALL in a literature course for L2 students.

2 Literature review

Studying literature plays a critical role in improving L2 students' writing. Although debates over the advantages and disadvantages of using English literature in composition instruction persist, literature has always managed to attract some teachers of L2 writing and maintained an essential presence in the long history of L2 teaching (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000). When systematically reviewing use of literature and L2 composition, Belcher and Hirvela assert, "Literature has demonstrated a unique staying power in language teaching history as other methodologies and text types have come and gone" (2000, pp. 33–34). When engaging with literary works, L2 learners can extend their knowledge of the source language and its nuances (e.g. varied sentence structures, patterns, and precise diction), deepen their understanding of cultural context through passionate narratives, as well as developing their critical thinking skills (Ghosn, 2002), which are hard to acquire in other texts or materials. More recent studies emphasize the integration of literature into L2 instruction as a powerful language acquisition strategy (Barrette et al., 2010; Bloemert et al., 2017; Mart, 2021; Nance, 2010; Tsang et al., 2023; Weist, 2004). This body of work further posits that

language and literature are mutually reinforcing experiences that can make a significant contribution to L2 students' development of advanced language competencies.

As a matter of fact, literature used to be an inseparable part of academic training before English for academic purposes (EAP) was introduced as a concept in 1974 (Jordan, 2001, p. 181). Duff and Maley (2007) discovered that the use of literature fosters language learners' sensitivity to different styles and genres of writing, hence expanding their own repertoire. Furthermore, they argue that literary genres, with their emphasis on character development, narrative, dialogue, and symbolism, etc., can provide students with models to emulate in their own writing. This could potentially move students beyond basic language forms and explore more sophisticated and creative expressions. Duff and Maley's argument is consistent with Littlewood's (2023) advocation to balance the creative aspects of language learning while instilling conventions of academic writing into "lively young minds" (p. 4). Literary criticism, therefore, can be a space where both creative and critical thinking are exercised by L2 students.

For reasons mentioned in the introduction, the interaction between CALL and literature teaching is an under-researched area. Nonetheless, an extensive body of research explores CALL in enhancing L2 writing skills. Grgurovic et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis found a positive effect of CALL on L2 writing, highlighting improvements in fluency, organization, and content. One important phenomenon to note among these literatures is that CALL contributes significantly to collaborative writing in L2 learning environments (Abrams, 2019; Kessler, 2009; Li, 2018; Shehadeh, 2011; Zhang, 2019), which was difficult to achieve in a traditional pen-and-paper classroom environment. A study by Kessler (2009) showed that the use of CALL encourages L2 learners to engage in collaborative writing tasks, improving, in particular, grammatical accuracy and language fluency. Kessler also points out that CALL platforms are low-stress environments, allowing learners to focus on their writing. These important findings on collaborative writing also inform our present study.

Since two essential CALL tools, Padlet and Zoom, are examined in this paper in relation to students' literary essay writing performances, it is necessary to provide a brief review of them here. Padlet is mostly used as a virtual wall for brainstorming, process-writing, pre-writing exercises, and simple feedback giving (AbdAlgane & Ali, 2023; Dollah et al., 2021), while Zoom is more associated with content delivery and student-teacher conferencing. Yastibaş's study (2023) used a single case study to examine the experiences of a language instructor who conducted online writing meetings via Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research was based on a semi-structured interview and the results suggest that online writing conferences have benefits such as time efficiency, but also face challenges like technical issues. Furthermore, while the feedback content in online sessions resembled that of in-person conferences, differences

such as student prejudices were noted. Another study explores the motivational strategies used by college EFL learners in an online writing course conducted via Zoom (Kim & Kim, 2021). Data were drawn from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The research findings demonstrate that students with higher proficiency level of English utilized feedback better and responded more positively to the Zoom context, while lower proficiency level students struggled with motivational strategies due to the lack of understanding of feedback given online. The existing literature on these two tools' adequacy for L2 writing is still limited in that research so far is mostly based on surveys and interviews. Very few close analyses of student writing are done to provide evidence of positive changes in student writing using these tools.

Finally, we would like to explain the use of narrative inquiry in this case study. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that seeks to understand and interpret people's experiences through their personal stories and narratives. This approach, as demonstrated by Clandinin and Connelly (1999), places emphasis on the personal and social aspects of experience over time, and it sometimes involves a process of collaborative story-making between the researcher and the participants. In the social sciences, a narrative turn to study experience has taken place since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). According to Clandinin (2016), one of the pioneers and advocates of narrative inquiry in educational research, anyone can use a narrative inquiry method to approach any aspect of teaching and learning. It is particularly valuable in language learning research for its ability to capture the complexity and individuality of learners' experiences. It enables researchers to explore the personal, social, and cultural factors influencing language learning and use, which can provide a richer understanding than pure quantitative measures. Additionally, Barkhuizen et al. (2013) assert that narrative inquiry is particularly valid in language teaching and learning research: teaching memoir, students' learning history, and oral narratives provide a rich repertoire for the study of L2 education. For the present study, it is appropriate to use narrative inquiry as we study a literature course where detailed, personal narratives can be viewed as a literary form of research that is not just about literature, but a form of literature itself. Besides the students' learning history as collaborated between the researchers and the research participants, another narrative data was the teacher's teaching memoir (Barkhuizen, 2014; Barkhuizen et al., 2013) which recorded the teacher's constant reflection on the students' performance and insights into the influences of technology used during the teaching period from September to December 2020. To sum up, in this case study, we see the value of narrative inquiry methods as forms of creative and critical response as well as narrative response to our research questions.

3 Methodology

This research paper is based on a case study of a highly regarded introductory literature course[3] that has been offered at a community college in Hong Kong, China for four years (2018–2022). It is a discipline-specific elective course for Associate in English for Professional Communication. About 90 % of these students are later admitted to government-funded universities in Chinese Hong Kong, higher than the college's already impressive average articulation rate (65.8 % in 2020) (The College's Graduate Survey, 2020, see Appendix A). Among them, quite a few secured senior year placements at top universities in Hong Kong, China. The course focused on three literary genres (poetry, fiction, and drama), close reading skills, essay writing skills, and critical thinking skills.[4] No lengthy or heavy reading was assigned to students, and students were required to respond to each literary genre by writing a literary criticism every four weeks.

The case study's uniqueness is threefold: First, the introductory literature course itself is positioned at the intersection of second language acquisition and content-based instruction (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000; Gajdusek, 1988; Gaskins, 2015; Hall, 2005; Vandrick, 2003). Second, the time and context are unique. It was the second semester where the subject lecturer attempted full online teaching at the community college. Unlike the emergency remote teaching (ERT) that was urgently implemented in the first quarter of 2020 (Wu & Shi, 2021), CALL teachers had more time to adjust to the new norm, and the subject lecturer took this opportunity to experiment with various online pedagogical tools. In other words, the ERT had been exercised and practiced once and was no longer "emergent". In this context, CALL teachers were no longer forced to react to a major crisis but could better practice CALL strategies. Third, literature scholars and teachers, who are not formally trained as language teachers, often do not pay much attention to either English language pedagogy or educational technology. As Porter (2000) points out, language teaching by nature tends to reflect and describe methodologies and pedagogies much more than literary and cultural studies. The present study, however, recorded the lecturer's full teaching experience in the form of a teaching memoir,

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3 The course has secured an overall rating of 4.74 out of 5.00 in the College's Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ). SFQ is a teacher evaluation mechanism conducted every semester at the community college where this case study took place. At the end of each semester, all subjects are to be evaluated by students using the SFQ. The SFQ contains 24 questions to rate a subject as well as its subject lecturer/tutor. The most crucial questions are "Overall, s/he is an effective lecturer" and "Overall, s/he is an effective tutor". As a point of reference, the college's average rating of SFQ is around 4.10/5.00.

4 The intended learning outcomes of the course include (1) evaluate various literary texts from the perspective of literary criticism; (2) analyse literary works in a systematic manner; (3) apply various literary terms or devices in analysing literature; (4) formulate their opinions in appreciating literature; and (5) cite source materials using MLA style.

detailing her pedagogical choices, interactions with students, and first-hand experience of applying CALL.

Essentially, this paper reports and highlights how individual Zoom essay consultations, together with collaborative writing on Padlet, scaffolds and enhances students' essay writing skills in English using qualitative methods of narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis of student essays to present a full picture about L2 students' essay writing experience facilitated by CALL. The paper specifically addresses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the lecturer and students' perceptions towards the two CALL tools, namely Padlet and Zoom, in facilitating L2 writing?

RQ2: What are the students' specific improvements in their writing before and after the use of the CALL tools?

In addressing these research questions, we utilized a case study methodology (Miles, 2015). This approach was deemed appropriate given the fact that the course under investigation is offered annually to a relatively limited number of students. The manageable size of the 2020 class, which comprised 13 students in total, facilitated an in-depth examination and analysis, affording richness and detail that may not be achievable with larger samples. To ensure the authenticity of the data and to gain nuanced, insider perspectives, we employed a triangulation of qualitative methods, incorporating narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis of the essays written by students. The subsequent section provides a comprehensive overview of the research procedures and documentation utilized in this study.

3.1 Method for data collection

This study is based on data collected and accumulated from the discipline-specific course called "Introduction to Literature in English" (hereafter, "the course") offered in a community college in Hong Kong, China from September to December 2020-21. We investigated four types of materials:

Online surveys before and after the course, facilitated by Google Forms and Padlet. These are less formal short questions and answers that enabled teacher-student interaction throughout the semester. Comparisons were made to further prove students' improvements in understanding the subject matter and argumentative writing in English.

Documents. All documents related to the course and its written assessment design, for example, the subject description form, the teaching plan, the written assignment guidelines and marking schemes, sample essays, online collaborative writing samples (mainly on Padlet), the post-teaching report, email and WhatsApp communications.

Narrative data. We collected the subject lecturer's teaching memoir (about 4,800 words) and semi-structured interviews with five student representatives,[5] each of them interviewed for 50–60 minutes. The interviews were conducted by the third author and transcribed by research assistants. The key thematic prompts of the narrative data selection were:

(1)   Which CALL tools were most helpful in teaching and learning literary criticism?
(2)   What were the online experiences of teaching and learning to write about literature like?
(3)   Did students see themselves as better L2 writers after taking the online course? If so, how?

The 12 interview questions were developed by the first author and the third author based on the literature in the field (Ong, 2016; Traore & Kyei-Blankson, 2011) and the emerging language teaching issues triggered by online teaching during the pandemic. These questions were then reviewed by the fourth author, an ESL expert who adopts and researches technology-enhanced language teaching in Hong Kong, China. The second author, whose EdD dissertation was on narrative inquiry and students' personal growth, examined the methodology, gave suggestions for adjustments, recruited student participants, and revised the research paper with the first author.

Student essays (literary criticism). In this study, we collected 5 student participants' 3 literary critical essays (450–600 words long) as appropriate evidence of potential language and content improvement.

All data collected above were carefully sorted and documented for investigation. Additionally, they were all meticulously examined and cross-referenced to explore the shared experience of teaching and learning to write literary criticism in an L2 context.

3.2 Participants

Graduates of English for Professional Communication (3 males and 2 females), who took the discipline-specific elective course in Semester One 2020–2021, and their subject lecturer comprise the focus group. The five student participants were interviewed in December 2022 and January 2023, roughly two years after the course was completed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the third author of the article to avoid conflict of interest and to ensure the students could share their stories in an unbiased manner. It was expected that the participants might want to

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5 Invitations were sent to all 13 students who took the course in 2020–21 via email and phone calls, and 5 of them agreed to participate voluntarily in the research. Ethic clearances were done before the interviews, and participants were informed about the nature of the research.

give mainly positive narratives should the first author have interviewed them. The interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed in full. Before the interviews, ethical clearance was formally done through agreement forms, and participants agreed to appear in pseudonyms in any publication deriving from the research.

Student participants aged between 18 and 21 years old with an average of 13 years of learning English at the time of the course. Their English proficiency level was upper intermediate to highly proficient, as indicated in Table 1. The participants had emergency online learning experience prior to taking the course, and hence were familiar with online teaching and learning when the course was offered.

4 Results and discussion

To address the research questions in a thorough manner, this section is divided into four subsections. Subsections 4.1 and 4.2 use findings from the teaching memoir and the student interviews to answer RQ1, while Subsections 4.3 and 4.4 analyze students' in-class online writing and three literary criticisms respectively to answer RQ2, providing evidence for the two CALL tools' efficacies in terms of L2 writing.

4.1 The use of Padlet and Zoom: teacher's perspective

In the teaching memoir, we find only a brief mentioning of the use of Padlet:

Table 1: Student profiles.

Pseudonym	Native language	English proficiency level	Place of study after graduating from the community college
Matthew	Chinese	Proficient (IELTS overall score: 7.5, writing: 7.0)	BA in English (Literary Studies), The City University of Hong Kong
Nicholas	Chinese	Upper intermediate (IELTS overall score: 6.5, writing: 6.0)	BA in English Language and Literature, Baptist University
Thomas	Chinese	Highly proficient (IELTS overall score: 8.0, writing: 6.5)	BA in Linguistics, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Helena	Chinese	Proficient (IELTS overall score: 7.5, writing: 6.5)	BA in English (Literary Studies), The City University of Hong Kong
Christina	Chinese	Highly Proficient (IELTS overall score: 8, writing: 6.5)	BA in Linguistics, The University of Hong Kong

> During the online classes, I used the Padlet wall to solicit students' opinions and to invite them to write their own metaphors after lectures on poetry. Padlet enabled me to engage students and keep their attention through simple, short written exercises (Teaching memoir, 2022).

Apart from the above, no further reflection was given by the lecturer to show the importance of collaborative writing online or effectiveness of this CALL tool.

By comparison, when investigating the individual essay consultations facilitated by Zoom, the teaching memoir reveals the teacher's overwhelmingly positive attitude and perceptions towards Zoom's usefulness and convenience (Bold by the authors):

> I started offering individual essay consultations on Zoom in addition to the lectures. I enjoyed the **simplicity** of organizing these consultations. Just a click, and a student was invited. Then normally **I would ask the student to turn on the camera and talk to me like we were in a video conference. I would share the screen, and we would go through the essay line by line**. Students seemed more engaged than they had been in a face-to-face setting, more willing to ask questions too in such a setting.

> To illustrate, after marking the first essay on poetry, I held individual consultations via Zoom. I gave each student 15–20 min to **read aloud their own work**; I asked them what they meant by writing this and that; and finally, I told them what I thought about their writing and why I graded/edited this way. I also stressed that body paragraphs can be better enhanced by using the **P-E-E structure** (point-evidence-explanation). I found that surprisingly, reading aloud helped both students and me to focus our minds on clarity issues in the writing. I think students were also surprised by how much of their intended meaning was lost to their audience. … **I remember quite a few of them telling me my feedback was useful for their writing of the second essay**. In retrospect, **I think this extra help was effective** because students respected me as an authority figure, and they appreciated my extra time spent on them individually. I remember Helena and Thomas had a leapfrog improvement in the second essay too (Teaching memoir, 2022).

From the lecturer's narrative, what can be regarded as unique about this Zoom practice is that firstly, the students were asked to turn on the camera and have a real-time interaction with the lecturer, mimicking a face-to-face setting; secondly, the students were asked to read aloud their own work and clarify their points when necessary; lastly, the lecturer gave additional explanation on her written feedback. These were carefully scaffolded strategies to engage students and provide personalized diagnosis of issues in their writing. Finally, the P-E-E structure further strengthened students' genre awareness in that they were reminded of writing literary criticism specifically, which required them to be familiar with the original text, to have their own opinions about the text, and to support their points by using fitting textual evidence.

The lecturer was more aware of the benefits of Zoom consultations than Padlet collaborative writing, highlighting the former's convenient features, effectiveness, and students' positive responses. It is also evident that she clearly employed more deliberate and structured pedagogical strategies during the Zoom consultations, coupled with interactive feedback-giving.

4.2 The use of Padlet and Zoom: students' perspective

Students, on the other hand, assigned equal importance to both Padlet and Zoom in their evaluation. In the semi-structured interviews, students reported that among all the CALL tools that the subject lecturer experimented with, collaborative writing on the Padlet Wall and individual Zoom essay consultations were the most helpful with their English writing skills.

When asked, "Were you motivated when you were asked to write online collaboratively?" Almost all students (four out of five) remembered Padlet Wall being used for collaborative writing. Additionally, these online writing activities were apparently important for students as they gave very positive feedback in the interviews.

> **Christina:** Yes. Padlet gave shy students' some opportunity to express their opinions. For both the teacher and students, they could know more diverse views …

> **Matthew:** Yes, I remember Padlet Wall worked well. It was better than giving answers in (Zoom's) chat room. The teacher's response was more instant, and the teacher could trace those students who were quiet in class, so the participation rate was high.

> **Helena:** On the Padlet Wall, we were asked to type our answers to an open-ended question such as "how would you define literature?" or "what do you think of this short story's ending?". It was interesting to see other people typing simultaneously on the wall: not only was it interactive, but I could learn about other people's thoughts. I found it very inspiring as it provided a platform for me to get to know others' ideas. This also made up for the fact that not everyone could turn on the microphone and share their opinions in an online setting. I learned a lot from other students' ideas.

> **Thomas:** As a matter of fact, I found the real-time writing and typing enjoyable. As you wrote your answers on the Padlet Wall, you also could look at what others wrote on the same topic. In a way, you were inspired to revise, revisit and edit your answers. This mode of collaborative writing could not be achieved in a face-to-face setting. In a traditional classroom, when asked to answer a question in the written form, everyone just focused on their own work, and no one really looks at others' writing. On the Padlet Wall, however, I saw everything happening all at once. Besides, literature is also about obtaining multiple perspectives: every reader would have a different angle on a single text, so it was valuable to see all these perspectives at once.

Students' responses show Padlet as a powerful tool for especially perspective-taking and idea-generating. Multiple perspectives appearing spontaneously in a synchronous online class can motivate students to think and rethink an open-ended question, hence inspiring and motivating them. Thomas' comment on the impossibility of sharing ideas in a traditional classroom is not strictly accurate as ideas could still be shared on a blackboard or a whiteboard in a classroom setting, but the space and time of writing would be more limiting than those on the Padlet Walls.

Although the teacher's memoir and students' oral narratives diverge on the collaborative writing, in that the lecturer did not perceive Padlet as an essential CALL instrument in her course while students reflected that their writing improved from these shorter, frequent online synchronous exercises, we can still conclude that collaborative writing on Padlet is engaging, helps brainstorm and generate ideas, and provides multiple answers for open-ended questions. Language acquisition is also achieved in a more organic and peer-motivated manner.

Regarding the Zoom essay consultations, we discover a consistent pattern of agreement on their effectiveness in both the teaching memoir and the students' oral narratives, yet given the limited space of the article, we cannot present the students' narratives in totality, so their key points are summarized below (Bold by the authors):

Students' oral narratives about the individual essay consultation on Zoom

Matthew: I find it (Zoom consultation) **the most effective for me** to improve my writing. There is basically **no difference between online consultations and face-to-face consultations.** In fact, I would say the online consultation worked better for me as the teacher would **do screenshare and highlight the bits that need changing**.

Nicolas: I learned a lot from the Zoom one-on-one essay consultation. I found written feedback only is not helpful. For example, a teacher could write down "good", but I didn't know which part is good. Before the online consultation, I **also reread my own essay and the lecturer's comments carefully, which I normally would not do.**

Thomas: I enjoyed the one-on-one consultation as I **could ask questions on the spot**. It also gave me an opportunity to **revisit my writing and make edits**. Unlike when I was at the secondary school, I received feedback when I almost forgot what I had written and there was no follow-up from teachers, so I had only one chance.

Helena: I went to the lecturer's office for a face-to-face consultation in person.

Christina: The individual consultation on Zoom worked very well. The teacher focused on each student's problems and **gave constructive feedback, so students can learn a lot. I often find written feedback from English teachers too vague or too hard to understand partly because it is a one-way communication.** For example, some comments would be "the essay should be more critical", but I still don't know how to be more critical after reading such feedback.

Three out of the five participants stressed the importance of the individual essay consultation conducted via Zoom as they had similar frustrations with written feedback for their writing in English in the past. Nicolas shared a past negative experience of not being able to identify what he had done right with writing even though he got positive written feedback. Thomas' observation was on the timeliness of the practice in this course (1 week after the essay submission) and the rare opportunity to revisit and revise a piece of writing. Christina implied the benefit of mutual communication instead of a "one-way communication" in such a practice. When asked if the Zoom essay consultation had the same effect as the face-to-face one, most students agreed that Zoom consultations functioned equally well. One student even went as far to claim that Zoom worked better than face-to-face because of its share-screen and annotation functions, enabling a synchronous feedback session.

Sections 4.1 and 4.2, therefore, answer RQ1: What are the lecturer and students' perceptions towards the two CALL tools in facilitating L2 writing? It becomes evident that both the teacher and the students highly valued the individual Zoom consultations in facilitating feedback giving and improvements in L2 writing. While the teacher seemed to take Padlet as a fun pedagogical tool to keep students' attention online, students recognized Padlet as a safe and free space to share ideas and learn about their peers' thinking process and different perspectives.

4.3 Evidence of L2 writing improvements on Padlet: before and after the course

To illustrate the improvements in students' online collaborative writing, we present the five participants' full responses to the same question "What is literature?" at the beginning and the end of the course (Table 2). Initially, the two surveys were done for the subject lecturer to evaluate the effectiveness of her teaching during the pandemic, yet by comparing the pre-course and post-course answers of students, we can see that not only the ways in which students perceive literature were different, but also the ways in which they presented their ideas in English changed.

Table 2 presents students' change in language use, clarity, attitude, and concept. All participants except for Matthew seemed to be more expressive when asked to define literature in their own words after 13 weeks. In addition, a more positive attitude towards literature and/or the participants' own ability to appreciate literature is found. Conceptually, not only could students correct their initial mistakes, but they also developed a more sophisticated understanding of the subject matter.

Table 2: Collaborative writing activity, "What is literature?"

English name	"Define literature in your own words." (Pre-course survey)	"What is literature now? Define it in your own words." (Post-course Padlet Wall survey)
Matthew	Elegant Communication. In all forms of art, whether it be through words, music, visual art, games or even culinary arts, a message is conveyed. Regardless of their purpose, different forms of different medium have evolved to make the communication more effective. Contemporary arts use the involvement of viewers as the part of its art, games have evolved into cinematic centric pieces. Communication is no different. We tell our stories we want to tell to convey the pictures in my head to yours. Yet literature takes the form and step backwards with poems and allow viewers [to] interpret meaning, a natural process of communication, hence the elegance.	My answer remains the same: Art roots from expression, literature is the form. How good it is depends on how effective to express themselves, be it poetry, drama, or fiction.
Nicolas	Literature is the study of poetry written by the people who would like to record their lives and the world of their time.	Literature is no more a boring thing for me now. Through literature, everyone can see what the writer is thinking or which period he/she is in.
Thomas	Classic writings which show us a certain era or place's thinking, culture, and history.	Before the course began. I answered, "Literature is classical writings that reflect a certain time's idea, beliefs" Now, I've come to realise that not only classical writings are literature. Any text, even as simple as one line, if it strikes a thought in a reader, it is literature; this brings me to my next point. I have realized that the reader's rapport is just as important as the writer and text. This course has taught me to analyse text through many elements. It is truly astounding the details one can observe.
Helena	Literature is like arts, we can use our creativity, imagination or ideas to create a piece of work on our own I think literature is also all about appreciation in different aspects like poems, movies, dramas and novels etc. so that we can learn some professional literacy skills from the well-known writers.	For me, studying literature is fun and interesting. It is not just about words, history or whatever. It's about feelings. (trust your gut haha) When I was reading a poem, it evoked my emotions and thoughts. I love "The Road Not Taken", "Harlem" and "Scaffolding" the most because they correlated with my personal struggles and experience,

Table 2: (continued)

English name	"Define literature in your own words." (Pre-course survey)	"What is literature now? Define it in your own words." (Post-course Padlet Wall survey)
Christina	I think literature is a realistic portrayal of society while being imaginative for people to escape their sadness in their lives. It is like a spaceship leading us to travel across the universe full of stories and memories from different people.	bridging the gap between what we think we feel and what we don't realise we do. When [the teacher] sent us the questionnaire in August, my answer is "It is like a spaceship leading us to travel across the universe full of stories and memories from different people". I think the answer will still be similar even though I have completed this course, but I am now able to further elaborate my definition for literature. I think literature also reflects the history and the society, which allows us to explore the complexity of human's mind.

4.4 Evidence of L2 writing improvements: students' literary criticism essays before and after Zoom consultations

We already discussed students' recognition of the value of additional Zoom interventions in 4.2 and presented students' improvements in L2 writing on Padlet in 4.3. In this subsection, the findings and discussion are based on the results derived from the students' first, second, and third literary critical essays (on poetry, fiction, and drama respectively). We use textual analysis to see if the students' positive feedback about the Zoom individual consultations (teachers' interventions) can be validified by the actual results of their essays.

The discussion begins by examining the results based on the conventions taught in the course before moving on to discussing the effectiveness of such interventions. Aspects of the lexical-grammatical conventions and rhetorical conventions below (Tables 3, 4, and 5) were partly adopted from Ong's study (2016) on teaching literary critical writing. The first and second authors read the five students' three literary criticism essays and agree on their fulfilment of different literary criticism conventions. For each convention fulfilled by a student essay, one mark is given.

Text analysis from the respondents' three essays have shown that these students were able to master some of the lexical-grammatical conventions from an early stage (Table 3). All students achieved the lexical-grammatical conventions number 1, 4 and 5

Table 3: Participants' mastery of lexical-grammatical conventions of literary criticism.

Lexical-grammatical conventions (*n* = 5)	Essay 1 On poetry	Essay 2 On fiction	Essay 3 On drama
1. Use of simple reporting verbs such as "show, tell, indicate, reveal, imply" to relate the student's close reading to elements/themes of the literary text	5	4	5
2. Use of complicated verbs such as "reflect, illustrate, portray, signify, suggest, foreshadow, symbolize" to present a point of view or interpretation	3	3	3
3. Consistent use of simple present tense when summarizing the content of the text	4	2	2
4. Consistent use of simple present tense when presenting the student's argument about the text	5	3	5
5. Able to vary sentence lengths and use proper conjunctions to connect sentences	2	3	5
6. Able to vary sentence lengths, mix passive and active voices, and use appropriate conjunctions	5	4	5

Table 4: Participants' mastery of rhetorical and organizational conventions of literary criticism.

Rhetorical and organizational conventions (*n* = 5)	Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3
1. Present a brief overview of the literary text analysed in the introduction	3	4	4
2. Establish a claim or a thesis statement in the introduction	2	2	5
3. State a topic sentence in each body paragraph	3	4	5
4. Present analysis, interpretation, and argument which link the text to the points made in the body paragraphs	3	5	4
5. Restate the claim or thesis statement in the conclusion	2	3	4

Table 5: Participants presentation of arguments in Essays 1 & 3.

Name	Assertive language to present arguments in Essay 1	Assertive language to present arguments in Essay 3
Matthew	N.A.	N.A.
Nicolas	N.A.	**I argue** that the most distinctive element of the play is its characters. In this essay, I will discuss Mercutio, Tybalt and the gender stereotype…
Thomas	In my opinion, the ballad owes its perseverance through the ages to its rhymes	**In my opinion**, "Romeo and Juliet" constructs fatally flawed characters and pathos-heavy plot developments to engender this audience rapport
Helena	I would like to talk about the theme of the poem	**I will discuss** the balcony scene and the dialogue between Romeo and Juliet
Christina	I guess the guilt does not only refer to eating but also apologizing for the quarrel that they have previously…	**I argue** that the figurative language used by Romeo and Juliet to describe each other is the most distinctive dramatic element of this scene

after the interventions of the Zoom consultations, while item number 2 was only achieved by 3 students, and no improvement was shown. Item number 3 indicates that students struggled with the convention of using present simple tense when summarizing the content of the literary text. It is interesting to see an emerging pattern: when analyzing poetry, all 5 students achieved tense consistency. On the other hand, with fiction and drama, the literary genres that are loaded with past events in the original texts, students found it hard to stick to the present tense. However, when making their own arguments about the text, students were able to use present tense consistently in Essay 3 (Item 4).

Overall, these students were competent writers of English from the beginning, but Essay 3 showed the highest degree of lexical-grammatical competencies, confirming students' improvements. Noticeably, more advanced English users, such as Thomas and Helena,[6] used complicated verbs when analyzing literature. Examples of such verbs include "visualize", "foreshadow", "embody", "exemplify", "portray", "parallel", "amplify", and "evoke". Their high-level diction paralleled the quality of their essays (A/A-grade papers).

Students' 3 essays progressed and showed steady improvement in terms of summarizing skills (Item 1), analytical skills (Item 4), and awareness to bring their essays to closure (Item 5). They also became more competent in presenting a claim in the introduction and supporting the claim with topic sentences in the body paragraphs that follow. In addition, participants' essays also showed a change in tone, that is, from a tentative tone to an assertive one when making arguments. In Essay 3, students were evidently more comfortable and confident in being critics of literary work. Table 5 demonstrates further evidence of the change:

As shown above, in Essay 3, participants developed a stronger, more affirmative tone when arguing for a point of their own. In the case of Thomas, his choice of words "in my opinion" remained the same, yet his claim in the third essay was much more sophisticated and powerfully charged. Helena and Christina's diction switched from "I would" to "I will" and "I guess" to "I argue". Nicolas used "I argue" for the first time in the final essay, asserting his opinion.

To have the personal pronoun "I" is often deemed problematic in other forms of academic writing as it is not "impersonal" or "scientific" enough, but at an initial stage of learning to respond to literary texts, the appearance of the first-person "I" is essential for the development of students' critical voice.

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6 Xu's study (2021) of Chinese university students' L2 writing in online teaching during COVID-19 implies that students who are inclined to seek feedback are capable of utilizing self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies effectively, irrespective of the method through which instruction is delivered. In our study, Thomas and Helena were good examples of students utilizing SRL strategies as they sought advice on writing both online and offline and asked meaningfully relevant questions during essay consultations.

Table 6: Participants' mastery of close reading and critical thinking.

Close reading and critical thinking skills (*n* = 5)	Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3
1. Able to select relevant parts of the text for analysis	4	4	5
2. Apply literary terms accurately	4	4	5
3. Present creative, insightful personal comments to a carefully selected scene/part of the literary work	2	2	4
4. Explain the connection between the points and the text in a convincing way	3	3	4
5. Able to make meaningful and informed interpretations through detailed analysis	2	3	4

Unlike Tables 3 and 4, where diction, grammar, structure, and tone are the focus, Table 6 evaluates essay content and quality of arguments. Although no obvious change can be seen between Essay 1 and Essay 2 in the 5 items being examined, Essay 3 shows improvement in all aspects of the students' close reading and critical thinking skills. Importantly, four out of five students successfully transformed from descriptive writing to argument-led writing when analyzing literary texts.

Although one student (Nicolas) struggled with literary criticism from the beginning to the end, not being able to quite master the genre despite the Zoom consultations, another student (Thomas) made a leapfrog progress in a short space of a semester: His first essay was excellent in almost all criteria in Tables 3, 4 & 6, with only a few word choice problems. His second essay integrated feminist theory, in-depth textual analysis, and highly insightful interpretation. His final essay philosophized the relationship between tragedy and comedy using Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, lifting his criticism to a highly advanced level.

All in all, textual analysis of participants' essays has shown results that are consistent with the teacher's and the students' evaluation of the Zoom consultations' importance in scaffolding L2 writing.

Therefore, Sections 4.3 and 4.4 answer RQ2: What are the students' specific improvements in their writing before and after the use of the CALL tools? It is evident that Zoom consultations, together with the collaborative writing exercises in class, were able to help students produce literary criticism using precise and rich wording, diverse sentence patterns, and powerful narratives (Ghosn, 2002).

5 Implications and conclusion

Anyone who is trained in English studies knows the difficulty of writing literary critical essays: literary criticism appears very subjective, and there are no clear,

standard ways of approaching literature per se. Writing literary criticism is no easy task for L2 students because they need to read and interact with the literary texts, relate them to their life experiences, interpret the meaning in their own words, cite relevant textual evidence, and evaluate the work using appropriate language. As Halliday and Matthiessen (1999) rightly assert, ESL students who study content-based subjects in English have the double jeopardy of tackling both content knowledge and the language use. However, it is precisely because of this challenge, once students overcome it, they would find it doubly rewarding. In this study, the teaching of conventions of literary criticism (lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical), facilitated by two important CALL tools, was able to address students' needs of writing about literature in their second language.

This study has also shown teacher-student consensus on the importance of using online collaborative writing tools (Padlet in particular) and online individual essay consultations (via Zoom) to facilitate student writing in addition to face-to-face teaching. Although the teaching memoir and student interview data have different emphases, both demonstrate the joint effort to experiment with new tools online to enhance L2 writing. L2 learners report Padlet to be a highly effective tool for brainstorming, perspective-taking, and positive interdependence while writing casually in class. Compared to online peer review exercises, learners find individual essay consultations via Zoom more constructive in feedback-giving, to the point that some regard it even more effective than face-to-face consultations. Results of students' performance in their three critical essays witness visible improvements in terms of diction, organization, and analytical skills.

The study has its limitations mainly due to the small sample size. However, for a course that is offered as a discipline-specific elective course, it is normal to have 10–25 students in a class. Thorough textual analysis and in-depth narrative inquiry, therefore, give the case study its research rigor. Student participants also shared their genuine and first-hand experience of learning to write literary criticism online, which was a rare and singular research opportunity. To inform ESL and CALL teachers more fully, it is necessary to conduct a longitudinal study in future to explore students' experience of similar interventions.

Although as of now face-to-face teaching and consultations are still favored across tertiary education, our study proves that Zoom individual consultations can work well when the teacher and student have the same marked essay to work with. Such Zoom sessions can compensate for lack of attention or immediacy by utilizing on-screen synchronized annotations and student-teacher interactions with the camera and microphone turned on. We agree with Yeung and Yau's (2022) argument that as students leverage technology for online learning, it is important for educators to address these technological requirements. By doing so, educators can ensure that the potency of students' self-regulated learning strategies is fully realized.

Finally, we would like to stress that online technologies expand the dimension of literary education and empower literature as a form of content-based second language instruction for tertiary level students in an ESL context. Therefore, literature teachers should actively embrace CALL methodologies that broaden their teaching and research arena in order that neither their field nor their teaching becomes obsolete in this technology-driven world.

Appendix A: The College's Graduate Survey

Source: 2020 HKCC Graduate Survey
(figures as at October 2020)

In 2020, a total of 2,891 graduates articulated to bachelor's degree programmes. The articulation rate reached 90.5%, which hit a record high. Among those, 1,901 (65.8%) were admitted to government-funded bachelor's degree programmes.

Number of graduates	3,726
Number of respondents	3,196
Response rate	85.8%
Number of articulated graduates	2,891
Overall articulation rate	90.5%
Gov't-funded Portion	65.8%
Portion for degree programmes leading to awards of the 8 UGC-funded universities	81.1%

Degree awarded by 8 UGC-funded universities

81.1%*

2020 Articulation

90.5%
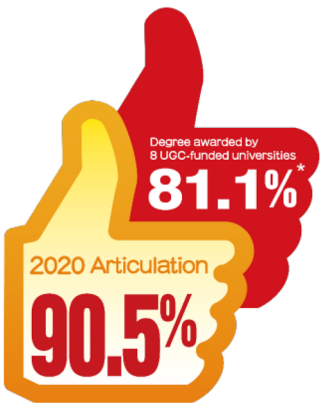
*Including self-financed programmes

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