

Investigating the Rationales Behind Student Engagement in Learning English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to qualitatively investigate the factors that affect non-English major students' engagement in their EFL courses at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry. Regarding the literature, the paper firstly reviews the notion of engagement and its different dimensions then ends with an overview of the recent relevant studies. The data is collected and analyzed through group interviews. Finally, the results and findings will serve as a foundation for future studies which look at the strategies to raise non -English major students' engagement in learning English at tertiary education in Vietnam.

1. Introduction

It is true that English has been a dominant foreign language across the globe for decades. More and more countries are putting a tremendous amount of effort into improving their people's English capability. Vietnam is no exception when the nation's government has been launching multiple projects to better the English proficiency for Vietnamese people since the Doi Moi era (Do, 2006). As for the context of teaching English at higher education in Vietnam, the project called "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008 – 2020" hoping to prepare Vietnamese tertiary students the adequate foreign language competence to enter the competitive labor market (Nhan, 2008). However, the project falls short when roughly 20% of university graduates in Vietnam is claimed to be competent in using English. (Tuoi Tre News, 2008). This shows there have been underlying factors leading to this undesirable outcome, which explains several studies into what causes the problem. However, there is little work on investigating the correlation between Vietnamese students' engagement and their English education, albeit the exploration of learning engagement is highly essential in assessing the process of learning in order to come up with any necessary adjustments in terms of the teaching or learning practice (Coates, 2007). Moreover, researches into the role of student engagement are so growing that the term is considered as 'the holy grail of learning' (Sinatra et al., 2015, p. 1). Regarding student engagement in an SLA context, many studies have identified the key role that engagement holds in helping learners acquire the new language (Gass, 2003 ; Schmidt, 2001 ; Leow 2015)

How significant student engagement is in improving and hindering one's English proficiency and how little has been done regarding the same matter in the educational context of Vietnam are the rationales behind this article. It firstly explores the definitions of engagement and its different dimensions. These dimensions are used for studies related to learning engagement, including the ones in the field of EFL, which are also reviewed. The same dimensions are then applied to study the current status of student engagement in learning English as a subject at the Ho Chi Minh city the University of Food Industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of engagement

The term engagement can be generally understood as the state of paying attention to perform a certain activity (Hiver et al., 2021b). In the educational realm, an engaged student can be defined as the one who exerts themselves to the process of

learning (Guthrie et al., 1996; Hiver et al., 2021b). As for how engagement is viewed at tertiary education, Coates (2007) argues:

engagement is seen to comprise active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities. (p. 122)

2.2 The dimensions of student engagement

In terms of the characteristics of engagement, it is agreed by many scholars that engagement is a “multifaceted” concept which comprises three dimensions. (Fredricks et al., 2004; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). The followings review these dimensions in their nature and how each can emerge in a foreign language classroom.

Behavioral engagement refers to the extent to which a student actively participates in learning. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), there are several indicators of whether a student is engaging behaviorally in learning. They range from students adhering to the class rules to persevering in a demanding academic task. As for the EFL context, behavioural engagement can be noticed due to the degree of voluntariness one shows in doing interactional tasks (Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

Many scholars define cognitive engagement as how a person is investing mentally in learning. This is done through the application of self-regulation strategies (Fredricks et al., 2004; Helme & Clarke, 2001). For example, a cognitively engaged student can raise a question, rehearse, summarize or justify an opinion. Furthermore, Fredricks et al. (2004) point out that a highly engaged learner will apply these strategies to persevere by overcoming any distractions or failure to continue learning. According to Hiver et al. (2021), a high degree of cognitive engagement in an EFL classroom can emerge from a range of verbal activities such as ‘peer interactions, students’ questioning, hesitation and repetition, volunteering answers, exchanging ideas, offering feedback, providing direction, informing and explaining.’ (p. 4).

Emotional engagement’s definition varies depending on how it is studied (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). It can be how effectively connected a student is to their school (Lee & Smith, 1995; Yazzie-Mint, 2009). In addition, the other indicators of this dimension can be categorized as positive and negative engagement. While the former refers to students being enthusiastically involved in learning, the latter indicates feelings such as anger or nervousness that a student experiences while working on a task (Mercer, 2019; Skinner et al., 2009). In their summary, Philp and Duchesne (2016) also suggest emotional engagement is related to the degree of feeling connected a student has with their friends and teachers. As for the language learning context, an engaged language learner will have ‘a positive, purposeful, willing, and autonomous disposition’ towards the language (Svalberg, 2009, p. 247).

There are two widely held views about the characteristics of the dimensions. Firstly, they are interrelated with each other (Fredricks et al., 2004; Hiver et al., 2021a; Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Svalberg, 2009). In other words, Svalberg (2009) points out there are ‘similar overlaps’ among them (p. 255). Fredricks et al. (2004) also propose that a high degree of behavioural and cognitive engagement in learning can be the results of one being emotionally engaged. This view aligns with Philp and Duchesne’s (2016) which is ‘Emotions, whether positive (e.g., interest, enjoyment) or negative (e.g., boredom, frustration), influence effort and strategies for learning.’ (p. 8). Secondly, context holds a crucial role in how efficiently these dimensions can be investigated. In particular, studying student engagement in a specific context will bring to light what determines the degree of engagement in that context (Janosz, 2012). Svalberg (2009) also demonstrates a similar view by arguing that what influences engagement in one circumstance may not have the same impact.

In summary, the rich literature in the multidimensional or multifaceted nature of student engagement confirms its significance in the educational growth of a student. As a result, efforts must be made into drawing students’ attention to their learning to attain ideal outcomes such as successful academic performance, promising career or successful dropping out avoidance (Fredricks et al., 2004; Christenson et al., 2012). In the language learning context, students’ attention should undoubtedly be the target language itself (Svalberg, 2009). Furthermore, Hiver et al. (2021a) define an engaged language learner as one whose focus is on the activities or ‘tasks’ that bridge the target language form and the functions it can perform in real life (p. 6). The undeniable importance of learner engagement has convinced more work to explore what heightens and impedes it.

2.3 Factors affecting student engagement

This section is dedicated to reviewing the key factors which lead to learners’ engagement and disengagement in the context of learning in general and language learning, respectively. The main literature sources to be reviewed will be Fredricks et al. (2004) and Svalberg (2009).

a) The findings of Fredricks et al. (2004)

According to Fredricks et al., there are three determinants of student engagement: a wide range of smaller factors.

The first one is categorized as 'school-level factors' (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 73). They can range from class size to students being able to be a part of developing school policy. Specifically, the scholars have found many studies that agree that small class size gives rise to students' behavioral and emotional engagement level (Bell et al., 1965; Wehlage & Smith, 1992; Finn & Voelkl, 1993). In addition, Fredricks et al. (2004) point out that students' behavioural disengagement can be averted due to schools being just and flexible in exercising their authority.

The second determinant refers to five factors related to the classroom context. Fredricks et al. (2004) argue that academic and interpersonal supports from teachers are highly valuable in engaging students behaviorally and emotionally. Consequently, once a student has achieved a sense of comfort due to his teacher support, he is more likely to be more strategic in dealing with a learning task, thus show an increasing level of cognitive engagement. Besides teachers, classmates or peers also play a crucial role in raising or lowering student engagement, although the latter has not received as much attention as the former (Fredricks et al., 2004). In their summary, the scholars propose that peers support is related directly to how a student become more engaged or disheartened. In other words, it is emotional engagement that is affected by peer support. Teachers' expectations are the next influential factor in a classroom setting. Fredricks et al. (2004) conclude that if teachers can manage to clarify their expectations in terms of academic outcomes and classroom behaviors, they can help students be more behaviorally engaged. The context where learners' autonomy can be encouraged is believed to increase engagement. Connell (1990) defines a classroom with autonomy as one where students are able to make their own decisions regarding schoolwork without being concerned about the failure of punishments. As a result, this type of learning environment will be allowed a student to act as a strategist who seeks different approaches to persist in performing a task, which are the indicators of cognitive engagement (Perry, 1998; Turner, 1995). Finally, the characteristics of a task can enhance or disrupt engagement. By reviewing the work of Newmann (1991) and Newmann et al. (1992), Fredricks et al. (2004) mention five distinct characteristics of an engagement stimulating task which are:

- a) are authentic;
- b) provide opportunities for students to assume ownership of their conception, execution, and evaluation;
- c) provide opportunities for collaboration;
- d) permit diverse forms of talents;
- and (e) provide opportunities for fun (p. 79)

As Fredricks et al. (2004) suggest, the third determinant refers to 'individual needs', which is divided into three categories: 'relatedness, autonomy and competence' (p. 80). Their argument is that students become more or less engaged in their learning depends on how these needs are satisfied by their institutions. Regarding the first need, it is defined as a sense of belonging from a student. This, according to Fredricks et al. (2004), can be achieved in the classroom in which a teacher is 'caring and supportive' (p. 80). Consequently, a student is truly emotionally engaged when knowing they are cared for and supported by teachers, parents, or friends (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ryan et al., 1994). As for autonomy needs, they can be met under the circumstances when students are allowed to make their own choices without being constrained to any 'external controls' (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 81). According to Patrick et al. (1993), students become more willing to participate (increased behavioural engagement) and experience positive feelings (increased emotional engagement) when they are more autonomous in learning. The need for competence can be understood as the strong belief one possesses in controlling what to be done to achieve success (Fredricks et al., 2004). Once a student is adequately equipped with the essential instructions and knowledge, their needs for competence are met, making them more emotionally and cognitively engaged in learning (Pintrich, 1991; Skinner et al., 1998).

b) The findings of Svalberg (2009)

There are two types of factors that impact a student's learning of a language (Svalberg, 2009). According to the researcher, the factors are categorized as 'facilitators' which positively affect engagement, while 'impediments' relate to what disengage students from learning (p. 255). Among Svalberg's findings, a few of them overlap with what emerges from the work of Fredricks et al. (2004). Similarly, she mentions teaching methodology and teacher attitude along with the design of tasks or activities as the determining factors of *cognitive engagement*. As for *emotional engagement*, Svalberg states that tasks with their distinct characteristics also play a key role in facilitating or impeding how effectively engaged a student can be.

Moreover, being able to feel competent in learning can increase engagement, which leads to the achievement of success. To a certain degree, this factor is identical with the needs for competence proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004). The final similarity identified in the literature from Svanberg (2009) is the factor named 'belonging', also known as 'relatedness' by Fredricks et al. (2004).

In terms of the new factors emerging from Svalberg's work, there is a range of unique determinants in the context of language learning. Firstly, the notion of 'self-perception' is highly influential to *emotional engagement* of a language learner. In particular, once a student feels he is confident with his target language knowledge, he is likely to be more engaged. Moreover, having higher language proficiency can also explain the increasing degree of engagement (Svalberg, 2009).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Four groups of participants are selected from four classes where English is taught to non-majored students at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry (HUFI). The brief introduction of the study in terms of its main purposes and how the data is collected was issued to the classes by their teachers via a short presentation. At the end of the presentation, the teachers managed to choose a group containing from four to six students from each class who volunteered to support the study.

The respondents possess several similar characteristics that allow them to be formed as a focus group (Birmingham & Wilkinson, 2014). In particular, they are all freshmen who are also non-English major students. As for the last similarity, the English classes they are currently attending are designed to teach students with elementary proficiency in the language, which is determined by the result of their English placement test issued by HUFI at the beginning of the school year.

3.2 Instrument

This qualitative paper applied a focus group interview as its tool to collect data. The reason for choosing this type of instrument is its being characteristically aligned with the study's goal. Specifically, Birmingham and Wilkinson (2014) conclude the followings as the main aims of a focus group interview. Firstly, it is established to collect in-depth information from participants by allowing them to 'talk in their own words' about what the researcher(s) aims to investigate. Secondly, capturing participants' complex attitudes or behaviours is the nature of this research tool. The results from focus-group interviews can also be served for a bigger future study. Finally, existing problems of a service or an organization can emerge through the insight gathered from this type of interviews. All these goals are identical with the study's purposes which are to seek the respondents' perspectives regarding what engage and disengage them from participating in the English lessons in their university as well as provide efficient insight for future studies which may examine the different methods to raise non-majored students' engagement in learning English at HUFI.

There is a total of four focus-group interviews conducted. Among the groups, only the first one was interviewed in a classroom setting while the other four were carried out via Zoom due to the recent COVID-19 outbreak in Vietnam. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Regarding the questions, they are created to make every interviewee 'feel like he or she is taking part in a free-flow discussion' which begins by checking the respondents' general understanding of the concept of student engagement. The second question then explores each group's perceptions of the determinants of student engagement in English learning mentioned in the literature. Finally, the participants are asked to speak their mind regarding whether there are other factors which impact their engagement in learning the English language. The design of the three questions is based on the criteria recommended by ... when building questions for focus-group interviews which starts by asking something general then moving on to discover more specifically the participants' viewpoints about the focus of the study (Birmingham & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 98). The following table contains the interview questions for each focus group.

No	Questions
Q1	In your own understanding, what is student engagement?
Q2	According to many studies, there is a range of factors which can influence student engagement. What do you think about each factor below? 1. School contexts 2. Teacher support 3. Peer support 4. Learner autonomy 5. Task characteristics 6. The need to feel related 7. The need to feel competent 8. The need to feel autonomous 9. Self-perception of language ability
Q3	In your opinion, are there other factors affecting your engagement in learning English at HUFI?

4. Results and Discussions

Regarding the first question, it is apparent that all the respondents can comprehend the basic notion of student engagement since all of them define it as the act of showing attention to what is being taught through a range of different actions. Below are the common responses:

For me, a student can be considered engaged in a lesson when he is writing down the things said by his teacher.

I believe an engaged student is one who is willing to interact with his teacher. For example, he may have questions for the teacher about the parts of the lesson which he finds difficult to understand.

Student engagement is when a student is curious about the topic raised by a teacher and is going to ask more questions to discover this topic more deeply.

While most of the answers suggest that student engagement will emerge in a classroom where a lesson is being taught, one participant adds further:

Student engagement, for me, even takes place before a student comes to class. This is when he tries to prepare for the lesson by reading about it in advance.

There are a few overlaps in the responses to the second questions. These overlaps emerge both within a single focus-group, and among the groups themselves. Specifically, these emerging themes reveal that the participants can be emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally engaged in learning English at HUFU due to five factors.

The followings will examine how each factor can influence a specific dimension of the participants' engagement in their English learning.

Firstly, class size is agreed by most of the respondents to affect all three dimensions of their engagement in English learning.

For me, class size does matter in making me engaged in learning English. There are too many students in my class and a teacher may only invite my classmates without paying attention to me who also wants to participate in learning. Therefore, I will feel disappointed and may not demonstrate the same degree of engagement later on.

I usually feel shy and unwilling to participate in learning English because of my large class.

When a big class is not well managed by a teacher, it will be a mess and I do not want to attend to it.

I cannot concentrate on learning when my class has too many students.

The first two responses demonstrate that emotional engagement is negatively influenced, while the third and fourth responses relate to how behaviorally and cognitively disengaged the participants can be if their class is too large. These finds are identical to the ones from Fredricks et al. (2004) and Svalberg (2009)

The regulations issued by a school is another context reported by the respondents to affect their behavioral engagement. A common response is:

I try to engage in my English class to improve my English because I know the university requires non-English major students to gain at least 550 points in TOEIC if we wish to graduate on time.

Secondly, the groups propose that the characteristics of a task in their English class at HUFU can have an impact on their emotional engagement. Some of their typical responses can be found below:

If the task requires me to base on my pre-existing knowledge of English, I will feel more positive and thus focus more on doing it.

I suppose the subject or topic of learning is important. For example, I prefer those who care about our daily life or nature.

I agree strongly with the factor of task characteristics. Specifically, a task should generate the feeling of comfort among students while still remain efficient. In contrast, if I feel too much pressure in doing a task, I won't be so engaged.

I agree that we must improve our English grammar by doing more exercises, but I think the learning activities in English should also be fun and relaxing.

One participant states she can be very emotionally engaged in a task which is designed in the form of a game.

Personally, I feel extremely excited about playing some games designed by my teacher. Through these games, I can learn more vocabulary and, at the same time, feel more open with my classmates. Besides, I also find myself looking forward to the next lesson.

Thirdly, how students perceive their own target language capability, as suggested by Svalberg (2009), is also proposed by the groups as a vital determinant of their engagement in learning English:

I agree with believe we must know where we are in terms of our English proficiency to study the subject harder.

The fourth factor emerging from the interviews is autonomy as the driving force for the participants' engagement. The common argument is when a student becomes autonomous in learning English, they will try different strategies to be more efficient in learning such as asking for help from their teachers and friends for what they do not understand. When asked about how this can be done, the respondents reply by suggesting raising hands, staying after the class is over or sending teachers a message, which are the signs of being cognitively engaged. Another indicator of cognitive engagement being facilitated by learner autonomy is shown in the response below:

When I know that I must improve my English because it is important for me, I will try to communicate more with my teacher by using English.

The last factor which receives the most agreement among the groups is teacher support. Specifically, all the participants point out the pivotal an English teacher at HUFU holds in making them engaged more or less emotionally engaged in learning:

For me, if a teacher can create a fun learning environment, I will be more willing to attend his lesson.

A teacher must show students he is ready to support them. As for shy students, they will use this as a chance to ask the teacher for help.

I think our teachers should give us a bonus or praise us in the classroom for our hard work. This will definitely motivate us to keep trying harder.

When I feel like my teacher cares about me, I will be pay more attention to the lesson.

In my English class, my teacher keeps asking the students for recitals, many of my friends are scared and they stop joining the class.

One respondent also points out a teacher's inappropriate attitudes towards their own mistakes may jeopardize student engagement:

My former English teacher once made a mistake when correcting the exercises and she behaved very negatively when my friend and I tried to mention it to her. Since the event, I feel like I don't want to join the class anymore.

In their responses regarding the importance of teacher support, some participants also confirm the relationship among the factors in engaging them in learning English (Fredricks et al., 2004; Svalberg, 2009).

When the task is too hard for me and I realize my teacher is not really supportive of us, I don't feel interested in learning anymore.

I think a teacher should understand the true English proficiency of his students to design a suitable task. When they view the task as doable, they will be more engaged.

As for the last question, three out of four groups responded their engagement in English learning is only affected by the factors suggested in the second question. The remaining group, however, propose the following:

I think being exposed to English also affect how engaged I am in learning it. I was lucky because my brother always helps me communicate in English by listening to music, watching movies or reading English books. I learn a lot from these activities, so I feel very confident with my English level. That's why I am usually engaged in this subject.

This response gained support from the other group members as it can improve their emotional engagement. They also argue who should be accountable for increasing the chances for more exposure to English. Specifically, one participant suggests that the school and teachers should create more opportunities for students to use English, while others agree that they should seek these opportunities. The latter is correlated with the factor of learner autonomy which the groups agree as to the key influencer of their engagement.

5. Conclusion

The above findings are relevant to the literature of student engagement in English learning, but they also reveal the distinctive factors that can influence non-English major students' engagement in learning the language at HUFU. The established group interviews managed to capture great alignment voicing heightened student engagement in English acquisition can be achieved by creating comforting learning. As the results show, this can be done due to the combination of ideal school contexts, task characteristics, self-perception of target language ability, autonomy, and teacher support. In addition, being exposed to English is also suggested to play a role in fostering learner engagement. Therefore, it is strongly believed that stakeholders such as policymakers, course designers, or teachers should play a larger role by building better English courses, learning materials, or teacher training catering to those factors.

As for the research gaps, there are a few drawbacks. Firstly, it is designed to examine only four focus groups due to time constraint. Moreover, all the study participants are at the elementary level of English, which has allowed common perceptions about the study subject to emerge. However, how students with higher English proficiency at HUFU perceive the facilitators and impediments of their learning engagement should also be examined.

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