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FACTORS INFLUENCING ADOLESCENT EFL LEARNERS' ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE CLASSES: INSIGHTS FROM LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:
Learners' engagement has been identified as a crucial factor contributing to effective teaching and learning (Chiu, 2022); yet research focusing on this particular topic remains limited (Werang & Leba, 2022). In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-depth investigations into this aspect have become increasingly urgent, especially in such contexts as Vietnam where online instruction has become "a new normal". This descriptive case study, as a part of a more comprehensive study, responded to such as pressing call by exploring two aspects: (1) adolescent EFL learners' engagement levels, and (2) factors influencing learners' engagement in synchronous online classes. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to 193 Vietnamese adolescent EFL learners at an EFL language center in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Results revealed that learners' perception of adolescent learners' engagement level was high. Specifically, learners were more behaviorally engaged compared to the other dimensions, namely emotional, cognitive and agentic engagement. Two categories of factors, namely teacher-related aspects and teaching content and activities were found to have the most significant influence on learners' engagement. These findings provide teachers, curriculum developers, and institution administrators with important practical implications for measures to effectively foster higher engagement in virtual classrooms.

Keywords: adolescent EFL learners' engagement, online classes, perceptions, factors

1. Introduction

Student engagement, also known as student involvement or participation, has been getting more concern thanks to Astin's publication in 1984. Previously conducted studies with a focus on student engagement have established conceptual frameworks, particularly in relation to student involvement (Astin, 1984), and student engagement (Kuh, 2003). Learners' engagement in online learning has received increasing interest

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from researchers with more studies investigating learners' engagement and learners' and/or teachers' perceptions of student engagement in online learning (e.g., Sari, 2020; Oraif & Elyas, 2021; Suharti et al., 2021). Findings from this research body have identified learner engagement as a key factor contributing to their active involvement in learning and academic achievements. These also revealed that students' engagement in EFL online classes was powerfully affected by various factors which might hinder or promote their learning (Lazareva, 2017; Sari, 2020; Deka, 2021; Esra & Sevilen, 2021). Among these, the most influential factors included teachers' and learners' characteristics, course design, course content, learning environment, and technology infrastructure.

The spread of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic has led to a technological shift from face-to-face learning to online learning to address educational needs in various EFL teaching contexts (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Heng & Sol, 2021; Maheshwari, 2021). This situation has forced many schools in Vietnam to switch from face-to-face mode to online instruction (Pollack et al., 2020; Maheshwari, 2021). For instructors and particularly students, it was a problematic situation since this was the first time they had ever been exposed to online teaching and learning.

Zooming down to the context of teaching and learning in Vietnam, the field of student engagement has received more attention from educators and researchers, particularly since the worldwide spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers have started their studies with a focus on student engagement, particularly in online tertiary education. It was reported that the urgent transition from face-to-face classes to online classes has posed numerous challenges for different stakeholders, including students, teachers, and institution administrators. The low level of student engagement in online learning environments has also been identified as one of the most significant challenges and concerns (Pham et al., 2021). Accordingly, more studies have laid a stronger emphasis on investigating factors influencing student engagement in online classes. Yet, this focus appears to remain dormant in the context of private language schools, especially those that involved teenage learners. In light of such a situation, this study was designed to explore EFL adolescent learners' engagement level and factors determining this level in the particular context of online teaching and learning in a language school in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

2. Literature review

2.1 Learners' engagement

Student engagement is a well-researched construct that has been conceptualized from the dimensional perspectives of experts. Student engagement, first introduced by Astin (1999) as student involvement (1984), was initially defined as "*the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience*" (1984, p. 297). Newman et al. (1992) defined student engagement as the psychological engagement in and effort invested toward learning. In the same vein, student engagement was defined

as the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities (Kuh, 2003; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008).

Student engagement could also be defined as students' active participation in educational practices and their commitment to learning goals for obtaining desired educational outcomes (Christenson et al., 2012). From a similar standpoint, Ting et al. (2020) described student engagement as students' active participation in and ownership of their learning. In other words, it is generally perceived that students are only considered to be engaged in their learning if they are willing to actively participate in their learning for achieving their goals and positive academic outcomes.

In more recent conceptualizations, student engagement has been defined as students' motivation to take action to learn (Mahdikhani & Rezaei, 2015). These actions include emotions, attention, goals, and other psychological processes along with persistent and effortful behavior. Such a definition appears to be identical to Fredricks et al. (2004) with their endeavor to classify distinct aspects of student engagement. Prominently, student engagement has been defined as a multidimensional construct that involves three fundamental dimensions, namely *behavioral*, *cognitive*, and *emotional* engagement (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Based on the definitions and descriptions proposed by the aforementioned experts, the overall concept of learners' engagement in online classes refers to the degree of attention, interest, motivation, willingness, and participation students have and the effort they invest in learning to improve academic achievement. Specifically, it can be adequately defined as learners' willingness to actively engage and participate in synchronous online classes in which teachers and learners interact with each other, utilizing technological devices and virtual meeting platforms, namely Zoom and Google Meet. For the current study, this concept can be adequately defined as learners' willingness to actively engage and participate in synchronous online classes in which teachers and learners interact with each other, utilizing technological devices and two main virtual meeting platforms, namely Zoom and Google Meet.

2.2 Importance of learners' engagement in online classes

Online classes are commonly defined as those delivered through a virtual classroom, meaning "*a teaching and learning environment located in a computer-mediated communication system*" (Hiltz, 1995, p. 26). Virtual classes are distinguished from face-to-face modes due to the involvement of technology in teaching delivery (Michael, 2012). As stated by Maheshwari (2021), online classes in Vietnam were commonly delivered on three main digital streaming platforms, namely Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet. In this study, the term "online classes" refers to the synchronous classes delivered to learners via two platforms, including Google Meet and Zoom.

Research evidence has proven that student engagement might have a significant impact on students' learning and performance in an online environment. Suharti et al., (2021), for instance, reported that students' active engagement improved their interest, motivation, and satisfaction with their learning outcomes, assisting them in studying

more effectively and achieving higher academic results. Meyer (2014) and Britt et al. (2015) also viewed student engagement as evidence of their considerable effort for cognitive development and ability to construct knowledge, contributing to high achievement. Learner engagement has also been reported to be a key factor determining learners' dropout, isolation, and retention (Banna et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2018). Given that learners have fewer opportunities to be engaged in virtual learning settings (Martin & Bolliger, 2018), it is critical to search for effective ways to enhance student engagement in this particular setting.

2.3 Learners' engagement dimensions

To investigate the participants' current engagement levels in online classes, this study employs a model adapted from Reeve and Tseng's (2011) with four interrelated dimensions of engagement, namely *behavioral*, *emotional*, *cognitive*, and *agentic* engagement. Accordingly, the first three dimensions have been well-established on various theoretical foundations (Fredricks et al., 2004, 2016; Jung & Lee, 2018). In its grassroot sense, behavioral engagement refers to how involved students are in learning activities concerning attention, participation, effort, intensity, or persistence. Meanwhile, students' positive or negative emotions toward their teachers, classmates, school experience, and online courses are the prominence of emotional engagement. Cognitive engagement is viewed as a learner's cognitive efforts in the development of sophisticated knowledge and specific skills in online learning. The fourth dimension, agentic engagement, which was suggested by Reeve and Tseng (2011), is explained as "*students' constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive*".

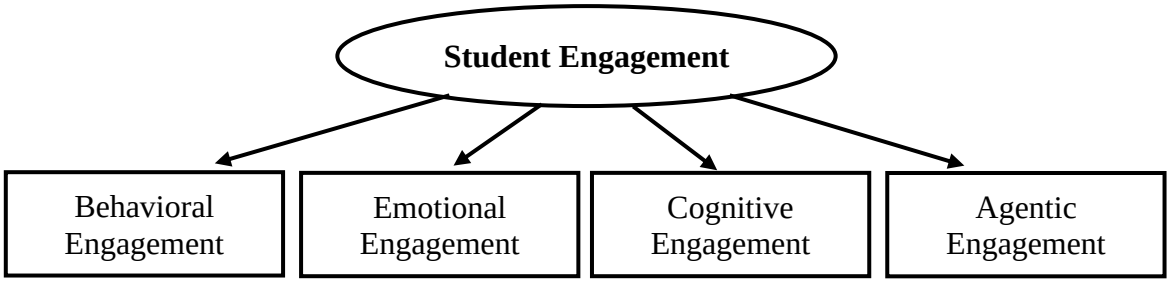

Figure 1: Reeve and Tseng's four dimensions of student engagement (2011)

2.4 Factors influencing learners' engagement in online learning from previous studies

A volume of previously conducted studies has brought into light a collection of factors that might influence engagement in online classes. Among these, key factors include teachers' and learners' characteristics (Gedera et al., 2015; Deka, 2021; Maini et al., 2021), course design and content (Sari, 2020; Deka; 2021; Esra & Sevilen, 2021), learning environment and technology infrastructure (Lazareva, 2017; Carroll et al., 2021; Khlaif et al., 2021).

Many other factors have also been identified with different extents of impact on learners' engagement levels. Based on findings from these studies, five clusters are

identified and employed in this study for investigating factors that influence adolescent learners' engagement in the virtual learning setting including *teacher-related factors, learner-related factors, communication and collaboration, curriculum design, learning environment,* and *technology infrastructure*. The components of each cluster are clearly presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of factors influencing learners' engagement in online classes

Categories	Individual factors	Sources
Teacher-related factors	• Teacher's enthusiasm • Clarity of the teacher's explanations • Teacher's teaching style • Teacher's online teaching methods, strategies • Teacher's capability to use technology	Deka (2021) Maini et al. (2021) Kurt et al. (2022)
Learner-related factors	• Learners' attitude and motivation towards online learning • Learners' adaptation of learning styles • Learners' linguistic competence • Learners' technological skills and experience with online learning • Learners' personality traits	Carroll et al. (2021) Deka (2021) Kurt et al. (2022) Werang & Leba (2022)
Classroom social interaction	• Teacher-learner communication and interaction • Learner-learner communication and interaction • Teacher feedback and support for learners • Peer collaboration and support • General engagement level of the whole class	Esra & Sevilen (2021) Maini et al. (2021)
Teaching content and activities	• Content load and its relevance to topics • Variety of sources of teaching content • Use of multimedia and online websites/apps • Variety and challenge of tasks and activities • Level of interest and relevance of tasks/activities • Value and meaningfulness of tasks/activities	Carroll et al. (2021) Deka (2021) Kurt et al. (2022)
Learning environment and technical facilities	• Quality of internet connection and accessibility to technical devices • Functions of online platforms • Technical support from others • Learners' private study space and surrounding environment	Deka (2021) Khlaif et al. (2021)

2.5 Related studies

Numerous studies with a focus on investigating learners' engagement in online learning, particularly factors influencing learners' engagement in virtual learning environments have provided evidence concerning levels of student engagement, satisfaction and influential factors as well. Key studies in this research strand will be reviewed below.

In terms of exploring students' engagement levels, Susanti's (2020) study revealed that students' behavioral engagement was relatively high whereas their cognitive and emotional engagement was not broadly positive in several aspects. In the same vein, Nguyen (2021) revealed that *behavioral engagement* was the highest dimension, followed

by *emotional engagement*, and *cognitive engagement* was the lowest. In an attempt to identify the factor influencing the effectiveness of online learning, Deka (2021) found that although student characteristics, instructor characteristics, learning environment, course design and content, and technological support all impacted learners' engagement, instructor characteristics were highlighted as the most significant factor. The more recent study by Kurt et al. (2022) proved that teachers and students shared similar perceptions of the influencing factors. Remarkably, instructional factors, individual factors, learning environment, and policies were the four major categories of factors contributing to student engagement in online learning environments.

Scoping into the Vietnamese context, studies on the factors influencing learners' engagement in online teaching and learning have not been highly researched. Regarding tertiary contexts, Pham et al. (2021) revealed that the student participants had positive perceptions of the factors that influenced their engagement in online lessons, including the quality of the learning management system, factors related to the teachers (i.e., personality, lecturing skills and activation of students). In an exploratory study conducted in a comparable context, Ngo (2021) researched EFL tertiary students' perceptions of the correlation between online education and learner engagement. The findings revealed that students possessed different degrees of engagement. Various factors were detected to have impacts on student engagement, including surroundings, teacher-related aspects, students' emotions, motivation, and strategies to study online.

Findings from these prior studies conducted in different settings have informed a plethora of factors affecting learner engagement in online classes. In the Vietnamese setting where online teaching and learning has become a new norm since the breaking of the COVID-19 pandemic, previous work, however, has not properly focused on student engagement in the online teaching settings of foreign language centers in Vietnam, particularly for adolescent learners. In light of this contextual situation, the current study aims to investigate adolescent EFL learners' engagement in online classes. The study showcases a two-fold purpose: (1) exploring adolescent learners' current engagement levels in online classes; and (2) identifying factors influencing learners' engagement in online learning. Findings from the study are expected to provide important implications for improving the effectiveness of online teaching and learning.

2.6 Research questions

For the aim of addressing this gap, this study was designed in questing for the answers to the following two questions.

1) To what extent are adolescent EFL learners engaged in online classes?
2) What factors influence adolescent EFL learners' engagement?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the study and instruments

The current study was designed as a descriptive study, employing a quantitative research approach to explore adolescent EFL learners' engagement levels and factors influencing their engagement in synchronous online classes. A questionnaire was designed to survey learners' perceptions of adolescent EFL learners' engagement in online classes. The questionnaire, utilized to gather quantitative data, focus on learners' perceptions of adolescent EFL learners' engagement and factors influencing their engagement in their online classes.

The 45-item questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was designed with two main sections. The first section primarily focuses on the participants' perceptions of adolescent learners' engagement in their online classes. It includes four clusters with 20 items *(items 1-20*), namely *agentic engagement (items 1-5), behavioral engagement (items 6-10), emotional engagement (items 11-15),* and *cognitive engagement (items 16-20)*. These clusters and items were adapted from the framework proposed by Reeve and Tseng (2011) and Reeve (2013).

The second section investigating factors influencing learners' engagement in synchronous online classes comprises five clusters with 25 items *(items 21-45)*, presented in Table 2. These clusters were adapted from key studies reviewed in the literature including Carroll et al. (2021), Deka (2021), Esra and Sevilen (2021), Khlaif et al. (2021), Maini et al. (2021), Kurt et al. (2022), and Werang and Leba (2022). The individual factor items corresponding to prior studies are also illustrated in the table below. Furthermore, several factors were added to complement the five categories as well as strengthen the framework of influential factors. These additional factors comprise Item 28 *(Learners' linguistic competence),* Item 35 *(General engagement level of the whole class),* Item 37 *(Variety of sources of teaching content),* and Item 43 *(Functions of online platforms like Google Meet)*.

Table 2: Summary of five clusters of factors of the questionnaire

Clusters	**Numbers of items**	**Sources**
1. Teacher-related factors	5 items (items 21-25)	Deka (2021); Maini et al. (2021); Kurt et al. (2022)
2. Learner-related factors	5 items (items 26-30)	Carroll et al. (2021); Deka (2021); Kurt et al. (2022); Werang & Leba (2022)
3. Classroom social interaction	5 items (items 31-35)	Esra & Sevilen (2021) Maini et al. (2021)
4. Teaching content and activities	6 items (items 36-41)	Deka (2021) Carroll et al. (2021); Kurt et al. (2022)
5. Learning environment and technical facilities	4 items (items 42-45)	Deka (2021); Khlaif et al. (2021);

3.2 Participants

The subject of the study involves 193 adolescent EFL learners at an English language center in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Due to the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Vietnam, face-to-face teaching and learning at the center was urgently switched to online mode in 2021. Regarding the context of online English teaching and learning at the institution, English classes were conducted in the form of synchronous online instruction employing two main online platforms, namely Google Meet and Zoom. The learners attended two to three classes per week. Table 1 below summarizes the information of participants for the questionnaires

Table 3: Demographic information of learner participants for the questionnaire (N=193)

Variables	Categories	N	Percentage
Gender	Male	82	42.5%
	Female	111	57.5%
Age	12-15 years old	153	79.3%
	16-18 years old	40	20.7%
Years of learning English	Under 5 years	33	17.1%
	5-10 years	146	75.6%
	Over 10 years	14	7.3%
Platforms for online classes	Google Meet	170	88.1%
	Google Meet & Zoom	23	11.9%

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was first piloted on 50 adolescent EFL learners sharing the same context as the target participants. The Google Form-based questionnaire was delivered to the learners via Zalo. To ensure the reliability of quantitative data, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese, the learners' mother tongue, to avoid ambiguity and facilitate their comprehension of the questionnaire items. Regarding the ethical issues, the researcher informed the adolescent learners' parents and asked for their permission before piloting the questionnaire in Zalo groups. SPSS Statistics 20 Software was utilized to analyze the data collected from the questionnaire. A Scale Test was run to verify the reliability of the questionnaires. The results indicated that the internal consistency of the questionnaires was high, with Cronbach's α=.95 (N=50) for learners' questionnaire, which means the questionnaires are feasibly applied for collecting the data ($\alpha \geq .70$). The results from the coefficient alpha indicated that the questionnaire was a reliable tool to be employed for the official questionnaire administration and data collection.

After the pilot stage, the questionnaire was properly revised and then officially administered to 193 adolescent EFL learners who were attending online classes at the center during the quarantine. They were informed about the purpose of the study and asked for their participation prior to the delivery of questionnaires via email and social networking sites, including Zalo. The questionnaire comprises four sections as described in the instrument.

For the quantitative data analysis, all data obtained from the questionnaire were subjected to SPSS Statistics 20 Software for calculating and analyzing the quantitative data. First, a Scale Test was conducted to test the reliability of the questionnaires. The results revealed that the questionnaire was highly reliable, with Cronbach's α=.95 (N=193). The results indicated that the questionnaire was a reliable tool to be employed for the official administration of data collection.

Below is the description of the statistical tests that the researcher has conducted for this assignment. One Sample T-Tests were run to compare mean scores with a specific test value according to the scale in Table 3.9 adapted from Pallant (2005). Secondly, Paired-Samples T-Tests were carried out to compare mean scores of four engagement dimensions and five clusters of factors influencing adolescent learners' engagement in online classes. Besides, Independent-Samples T-Test was operated to compare learner participants regarding their genders, ages, and years of learning English. To interpret Likert scale results, weighted means to represent each item and cluster were computed. Table 4 shows the levels of agreement associated with each weighted average mean range based on Pallant's (2005) framework.

Table 4: Interpretation of the mean scores

Weighted mean	**Levels of agreement**
4.21 – 5.00	Very high
3.41 – 4.20	High
2.61 – 3.40	Moderate
1.81 – 2.60	Low
1.00 – 1.80	Very low

4. Findings

4.1 Adolescent EFL learners' engagement levels in online classes

Concerning the answer to the first research question – the learners' level of engagement, data were collected from the questionnaires administered to both learners and teachers. A Descriptive Statistics Test was administered to analyze the engagement level of adolescent learners in online classes from learners' perceptions. The results of the test are presented in the following table.

Table 5: Learners' perceptions of adolescent EFL learners' engagement levels (N=193)

Clusters	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**SD**
Agentic engagement	1.00	5.00	3.54	.69
Behavioral engagement	2.60	5.00	4.19	.65
Emotional engagement	2.20	5.00	3.86	.60
Cognitive engagement	2.00	5.00	3.90	.65
Overall	**2.35**	**5.00**	**3.87**	**.52**

As shown in Table 5, the overall mean score of learners' perceptions of adolescent learners' engagement (M=3.87) was at a high level as informed by Pallant's (2005) framework. Then, a One-Sample T-Test was carried out to check whether the mean score (M=3.87) and the test value of 4.3 (very high level) were statistically different. The result revealed that the two means were significantly different (t =-11.32, p=.00). Therefore, the participants highly perceived learners' engagement levels in synchronous online classes. Regarding each engagement dimension, the results showed that adolescent learners were highly engaged in all four dimensions of engagement, in which all mean scores were over 3.4. Explicitly, the mean score of *behavioral engagement* (M=4.19) was the highest, which indicated that adolescent learners were most engaged in online classes in terms of behavior. Also, the level of *cognitive engagement* (M=3.90), *emotional engagement* (M=3.86), and *agentic engagement* (M=3.54) were perceived at high levels. A Paired-Samples T-Test was performed to compare these three engagement dimensions. The results exposed no significant difference between *cognitive* and *emotional engagement* (t=1.43, p=.26). The levels of these engagement aspects were generally the same. Meanwhile, there was a notable distinction between *emotional* and *agentic engagement* (t=6.62, p=.00). Accordingly, the learners' level of *emotional engagement* was higher than that of *agentic engagement*. Evidently, the learners were observed to be least agentically engaged in virtual classrooms compared to the other three engagement dimensions.

4.2 Learners' perceptions of factors influencing learners' engagement in online classes

A Descriptive Statistics Test was calculated to investigate learners' perceptions of factors affecting adolescent EFL learners' engagement in online classes. Table 6 displays the results of the test.

Table 6: Learners' perceptions of factors influencing learners' engagement (N=193)

Cluster	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Teacher-related factors	2.00	5.00	4.36	.64
Learner-related factors	2.00	5.00	3.96	.62
Classroom social interaction	2.20	5.00	4.16	.64
Teaching content and activities	1.67	5.00	4.22	.63
Learning environment and technical facilities	1.75	5.00	4.05	.72
Total	**2.12**	**5.00**	**4.16**	**.55**

As illustrated in Table 6, the overall mean score of factors affecting adolescent learners' engagement was highly perceived in light of Pallant's framework (M=4.16). To examine whether the mean score (M=4.16), at a high level, was statistically different from the test value of 4.3 (very high level), a One-Sample T-Test was computed. The result specified that the mean score was notably distinctive from the test value 4.3 (t=-3.65, p=.00). Correspondingly, adolescent learners' engagement in online classes was influenced by the investigated factors at a high level.

As also shown in Table 6, the participants' perceptions of the influence of the five-factor categories appeared to be very high with the means ranging from 3.96 to 4.36.

Specifically, *teacher-related factors* and *teaching content and activities* were ranked first and second (M=4.36 and M=4.22 respectively), followed by factors related to *classroom social interaction* (M=4.16), *learning environment and technical facilities* (M=4.05) and the least decisive category of factors was *learner-related* factors (M=3.96).

Another One Sample T-Test was run to evaluate if there was a statistically substantial discrepancy between the overall mean value of factors influencing learners' engagement and the mean of each category of factors. The results are presented in the following table.

Table 7: Comparing learners' perceptions of five categories of factors and the total mean

Factors influencing learners' engagement	**Mean**	**Test Value = 4.16**			
		t	**df**	**p**	**Mean Difference**
Teacher-related factors	4.36	4.23	192	.00	.20
Learner-related factors	3.96	-4.51	192	.00	-.20
Classroom social interaction	4.16	.10	192	.92	.005
Teaching content and activities	4.22	1.30	192	.20	.06
Learning environment and technical facilities	4.05	-2.15	192	.03	-.11

Table 7 indicated no remarkable difference among *teaching content and activities* (t=1.30, p=.20), *classroom social interaction* (t=.10, p=.92), and the total mean while the other factor groups showed the major dissimilarity compared to the total mean value of all influential factors.

For the analysis of individual factors, a Descriptive Statistics Test was computed to examine the mean scores of 25 individual factors in five categories. Findings resulting from the analysis are presented in the following sub-sections.

a. Teacher-related factors

Among the five categories of factors affecting learners' engagement, *teacher-related factors* were most highly ranked by the participants (M=4.36). For the analysis of individual *teacher-related factors,* a Descriptive Statistics Test was computed to determine the mean scores of each factor. Table 8 highlights the influence of these factors on learners' engagement as informed by learners' perceptions.

Table 8: Learners' perceptions of teacher-related factors

Teacher-related factors	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**SD**
21. Teacher's enthusiasm	1.00	5.00	4.52	.74
22. Clarity of the teacher's explanations	2.00	5.00	4.42	.74
23. Teacher's teaching style	2.00	5.00	4.34	.77
24. Teacher's online teaching methods and strategies	2.00	5.00	4.32	.78
25. Teacher's capability to use technology in teaching	1.00	5.00	4.18	.93
Total	**2.00**	**5.00**	**4.36**	**.64**

Evidence from Table 8 showed that the mean scores of most individual teacher-related factors were higher than the test value of 4.30. Among the five specific factors, the *teacher's*

enthusiasm was the topmost factor, with the test value of M=4.52, followed by the *clarity of the teacher's explanations* (M=4.42) and *teacher's teaching style* (M=4.34). These statistics indicated that the participants agreed with the influence of *teacher-related factors* at a very high level. Given that teachers' capability to use technology in teaching received the lowest mean score in this group, this factor did not seem to be as decisive as the others.

b. Learners-related factors

In opposition to the topmost significant category of *teacher-related factors*, the category of *learner-related factors* was found to have the least influence on the engagement of adolescent learners, with a mean score of 3.96. Table 9 summarizes the data on this learner-related group of factors.

Table 9: Learners' perceptions of learner-related factors

Learner-related factors	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
26. Learners' attitude and motivation	1.00	5.00	4.21	.79
27. Learners' adaptation of learning styles	1.00	5.00	4.11	.84
28. Learners' linguistic competence	1.00	5.00	3.75	.90
29. Learners' technological skills and experience	1.00	5.00	3.95	.89
30. Learners' personality traits	1.00	5.00	3.77	.94
Total	**2.00**	**5.00**	**3.96**	**.62**

As detailed in Table 9, though *learner-related factors* were perceived as the least significant factors, the mean scores of all individual factors were higher than the test value of 3.40, the moderate agreement level. Accordingly, these factors were demonstrated to also have a highly significant impact on adolescent learners' engagement. The learner participants highly perceived that *learners' attitude* and *motivation towards online learning* (M=4.21) and *learners' adaptation of learning styles* (M=4.11) were the most decisive indicators. In other words, learners' attitudes and motivation were perceived to be hugely significant in strengthening the engagement of adolescent EFL learners in synchronous online classes. Additionally, the significance of adapting learning styles when switching to online classes was strongly emphasized by the participants.

Following the aforementioned influential factors, *learners' technological skills and experience with online learning* ranked third. The statistical analysis of this cluster highlighted that the two factors *learners' personality traits* (M=3.77) and *learners' linguistic competence* (M=3.75) had the least crucial influence on the learners' engagement with the lowest mean scores in this cluster and also the lowest of all the factors in the current study. As usually perceived, *learners' competence* and *learners' personality traits* like confidence might be the key factor that fosters or hinders learners' engagement in any classroom activities, but interestingly, the finding revealed that the learners perceived these factors as not very significant.

c. Classroom social interaction

This section presents findings in relation to specific factors in the third cluster, namely *classroom social interaction*. Accordingly, five individual factors regarding the communication, interactions, and support between the teacher and learners were included. For the analysis of *classroom social interaction*, a Descriptive Statistics Test was run to examine the mean scores of each factor. Table 10 reports the data on the perceptions of the participants on these influential factors.

Table 10: Learners' perceptions of classroom social interaction

Classroom social interaction	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
31. Teacher-learner communication and interaction	1.00	5.00	4.25	.79
32. Learner-learner communication and interaction	1.00	5.00	4.07	.85
33. Teacher feedback and support for learners	2.00	5.00	4.28	.79
34. Peer collaboration and support in online classes	1.00	5.00	4.07	.82
35. General engagement level of the whole class	1.00	5.00	4.15	.79
Total	**2.20**	**5.00**	**4.16**	**.64**

Apropos of the *classroom social interaction* group, the learners perceived two factors concerning the involvement of teachers at a very high level, namely *teacher feedback and support for learners* (Item 33, M=4.28) and *teacher-learner communication and interaction* (Item 31, M=4.25), receiving the highest mean scores. The extra factor, the *general engagement level of the whole class* (M=4.15), was also highly influential in the engagement of individual learners. Although the other two factors, *learner-learner communication and interaction* (Item 32) and *peer collaboration and support in online classes* (Item 34) received the lowest mean score in this group, they were proved to be critical to the learners' engagement with the mean value of 4.07 each.

d. Teaching content and activities

This section presents the learners' perceptions of the impact of individual factors in the category of *teaching content and activities*. As earlier presented, among the five categories of factors, the mean score of this group ranked second (M=4.22 for learners), just after the *teacher-related factors*. For the analysis of the subsets incorporated in this category of teaching content and activities, a Descriptive Statistics Test was calculated to investigate the mean scores of each factor. The test results regarding the perceptions of these six individual factors are briefly summarized in the following table.

Table 11: Learners' perceptions of teaching content and activities

Teaching content and activities	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
36. Teaching content load and its relevance to topics	2.00	5.00	4.19	.75
37. Variety of sources of teaching content	1.00	5.00	4.26	.78
38. Use of multimedia and online websites/apps	1.00	5.00	4.36	.77
39. Variety and challenge of tasks and activities	1.00	5.00	4.07	.83
40. Level of interest and relevance of tasks/activities	1.00	5.00	4.24	.83
41. Value and meaningfulness of tasks and activities	2.00	5.00	4.19	.81
Total	**1.67**	**5.00**	**4.22**	**.63**

As highlighted in Table 11, most of the mean scores of individual factors in this category were higher than 4.20 which fell into the range of *very high* agreement level. In this sense, most factors related to *teaching content and activities* appeared to have an extremely significant influence on the engagement of adolescent learners from learners' perspectives.

Among six sub-factors, the *use of multimedia and online websites/apps in online lessons* (Item 22) was the most crucial factor (M=4.36). Prominently, when switching to synchronous online classes, multimedia and online websites and apps seemed to be more significant in actively engaging adolescent learners in the classes.

Aside from the topmost factor, the learners also agreed on the influence of *variety of sources of teaching content* and *level of interest and relevance of tasks and activities to learners* at very high levels (M=4.26 and M=4.24 respectively). In other words, adolescent learners will be exceedingly engaged in online classes if they are supplied with various sources of learning content, and fascinating and relevant tasks/activities. Though the factor *variety and challenge of tasks and activities* (M=4.07) achieved the lowest mean score compared to the other factors, its impact on the learners' engagement was also at a high level.

e. Learning environment and technical facilities

The fifth category of factors investigated in the study was the *learning environment and technical facilities.* Results from the data analysis showed that the mean score for this category was ranked in fourth place, quite close to the cluster with the least influence, namely *learner-related factors*. For the purpose of analyzing the participants' perceptions of the impact of these factors, a Descriptive Statistics Test was executed to investigate the mean scores of each factor. The results of the influence of these factors are demonstrated in Table 12.

Table 12: Learners' perceptions of teaching content and activities

Learning environment and technical facilities	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**SD**
42. Quality of internet connection and accessibility to technical devices (computers, smartphones, etc.)	1.00	5.00	4.13	.93
43. Functions of online platforms (Meet, Zoom)	1.00	5.00	4.04	.86
44. Technical support from others (teachers, center)	1.00	5.00	4.06	.91
45. Learners' study space & surrounding environment	1.00	5.00	3.95	.96
Total	1.75	5.00	**4.05**	**.72**

Table 12 revealed the fact that the first factor listed in this group, *quality of internet connection and accessibility to technical devices* (Item 42), had the greatest impact on the adolescent learners' engagement, at a high agreement level by the learners (M=4.13). This evidence suggests that the involvement and interest of adolescent learners in the contexts of online classes are enormously affected by environmental and technical factors. The statistical results analyzed from the learners proved that the top factor was followed by *technical support from others* (M=4.06) and *functions of online platforms* (M=4.04). The influence of *learners' private study space and surrounding environment* was thought to be the

least decisive factor in this category (M=3.95). In other words, adolescent learners could be significantly influenced by their study space and the surrounding environment where they have online lessons.

Examining all the individual factors affecting learners' engagement in online classes, the *teacher's enthusiasm* was the most influential factor from learners' perceptions, preceding *clarity of teacher's explanations* and *use of multimedia and online websites/apps in online lessons*. On the contrary, *learners' personality traits*, and *learners' linguistic competence* were the least substantial factors affecting the engagement of adolescent learners. In short, the detailed analysis of five categories and individual factors has provided an overall comprehensive picture of learners' perspectives on factors influencing the engagement of adolescent learner's engagement in the contexts of synchronous virtual classes.

5. Discussions

As explained in the introduction, the present study was conducted to investigate factors influencing adolescent EFL learners' engagement in online classes. In particular, it aimed to achieve the following two-fold objective, which is discovering learners' engagement levels in online classes, and factors influencing learners' engagement. The study employed a 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire. The participants of the questionnaires involved 193 learners attending online classes at an EFL language center in the Mekong Delta. In the following sub-sections, key findings will be summarized and discussed sequentially in accordance with the two research questions that the study set out to investigate.

5.1 Adolescent EFL learners' engagement levels in online classes

The first research question was designed to investigate the engagement levels of adolescent EFL learners in the context of online classes with a focus on four dimensions of engagement, including *agentic, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement*. As previously presented, the learners' overall perception of adolescent learners' engagement in online classes was at a high level in light of Pallant's (2005) framework. Another key finding in relation to the students' engagement level is that as perceived by the learners, all four engagement dimensions were perceived at high levels with *behavioral engagement* found to be the most salient among the four dimensions. Particularly, the participants agreed at a very high level that when teachers presented the lectures, they listened and read carefully. Furthermore, they paid sufficient attention to the teachers and tried hard to perform well in online classes. This finding appears to show a high level of resonance with the previous result reported by Susanti's (2020) and Nguyen's (2021) study. Together, this body of research findings reconfirms that students' behavioral engagement dimension is higher than other aspects of cognitive and emotional engagement. It evidently supports that the learners generally appreciate their engagement degree in terms of behaviors in online classes.

As previously presented, adolescent learners were least agentically engaged in online classes. In this sense, the learners' *agentic engagement* level was lower than the other three engagement aspects. Explicitly, quantitative data revealed that the level of *agentic engagement* was only at the average and near-average levels, which is consistent with Reeve's (2013) results. From quantitative evidence, participants did not highly agree with the idea that the learners offered suggestions about how to make the online classes better. On the other hand, this finding shows a marked contrast with reports from the previous study by Chiu (2022), demonstrating that students' perception of *agentic engagement* was at the highest level compared to the other three aspects of *behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement*.

5.2 Factors influencing adolescent EFL learners' engagement in online classes

In general, the findings indicated that the participants perceived the influence of investigated factors at *high* and *very high* levels. In this sense, learners were highly aware of the impacts of influential factors which might foster or decline their engagement levels in the virtual setting. Among the five major categories of factors, the learner participants identified *teacher-related factors* as the topmost influential as evident from the quantitative data. To a large extent, this general finding reflects a high level of similarity with Deka's (2021) findings concerning the main factors determining learners' engagement in online classes, given that instructor-related aspects had the strongest influence among the five analyzed groups of factors. Following the topmost significant factors was the category *teaching content and activities*. Though learners were regarded as the center of the teaching and learning process in both face-to-face and online instruction, *learner-related factors* were observed to have the least substantial impacts on the learner's engagement.

Drawing further on the sub-components of the *teacher-related factors*, which were perceived to be at very high levels, evidence from the learners' data showed that *teachers' enthusiasm* was found to be the most critical determinant in this category. This finding is seemingly equivalent to Hew's (2016) comment that the learners were positively engaged thanks to the instructors' excitement for the subject as well as their enthusiasm for online teaching. In general, regarding the influence of teachers, the majority of previous studies tended to focus on teachers' lectures, teaching styles, instructional methods, and strategies rather than their enthusiasm. Aside from *teachers' enthusiasm*, the influence of *teaching methods and strategies* was highly perceived by the participants. This finding confirms the results of studies conducted by previous researchers (Ding et al., 2018; Ngo, 2021). Together these research findings reaffirm that the instructional methods and strategies that teachers utilize in online classrooms influence the extent to which the learners are engaged in the classes.

Another important category of factors that was perceived as having a significant impact on learners' engagement was *teaching content and activities*. As reported earlier, learners rated this aspect at a very high level. This is in coherence with the findings of prior studies, including Dwivedi et al. (2019), Deka (2021), Esra and Sevilen (2021), and Khlaif et al. (2021). Evidence from the present study showed that the use of multimedia

(pictures, videos, etc.) and online websites/apps in online lessons had the most decisive influence on the learners' engagement levels. This finding reinforces Deka's (2021) research report emphasizing that the use of multimedia, especially graphics and other visual features (images, videos) made the online lessons more attractive and engaging to the learners. Similarly, Lucas et al. (2020), by consistently appreciating the employment of websites and apps in online learning with this finding, commented that the delivery of online lessons through employing teaching materials with educational websites or apps possibly positively reinforced the learners' engagement.

One further significant finding from the study was related to the notable influence that *classroom social interaction* has on the students' engagement. As presented in the finding section, learners and teachers were in agreement that the learners' engagement levels were highly affected by all determinants of this category, prominently *teacher feedback and support for learners*, and *teacher-learner communication and interaction*. This evidence echoes the findings of the earlier study by Esra and Sevilen (2021) who found that the students reported better levels of motivation and engagement as a result of teachers' positive feedback and adequate communication and interactions with teachers in online settings. One possible explanation for this finding in the present study could be the fact that when classes were switched from face-to-face mode to online learning with somewhat limited direct communication and interaction, learners might more highly appreciate the interaction with their teachers, especially the teachers' feedback and support during online classes.

Consequently, for the sake of fostering the quality of social interaction in online classrooms, teachers need to facilitate the communication and interaction with learners and try to provide relevant feedback to learners, and enthusiastically support them for their better engagement in the context of online learning. Additionally, it was noticed that among the five analyzed factors related to this category, the influence of *peer collaboration and support in online classes* received the least agreement. Dissimilar to this finding, Lee et al. (2019) reported from their study that peer collaboration and support were one of the main indicators contributing to student engagement in online learning. The *general engagement level of the whole class* was revealed as the most crucial determinant, followed by *learner-learner communication and interaction*. In reality, limitations on peer interaction and communication might result in boredom or loss of motivation among the learners, decreasing their engagement level in the online classes.

The next important finding from the study is that although *online learning environment and technical facilities* have been extensively discussed in previous studies as a key factor determining learners' engagement, this appears not to be highly evident in the present study. As aforementioned, although learners' perceptions of these factors were rated at *high* and *very high* levels, they did not appreciate the influence of this category as much as the three categories discussed earlier. It could be explained that COVID-19 had broken out a few times before, and the learners were increasingly familiar with the virtual learning environment and the application of technology in their online learning. Also, among the four sub-factors housed under this category, the *quality of*

internet connection and accessibility to technical devices was considered to be the most influential determinant. These findings are in alignment with the previously reviewed studies (e.g., Khlaif et al., 2021; Maini et al., 2021; Werang & Leba, 2022). These studies consistently stated that learners' lack of access to personal computers, smartphones, and the Internet hindered them from actively participating and engaging in online classes. It can be argued that the learners would find it challenging to engage in online classes if they were not provided with appropriate technical devices such as smartphones, computers, headphones, and microphones, or the Internet connection was unstable or lost.

Concerning the least decisive sub-factor in this group, learners highly agreed that *study space and surrounding environment* was the least influential to learners' engagement in online learning. These findings were observed to be not equivalent to the results of prior studies (e.g., Deka, 2021; Esra & Sevilen, 2021; Khlaif et al., 2021), in which the importance of technical support and private learning space was emphasized and appreciated. Although it was quantitatively reported that learners perceived the significance of learners' *study space and surrounding environment* lower than other factors. This has been confirmed by Oliveras-Ortiz et al. (2021), with their argument being that the characteristics of learning environments and learners' study spaces significantly affect students' learning and engagement.

The final prominent finding concerning factors determining learners' engagement levels was that *learner-related factors* were revealed to be the least critical category. In this sense, the participants had a tendency not to consider learners as the key players that greatly impact learners' engagement. This said, one particular factor in this category, namely *learners' attitude and motivation towards online learning,* was perceived at very high levels. This finding is identical to the result from the studies conducted by Park and Yun (2018), Kara (2021), and Kurt et al. (2022), correspondingly reporting that learner motivation had a direct impact on the learners' engagement. More specifically, a higher level of motivation for learning leads to a higher level of learner engagement. Among all the investigated factors of five groups, *learners' linguistic competence* was consistently perceived as the least influential determinant. This finding is, to some extent, inconsistent with the finding by Dwivedi et al. (2019), indicating that students' lack of proficiency in this language hindered their understanding, motivation, and engagement in online learning environments. Besides, the learners also perceived the factor *learners' personality traits* to be in the top least influential factors. In this sense, these indicators seem not to have a significant influence on the learners' engagement. It was seemingly divergent from the findings presented by Quigley et al. (2022), proving the significance of *learners' personality traits* in predicting and influencing students' online engagement. Accordingly, the impact of *learners' linguistic competence* and *personality traits* should be taken into consideration in an attempt to fully engage learners in the online learning environment.

6. Implications

As a pioneering investigation of learners' perspectives on adolescent EFL learners' engagement in online classes in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, this study provides learners, teachers, curriculum developers, and institution administrators with significant practical implications for measures to effectively enhance learners' engagement in online classes.
To begin with, from the learners' angle, the findings of the study can assist them in reflecting on their engagement in synchronous online classrooms. Specifically, the learners are informed of which engagement dimensions they need to improve to increase the overall engagement level. More importantly, the learners become more aware of determinants affecting their engagement. In addition, these findings form bases for learners to reflect upon their own learning styles and strategies to make appropriate adaptations to ensure the best conditions for facilitating their learning experiences. It is also advisable that students should show more enthusiasm, activeness, self-regulation, self-discipline, and a positive learning spirit towards online teaching and learning.

Secondly, by acknowledging the learners' engagement levels, teachers can find out which aspects of engagement need to be facilitated to actively engage the learners in their online learning. The findings, as such, offer teachers more insights into determinants affecting learners' engagement. Based on these, teachers can figure out effective ways and strategies to encourage learners to become more engaged in online discussions and tasks/activities. Apart from the teachers, curriculum developers also ought to be more concerned about integrating diverse and engaging teaching content into lessons. Learning tasks and activities employed in online courses should be tailored to the context of online instruction for better achieving course objectives and learning outcomes.

Last of all, for school administrators and program coordinators, the findings of this research have important managerial implications. The findings have revealed the essentiality of providing both learners and teachers with proper training and support, including professional development sessions with hands-on experience for teachers and sufficient technical support for learners.

7. Conclusion

The study addressed a gap in the literature by exploring key factors influencing adolescent EFL learners' engagement in virtual classrooms. Findings from the study concluded that behavioral engagement was the highest from learners' perspectives whereas agentic engagement was found to be the lowest dimension. With respect to learners' perspectives on decisive factors on adolescent learners' engagement in synchronous online classes, teacher-related factors and teaching content and activities were quantitatively and qualitatively found to be the two most crucial categories. Though learner-related factors were observed to be the least influential category, these factors were proved to be highly influential in motivating and/or hindering learners' engagement in online learning settings. Regarding individual factors, teachers'

enthusiasm, clarity of explanation, and use of multimedia and online websites/apps were in the top three most influential factors as perceived by learners.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the author

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