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EFL VIETNAMESE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract:
English has gradually been very important in education in Vietnam and it is taught from the early ages. However, many students cannot communicate English appropriately after graduation. There are many reasons for this, but student engagement is considered as one of the major reasons which cause the low level of English proficiency of Vietnamese students. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate EFL Vietnamese students' perceptions of their engagement with English learning in the face-to-face learning environment. A quantitative method was employed. The sample consisted of 428 students who have studied English. The results revealed that students were highly engaged with their learning. Students indicated that they were cognitively engaged with learning the best and were agentically engaged the least. In addition, the findings also showed that English major students were more engaged with their learning than their non-English major counterparts. The students in the group of freshman and sophomore year combined were found to be more engaged than those in junior and senior years. Some implications from the findings were also suggested.

Keywords: student engagement, EFL students, face-to-face learning environment, traditional learning environment

1. Introduction

With the ever-growing levels of interconnectivity and globalization around the world, English has been acknowledged as a common and international language to communicate between people from different countries (Chang, 2006; Naji Meidani & Pishghadam, 2013). In education, it is considered a key that opens up better education (Ahmad, 2016; Khan & Mansoor, 2020) and job opportunities (Ahmad, 2016) for students. Hence, English is undoubtedly the most important foreign language in Vietnam.

It has been taught for students from the early ages. Previously, English was the elective subject from Grade 3 (7 years old) and the compulsory subject from Grade 6 (12 years old); but Minister of Education and Training issued the Circular no.32/2018/TT-

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BGDDT on 26th December 2018 on changes in General education program, in which English is a compulsory subject taught from Grade 3 in 2022-2023.

In tertiary education, some Vietnamese higher institutions are now using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in some areas (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020), which refers to the use of English to deliver the academic content of other subjects. In the early 1990s, EMI was first introduced in Vietnam and since 2000, EMI was adopted by many Vietnamese higher educational institutions. Vietnam had over 70 higher education institutions that introduced EMI programs in 2008 (Dang et al., 2013). In 2018, there are approximately EMI-based programs, including 280 Joint Programs, 33 Advanced Programs, and 55 High Quality Programs cooperated by Vietnamese higher institutions (Tran & Nguyen, 2018). Furthermore, the increase in the number of English language centers with multileveled classes to meet the students' needs from North to South also shows the significance of English in Vietnam. The number of English language centers in the whole Vietnam reached approximately 4000 centers.

Despite the fact that English is taught through many years of formal English instruction and from public schools to private language centers, many students do not have enough English skills to communicate effectively with others after graduation (Nguyen et al., 2020). Skinner and Pitzer (2012) stated that engagement is "*a robust predictor of students' learning, grades, achievement test scores, retention, and graduation*" (p.21) and "*the direct (and only) pathway to cumulative learning, long-term achievement, and eventual academic success*" (p.23-24). In other words, if students are not highly engaged in their learning, they cannot study well. Therefore, the low level of student engagement can be one of the main reasons causing such limited English proficiency of Vietnamese students. Furthermore, understanding student engagement is crucial because it contributes to effective teaching and learning (Chiu, 2022). Therefore, this study will examine to what extent EFL Vietnamese students engage in English learning in a face-to-face (F2F) learning environment.

2. Literature review

2.1 Student engagement

There are different perspectives on the definitions of student engagement (Kahu, 2013). Student engagement describes students' time and energy investment in interactions with other students through educational activities which are created purposeful (Kuh, 2001). In educational settings, student engagement is defined as "*constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive and cognitively focused participation with learning activities*" (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 22). Another definition of student engagement is "*the extent of a student's active involvement in a learning activity"* (Wellborns, 1991 as cited in Reeve, 2012, p.150). Student engagement refers to the *"energy and effort"* that students invest in their learning (Bond et al., 2020, p.3). The energy and effort can be reflected through some observably behavioral, cognitive, or affective indicators. In other words, engaged students show high degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion when they are learning (Kalyani & Rajasekaran, 2018), so the students' learning participation

can be considered as the meaningful involvement. From the definitions raised above, the term engagement contains at least the behavioral and psychological components (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

2.2 Dimensions of student engagement

Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of student engagement are widely commonly accepted dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). Reeve and Tseng (2011) introduced four aspects of student engagement, consisting of behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and agentic engagement. Therefore, this study will explore student engagement with a four-dimensions construct according to the perspectives of Reeve (2012) and Reeve and Tseng (2011).

- **Behavioral engagement** is how students actively involve in the learning activity. Behavioral engagement can be assessed by students' concentration, attention, and effort. If students are behaviorally engaged with learning, they will show on-task attention and concentration, make a high effort, high task-persistence.
- **Emotional engagement** includes the presence of task-facilitating emotions. An emotionally engaged student is interested, curios, and enthusiastic about learning. They also do not show their negative emotions including distress, anger, frustration, anxiety, or fear of school.
- **Cognitive engagement** refers to the students' personal investment in learning. In particular, they tend to use deep and sophisticated strategies to master the knowledge rather than experiencing the surface knowledge. For example, when students use elaboration (which refers to the ability to use goal-setting, self-monitoring or self-talk, and self-reinforcement) and self-regulation strategies (which refers to a process of connecting the prior knowledge to what is being learned), they show that they are cognitively engaged in learning.
- **Agentic engagement** is the extent to which students make attempt to enrich the learning process instead of passively receiving what is delivered by teachers. Moreover, proactive, intentional, and constructive contributions to the flow of the learning activities are also forms of agentic engagement. In particular, agentically-engaged students entail the actions such as offering input, expressing preferences or making suggestions.

The four aspects are distinct but inter-correlated (Appleton et al., 2006; Reeve, 2012). The way students act or think can be influenced by their emotions, so emotional engagement can affect the other dimensions (Hiver et al., 2021). To be more detailed, behavioral engagement can be influenced by cognitive and psychological dimensions (Appleton et al., 2006). For example, the student's feelings have an impact on students' readiness in interacting with their friends (Svalberg, 2009). Li and Lerner (2013) found that behavioral and emotional engagement has a two-way relation as well as one-way relation between emotional engagement and cognitive engagement in which emotional engagement influences cognitive engagement. In addition, emotional and behavioral engagements are also considered as the prerequisite of cognitive engagement because students need to be behaviorally engaged first, then emotionally engaged (by

experiencing "*a degree of emotional comfort and connectedness*") before being cognitively engaged (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010) p.11)).

2.3 The importance of student engagement in student learning

Student engagement is very crucial for students because student engagement relates to specific behaviors in the learning process and learning outcomes. Firstly, student engagement affects the student learning process. It is considered as a crucial condition that enhances student learning because if students are not engaged with the academic work, they would not learn (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). When they are engaged, they will show more active learning behaviors such as asking questions, cooperating with their peers, etc. (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005). Bond et al. (2020, p.3) stated that "*the more students are engaged and empowered within their learning community, the more likely they are to channel that energy back into their learning, leading to a range of short- and long-term outcomes, that can likewise further fuel engagement*". Consequently, the more students involves in activities, the more they achieve success in the institution (Astin, 1984). In addition, students only acquire knowledge and skills if they are engaged with the academic work in the classroom (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) indicated that engagement was linked with involvement which had a positive relationship with the students' acquisition of course content (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additionally, student engagement is not only associated with the physical state, it also connects to mental health and well-being. Cater et al. (2007) stated that highly engaged students will face to a lower level of depression. Instead, they will feel more motivated and find more joy in their learning (Kalyani & Rajasekaran, 2018). It can conclude that positive experience and a sense of satisfaction are the outcomes of student engagement (Kahu, 2013).

Research also pointed out that student engagement plays a very vital role in student academic success. Skinner and Pitzer (2012) stated that engagement is "*a robust predictor of students' learning, grades, achievement test scores, retention, and graduation*". Ku et al (2008) found that student engagement in academically purposeful activities has a positive impact on student grades and persistence between the first and the second year of study (Kuh et al., 2008). Moreover, the findings from Carini et al. (2004) also indicated that student engagement brought more benefit to lower-ability students than the others, leading to higher performance (Carini et al., 2004).

Understanding the level of student engagement is very important for teachers and educators because student engagement helps teachers understand how students think, act and feel in academic contexts (Hiver et al., 2020). Therefore, by evaluating the students' engagement level, teachers can design suitable, practical, and effective teaching techniques, lesson plans, instructional practices, and activities in order to foster students' experience with their learning (Mandernach et al., 2011).

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Construct the instrument for measuring student engagement

The instrument was designed to be able to explore student engagement in Vietnam. In this study, four aspects of student engagement – behavioral, emotional, agentic, and cognitive engagement, were assessed. First, the researcher collected and translated items related to the student engagement scale from previous studies, including measurement items from Reeve (2013), Mameli and Passini (2019), and Dixson (2015). It includes four clusters with 24 items, namely behavioral engagement (items 1-6), emotional engagement (items 6-12), agentic engagement, and (items 13-18) cognitive engagement (items 19-24). Then, the pilot questionnaire was checked by a translator in order to ensure the meaning between the English version and the Vietnamese version.

The questionnaires were designed based on a five-point Likert-scale instrument (1=Very little, 2=Little, 3=Moderate, 4=Much, 5=Very much). The pilot 24-item questionnaires with a five-point Likert scale and demographic information were delivered online with Google Forms. In total, the sample had 148 EFL tertiary students. Then, Cronbach's Alpha was used to check the internal consistency of the instrument (Brown, 2002). As a result, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient set showed an excellent reliability value, at 0.94 for all items, suggesting that the 24 items have relatively high internal consistency. Furthermore, the corrected item-total correlation values ranged from 0.52 to 0.68 which were higher than 0.40 (Hair, 2009), suggesting all the items were good for the scale. As a result, 24 items were retained.

Next, the data was extracted into components using EFA with the Varimax rotation method in SPSS version 20. The KMO value is 0.91 and Bartlett's test of Sphericity is significant. It extracted the 24 items into 4 components, with Eigenvalues (the total amount of variance that can be explained by a given principal component) greater than 1, which together explained 63.39% of the variance. (see Table 3.1)

Table 3.1: Total variance explained by the three components

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	10.21	42.56	42.56	4.10	17.09	17.09
2	2.22	9.26	51.81	3.91	16.28	33.37
3	1.51	6.28	58.09	3.70	15.43	48.80
4	1.27	5.30	63.39	3.50	14.59	63.39

There were 23 items with factor loadings larger than 0.50, ranging from 0.60 to 0.82, but item 18 has a loading factor of 0.48, lower than 0.50, so it was removed from the data. Therefore, the official questionnaire which was used for collecting the official data included 4 components as below:

- Behavioral engagement: 6 items retained (items 1-6). This component describes the visible act of students being involved in learning in the classroom, such as active participation, peer interaction, note-taking, …

- Emotional engagement: 6 items retained (items 7-12) showing the positive emotions or reactions towards their learning, including interests, enthusiasm, happiness, curiosity,…
- Agentic engagement: 5 items retained (items 13-17). This component also depicts the students' observable classroom event, but this is a form of proactive dimension, in other words, it represents students' contribution to the flow of the instruction rather than receiving it as it is given.
- Cognitive engagement: 6 items retained (items 19-24). This component describes the students' psychological investment in their learning, such as the amount of time, energy, and effort in their learning process, …

3.2. Data collection and data analysis

With the constructed scale, a survey questionnaire was used to collect the main data. Additionally, questionnaires can be utilized to obtain a general picture of the characteristics of a large population sample (Dőrnyei, 2003). Both online surveys and hard-copies were delivered to collect the data. Collecting data using an online questionnaire can be time-saving, and money-saving, and more importantly, students can complete the questionnaire at any time (Wright, 2005). For the hard copies, despite the high cost, the response rates for the paper-based survey were higher than that for the web-based survey (Ebert et al., 2018; Nulty, 2008). Furthermore, the paper-based survey can approach students who are not worthwhile responding to the online survey request for many reasons (avoid advertisement, keep safe). Combining the two data collection techniques saves time for the data collection process. The collected data will be analyzed in SPSS Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 20 for Windows.

The sample consisted of 428 EFL tertiary students who participated to respond in the questionnaire. Table 3.3 presents the demographic information of the participants of this study:

Table 3.3: The participants' demographic variables

Demographic factors	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	142	33.20%
	Female	282	65.90%
Student major group	English-majored	241	56.30%
	Non-English-majored	187	43.70%
The academic year of study	Freshmen & Sophomore	289	67.50%
	Junior & Senior	159	32.50%
School type	Public	313	73.10%
	Private	115	26.90%

In this study, the descriptive statistical analysis was proceeded. A descriptive statistic test was employed to analyze the level of student engagement and independent samples t-tests were utilized to compare the engagement of participants regarding their gender, group, the academic year of study, and school type.

4. Results

4.1 The level of student engagement in a face-to-face learning environment

Descriptive statistical analysis results (Table 4.1) showed that EFL Vietnamese students in are highly engaged in F2F learning environment (M = 3.59, SD = 0.57). Among the four types of student engagement, the level of cognitive engagement, behavioral and emotional engagement was reported to be at a high level while that agentic engagement was rated at a moderate level. Particularly, students were cognitively engaged the most (M = 3.74, SD = 0.71) while their agentic engagement was the lowest (M = 3.31, SD = 0.74).

Table 4.1: Levels of student engagement in the F2F learning environment

Components	Mean	SD
Student engagement in F2F learning environment	3.59	0.57
- Behavioral engagement	3.65	0.66
- Emotional engagement	3.67	0.64
- Agentic engagement	3.31	0.74
- Cognitive engagement	3.74	0.71

4.2 The differences in student engagement depending on their demographic information

An independent samples t-test was conducted to understand whether there were differences in the level of student engagement when they studied F2F between groups of participants who differed in gender. The results of the independent samples t-test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the level of student engagement in the F2F learning environment between male (M = 3.55, SD = 0.58) and female students (M = 3.61, SD = 0.56); t(422) = 0.96, p = 0.34.

Another independent samples t-test was conducted to compare student engagement levels in the F2F learning environment between types of schools (public and private) where the participants enrolled. The results showed no statistically significant difference in the level of student engagement in the F2F learning environment between participants from public institutions (M = 3.61, SD = 0.51) and from private institutions (M = 3.53, SD = 0.69); t(1633.06) = 1.14, p = 0.26.

To compare the level of student engagement in the F2F learning environment between English majored and non-English majored students, another independent samples t-test was run in SPSS. The results indicated that there were statistical significances in the difference in the level of student engagement with their learning when they attended F2F learning environment between English-majored students (M = 3.76, SD = 0.56) and non-English majored students (M = 3.37, SD = 0.50); t(426) = 7.51, p = 0.00.

Then, the independent samples t-test was conducted again to compare the level of student behavioral, emotional, agentic, and cognitive engagement between English majored students and non-English majored students in the F2F learning environment. The results indicated that:

- There were statistically significant differences in the level of behavioral engagement between English majored students (M=3.85, SD=0.60) and non-English majored students (M=3.40 SD=0.76), t(426)=7.66, p=0.00;
- There were statistically significant differences in the level of emotional engagement between English majored students (M=3.78, SD=0.65) and non-English majored students (M=3.52, SD=0.60), t(426)=4.24, p=0.00;
- There were statistically significant differences in the level of agentic engagement between English majored students (M=3.52, SD=0.74) and non-English majored students (M=3.03, SD=0.63), t(426)=5.32, p=0.00;
- There were statistically significant differences in the level of cognitive engagement between English majored students (M=3.89, SD=0.68) and non-English majored students (M=3.54, SD=0.70), t(426)=5.32, p=0.00

Among them, the mean differences in student agentic engagement (MD=0.54) and behavioral engagement (MD=0.44) between English majored-student and non-English majored student were the largest.

Finally, another independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the level of student engagement in the F2F learning environment between the group of freshman and sophomore students combined and junior and senior students combined. The results showed that there were statistically significant differences in the level of student engagement in the F2F learning environment between the group of freshmen and sophomores students combined (M = 3.65, SD = 0.56) and juniors and seniors students combined (M = 3.46, SD = 0.68); t(426) = 3.35, p = 0.00.

To compare the level of the four dimensions of student engagement between the group of freshman and sophomore students combined and the group of junior and senior students combined. The results showed that

- There were statistically significant differences in the level of behavioral engagement between the group of freshmen and sophomores students combined (M=3.72, SD=0.66) and the group of juniors and seniors students combined (M=3.51, SD=0.63), t(426)=3.07, p=0.00;
- There were statistically significant differences in the level of emotional engagement between the group of freshmen and sophomores students combined (M=3.71, SD=0.63) and the group of juniors and seniors students combined (M=3.57, SD=0.66), t(426)=2.16, p=0.03.
- There were statistically significant differences in the level of agentic engagement between the group of freshmen and sophomores students combined (M=3.37, SD=0.72) and the group of juniors and seniors students combined (M=3.16, SD=0.76), t(426)=2.92, p=0.00;
- There were statistically significant differences in the level of cognitive engagement between the group of freshmen and sophomores students combined (M=3.80, SD=0.70) and the group of juniors and seniors students combined (M=3.60, SD=0.72), t(426)=2.87, p=0.00.

5. Discussion

The results of the descriptive statistical analysis showed that student engagement in a face-to-face learning environment was high. In particular, students indicated that they were cognitively engaged the most while they were behaviorally and agentically engaged the least. The findings with a moderate level of agentic engagement suggest that Vietnamese students were still not active in the learning process. The passiveness and respect culture is the possible reasons leading to the lower level of students' behavioral engagement and the lowest level of students' agentic engagement. Vietnamese students were commonly perceived as passive, obedient, dependent, and shy students (Dieu, 2015; Thao-Do et al., 2016; Tran, 2013). Therefore, they were not ready to make questions to their teacher when studying in class because they want to save their faces. Another reason is because students were taught to show their respect to their teachers who were viewed as the "*found of knowledge*" (Dieu, 2015). To attain the knowledge, students need to put more psychological investment in their learning including thinking strategically, questioning themselves, and revising the knowledge. As a result, student cognitive engagement is high which was reflected in the findings of this study.

This study also found out that English majored students were more engaged with learning than non-English majored students. In Vietnam, non-English major students study English for the purpose of meeting the job or graduation requirements (Trang & Baldauf Jr, 2007; Tuan, 2011), so they tend to be less engaged than English majored students who choose to take entrance exam for English major program for the goal of mastering English. Intrinsic motivation is also a possible explanation for the finding. In addition, Tran and Baldauf Jr (2007) argued that English majored students had intrinsic motivation while their non-English majored counterparts just studied for meeting the school requirements. Similarly, Vietnamese English major students are found to be more intrinsically motivated and less compelled to study English than non-English major students (Ngo et al., 2017). With a high level of motivation, students will invest more in their studies, leading to higher engagement in English studies.

Moreover, the group of freshman and sophomore students combined was found to be more engaged than the group of junior and senior students combined. This can be explained by the students' mental health which correlates with the students' engagement (Baard et al., 2004; Bailey & Phillips, 2016). A study on student's happiness indicates that freshmen are happier than sophomores, juniors, and seniors, suggesting better mental health among Vietnamese students because of being more autonomous and excited to start university study (Thi et al., 2020), suggesting a higher level of engagement in the group of freshman and sophomore students combined than the group of junior and senior students combined. However, it would be useful to examine some factors which influence to the differences in the level of student engagement between the two groups of students.

6. Conclusion

The present study was primarily conducted to identify EFL student engagement in the face-to-face learning environment in Vietnam. The results highlighted that student engagement was high in the face-to-face learning environment. This is good news in the field of English teaching because student engagement is considered the key to success.

However, not all student engagement dimensions were high. Particularly, the results indicated that there is a need to take a look at the student's emotional and agentic engagement. This is a challenge because emotional engagement can affect the other types of student engagement (especially their behaviors), so teachers and institutional leaders should have strategies to promote student emotional engagement; for example, giving students with relaxing and friendly learning atmosphere and paying attention on the student's needs. Furthermore, the low level of agentic engagement, suggesting that students just received what teachers delivered to them, without pro-active behaviors, illustrated the typical passive learning style of Vietnamese students. This raised a need for teachers that they should encourage students to contribute to the flow of instruction with no fear by creating opportunities to contribute to the lessons and showing appreciation for students' opinions.

There were also concerns about the low level of student engagement of non-English majored students and the group of freshmen and sophomores. Thus, it is necessary for teachers to find out good techniques to engage non-English majored students who usually learn English to pass their exams as well as engaging freshmen and sophomores in English learning. Furthermore, teachers should raise the students' awareness about the importance of English for non-English major students, freshmen, and sophomores.

7. Recommendations for future studies

Because this study did not determine the causes of student engagement, additional research should be conducted to give insights into this to have clear explanations and more effective implications for English lecturing. Therefore, a mix-research approach (qualitative and quantitative) is appropriate in order to provide more understanding of these aspects. It also recommends that future studies investigate student engagement with both teachers' and students' perspectives to avoid bias due to their self-responses (Devaux & Sassi, 2016). Last but not least, a study on the comparison between student engagement in face-to-face and online learning environments is essential for future studies which will shed light on whether online or offline teaching is more effective for student engagement.

Conflict of interest statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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