



LEARNERS' ENGAGEMENT IN EFL CLASSROOMS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSION

Ulrich Orlando Sèna Hindemeⁱ

Department of English Studies,
Faculty of Humanities and Communication,
University of Abomey-Calavi,
Benin

Abstract:

For decades, education professionals and researchers have been reflecting on the measures that need to be implemented to promote learners' success and the factors that encourage engagement in the classroom for all students. Learners' engagement in language classes is now seen as a real challenge in teaching and a necessary condition for learning. The aim of this research is to contribute to a better understanding of the factors that affect the engagement and performance of learners in the EFL classroom. The survey, therefore, is going to examine what this engagement represents, as well as the factors that encourage it, and the implications of this engagement for education as well as learners' performance, in order to be able to apply it in the language classrooms. In language learning environments, the level of engagement appears to be linked to learners' performance. This research was modelled on a standard framework that treats academic engagement in terms of affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions. In addition, this essentially interpretative and descriptive study used a mixed methodology for data collection and analysis. The results highlight: the influence of the learning context and the learners' age on their behavioural, cognitive and social engagement as well as their performance, and the influence of the learners' gender on their cognitive engagement. The findings thus make it possible to highlight the mediating role of engagement, which occurs between the variables of age, the learning context and performance, and to highlight the positive effects of engagement in terms of behavioural, cognitive and social dimensions on learners' performance in language classes. Without being able to generalise, this study also provides a better understanding of the quality and evolution of learners' academic engagement in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: impact, students' engagement, EFL learners, emotional dimension, EFL classrooms

ⁱ Correspondence: email richdeme11@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of the English language have undergone significant changes over the decades. From the traditional teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred approach, the Competency-Based Approach (CBA), research has emphasised the necessity for EFL teachers to concentrate on important learning factors that go beyond vocabulary, sentence construction and grammar to ensure that students develop a positive attitude towards learning. As Bernstein (2022) points out, education has one and only mission: to foster learning and students' growth in order to prepare them to lead productive and meaningful lives. Students' engagement in the classroom appears to be in the foreground to fulfil the educational mission (*ibid.*).

According to the Glossary of Education Reform (2016), students' engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism and passion that learners show during the learning process. Since learners are at the centre of the learning process and are the key participants, it is necessary to focus on them and direct attention to their characteristics. As viewed by researchers (Malkiabadi *et al.*, 2019; Zhang, 2021), one of the learners' characteristics that can have a significant impact on their engagement and learning is their feelings and emotions. In education theories, not much research has addressed complex issues such as the impacts that emotional variables have on students' engagement in the classroom (Zhang, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, the topic of the emotional dimension, henceforth abbreviated as ED, is relevant and useful and plays an essential role in students' engagement in the classroom.

This dimension encompasses the attitudes, feelings and especially, the emotional state of students as they engage in the classroom environment and learning activities. It is argued that learning and emotions are linked in such a way that it is quite impossible to disassociate them. Zhang (2021) states that according to "*psychologists and neuroscientists, emotional dimension plays an essential role in cognitive learning, and the performance of cognitive activities is enhanced by positive emotions*" (p. 4). Students' emotional experiences have been said to significantly impact their level of engagement and motivation at school (Alkaabi, 2016; Cullen, 2023). Positive emotions such as enthusiasm, joy, and interest enhance students' engagement by making learning more enjoyable for them. On the contrary, negative emotions lower students' level of participation and involvement in the learning process.

In Benin, it is commonly noticed that many EFL students are not engaged in learning the target language, and they neither participate nor show interest in any classroom activity. Students' non-participation or lack of interest in learning activities has always been attributed to learners' laziness and poor lesson planning on the part of teachers. However, the situation observed here is that teachers seem to neglect the emotional aspect of learning and the influence emotions have on students' engagement in the classroom. Teachers fail to pay attention to students' internal state of being and, in other words, their emotional state and affective needs in the EFL classroom. Consequently, paying attention to and understanding students' emotions, as well as their

impact on their engagement in the classroom can help in providing learning experiences that foster students' learning, academic achievement and sense of connection. In view of the foregoing, exploring some impacts of the ED on students' engagement in the classroom is much significant. The study is basically centred on two research questions:

- 1) What impact does the emotional dimension have on EFL students' engagement in the classroom?
- 2) What are EFL teachers' challenges in encouraging intermediate students' engagement in the classroom?

Through those research questions, the current study seeks mainly to:

- investigate the factors that negatively influence EFL intermediate students' engagement in the classroom by taking the case of Beninese learners from some public and private secondary schools.
- examine teachers' challenges in fostering EFL intermediate students' engagement in the classroom. As a result, this study explores the impact of the emotional dimension on students' engagement in the EFL classroom.

2. Review of Literature

For a better understanding of the phenomenon under study, an overview of existing literature related to the topic is provided in this section.

2.1 The Emotional Dimension (ED) and EFL Learning

In English Language Teaching (ELT) pedagogy, the terms ED and affective dimensions are used as synonyms to indicate the relationship between emotions and learning. The ED has to do with the feelings and emotional aspects of learning and also includes particular attitudes and habits associated with learning. Research in the field of education shows that emotions play a crucial role in EFL learning and academic performance (Alrefaai & Shah, 2020; Immordinho-Yang, 2016; Williams *et al.*, 2015).

According to Frenzel and Stephens (2013), there is no doubt that "*emotions are a central component of every human's wellbeing and therefore have a powerful impact on various aspects of our lives, including language learning*" (p. 27). The words 'emotions' and 'feelings' are equally used interchangeably. Scherer (2005) contends that in education literature, emotions and feelings are considered close in meaning and are included interchangeably. In the field of psychology, emotions, feelings, and moods are integral components of affect (Forgas, 2001). Success in EFL learning depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between people in the classroom (Stevick, 1980, p. 4). The kind of emotions discussed in this study are related to the ones that affect the learning process and not the ones that are evoked by the learning process itself.

Barlozek (2013) asserts that in a classroom environment, emotions remain essential to the personal development of students as well as their academic success. Emotions have an effect on learning and achievements, which may be positive or negative in nature.

Barlozek (2013) argues that negative emotions have negative implications for students' abilities to learn. Furthermore, learners' emotions seem to affect learning as they engage the learner and their attitude towards learning and the learning environment (Houston, 2016; Pishghadam *et al.*, 2020). As Arnold and Brown (1999) significantly emphasises:

[...] attention to affective aspects can lead to more effective language learning. When dealing with the affective side of language learners, attention needs to be given both to how we can overcome problems created by negative emotions and to how we can create and use more positive, facilitative emotions. (p. 2)

It is important to mention that recent studies have advocated the need to focus on the positive emotions (Dewaele *et al.*, 2018; Shao *et al.*, 2020). It is said that emotions are not extras, they are the very centre of human life. Emotion is seen as an on-off switch for learning as it influences cognitive functions. It affects learners' ability to process information and to accurately understand what they are experiencing (Wang & Guan, 2020). Williams *et al.* (2015) highlight that affect is an umbrella term that covers emotions, feelings and mood. He further points out that the "*distinction between the concepts of emotions and feelings is not clear in psychology because they are very much interrelated*" (*ibid*, p. 80).

2.2 Students' Engagement and the ED

The term students' engagement is gaining more ground in research. Wang *et al.* (2021) stresses that engagement is a significant factor in Positive Psychology that has been receiving much attention recently since it is linked to better academic achievement. The Glossary of Education Reform (2016) mentions that the concept of student engagement is predicated on the belief that learning improves when students are inquisitive, interested, or inspired and that learning tends to suffer when students are bored, dispassionate, disaffected or disengaged.

Fredricks *et al.* (2016) contend that engagement, as a key contributor to learning and academic success, is about the energy students employ in their learning outcomes. The degree of cooperation in instructing exercises is identified as learners' engagement (Sun & Rueda, 2012). Students' engagement is characterised by how much learners are occupied with learning in the conventional teaching cycle and, to a great extent, refers to the time, effort, and energy they exert on learning activities (Chang *et al.*, 2016).

One of the most interesting aspects would be to know the link between students' engagement and the ED, as very much discussed in Cullen (2023). Cullen's work points out that an increased level of engagement will lead to great student learning and consequently, improve the learning process. Students who actively engage with their teachers, subject matter, and lessons will improve their understanding and appreciation of the topics. Cullen (2023) research concludes that educators are likely to see improved concentration levels and greater student interest if teachers become sensitive enough to students' emotional state. However, some activities were suggested that could help lower

students' negative emotional state, such as warming up activities and creative activities using modern technology.

It is worth mentioning that in the body of literature, students' engagement involves three main dimensions: emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimensions. Briefly put, emotional engagement is the way a student feels about aspects of the learning process. It focuses on the extent and nature of positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics and school (NAIS, n.d, as cited in Bernstein, 2022). For cognitive engagement, it is the dimension of students' engagement which refers to the mental effort and intellectual involvement in learning. It is the amount of effort a learner invests in a task at hand or students' level of investment in learning (Manwaring *et al.*, 2017). And, behavioural engagement relates to students' active participation in class and contributing to discussions. Behavioural engagement focuses on participation in academic, social and co-curricular activities (Bernstein, 2022).

2.3 Factors Affecting Students' Engagement

It is shared knowledge that students' engagement is vital to the learning process. However, there are factors that prevent them from being fully engaged in learning activities in the classroom. Students' engagement is influenced by varied factors that are within and outside the control of educators. For example, Evans (2020) states that knowing more about what results in variation in student engagement will help teachers better understand why there can be so much difference in learning outcomes and identify ways to improve students' performance. Some of the main factors affecting their engagement are: teaching methods (Evans, 2020); teachers' attitudes (Mendez, 2011; Sakib, 2022; Weinhold, 2021); classroom environment and class size (Kriegel, n.d); personal factors (Trezise, 2017; Shao *et al.*, 2020). Understanding these factors and adapting strategies to address them can help teachers promote and sustain student engagement in the language classroom.

3. Research Methodology

The aim of the research was to contribute to a better understanding of the factors that affect learners' engagement and performance in EFL classrooms at secondary schools in Benin. In order to identify the challenges related to the issue, some methods and approaches were designed to conduct the survey.

3.1 Research Design

This study has utilized an essentially interpretative and descriptive survey design, using a mixed methodology for data collection and data analysis. This method is considered appropriate because it allows for data to be collected from respondents without any attempt at altering the outcomes of the data collection procedures. More importantly, the design allows the researcher to use questionnaires and/or interview methods to collect

reliable and trustworthy data. Additionally, this procedure has been conducted to ensure that an adequate comprehension of the issue is fulfilled.

3.2 Research Participants

The respondents of this study were 134 EFL intermediate learners, as well as 19 EFL teachers teaching intermediate classes. The participants were selected from some secondary schools (both public and private) in the Littoral region of Benin.

3.3 The Research Instruments

The research instruments used for the data collection were the teachers' and learners' questionnaires, class observations and interviews.

3.3.1 The Questionnaires

Two categories of questionnaires have been used: one category for teachers and another for learners. The teachers' questionnaire consists of 12 items, which include both closed and open-ended questions, while the questionnaire for learners has 10 items. The learners' questionnaire was originally written in French to enable them to understand the topic in-depth, and their responses were translated into English. The questionnaires aim at collecting reliable information related to the degree of engagement related to the variables of age, the learning context and performance, and to highlight the positive effects of engagement in terms of behavioural, cognitive and social dimensions on learners' performance in language classes. The survey took place in the first term of the academic year 2023-2024 in some selected secondary schools in the Littoral region of Benin. 134 copies of the questionnaires to learners were handed out to the selected students, and 19 copies of the questionnaires to teachers were also handed out to the 19 selected teachers. Both questionnaires were filled in on the spot in the chosen schools, and they were collected back immediately. Prior to the filling in of the questionnaires, respondents have been assured that their identity will not be revealed in the frame of the research under consideration; just their answers and opinions will be used as illustrations of the chosen data.

3.3.2 The Class Observations

Class observation was carried out in three (3) intermediate classes from the selected schools. Prior to the class observation session, access to the selected class has been negotiated with the school authorities. The objectives of the research were explained to them. Once the importance of the research was understood, the researcher was put in touch with some EFL teachers of the school, and they were informed about the research project. They were also told that their identity would be kept confidential. After the information meeting, the researcher was accepted into the class and introduced to the learners by the class teacher. Then, he went to sit at the black bench in the classroom. This position enabled him to observe what was going on in the class, to pay attention to the teacher's behaviours and to those of the learners as well. Note was taken of what

happened in the class, and listened to what the teacher and students were saying. That is how the researcher observed every EFL teacher involved in this research, and the class observations enabled him to collect trustworthy data in regard to EFL learners' academic engagement in terms of affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions.

3.3.3 The Interviews

The interview was conducted with nine (9) EFL teachers. In order to have authentic and straightforward information relevant to this research, informal and semi-structured interviews were carried out. In informal interviews, the ideas and opinions of the informants about the topic at hand have just been followed. And through their answers and questions, the researcher just led them to what he was expecting them to provide him with. In semi-structured interviews, time was saved, and the researcher obtained directly what he wanted his 9 respondents to give him as information. This was possible because the questions were pre-set prior to the interview session, and the researcher could emphasize on the given questions while the interview was in progress.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

As stated earlier, questionnaires, interviews and class observations have been the research tools used for the collection of data. A formal letter was submitted and an authorisation obtained before the questionnaires and interviews were administered to the participants in the study for the data collection. Prior to the class observation sessions, access to the selected class has also been granted, and three classes were observed for the purpose of this research. To follow the research work data collection procedure, the questionnaires were distributed to the teachers and learners. Time was spent explaining the purpose of the study to the respondents. Finally, the interview with the teachers was carried out after the questionnaires had been filled in. However, the interview with some teachers was conducted on a date due to their busy schedule. On the whole, both teachers and learners participated fully in the research.

3.5 Methods of Data Analysis

The aim of the current research was to explore students' behavioral engagement and the factors that affect it in EFL classrooms. The study has adopted the use of descriptive statistics (percentages) to evaluate the variables which form the basis of testing the relevant hypotheses. Based on this, items and variables which have a higher percentage value were judged to have a lesser impact. The results of the data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed by calculating the average of answers to each question for all respondents using a percentage formula. After conducting the interviews, the researcher elaborated the results and reported them in a narrative form. The results of the observation were analyzed descriptively following the activities that occurred in the classrooms during the different observations.

4. Findings

The findings derived from the various research instruments are presented in this section. It is worth mentioning that only the most useful information is provided.

4.1 Data Related to the Questionnaires

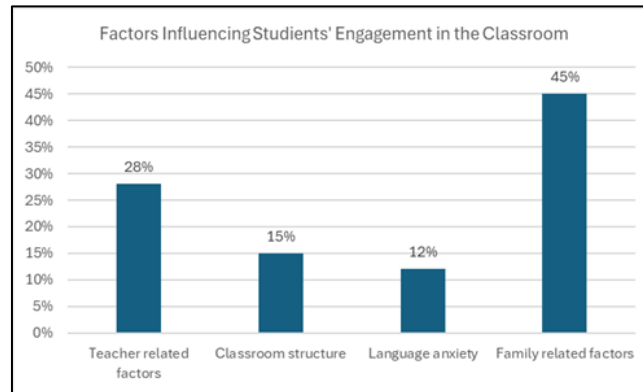


Figure 1 : Factors Influencing Students' Engagement

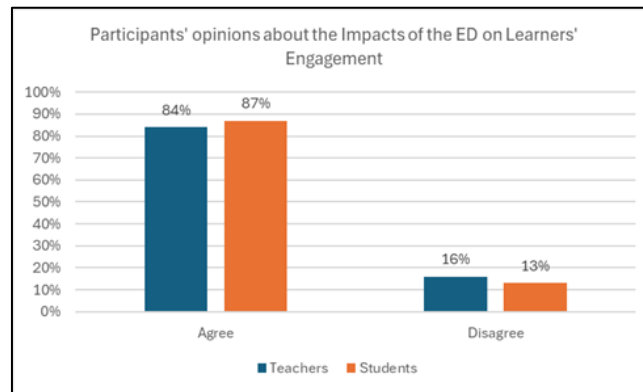


Figure 2: Participants' Opinions about the Impacts of the ED on Learners' Engagement

Table 1: Teachers' Opinion about Students' Participation in the Classroom

Question	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Do your students actively participate in the EFL lesson?	Occasionally	6	32
	Regularly	4	21
	Rarely	9	47
	Total	19	100

Table 2: EFL Teachers' Major Difficulties in Fostering Intermediate Students' Engagement in the Classroom

Researchers' responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Large class size	10	53
Inadequate teacher training	4	21
Individual learner's traits	2	11
Poor administrative support	3	16
Total	19	100

Table 3: Causes of Students' Negative Emotions in the Classroom

Question	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
What is the main cause of your negative emotions in the classroom?	Teacher's attitude	31	23
	Family issues	49	37
	Financial problems	37	28
	Peers	14	10
	Fear of learning the target language	3	2
	Total	134	100

Figure 1 reveals teachers' professional qualifications in the selected secondary schools. It shows that 26% of the respondents have undergone professional training prior to teaching in the secondary school, whereas 74% of the respondents have not attended a teacher training school. It could thus be inferred from the results that the overwhelming majority of Beninese EFL teachers in charge of teaching the language to learners have no professional qualification.

Figure 2 highlights the main factors affecting students' engagement that respondents have pointed out in the teachers' questionnaire. As can be seen in the figure, the various factors affecting EFL intermediate students in the classroom include teacher-related factors, classroom structure, language anxiety and family-related factors. However, a considerable number of the teachers (45%) stated that family-related issues are the major obstacles to students' active participation in the classroom. Furthermore, 28% of the respondents mentioned teacher-related factors as a factor influencing students' engagement, while 15% of the teachers stated classroom structure as the main hindrance to students' engagement. Language anxiety, which has the least percentage, 12%, has been pointed out by the respondents to be one of the major factors negatively impacting intermediate students' engagement. This finding suggests that family-related issues and teacher-related factors are the main factors that negatively influence intermediate students' engagement in the EFL classroom.

From the findings, it could easily be noticed that the ED has an impact on students' engagement in the classroom. Despite the various difficulties, both teachers (84%) and students (87%) agree that the ED influences students' engagement in the EFL classroom. Table 1 describes students' active participation in the classroom as revealed by their EFL teachers. From the table, 32% of the respondents revealed that their students actively participate in the class occasionally, whereas 21% of the teachers claimed that their intermediate students regularly participate in the EFL classroom. Nevertheless, 47% of EFL teachers clearly stated that their intermediate students rarely participate in the classroom.

Table 2 presents teachers' main difficulties in fostering their intermediate students' engagement in the classroom. Large class size has been reported by 52% of the respondents to be the major challenge they face in their intermediate classes. 21% of the teachers mentioned inadequate teacher training as the difficulty they have in engaging their intermediate learners in the EFL classroom. In addition, 11% of the respondents pointed out individual learners' traits as their difficulty, while 16% of the respondents

cited poor administrative support as their main challenge in fostering students' engagement in the classroom.

Table 3 points out intermediate students' opinions about the main cause of their negative emotional state in the EFL classroom. As it appears in the table above, 23% of the respondents attributed their negative emotion to their EFL teachers' attitude in the classroom. 37% of the respondents revealed that they experience negative emotions in the classroom due to the various family issues they have. 28% of the students expressed that financial problems are the cause of their negative emotions in the classroom, while 10% linked their negative emotional experience to problems or quarrels with their classmates' friends or peers. From the results in Table 3, only 2% of the respondents hold the fear of learning the target language as responsible for their negative emotions in the classroom.

4.2 Results Related to the Class Observations

The major findings of the three classes observed have revealed that the ED is largely ignored in the intermediate classroom. Most of the classroom's atmosphere lacks warmth. Teachers, especially those in public schools, do not exhibit any empathetic skills. Regarding students' engagement in the classroom, only a few students show a high level of attention, interest and enthusiasm in the EFL classroom. Teachers did not endeavour to bring students to participate in class activities, and only a few of them cared about to their learners' emotional state. The major difficulty observed throughout the class observation is related to the large class size.

4.3 Results Related to Teachers' Interviews

During the interview, teachers were asked how they handle their intermediate learners and engage them in the EFL classroom. They responded that it is not easy to engage learners in classroom activities. This is because most of the intermediate learners are teenagers undergoing the puberty stage of their physical development, during which they are likely to show disruptive behaviours in the classroom. Because of this, teachers are very strict with them right from the beginning of the academic year. It is important to note that the respondents emphasize the issue of large classes in their schools.

Regarding the factors that affect students' engagement in the classroom, most of the interviewed teachers mentioned students' poor family background. A considerable number of teachers also mentioned that the majority of the students are from broken homes. Another interviewee declared that one of the major factors affecting students' engagement in the classroom is their homes. Students who live with one of their parents come to school feeling depressed and unhappy. Some will even tell their teacher they miss their father, they miss their mother, to be sincere. These are moving and touching situations for teachers to bear. In addition, some respondents, through their reports, hold teachers responsible for their learners' failures to participate in the classroom activities. This position has been stated through the following statements: *"The misunderstanding by the students of what the teacher has done, if the teacher has not done the lesson well, they don't*

participate in the classroom"; "the quality of activities and the level of understanding are not controlled by the teachers"; "Some teachers are harsh. They reject the students' answers and humiliate them. This causes students' frustration and they decide not to participate in the lesson".

Regarding the challenges teachers face in engaging their intermediate learners in the classroom, the major themes are large class size, teacher training, students' personality traits and teachers' demotivation. A respondent confirmed that large class size is the main problem teachers have in Benin secondary schools. Other respondents are of the opinion that if the problem of large class size can be resolved, teachers will be more effective in their classes. Also, a few respondents mentioned teacher training, and the following statement highlights that: *"teachers are not skilled in teaching effectively, teachers should be trained on the various ways they can engage their intermediate learners during class activities"*. Some respondents have mentioned that teachers' low salaries constitute a sort of demotivation for them and affect their performance in the classroom. A respondent said, *"We always talk about students' problems, what about the teachers? You cannot expect me to be unsatisfied with my salary and still give the best of myself in the classroom"* Another respondent said, *"Teachers are going through financial difficulties in this present economic time. If the government wants teachers to perform better, they should increase salaries so as to improve their living conditions"*.

5. Discussion of the Findings

This section discusses the findings from the collected data. These discussions are guided by considering the research questions and the reports of the participating respondents.

5.1 Factors Influencing Intermediate Students' Engagement in the EFL Classroom

Identifying the factors that negatively influence students' engagement in the classroom has been one of the objectives of this research work. The findings of the study have shown that there are indeed factors that affect students' level of participation and enthusiasm in the EFL classroom. The results of the teachers' questionnaire have pointed out that of all the factors influencing students' engagement in the classroom, 28% are teacher-related, 45% family-related, 15% classroom structure and 12% language anxiety. It is obvious that family-related and teacher-related factors are the major factors that negatively influence students' engagement in the classroom. This finding is confirmed in the results of the students' questionnaire, where 37% of the students mentioned family issues, 25% stated financial problems, 23% mentioned teachers' attitude, and the least percentage stated misunderstanding with peers as the main causes of their negative emotions in the classroom. These findings match with those of Mendez (2011), who showed that parental disappointment and teacher attitude are among major *"reported sources of negative emotions"* (p. 50). In relation to family-related factors, the interview with EFL teachers has highlighted the issue. Clearly, many Benin learners carry some emotional burdens from their various homes. As revealed in the findings of the study, the majority of learners, especially in the public schools, are from poor family backgrounds and lack

financial support. This challenge makes it difficult for them to concentrate and participate in the classroom activities. In addition, some of them do not live with their parents and undergo maltreatment at the hands of their guardians.

Apart from the family-related factor, the findings of the study have shown teacher-related factors. Teachers need to understand that their attitude plays a crucial role in influencing students' engagement in the classroom. When they are strict and have a nonchalant attitude, students are not motivated enough to participate in the lesson. Furthermore, 42% of the intermediate students mentioned that their EFL teacher had never cared about their emotional state. The interview with teachers revealed that certain EFL teachers shout at their students and humiliate them when they make mistakes. This claim is similar to that of Mendez (2011). In his study, the respondent students reported that their teacher did not motivate them to be engaged in the lesson because he behaved in a way that inhibited them. Students do not like to participate because they are afraid of the teachers' comments (*ibid.*).

The results of the classroom observation also revealed that there was little interaction between teachers and students, and the classroom atmosphere was often hostile. There are EFL teachers who adopt a careless attitude right from the start of the school year. They show students that they are there only for the work assigned to them which, according to them, is to execute a study programme. This attitude repels learners' right from the start. They lose interest do not participate in the class. Besides, 56% of the intermediate students stated that their class is boring. Consequently, while some students are unhappy and disengaged from the lesson, others begin to dislike the language due to their teachers' attitude.

It is important for teachers to be aware of these factors that can negatively impact their learners and prevent them from handling them effectively. Their awareness of these factors will help them well in such a way that their emotional situation can be handled in a skilful way. Osika *et al.* (2022) mentioned that understanding what affects emotions in the context of learning, how to optimize emotional states that are conducive to learning, and how to minimize the experience of negative emotions can help teachers engage students in classroom activities and improve their learning outcomes.

5.2 Teachers' Challenges in Fostering EFL Intermediate Students' Engagement in the Classroom

Teachers are confronted with a number of difficulties that are worth mentioning. The results of the various research instruments used have pointed out the major challenges that teachers have in engaging their intermediate learners. The major challenge relates to large class size, as stated by 52% of the teachers. The problem of large class size is a major challenge in many schools in Benin. Teachers must handle up to 65 students in a class. Lack of school infrastructure often handicaps teachers' effort (Alcazar *et al.*, 2006). This is a cause for concern because having a large number of students in a class is tiring and makes it almost impossible for teachers to manage their students.

Teachers also reported a lack of professional training as another major problem that limit teachers' capability to engage their EFL learners. Table 2 shows that 74% of teachers are not professionally trained. The importance of teacher training cannot, of course, be overemphasized. A teacher who has the right knowledge, skills, and abilities creates a lifelong impact on his or her learners. That is why a teacher training programme is necessary to equip teachers with techniques and modern, appropriate pedagogy strategies that help them to better connect with, manage, and teach their students in a manner which ensures that all students are learning and benefitting (Matters, 2023). Furthermore, some teachers are completely worn out because of their duties outside the classroom, such as handling extra-curricular activities and performing administrative tasks. Hence, they do not have the time to attend to their learners' emotional situations. The relation teacher-student dynamics and the monitoring of students' learning processes will certainly help teachers to adapt tools and methods in order to increase students' determination in the class. Consequently, this will increase their level of confidence in their language proficiency and, therefore, their personal achievements.

There is a close link between the teacher's teaching skills and the class environment and dynamics. This is a key factor in the ED to establish permanent students' engagement in the classroom. Actually, students' positive evaluations of the classroom or their enjoyment in the class environment is a response to adaptive teaching approaches towards engaging students in the lesson through adequate activities which convey a sense of community, belonging and friendliness. By so doing, students would express themselves openly, and thereby they would contribute to the efficacy of the overall learning process. Students who are highly engaged in the class usually score significantly higher in regard to ED.

In addition to the foregoing, respondents have emphasised a lack of administrative support and low salary income. School administration does not motivate teachers to give the best of themselves in their classrooms. This is the case, especially in private schools, as revealed by the respondents of this study. There is always pressure on teachers to complete the syllabus and submit test scores. Besides, private schools in Benin are known for their speed in terms of completion of the syllabus designed for the academic year. These schools often put undue pressure on teachers. As a result, teachers themselves become stressed, overburdened and only focus on completing the syllabus. However, this situation could be detrimental to students' success at school because they may just endeavour to store information in their memory instead of truly enjoying the lesson and participating actively in the classroom. As it appears, there is no gain in rushing to complete a syllabus when learners are constantly in a negative emotional state.

Besides, it is important to add that teachers are demotivated due to their low salary. As reported in the results of the interviews, teachers have mentioned that their salary income matters in getting students to actively participate in the EFL class. Many teachers have complained that they are paid less than their counterparts in some other countries. It is true that teachers, especially those who are part-time teachers and who constitute the majority of teachers in many Beninese schools, face difficult working and

living conditions. That is why it is common to find some of them doing other jobs to support themselves and their families. Raising EFL teachers' salaries could lead to higher motivation and better performance, since if they are satisfied with their living and working conditions, they will devote their class time to making their learners happy.

5.3 The Impact of the ED on Intermediate Students' Engagement in the EFL Classroom

This section represents a corollary of the previous ones. In fact, appraising the impact of the ED on students' engagement in the classroom is one of the main objectives of this research work. From the literature review to the findings of the study, it can safely be concluded that the ED has a huge impact on students' engagement in the classroom. In this study, 58% of the teachers and 78% of the students strongly agree that the ED has an impact on students' engagement in the classroom. Additionally, all the respondents have affirmed that there are factors negatively influencing students' engagement in the classroom.

This is in line with the findings of Ghani Zadeh and Moufian (2011) whose study showed that emotions such as boredom, joy, enjoyment, fear, anxiety and sadness "all affect the learning process, classroom instructions and academic excellence" (p. 252). The findings are also consistent with those of Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) whose study emphasised that emotions can influence students' engagement, which then affects their academic learning and achievement. This implies that students' emotions influence how they learn, their ability to engage in a lesson, and their ability to listen well and process information.

However, since it is clear that emotions influence students' learning either positively or negatively, increasing positive emotions in them is essential for fostering their engagement in the classroom. Moreover, negative emotions are found to decrease learners' participation and involvement in language learning, which, in turn, results in lower marks on tests (Wang, *et al.*, 2023). Educators need to understand the role of the ED in students' engagement and motivation. No matter how knowledgeable teachers are, if they do not acknowledge the impact of students' emotional aspect on their learning, the main goal of teaching EFL learners will be missed. The emotional reality of a teenager determines whether or not he or she can learn. A student who is emotionally preoccupied and emotionally upset is unable to show any level of participation in the classroom.

Moreover, Alrefaai and Shah (2020) have emphasised that in the EFL context, language teaching does not focus only on the learners' intellect; it stresses their emotions and feelings as well. Certain pedagogical methods are designed because of the connected emotional and social engagement of both the teacher and learners. It can result in classroom engagement towards language proficiency. Learning should no longer be seen as a purely cognitive process since emotions are an integral and valuable part of learning that could promote engagement, motivation and success. As such, there is a need to raise more awareness of the role that the ED plays in intermediate students' learning and engagement in the EFL classroom.

6. Recommendations

In view of the various findings, this study puts forward some recommendations to those involved in the Beninese educational system.

First and foremost, EFL teachers are encouraged to adopt a more humanistic approach in their classrooms. They are also advised to develop some empathetic skills and emotional intelligence, show affective teaching behaviours likely to foster positive emotions and reduce negative emotions. EFL teachers should also be motivators and creative enough to design engaging and student-centred activities by keeping a good teacher-student relationship. For example, learners like it when the teacher calls them by their names, instead of pointing at them or using other gestures to address them. This way, learners feel happy because the teacher becomes a member of their outside family. It also reinforces the teacher-student relationship and brings learners to show much interest in the class, hence, their full engagement in the class activities.

Besides, teacher professional development programmes and weekly workshop meetings are avenues for teachers to exchange ideas and experiences on how to enlist students' engagement in the classroom since learning methods should predominantly be evaluated in relation to their success in stimulating students' involvement and engagement and, trying to eliminate possible negative feelings (e.g: stress) that can affect the learners' well-being.

The other actors in the education system to consider are those who are in charge of the teachers' training programmes and the advisory board. Teacher-trainers and teaching advisers are also addressed with these suggestions in view of the crucial role they play. During the training, they need to emphasize the importance of teachers' empathy to foster positive emotions in students. Beyond teachers' content knowledge and teaching methods, teaching advisers are expected to pay more attention to teachers' positive attitude towards their intermediate learners.

The last group of people not directly involved in the issue of learners' emotional dimension in the classroom is the government. It is obviously beneficial for everybody if the Beninese government organise training for teachers and also grants scholarships to those whose ambition is to teach so that they might be enrolled in teacher-training schools. Besides, the government could create a body of specialists whose task would essentially be to provide guidance and counselling to manage teenagers' emotional disturbances. This will considerably relieve the workload for teachers. In addition, the government, through school administrations, could collaborate with NGOs to create subsidised programmes to cater for less privileged children in public schools and raise parents' awareness about the necessity of their being involved in their children's emotional and psychological growth.

All in all, this study proposes that an emphasis be laid on the need for educators and policy-makers to focus more on what students would prefer and enjoy, because academic performance largely depends on the interest and the enjoyment that both the teacher and the learner derive from the teaching and learning process.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to appraise the impacts of the emotional dimension (ED) on learners' engagement in the EFL classroom. Mainly, it is to identify the factors that negatively influence EFL intermediate learners' engagement in the classroom, to examine teachers' difficulties in enlisting students' engagement in the classroom and to explore the influence of students' emotional state on their engagement in the class. To reach the objectives of the study, a descriptive research design was adopted. Questionnaires, interviews and class observation were used to gather useful data from EFL teachers and intermediate students in some selected schools in the Littoral region of Benin.

The major findings of this research work have shown that the main factors affecting students' engagement in the classroom are family-related as well as teacher-related. Regarding the family-related factors, it is revealed that many students undergo difficult family situations that stress them and make them passive in the classroom. These family situations are mainly related to financial difficulties and the effects of parents' disputes or sometimes divorces. In addition, many EFL teachers adopt a careless attitude towards their learners, which in turn, affects students' level of engagement in the EFL classroom. Teachers' major difficulties in engaging their EFL students are basically large class size, inadequate professional training, demotivation and lack of administrative support.

In conclusion, there is a consensus that students' engagement is vital to the learning process. Engaged students are more likely to perform better than their disengaged counterparts. Therefore, paying attention to students' emotional states can greatly help them learn, engage and participate in the lessons. In spite of the various difficulties, teachers remain the decisive factor influencing students' motivation in learning. As such, every teacher should strive to become 'that' teacher that inspires words like passionate, caring, exciting, creative and talented. Of course, such a teacher will forever remain in his or her learners' minds. For some limitations of this study, further studies related to the topic under study could be carried out with a particular emphasis on the importance of EFL teachers' emotional intelligence and teachers' role in managing students' emotional state.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Dr. Ulrich O. S. Hindeme received his PhD from the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC), Benin (West Africa). He is a Research Scholar and an Associate Professor of EFL Education and Business Administration. He is currently the Head of English Department in the same University. His research interests include English as a foreign language skills and sub skills teaching, computer-assisted language teaching, TESOL Theories as well as syllabus design and curriculum development. He has more than 30 contributions in the

form of research articles in journals and papers presented in seminars/conferences from national to international levels to his credits.

References

- Alcazar, L., Rogers, F.H., Chaudhury, N., Hammer, J., Kremer, M., & Muralidharan, K. (2006). Why are teachers absent? Probing service delivery in Peruvian primary schools. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 45(3), 117-136. Retrieved from https://econweb.ucsd.edu/~kamurali/papers/Published%20Articles/ijer_teacher_absence_in_peru.pdf
- Alkaabi, A.M. (2016). *Saudi students' motivation and attitudes toward learning English as a second language and their willingness to invest in learning it*. Retrieved December 19, 2022, from <https://repository.stcloudstate.edu> at 4:15 pm.
- Alrefaai, I., & Shah, S.A. (2020). The role of emotional intelligence in the EFL classroom: Reflection of EFL Teachers. *Journal of Education in Black Sea Region*, 6(1), 110-118. <http://dx.doi.org/10.31578/jeps.v6i1.223>
- Arnold, J., & Brown, H. D. (1999). A map of the terrain. In J. Arnold (Ed.), *Affect in language learning* (pp. 1–6). Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED532410.pdf>
- Barłózek, N. (2013). *Teachers' emotional intelligence—a vital component in the learning process*. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from <https://core.ac.k/download/pdf/71986632.pdf> at 5:18 am.
- Bernstein, L. (2022). *What is student engagement, and why does it matter?* Retrieved August 25, 2023, from <https://xello.world/en/blog/> at 4:15 pm.
- Bhandari, P. (2020). *An introduction to qualitative research*. Retrieved March 19, 2023, from <https://www.scribd.com/document/487221856/qualitative-res>. at 8:27 pm.
- Chang, D.F., Chien, W.C., & Chou, W.C. (2016). *Meta-analysis approach to detect the effect of student engagement on academic achievement*. Retrieved February 25, 2023, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309407873_Meta-analysis_approach_to_detect_the_effect_of_student_engagement_on_academic_achievement at 1:04 pm.
- Cullen, E. (2023). *9 ways to keep students engaged in 2023*. Retrieved August 19, 2023, from <https://www.mentimeter.com/blog/education/keep-students-engaged> at 7:15 pm.
- Dewaele, J. -M., Witney, J., Saito, K., & Dewaele, L. (2018). Foreign language enjoyment and anxiety: The effect of teacher and learner variables. *Language Teaching Research*, 22(6), 676–697. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1362168817692161>
- Evans, C.A. (2020). *(Part 1- individual student engagement)*. Retrieved August 20, 2023, from <https://englearning.engineering.cornell.edu/2020/12/14/unpacking-engagement-in-the-classroom-and-some-practical-suggestions-for-turning-theory-into-practice-part-1-individual-student-engagement/> at 7:57 pm.

- Forgas, J. P. (2001). *Handbook of affect and social cognition*. Erlbaum. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2000-16445-000>
- Fredricks, J.A., Filsecker, M., & Lawson, M.A. (2016). Student engagement, context, and adjustment: Addressing definitional, measurement, and methodological issues. *Learning and Instruction, 43*, 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2016.02.002>
- Frenzel, A. C., & Stephens, E. J. (2013). Emotions. In N. C. Hall & T. Goetz (Eds.), *Emotion, motivation, and self-regulation: A handbook for teachers* (pp. 4–39). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Emotion_Motivation_and_Self_Regulation.html?id=5K0Spn_B6VkC&redir_esc=y
- Ghanizadeh, A., & Moafian, F. (2011). The relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' sense of self-efficacy and their pedagogical success in language institutes. *Asian EFL Journal, 13*(12), 249-272. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289918836_The_Relationship_between_Iranian_EFL_teachers'_sense_of_self-efficacy_and_their_pedagogical_success_in_language_institutes
- Glossary of Education Reform. (2016). *Student engagement*. Retrieved September 13, 2023, from www.edglossary.org/student-engagement/ at 10: 25 pm.
- Houston, D. M. (2016). Revisiting the relationship between attributional style and academic performance. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 46*(3), 192–200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12356>
- Immordino-Yang, M.H. (2016). *Emotions, learning, and the brain: Exploring the educational implications of affective neuroscience*. Norton & Co. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-37480-000>
- Jansen, D. (2023). *Research design 101*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://gradcoach.com/what-is-research-methodology/> at 11:13 am.
- Kriegel, O. (n.d). *3 tips on how to manage an overcrowded classroom*. Retrieved September 30, 2023 from www.wgu.edu. at 6:23 pm.
- Learning Matters. (2023). *The importance of teacher training programs*. Retrieved September 17, 2023, from <https://learningmatters.ai/blog/the-importance-of-teacher-training-programs> at 2:15 pm.
- Makiabadi, H., Pishghadam, R., Naji Meidani, E., & Khajavy, G. H. (2019). Examining the role of emotion in willingness to communicate: a structural equation modeling approach. *Revista Psicodidáctica, 24*(2), 120–130. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psicoe.2019.03.003>
- Manwaring, K.C., Larsen, R., Graham, C.R., Henrie, C.R., & Halverson, L.R. (2017). Investigating student engagement in blended learning settings using experience sampling and structural equation modeling. *Internet and Higher Education, 35*, 21-33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2017.06.002>
- Méndez, M. (2011). The impacts of affective teaching behaviors and performance techniques on student engagement by exemplary teachers. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal, 13*(2), 43-59.

- Osika, A., MacMahon, S., Lodge, J.M., & Carroll, A. (2022). *Emotions and learning: What role do emotions play in how and why students learn?* Retrieved October 11, 2023, from www.timeshighereducation.com. at 8:17 am.
- Pekrun, R., & Linnenbrink-Garcia, L. (2012). Academic emotions and student engagement. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 259–282). Springer Science. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7>
- Pishghadam, R., Ebrahimi, S., & Derakhshan, A. (2020). Cultuling analysis: A new methodology for discovering cultural memes. *International Journal of Society, Culture and Language*, 8, 17–34. Retrieved from https://www.ijscsl.com/article_43256.html
- Sakib, S.M.N. (2022, January 30). *Importance of EFL teachers' emotional intelligence when working with students in Saudi universities*. Retrieved August 31, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/jxe89> at 1:56 pm.
- Scherer, K. R. (2005). What are emotions? And how can they be measured? *Social Science Information*, 44(4), 695-729. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018405058216>
- Shao, K., Nichlson, L.J., Kutuk, G., & Lei, F. (2020). Emotions and instructed language learning: Proposing a second language emotions and positive psychology model. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11:2142, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02142>
- Stevick, E. (1980). *Teaching languages: A way and ways*. Newbury House. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Teaching_Languages.html?id=vySB9BQvlfQC&redir_esc=y
- Sun, J.C.Y., & Rueda, R. (2012). Situational interest, computer self-efficacy and self-regulation: their impact on student engagement in distance education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43(2), 191-204. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2010.01157.x>
- Treize, K. (2017). *The need to understand how emotions affect learning and education*. Retrieved August 6, 2023, from <https://communities.springernature.com/posts/emotions-in-classrooms-the-need-to-understand-how-emotions-affect-learning-and-education> at 7:18 am.
- Wang, H., Wang, Y., & Li, S. (2023). Unpacking the relationships between emotions and achievement of EFL learners in China: Engagement as a mediator. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14:1098916, 1-13.
- Wang, Y. L., Derakhshan, A., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). Researching and practicing positive psychology in second/foreign language learning and teaching: The past, current status and future directions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12:731721. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.731721>
- Wang, Y. L., & Guan, H. F. (2020). Exploring demotivation factors of Chinese learners of English as a foreign language based on positive psychology. *Revisita Argentina de Clinica Psicologica*, 29(1), 851–861. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24205/03276716.2020.116>
- Weinhold, G. (2021). *The impacts of affective teaching behaviors and performance techniques on student engagement by exemplary teachers* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Saint

- Thomas]. Education Doctoral Dissertations in Leadership, 155. Retrieved August 13, 2023, from <https://www.proquest.com/openview/a224a2ffa56022bb638925a64bef7ae1/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y> at 5:16 pm.
- Williams, M., Mercer, S., & Ryan, S. (2015). *Exploring psychology in language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/document/510766781/Exploring-Psychology-in-Language-Learning-and-Teaching-William-Et-Al-2016>
- Zhang, X. (2021). The impact of EFL students' emotional level on their motivation and academic achievement: A theoretical conceptual analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12:798564, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.798564>

Ulrich Orlando Sèna Hindeme
LEARNERS' ENGAGEMENT IN EFL CLASSROOMS:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSION

Creative Commons licensing terms

Author(s) will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions, and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions, and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Foreign Language Teaching shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage, or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflicts of interest, copyright violations, and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated into the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed, and used in educational, commercial, and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).