Investigating Non-English- Majored Students' Engagement In EFL Online Classes

Nguyen Huynh Trang

School of Foreign Languages, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH), Vietnam

Abstract:

At the time of the heavy impact of coronavirus, online learning courses have been chosen as a solution to keep the learning and teaching in progress. As known, there may not be any other ways to solve the problem. In order to see if students are really interested in these courses, the author devised a five-point Likert scale questionnaire of 19 items centering on three domains of students' engagement: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral and delivered it to 216 non English-majored students from a public university in Vietnam. The results uncovered that the students were not drastically interested in online learning classes. The majority of them tended to stand neutral for all the questions in these domains, meaning that they do not advocate online learning. Finally, some questons were brought into discussion and seek further solutions to solving these indifferent students in engaging in online courses.

Keywords: *engagement; emotional; cognitive; behavioral; non English-majored students*

1. Introduction: Online education has emerged since the 1990s, but it is fiercely developed in the 21st century. In recent years, due to the outbreak of Covid 19 pandemic, it forces the whole world to shift drastically from traditional classroom-based instruction to online lessons (Bidar, 2021). In Vietnam, online classes have been conducted from the early days of the pandemic for undergraduate students to keep teachers and students stay safe. In reality, it was hard for both teachers and students to adapt this latest implementation which is completely different from the conventional learning classrooms. Teachers have to change their teaching styles or teaching methods and adapt the syllabus to fit their teaching situations. There have been many challenges arouse from both teachers and students.

Student engagement has drawn much attention from researchers around the world (Fredricks et al., 2004; Krause & Coates, 2008; Trowler, 2010). Student engagement is also known as student involvement, learning involvement or learning participation (Hu & Li, 2017). Students who are active in the classroom interaction are believed to have high

engagement in teaching and learning process (Susanti, 2020). Krause and Coates (2008:493) have clarified that students who are engaging in activities are shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes. According to Kuh (2003), students who involve in practising, getting feedback study more than others.

Hu and Li (2017) claimed that in online learning environment there is less degree of engagement due to the lack of communication between students and teachers. Suharti, et al. (2020) believe that student engagement in online learning is important because it may influence students' levels of interest, motivation and learning outcomes.

In fact, grasping the participation of students in online classes is not an easy task for teachers, especially in English classes where more interactive activities are needed than any other ones.   This study aims at finding out a group of non-English major students' engagement in their EFL classes at university. In order to explore these students' engagement in their English classes, one primary question is raised to guide the study:

What is the reality of students' engagement in EFL online classes in terms of emotional, cognitive and bahavioral engagement?

2. Literature Review

Definitions of student engagement

Accoring to Hu & Li (2017), student engagement is also known as student involvement, learning involvement or learning participation. Kuh et al. (2007 as cited in Trowler, 2010) defined student engagement as "participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes". Similarly, as Astin (1984 cited in Zohud, 2015) put it, student engagement is referred to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. Kuh (2009a cited in Trowler, 2010) defined student engagment as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes".

Student engagement in online learning

In online learning, Hu et al. (2016) confirmed that the learning is closely related to students' engagement. The authors emphasized "no engagement, no learning". They explained that due to separation of space and time between teachers and students, it is hard to hold student engagement' level in online learning process.

Engagement is mentioned one of the four main features of online learning in the study of Lisha and Zang (2003). The authors considered that involvement in online learning mainly refers to the response to tasks in class, concentration, establishment contact between the learning materials and cooperation with other students.

Dimensions of student engagement

Student engagement has gone through a single dimension to multi-dimensions but the current study follows the three dimensions proposed by Fredricks, et al. (2004). The researchers classify student engagement into three behavioral engagement, coginitive engagement and emotional engagement. Behavorial engagement is related to various learning and instructional activivies that students are engaged in. Emotional engagement is

connected with students' interest or enjoyment towards interactions with those at school and a sense of belonging. Cognitive engagement is described as student's degree of interest in learning. Cognitively engaged students are those who go beyond the requirements and would relish challenges.

Related studies

Student engagement is not a new field of research in learning and teaching a foreign language. However, so far student engagement in the online class has been received little attention.

Susanti (2020) did a study entitled "*Student Engagement in EFL On-Line Class*" which was conducted in Indonesia setting. The study employed a closed-ended questionnaire to explore students'coginitive, behavioural and emotional engagement in EFL online classes. The study recruited 120 students who were the students in English Education Department University of Nusantara PGRI Kediri. The study developed a questionnaire which is based on the three divisions of student's engagement proposed by Trowller (2010) and Fredrict, et al. (2004). The study found that student's behavorial engagement was relatively high, but their cognitive and emotional engagement were not high in some aspects. For example, the participants had some difficulties in communicating their ideas and cooperate or collaborate with other peers in some in-class activities.

In a similar context happened in Indonesia, Suharti, et al. (2020) conducted the study "Exploring Students' Learning Engagement in EFL Online Classroom". The study carried out a descriptive survey to investigate students' engagement in EFL online classrooms in a vocational school in Indonesia. The study was designed from the four divisions of engagement which are related to behaviour, emotion, involvement and cognition proposed by Dixson (2015). The study employed a questionnaire delivered to a group of 33 students at a vocational school in Karawang, Indonesia and applied multi-observations of an EFL teacher. The findings indicated that EFL students showed significant learning involments through the online language learning platform. The study also suggested EFL teachers to seek appropriate techniques to assess student's engagement, provide grades and synchronize scores when conduciting EFL online classes.

All in all, the previous literature has triggered this study to explore more about engagement of non-English major students in English online classes.

Methodology:

This study was designed and developed mainly from the framework of Susanti (2020) which used the three dimensions of student engagement proposed by Trowller (2010) and Fredrict, et al. (2004). Thus, a questionnaire was designed to elicit non English-majored students' perceptions of three divisions of engagement namely emotional engagement, cognitive engagement and behavioral engagement in EFL online classes from. According to Bryman (2008), questionnaires offer researchers more standard information and reduce the possible impact of the researcher's presence on participants' responses. The questionnaire

comprised nineteen items which aimed at investigating the student engagement in EFL online classes. The questionnaire had four sections in which the first section asked some demographic information of the population. The three last sections were the application of nineteen closed-ended questions which required the respondents to rate their agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

Table 1. Student engagement criteria

Aspects	Indicators	Items	Sub-indicators
Emotional	interest	1	I can't wait to join English online classes
		2	I enjoy doing all online class activities.
	anxiety	3	I feel enouraged when I am in English online classes.
		4	I'm free of worries when being inquired by my teacher.
	satisfaction	5	I'm satisfied with all English online lessons.
Coginitive	comprehension	6	I frequently respond to the teacher's questions to complete the tasks well.
	share ideas	7	We help each other to do the tasks.
		8	We exchange ideas with peers.
		9	I complete the tasks well.
	preview knowledge	10	I answer all the questions related to previous lessons.
		11	I try to connect what I am learning to things I have learned previously.
	preference for hard work	12	I like to give answers in different ways.
Behaviorial	attention	13	I follow the teacher's instructions.
	effort	14	I complete all tasks in and out of the class on time.
		15	I put effort into learning.
	Classroom participation	16	I try to learn about the topics covered in class.
		17	I participate actively in all tasks in English online classes.
		18	I ask questions in class.
	Persistence	19	I am persistent when meeting difficult tasks.

(Adapted from Fredricks et al. (2016); Susanti (2020)

Section two consisting of five items belonged to the students' emotional engagement (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Section three included six items which were related to the students' cognitive engagement (items 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12). Section three consisted of seven items (13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19) exploring the students' behaviorial engagement. Before delivering the questionnaire to the target sample, it was sent to 30 students who had similar background to

the sample of the study. The data collected from the pilot group were computed and used for checking reliability.

After constructing and piloting the questionnaire, it was delivered to the convenient sampling of 216 students (104 males and 112 females) with their consent to join the study. The study participants were all first-year students who took the first module of English as a Foreign language (EFL) program at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. They all had at least seven years of learning English in their school education. They received the questionnaire via Google Form. After a few days, all the questionnaires were sent back to the researcher with their full responses. All the data were analyzed employing SPSS version 22 for the reriability of the responses and the mean scores of each item in the three domains.

Findings And Discussion
Findings
Reliability of the questionnaire
The reliability of the questionnaire was checked and the results are displayed in this sub-section.

Table 2. The results of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of emotional engagement items

No	Items	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Emotional engagement	1. I can't wait to join English online classes.	13.00	2.706	.382	.709
	2. I enjoy doing all online class activities.	13.21	3.150	.412	.675
	3. I feel enouraged when I am in English online classes.	13.29	3.190	.441	.665
	4. I'm free of worries when being inquired by my teacher.	13.25	2.623	.651	.572
	5. I'm satisfied with all English online lessons.	13.17	3.087	.477	.651
Cronbach's Alpha = .804				**N of Items = 5**	
Cognitive engagement	6. I frequently respond to the teacher's questions to complete the tasks well.	21.05	5.854	.558	.849
	7. We help each other to do the tasks.	20.65	5.605	.775	.822
	8. We exchange ideas with peers.	20.99	5.864	.544	.852
	9. I complete the tasks well.	21.10	5.581	.570	.850
	10. I answer all the questions related to previous lessons.	21.58	5.590	.746	.824

	11. I try to connect what I am learning to things I have learned previously.	21.56	5.624	.718	.828
	12. I like to give answers in different ways.	22.35	5.765	.536	.854
	Cronbach's Alpha = .860		**N of Items = 7**		
Behavorial engagement **Behavorial engagement**	13. I follow the teacher's instructions.	19.40	2.834	.366	.507
	14. I complete all tasks in and out of the class on time.	19.44	2.644	.566	.446
	15. I put effort into learning	19.52	1.745	.547	.394
	16. I try to learn about the topics covered in class.	19.42	2.837	.463	.486
	17. I participate actively in all tasks in English online classes.	19.15	4.054	-.360	.732
	18. I ask questions in class.	19.27	2.710	.413	.488
	19. I am persistent when meeting difficult tasks.	19.37	2.903	.341	.517
	Cronbach's Alpha = .659		**N of Items = 7**		

The results in Table 2 revealed that all the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of three clusters are greater than 0.6 (.804, .860 and .659 respectively). Importantly, all items have correlation coefficients with the total variable (Corrected Item). -Total Correlation) are larger than the allowable standard (>0.3). It can be concluded that the questionnaire was reliable to use for this study.

To identify the scale of mean scores of student engagement, the author followed the scales as in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Agreement to understanding of mean score scales

Range	Level
1.0 to 1.8	1 (Strongly disagree)
1.81 to 2.60	2 (Disagree)
2.61 to 3.40	3 (Neutral)
3.41 to 4.20	4 (Agree)
4.21 to 5.00	5 (Strongly agree)

Descriptive Statistic Tests were run on all items of the questionnaire and also divided into three clusters as mentioned earlier.
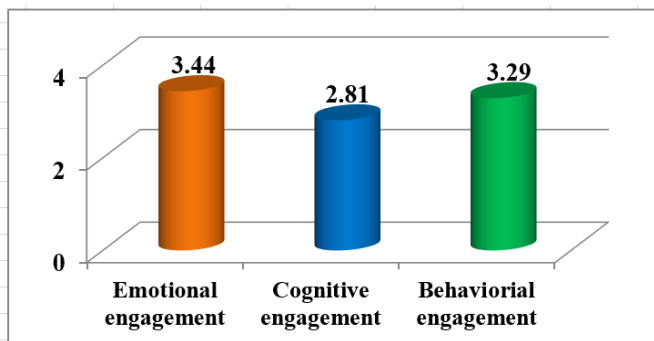
Figure 1: Comparison of mean scores of three caterogies of first-year students' engagement in EFL online classes

The results displayed in Figure 1 demonstrate that the three types of engagement namely emotional engagement, cogibitive engagement and behaviorial engagement are not high in which emotional engagement was perceived the highest (M=3.44). The details of all data will be discussed more below.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of first-year students' emotional engagement in EFL online classes

No	Items	Mean	S.D
1	I can't wait to join English online class.	3.14	0.52
2	I enjoy doing the class activities in English online classes.	2.46	0.55
3	I feel enouraged when being asked to work groups in English online classes.	3.89	0.53
4	I'm free of worries when being inquired by my teacher.	3.95	0.56
5	I'm satisfied with all English online lessons	3.78	0.67
	Overall	**3.44**	**0.64**

The results in Table 3 show that the overall mean score of first-year students' emotional engagement in English online classes is at level 4 (M=3.44,S.D=0.64), which is agreement. It can be inferred that these learners' emotional engagement is positive though it is not high. To be specific, items 3 and 4 insisting on anxiety aspect and the results reveal that these learners' anxiety is rather high (M=3.89 and M=3.95 respectively). It can be explained that the respondents are not confident in their language proficiency and though they are not created with conditions to have face-to-face interaction with their teachers, they are still anxious. "I can't wait to join English online class" and "I enjoy doing the class activities in English online classes" obtained the mean scores of neutral with M=3.14 and M=2.46 respectively. It can be explained that these learners do not show high interest in the activities that their teachers organize. However, their satisfaction of the English online lessons is not low (Item 5, achieving M=3.78).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of first-year students' cognitive engagement in EFL online classes

No	Items	Mean	S.D
6	I frequently respond to the teacher's questions.	3.06	0.61
7	I exchange ideas with peers.	2.38	0.48
8	We help each other to do the tasks.	2.29	0.44
9	I complete the tasks well.	3.86	0.49
10	I answer all the questions related to previous lessons.	2.33	0.46
11	I try to connect what I am learning to things I have learned before.	2.51	0.53
12	I like to give answers in different ways.	3.25	0.47
	Overall	**2.81**	**0.59**

Table 4 indicates that first-year students' cognitive engagement in EFL online classes did not receive high level of agreement (M=2.81, S.D =0.59). It means that the students' cognition in English online classes is at the medium level. To be specific, only Item 9 "I complete the tasks well" was much supported than other items (M=3.86, S.D=0.49). The rest of the items in this catergory did not obtain high agreement of the respondents, which are at Level 2 or Level 3 on a five-point scale. The item that received the lowest mean score is "We help each other to do the tasks", which is at level 2 (M=2.29, S.D=0.44). This can be explained that English classes which are conducted online do not catch students' interest in interaction with their peers in class. Their ability to preview previous knowledge also obtained a low level (M=2.33, S.D=0.46).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of first-year students' behaviorial engagement in EFL online classes

No	Items	Mean	S.D
13	I follow the teacher's instructions.	3.31	0.42
14	I complete all tasks in and out of the class on time.	3.23	0.52
15	I put effort into learning.	4.02	0.47
16	I try to learn about the topics covered in class.	3.96	0.51
17	I participate actively in all tasks in English online classes.	2.98	0.49
18	I ask questions in class.	2.45	0.50
19	I am persistent when confronting with difficult tasks.	3.11	0.56
	Overall	**3.29**	**0.55**

The results from Table 5 reveal that the overall mean score of the first-year students' behavioral engagement in EFL online classes is at a medium level (M=3.29, S.D=0.55). Among the seven items related to bahavorial engagement, Item 15 "I put effort into learning" achieved the highest rank (M=4.02, S.D =0.47), which is at a rather high level (level 4 of a five-point scale). It is clear that these students have high responsibility for most of the tasks they assigned though they are learning online. Most of the items of this catergory are found at a medium level. The students' participation in online classes were found to stand at an average level. For instance, Item 13 "I follow the teacher's instructions" and

Item 17 "I participate actively in all tasks in the classroom" reached a medium rank from the respondents (M=3.31 and M=2.98, orderly).

Discussion: As can be seen from the results, emotional engagement of non English-majored students has been found to be at a quite high level (M=3.44), which is in line with the study of Susanti (2020), who confirmed that students' emotional engagement in EFL virtual classes was high. Observing the sub-caterogies of emotional engagement, students enjoy the English online classes and showed high interest in online classroom activities. However, they were afraid of making mistakes, so it can be said that these learners are anxious about online lessons. This finding is consitent with the findings of Susanti (2020). In terms of cognitive engagement, it is regarded that the students are rated at a medium level (M= 2.81). When observing the sub- caterogies of the cognitive aspect, it is discovered that the students were able to comprehend the lessons, but they did not relish challenges. The results also showed that the students' level of sharing ideas and expressing ideas is not high. Finally, the behaviorial engagement of the participants is found to be at a medium level (M=3.29). The students admitted that they had low participation in class activities and had problems in focusing on the lessons.

Conclusion: This study aims at exploring a group of non-majored students' engagement in their online classes at the time of the spread of Coronavirus. More specifically, three aspects of the issue have been investigated. The author looked for their levels of emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and behavioral engagement. The overall results of their engagement in these three domains are not high. No observations of any mean scores of the three reached Scale 4 (agreement). The results obtained from the three domains were not much dichotomous (Emotional: M=3.44, Cognitive: M= 2.81, and Behavioral: M=3.29, in order). These results are alarming for institutions and teachers who chose to conduct their classes online. More sadly, the cognitive domain is gently low. As known, in higher education, students are expected to use their brain actively and cognitively. Nonetheless, this result reverses this expectation and therefore we, educators, need to find some ways to optimize their cognitive advantage for their university journal. As said, students' behavior plays not less impotantly in educational success. Nevertheless, this result (M=3.29) does not show that the students are in great interest in online courses and therefore again educators have to seek solutions to tackle this problem. A better result in comparison comes from the emotional domain; However, it still worries us, educators, because the mean score of 3.44 does not have much meaning. It should have been at Level 4 or at least close to Level 4 to support online learning classes. All in all, these results do not highly advocate online learning courses and the problems need urgently addressing.

References:

1. Bidar, S. (2021). Engaging Learners in Online Classrooms: A Case Study from Nepal. *Journal of World Englishes and Educational Practices*, Vol. 3 (7), 1-6).
2. Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Bryson, C., & Hand, L. (2007). The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning. *Innovations in education and teaching international*, 44(4), 349-362.
4. Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of educational research*, 74(1), 59-109.
5. Dixson, M. D. (2010). Creating Effective Student Engagement in Online Courses: What Do Students Find Engaging?. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 10(2), 1-13.
6. Helme, S., & Clarke, D. (2001). Identifying cognitive engagement in the mathematics classroom. *Mathematics Education Research Journal*, 13(2), 133-153.
7. Hu, M., Li, H., Deng, W., & Guan, H. (2016, September). Student engagement: one of the necessary conditions for online learning. In 2016 *International Conference on Educational Innovation through Technology* (EITT) (pp. 122-126). IEEE.
8. Hu, M., & Li, H. (2017, June). Student engagement in online learning: A review. In *2017 International Symposium on Educational Technology (ISET)* (pp. 39-43). IEEE.
9. Krause, K. L., & Coates, H. (2008). Students' engagement in first-year university. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(5), 493-505.
10. Kuh, G. D. (2003). What we're learning about student engagement from NSSE: Benchmarks for effective educational practices. *Change: The magazine of higher learning*, 35(2), 24-32.
11. Lisha, L., & Zhang, Q. (2003). The types and characteristics of online learning. *Education Science*, 1, 49-52.
12. Mulia, N. A. (2020). Indonesian EFL Students' Engagement in Online Language Learning Platform. *Retain*, 8(2), 154-163.
13. Suharti, D. S., Suherdi, D., & Setyarini, S. (2021, April). Exploring Students' Learning Engagement in EFL Online Classroom. *In Thirteenth Conference on Applied Linguistics (CONAPLIN 2020)* (pp. 139-149). Atlantis Press.
14. Susanti, Y. (2008). Student Engagement in EFL On-Line Class. *Lingual* 10 (2), 8-15.
15. Trowler, V. (2010). Student engagement literature review. *The higher education academy*, 11(1), 1-15.
16. Zohud, N.W., I. (2015*). Teaching Strategies and Their Role on Students' Engagement in Learning English*. Published Thesis of an-Narah National University Faculty of Graduate Students.