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Dimensions of Active Participation in Synchronous Online English as a Foreign Language Classes for Young Learners

Dimensiones de participación activa en clases de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera en línea para niños

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ABSTRACT

Active student participation has been studied extensively, as it is seen as a primary factor in student learning. A four-dimensional framework that assesses the cognitive, Emotional/Affective, and Social Dimensions of student participation was used to examine class participation of young learners in synchronous online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classes. Given that dropout rates remain a major concern in online learning environments and that active student participation plays an essential role in effective online learning, this continues to be an important area of research. However, much is unknown regarding the experiences of young learners. A mixed-methods approach combining self-reported data from an adapted active participation scale with classroom observations was used in this instrumental case study. Data were analysed using a three-phase design. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed through an initial content analysis followed by thematic analysis. The results indicate that the emotional dimension was the most dominant, whereas the behavioural dimension was the least dominant. The findings reveal both correspondences and divergences between self-reported and observed participation and identify the use of chat and emojis as a promising avenue for future research. This study also emphasises the importance of multimodal tools, varied learning activities, and opportunities for social interaction in fostering active participation in online learning environments. As increasing numbers of children engage in online language learning, research in this field has become increasingly prominent, since understanding and assessing language learning requires multidimensional, context-sensitive frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Engagement, English as a Foreign Language, EFL, Online Learning, e-Learning, Young Learners.

RESUMEN

La participación activa de estudiantes ha sido objeto de estudio exhaustivo, pues es ampliamente reconocida como uno de los factores más significativos en el aprendizaje. Este artículo analiza la participación de estudiantes jóvenes en clases síncronas en línea de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE), usando un marco cuatridimensional que comprende las dimensiones cognitiva, emocional/afectiva, conductual y social. Puesto que la deserción sigue siendo una gran preocupación en los entornos de aprendizaje en línea, y dado el papel innegable de la participación activa estudiantil en el aprendizaje en línea eficaz, ésta se mantiene como un área de investigación relevante; sin embargo, las experiencias de niños y niñas siguen siendo en gran parte inexploradas. Utilizando un enfoque mixto, que combinó datos auto-reportados en una escala de medición de participación activa adaptada y observaciones en el aula, este estudio de caso instrumental pretende identificar cómo 25 niños y niñas, de entre 6 y 12 años, de seis clases diferentes de ILE en un instituto de idiomas vietnamita, se involucran en sus clases en línea, y si la participación observable se alinea con sus percepciones

auto-reportadas. El análisis de datos se llevó a cabo a través de un diseño de tres fases utilizando estadística descriptiva para los datos cuantitativos y análisis de contenido primero y posteriormente temático para los datos cualitativos. Los resultados muestran que la dimensión más prevalente es la emocional; por el contrario, la conductual aparece como la más débil. Los hallazgos destacan tanto correspondencias como divergencias entre participación auto-reportada y observada, y el uso del chat y emojis como un área valiosa para futuras investigaciones. El estudio destaca el papel fundamental que desempeñan las herramientas multimodales, la diversidad de actividades y las oportunidades para fomentar la interacción social en el mantenimiento de la participación activa en los entornos de aprendizaje en línea. La presencia de niños y niñas en entornos de aprendizaje de idiomas en línea aumenta cada día, dando mayor relevancia a la investigación sobre este tema, especialmente porque los marcos multidimensionales y sensibles al contexto son esenciales tratándose del aprendizaje de idiomas y su evaluación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Participación activa, Inglés como Lengua Extranjera, ILE, Aprendizaje en línea, Aprendizaje electrónico, Niñez estudiante.

INTRODUCTION

Online language learning has become increasingly popular in the last five years as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic because students were unable to attend classes in person. This is particularly true for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, due to the growing global demand for English proficiency. The pandemic brought about a digital transformation in EFL education, urging educators to rethink and redesign their pedagogical approaches to suit online environments (Gao & Zhang, 2020). While online learning offers flexibility and accessibility, it also presents challenges, particularly in keeping students actively engaged.

Engagement is a multidimensional construct (Bowden et al., 2021), and student engagement has long been recognised as a critical factor influencing academic success across educational contexts (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2007). Research demonstrates that higher engagement levels correlate strongly with improved academic outcomes, increased motivation, and deeper learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Given its importance in education, engagement has been widely studied; however, much of the existing literature has traditionally focused on young adult and adult learners. Understanding how engagement manifests itself in online learning environments is also important. Research suggests that while online education offers significant advantages such as flexibility and expanded access, sustaining high levels of engagement remains a persistent challenge (Bond et al., 2020).

Active engagement in EFL education is also key to successful language learning (Allen et al., 2019), and student participation plays a crucial role in supporting engagement in foreign language

contexts (Karabiyik, 2019). Students who attend class more regularly perform better academically, are intrinsically motivated to learn English, and tend to be significantly more engaged than their less motivated peers (Dincer et al., 2017). Although engagement research in EFL contexts has grown in recent years, it has predominantly focused on university-level learners, where learners generally exhibit higher levels of self-regulated learning (Kahu, 2013).

Young learners constitute a distinct population with unique cognitive, social, and emotional characteristics. Unlike older students, they often require greater scaffolding, ongoing encouragement, and structured opportunities for participation to sustain engagement (Bond et al., 2020), and the level of engagement in education is closely linked to its quality and can forecast children's future skills (Steinbrenner & Watson, 2015). In order to develop effective instructional strategies for young learners, it is essential to understand and assess student engagement correctly (Carpenter et al., 2015). Research on engagement with online English as a foreign language (EFL) classes for young learners has increased dramatically over the last few years because of the rapid growth of online learning.

Existing studies suggest that engagement in online EFL environments can be influenced by a combination of factors including teacher support, instructional design, access to technology, and the social-emotional needs of learners (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Yuan & Dao, 2025). Emotional engagement in particular has been highlighted as a critical factor in sustaining participation and motivation, with some studies pointing to the positive effects of visual materials and interactive platforms on vocabulary development and learner interest (García-López et al., 2023).

Despite emerging insights, current research on engagement in online EFL learning for young learners remains limited in scope. Much of the existing literature stems from emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sari, 2020), which may not reflect today's more structured online learning environments. Moreover, studies tend to focus on older students, with relatively little attention paid to younger learners in EFL contexts.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine young EFL learner engagement in synchronous online classes through Bowden et al.'s (2021) four-dimensional framework, consisting of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social engagement. The objective was to identify the most prevalent dimensions of engagement, examine how they manifested in this context, and assess the degree of correspondence between self-reported and observed engagement. By adopting a mixed-methods approach that combined self-reported and observed engagement data, the research contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of engagement in online language learning. The findings will offer valuable insights for educators, helping them to better understand student engagement in this new online context, while contributing to the broader discourse on engagement in online education and supporting the development of more effective and engaging digital learning environments for young learners.

This article first presents the theoretical framework that was followed to approach the construct of engagement in the online EFL classroom for young learners, followed by a review of the most relevant literature regarding young learners and engagement, engagement in online learning, and young learners' engagement in online EFL learning environments. Then, the methodology is described, including context, participants, data collection instruments, and data analysis. Results are organised by first discussing the quantitative findings from the engagement measurement scale, and then the categories for 'Engagement in action' resulting from the qualitative data analysis (online classroom observation), triangulating the information with quantitative results when appropriate. The paper concludes with a general discussion of the findings, how they contribute to the field, and the main limitations of the study.

Defining and framing engagement

Student engagement is a widely studied, yet complex construct that resists a straightforward, universally accepted definition. It has been described in different ways across the educational field, reflecting its dynamic and multifaceted nature (Alrashidi et al., 2016). Skinner et al. (2008) broadly define engagement as the quality of students' connection to their learning experience, encompassing their participation, relationships, goals, and emotional investment. Similarly, Harper and Quayle (2007) describe it as active participation in educational practices that lead to measurable learning outcomes, while Kuh (2009) frames engagement as the time and energy students devote to meaningful academic activities both inside and outside the classroom.

Other researchers further highlight the proactive and energetic aspects of engagement. For example, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) define it as energy in action, indicating its dynamic nature in the classroom. Bond et al. (2020) elaborated on this by describing engagement as the effort and energy students invest in their learning community, influenced by peer relationships, learning activities, and the general learning environment. Despite the broad range of definitions, most share common themes of active participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive effort (Christenson et al., 2012; Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Due to its complexity, researchers have sought to conceptualise student engagement through distinct dimensions and models. An early model of engagement proposed by Willms (2003) identified two core dimensions: behavioural and emotional (or affective) engagement. Literature has recently adopted a three-dimensional model including cognitive engagement (Farmani et al., 2022). Further expansions have proposed a four-dimensional model adding social engagement, a model in which students may simultaneously or independently demonstrate all four dimensions (Bowden et al., 2021). This more holistic model is currently adopted in studies aiming to capture the full spectrum of students' educational engagement (Mekki et al., 2022).

Therefore, this study adopts the four-dimensional framework developed by [Bowden et al. \(2021\)](#) as it is considered the most appropriate to study engagement in language learning contexts, where social interaction and emotional support play key roles. In Bowden's framework, cognitive engagement refers to students' mental effort, self-regulation, and strategic use of learning techniques, encompassing higher-order thinking and focused attention. These aspects, however, are only one form of cognitive engagement. Task focus (when task accomplishment rather than language acquisition is important), resource management (researching external sources of information) and recipience (following instructions with minimal effort bypassing cognitive self-regulation mechanisms) are also important elements within this dimension ([Farmani et al., 2022](#)). Cognitive engagement encompasses the ability to apply cognitive strategy and knowledge in handling a learning task and the effort invested to perform it.

Emotional or affective engagement refers to students' emotional connection to learning, teachers, and classmates. It is often reflected by positive emotions such as enthusiasm, pride, and enjoyment, fostered by empathy, emotional support, and emotional regulation ([Saucedo & Pietrocola, 2021](#); [Sun et al., 2021](#)). In language learning, particularly online courses, emotional engagement plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic performance, involvement, and satisfaction ([Deng, 2021](#)), as it reflects the degree of emotional investment students bring to the learning experience, ranging from enthusiasm to disinterest ([Bowden et al., 2021](#)).

Behavioural engagement is defined by observable actions such as active participation, attentiveness, and on-task behaviour, making it one of the most commonly measured dimensions. Behavioural engagement is also a multidimensional construct, as the consistency and quality of observable actions, rather than just their frequency, are also considered ([Gomes et al., 2023](#)). Behavioural engagement is not limited to in-class activities. Involvement in extracurricular activities is also an indicator of behavioural engagement, as are qualities such as perseverance and resilience ([Fredricks et al., 2016](#)).

Lastly, social engagement highlights students' sense of belonging, collaboration, and connection with others, including classmates, academic staff, and other figures within the learning community who contribute to their academic development. This dimension is especially important in language learning contexts, which thrive on interaction. Apart from the interactive nature of students' learning experience, social engagement comprises the positive feelings of inclusivity, purpose, socialisation and connection that students may experience ([Bowden et al., 2021](#)), as well as explicit actions of cooperation, listening to others, attending class on time, and maintaining balance in the student-teacher relationship ([Finn & Zimmer, 2012](#)).

Young learners and engagement

The term young learners within the EFL context typically refers to students between the ages of 5 and 15 ([Linse, 2005](#)), and is commonly used within private language institutions and EFL research to dis-

tinguish learners with developing cognitive, social, and linguistic capacities. [Scott and Ytreberg \(2004\)](#) emphasise that children within this age range exhibit differing learning needs, often requiring more support, repetition, and active engagement to sustain participation and comprehension in EFL contexts.

Given the different developmental characteristics of children, maintaining high engagement levels requires personalised pedagogical strategies. Research indicates that young learners benefit from structured routines, scaffolding, and the creation of a supportive classroom environment ([Bond et al., 2020](#)). [Steinbrenner and Watson \(2015\)](#) highlight that the quality of engagement at an early age is a strong predictor of future academic and cognitive outcomes, and that when engagement is high in early education, children are more likely to develop skills necessary for later success. Similarly, [Carpenter et al. \(2015\)](#) stress the importance of measuring and understanding engagement in young learners to inform effective teaching practices and the importance of valid assessment tools, without which teachers may miss opportunities to adapt instruction.

Previous research on engagement among young learners in EFL contexts points to several key factors. In their study with Turkish EFL students, [Dincer et al. \(2017\)](#) found that those with higher attendance and stronger academic performance were more likely to be engaged with the English classes. Similarly, [Karabiyik \(2019\)](#), who studied student participation in EFL classrooms, concluded that active participation in classroom tasks was a predictor of overall engagement. [Ellis \(2013\)](#) advocates for child-centred, interactive techniques like games, storytelling, and movement-based activities to support attention, motivation, and social/emotional engagement in English learning. Most research predates the pandemic and focuses on face-to-face interaction.

Engagement in online learning

In addition to examining engagement as a separate, multifaceted concept, it is vital to understand it as a critical component that shapes the quality and effectiveness of online learning experiences. Although online education is praised for its flexibility, accessibility, and potential to increase learning opportunities, maintaining consistent and meaningful engagement remains a reported challenge ([Bond et al., 2020](#)). [Bond et al.'s \(2020\)](#) review underscores that, in digital settings, where learners are often more isolated and are required to self-regulate, disengagement is especially prominent.

Research by [Martin and Bolliger \(2018\)](#), which surveyed student perceptions in online courses, identified several critical factors that influence engagement, including instructional design, teacher presence and role, opportunities for interaction, and the learner's access to and comfort with technologies. Their findings emphasise the importance of interactive and collaborative learning tasks, such as group discussions and peer feedback, aligning with [Nagaratnam et al. \(2023\)](#), whose study with Malaysian undergraduate students demonstrates that cognitive, social and teaching presence significantly contribute to students' satisfaction and success in the online classroom.

Young learners engagement in online efl learning environments

With the global shift to digital education, research into engagement in online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning environments for young learners has grown, particularly in response to the educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gao & Zhang, 2020). Much of this research was motivated by emergency remote instruction, leading experts to explore how engagement manifested in these new, and relatively unfamiliar digital contexts. Focusing directly on young learners, Yuan and Dao (2025) examined primary-aged EFL students in China and found that technological familiarity, scaffolding, and engaging multimedia content were important factors in maintaining behavioural and emotional engagement. Their mixed-methods approach combined surveys with observational data, allowing for a more comprehensive view of learner involvement during synchronous online sessions.

Emotional engagement has particularly been an issue in recent research on this area, with García-López et al. (2023) highlighting how the use of vibrant visuals, gamified activities, and interactive platforms increased motivation and vocabulary retention among Spanish-speaking children aged 6–10. Their study used a quasi-experimental design comparing traditional video-based lessons with interactive tools, reporting significantly higher levels of enjoyment and participation. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2022) explored the psychological dimensions of engagement in adolescent EFL learners, noting that fulfilling learners' basic needs for independence, competence, and belonging contributed to stronger engagement in all four dimensions, with competence being the strongest factor. While their study focused on teenagers, the findings have implications for younger learners, particularly emphasising student agency and confidence.

These studies support earlier engagement frameworks, highlighting that online contexts often demand more deliberate strategies to foster interaction, presence, and autonomy. However, despite these promising findings, the literature remains relatively underdeveloped with regard to younger learners specifically. Moreover, much of the available work was conducted during the pandemic and reflects the constraints of emergency remote learning rather than stable, purposefully designed online programs (Sari, 2020). Furthermore, studies often target older children or adolescents, with fewer studies into the engagement needs and engagement levels of learners under the age of 12 in EFL settings, hence the need for further empirical research exploring engagement within structured online EFL programmes for young learners.

METHODS

Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods case study design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to capture both measurable (quantitative) and observable (qualitative) aspects of student engagement.

By combining these methods, the study could triangulate data and reveal alignments and discrepancies between what students reported and what they demonstrated in synchronous online EFL classes. In this case, the online classrooms served as a platform to examine the dimensions of student engagement, cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and social, both as self-reported by students and as observed by the main researcher during lessons. Overall, this study design ensured practical, context-specific insights and provided a framework for understanding the complexity of engagement in online EFL education for young learners, with implications that can extend beyond this specific setting.

Context and participants

The study was conducted in a private language school based in Vietnam. While the school provides various educational formats (in-person and online), this research focused exclusively on synchronous online classes, in which students attend weekly live sessions via Zoom, submit homework on Padlet, and communicate with teachers through Zalo, Vietnam's most widely used messaging app. Participants were 25 young learners aged 6 to 12. Most were based in major Vietnamese cities, while the remainder lived in rural areas, except for three who lived abroad (Australia, the United States, and Canada). Their experience with online English learning varied, ranging from just a few months to over two years. They were split into six different groups based on their level: three groups in Level 1, two in Level 2, and one in Level 3. A convenience sampling strategy was used, as all participants were students of the main researcher. While this limits generalisability, it offered valuable access and context-specific insights into students' engagement behaviours. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality (see Table 1) used throughout data collection and reporting phases.

Table 1.

Participants breakdown by group with pseudonyms

Group	Number of students	Pseudonyms	
Level 1 K1	5	Mary	Tammy
		Jenny	Matt
		Alicia	
Level 1 K2	4	Bob	Claire
		Leonard	Leiah
Level 1 K3	7	Matheo	James
		Oliver	Lucy
		Sussy	Daisy
		Amy	
Level 2 K1	3	William	Kyla
		Lisa	

Level 2 K2	2	Jack	Katherin
Level 3 K1	4	Luna	Liam
		Harry	Ella

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

For ethical considerations, approval was obtained from the appropriate school authorities before the children were invited to participate in the study. Students were then informed about the nature and objectives of the study and that participation was voluntary. If the student wished to participate, their parents/guardians were contacted via Zalo (the approved means of communication). They were then told about the study, their children's assent to participate in the study and asked for their consent. Parents were also informed that participation was voluntary and that their children could withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions, as participation had no effect on their course grade

Data Collection Instruments

The study employed a cross-sequential data collection design, which combines aspects of both cross-sectional and longitudinal approaches to gather insights over a manageable time frame (Subedi, 2016). In line with this approach, two instruments were used, a quantitative Engagement Measurement Scale and a qualitative Engagement Observation Guide. This dual method aimed to measure and observe engagement among young EFL learners during synchronous online classes, allowing for a comprehensive study of engagement, capturing students' self-perceptions and their observable behaviour in a digital classroom setting.

The Engagement Measurement Scale was adapted from Mekki et al. (2022), who originally developed it for secondary students, assessing four engagement dimensions (cognitive, behavioural, Emotional/Affective, and Social) through 42 items distributed across the subscales. Items were modified to suit the online context and to be appropriate for learners aged 6–12. For example, *I try hard to do well in the English language classroom* was changed to *I try hard to do well in the online English class*. Some items were further simplified or partially translated into Vietnamese to ensure clarity for young learners. The term *work values* was accompanied by its Vietnamese equivalent (giá trị học tập) to ensure comprehension. Two native-speaking Vietnamese EFL teachers reviewed and validated these adaptations. The scale was administered at the beginning of each group's observation period, and students completed it during the first lesson of the unit. The Likert-type scale used three-point responses ranging from *Always* to *Never* for behavioural, cognitive, and social items and from *Agree* to *Disagree* for emotional items. Reverse-coded items were included to reduce response bias.

To complement the self-reported data, a qualitative engagement observation guide was used to observe and assess real-time behaviour during class sessions. This guide was adapted from the STELAR & ITEST (2019) Engagement Observation Protocol, originally designed for use in science education

with children aged 6–12. The original tool measured cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement, and this study added a social dimension based on indicators identified by [Philp and Duchesne \(2016\)](#). Observable behaviours, such as the use of Zoom chat, non-verbal cues, and collaboration in breakout rooms, were recorded for four 90-minute lessons per group, for a total of 36 hours of observation across six groups. The guide was modified to include behaviour relevant to online learning and remove irrelevant science-specific items.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a three-phase design that conforms to the mixed-methods nature of the study. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, allowing for a comprehensive and integrated exploration of student engagement, but initial analysis was done separately. For quantitative data from the Engagement Measurement Scale, descriptive statistics were used to summarise student responses across the four engagement dimensions. The frequency of answers provided insight into how often students selected each option, while mean scores and standard deviations were calculated to measure tendencies and variability. These descriptive measures offered an understanding of students' self-reported engagement levels and helped identify overall patterns within the sample ([Creswell & Creswell, 2018](#)).

In parallel, qualitative analysis was performed on classroom observation data using content analysis. This involved coding recorded sessions and observation notes to capture instances of engagement as they occurred during the online classes. Codes were assigned to observable behaviour relative to the four engagement dimensions, which were then grouped into themes through thematic analysis ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). This process provided insight into students' behaviour, emotional responses, and social interactions that could not be measured ([Creswell, 2013](#)). The final phase involved data triangulation, which integrated findings from both data sources. Using a concurrent triangulation strategy ([Creswell, 2013](#)), the study compared self-reported data with observed behaviour to assess alignment and explore discrepancies. This integration provided valuable insights, while quantitative data revealed trends, qualitative data developed understanding by offering context-specific examples.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of student engagement in synchronous online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons for young learners. The findings are organised according to the dimensions of engagement explored in the research: Cognitive, Emotional/Affective, Behavioural, and Social. Quantitative results from the Engagement Measurement Scale are discussed first, followed by qualitative insights triangulating both data sets in order to interpret what the results suggest about learners' engagement levels, the observations on how engagement is displayed, and the implications for language teaching and learning.

Engagement measurement scale results

Quantitative data from the Engagement Measurement Scale were collected at the beginning of the observation period, providing insight into how students perceived their engagement during online learning. Table 2 displays the overall engagement levels, showing the average scores across all four dimensions of engagement. Results show that Emotional/Affective engagement scored the highest ($M = 2.61$), followed by Social ($M = 2.40$), Cognitive ($M = 2.27$), and Behavioural Engagement ($M = 2.19$). The data suggest that while students appeared to feel emotionally connected to and interested in their online English classes, they did not consistently exhibit the same level of behavioural engagement, despite Behavioural Engagement remaining at a moderate level.

Table 2.

Overall and Dimension Engagement levels and Standard Deviation

Engagement Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
Emotional / Affective Engagement	2.6177	0.77466
Social Engagement	2.4040	0.65719
Cognitive Engagement	2.2727	0.67297
Behavioural Engagement	2.1900	0.74871
Overall	2.3711	0.71338

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

These findings align with previous research by García-López et al. (2023), who reported strong emotional engagement among young EFL learners due to the use of interactive platforms and gamified tools. Similarly, Yuan and Dao (2025) found that visual and multimedia stimuli played a key role in sustaining emotional interest. However, the lower scores for Behavioural Engagement differ from studies such as Dincer et al. (2017), where active classroom participation and persistence were found to be more prominent in traditional face-to-face settings. Interestingly, these results also contrast with Mekki et al. (2022), whose research using a similar scale found behavioural and cognitive engagement to be the strongest dimensions (but moderate) among EFL learners in a face-to-face context. This suggests that modality may significantly influence which dimensions of engagement are most developed.

The *Emotional/Affective* dimension scored the highest across all dimensions ($M = 2.61$). Students expressed enjoyment, interest, and emotional connection to the learning experience. Emotional engagement is often considered a critical driver for young learners, who rely more on affective support and motivation to sustain attention and persistence (Fredricks et al., 2004; Bond et al., 2020). The strong emotional scores in this study reaffirm García-López et al. (2023) findings, which highlighted the value of gamified and interactive content in boosting emotional responses.

Social Engagement received a moderate score ($M = 2.40$), suggesting that while some peer interaction occurred, it was not a dominant part of the learning experience. In online contexts, this is often

due to limited opportunities for socialisation. These findings partially support Zhou et al. (2022), who found that peer relationships enhanced adolescent engagement, though younger learners may require more guided opportunities to interact socially online. The reduced opportunities for spontaneous interaction in online classes could account for the lower-than-expected social engagement.

As for *Cognitive Engagement*, students reported a moderate level of cognitive engagement ($M = 2.27$), suggesting they were generally engaged and made an effort to understand and complete tasks. This is consistent with findings by Karabiyik (2019), who emphasised that task participation is a strong predictor of cognitive engagement. Nevertheless, the slightly lower average compared to emotional engagement may indicate challenges in maintaining mental focus in online environments, echoing concerns raised by Deng (2021) about digital distractions.

Behavioural engagement had the lowest average (mean) score, $M = 2.19$, which indicates a lack of consistency in terms of student participation, following classroom routines and making an effort to do so. This result is notably different from findings in traditional classroom studies, such as those by Dincer et al. (2017) and Mekki et al. (2022), where Behavioural Engagement had higher scores. A possible explanation for this difference may reflect the challenges associated with assessing student behavioural engagement in online learning, where the teacher does not have direct supervision over the student.

Engagement in Action

This section highlights the qualitative findings from classroom observation across all six synchronous online EFL groups comparing them to the self-reported data in the Engagement Measurement Scale. Each dimension of engagement: Cognitive, Behavioural, Emotional/Affective, and Social, is explored through emergent themes that illustrate how engagement was enacted by young learners in the digital classroom.

Engaging Cognitively, or Not

Cognitive engagement demonstrated consistency across data sources. Many students self-reported high or moderate cognitive effort, contrasting with Mekki et al. (2022), who reported lower to moderate cognitive engagement. Observations supported the self-reported students' perceptions of their cognitive engagement, which was evident when students generated original sentences, solved problems, or articulated reasoning. For instance, when asked to use new vocabulary, William (Impact 2K1) wrote *Wildfires are dangerous*, while Kyla added, *Natural disasters are bad*.

These examples reflect effortful processing of new information. More advanced reasoning was seen when Liam (Impact 3K1) critiqued a reading task: *No, I think the purpose was to inform because she says things she does to be an astronaut, not why she is an astronaut*. Other indicators of cognitive engagement were mistake correction and reflection. Learners who corrected themselves after errors

demonstrated metacognitive awareness. For example, during a grammar task, Katherin (Impact 2K2) said, *Goodest? Oh no—best! The best car*, indicating active learning.

Such insights reflect higher-order thinking, which supports prior research suggesting that online learners, even young ones, are capable of demonstrating metacognitive strategies when provided with structured tasks and supportive feedback (Tu, 2021). However, some students showed disengagement. Lisa (Impact 2K1), for instance, stated, *I don't know* when prompted for a sentence, showing a lack of mental investment, just like Harry did (Impact 3K1) when prompted to reflect on a wrong vocabulary answer.

Behavioural engagement at different levels

While survey responses suggested moderate behavioural engagement, classroom observations often revealed signs of disengagement: students going off-task, failing to respond, or demonstrating minimal participation in breakout room tasks. This does not imply students would not show this type of engagement. In every class, at least one student raised their hand first when asked a question, showing willingness to participate. Students also confirmed task completion in the chat or repeated instructions correctly, indicating attentiveness and procedural compliance. These simple yet consistent behaviours across groups can indicate the presence of behavioural engagement (Kuh, 2009).

On the other hand, distraction and passive behaviour were observed very commonly. Signs of behavioural disengagement included students being off-camera, slouching, or visibly distracted. Jenny (Impact 1K1) was consistently distracted by her younger sibling, while Leah (Impact 1K2) used a face filter to obscure visual presence. Some students, like those in Impact 2K1, were hesitant to unmute even after multiple prompts. These findings echo Abbasi et al. (2024), who observed that external distractions are a persistent challenge in online learning environments. This discrepancy may reflect a social desirability bias in self-reporting (Paulhus, 1991), where students tend to present themselves as more attentive or cooperative than they are in practice. The results also support Reschly and Christenson's (2006) observation that behavioural engagement is highly dependent on the learning context and is strongly influenced by external factors, particularly among younger learners.

Online Emotions

A key area of convergence between the two data sources emerged in the emotional (affective) engagement dimension. Students reported high levels of emotional engagement on the scale, especially on items related to enjoyment, connection with the teacher, and positive classroom experiences. This was confirmed in classroom observations, where students often expressed enthusiasm through smiling, nodding, enthusiastic emoji reactions in the chat, and positive responses to praise and game-based activities. For example, during a Kahoot game, Daisy (Impact 1K3) laughed and exclaimed *Yei!* unprompted, while Liam (Impact 3K1) gave a thumbs-up to the camera after a correct answer.

These reactions mirror the findings of [García-López et al. \(2023\)](#) where game-based tools increased enjoyment and motivation.

These findings align with [Bond et al. \(2020\)](#), who emphasised the importance of emotional connection and enjoyment in fostering engagement in digital environments. In contrast, signs of emotional disengagement included slouching, blank expressions, or minimal reaction. Matt (Impact 1K1) repeatedly looked away from the screen while playing on a Nintendo Switch, and Harry and Ella (Impact 3K1) responded to a preference question with *Whatever*, paired with a shrug. These moments suggest that while emotional engagement was often high, it was not uniformly distributed across students, sessions, and groups.

Little opportunities for Social Interaction

Students showed relatively moderate self-reported levels of social engagement, which was supported by observational data. Nonetheless, observations also revealed moments of authentic peer interaction such as shared humour, spontaneous conversations, and collaborative task completion. An example of this was the collaborative interaction in breakout rooms, where students were able to organise themselves: *I can do two, Sussy do two and Daisy look for the pictures* (Amy, Impact 1K3). In other sessions, students casually asked each other about their favourite games, as in an Impact 1K2 session: Bob, *What is your fav video game?*; Leo, *Minecraft. Yours?* These interactions reflect a blend of task-related and interpersonal communication. However, whole-class teacher-centred instruction often reduced peer-to-peer exchanges. Limited breakout room time or lack of follow-up sometimes led to missed social interaction opportunities, highlighting a structural barrier to fostering a sense of connectedness, which is essential for building social engagement in online learning environments ([Zhou et al., 2022](#)).

Using the chat to show engagement across dimensions

Across all groups, the Zoom chat feature emerged as a primary space for expressing engagement, cutting across all four dimensions. It functioned as an inclusive channel for interaction, particularly in an environment where non-verbal cues were limited. Students actively used the chat to respond to teacher prompts, request clarification, share humorous comments, and react to peer contributions using emojis.

For example, in a vocabulary Pictionary activity, students used the chat to submit their answers voluntarily without being prompted, showing initiative and task focus. During a reading task, Leiah (Impact 1K2) asked, *What is wildlife coflet?* demonstrating cognitive engagement through clarification-seeking. Similarly, students displayed behavioural engagement by writing *I am done or Finish* to indicate task completion and followed norms like asking, *May I go out?* (Daisy, Impact 1K3).

Emotional engagement was evident through emojis, especially in response to praise or peer input. For example, when Ella (Impact 3K1) suggested a song, classmates reacted with hearts, smiles, or

even a 🥰 emoji, illustrating positive and humorous emotional reactions. Social engagement also surfaced through informal conversations, such as students discussing shared hobbies or referencing playing Roblox together. This aligns with [Bowden et al. \(2021\)](#), who highlight that online social spaces help sustain peer connection and group identity.

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the study's main findings in relation to the research objectives and existing literature. It focuses on how observable engagement corresponds to self-reported data, identifies the overall extent and nature of engagement, and explores which dimensions are more or less apparent in synchronous online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons for young learners.

One of the central aims of this research was to explore the relationship between observable and self-reported engagement among young learners in synchronous online EFL settings. According to the findings, there was strong alignment between both data sources in the emotional and cognitive dimensions. Students reported high emotional engagement, which was confirmed by observable enthusiastic behaviour, such as frequent emoji use, smiling, and positive responses to praise or game-based learning. These results support prior findings by [García-López et al. \(2023\)](#), who found that emotional cues, especially in the form of visuals and interactive platforms, can promote enjoyment and motivation among young EFL learners.

Similarly, cognitive engagement appeared consistent across data sets. Self-reports indicated moderate to high engagement in tasks requiring concentration and thinking, which was reflected in classroom behaviour such as answering complex questions and correcting mistakes in real time. These findings align with [Dincer et al. \(2017\)](#), who emphasised the role of learner autonomy and problem-solving in sustaining cognitive investment in language tasks.

However, behavioural engagement diverged significantly between data types. While students reported consistent task completion and participation, observational data showed varying levels of attentiveness. Some learners displayed passivity, avoided camera interaction, or failed to complete tasks independently. This discrepancy echoes findings from [Reschly and Christenson \(2006\)](#), who argue that behavioural engagement is particularly susceptible to external factors, such as home distractions or digital fatigue, which can impact both perception and performance.

In general, students demonstrated moderate overall engagement in their online EFL classes. Across the six observed groups, moments of participation, enthusiasm, and collaboration were consistently present. However, there was a fluctuation in engagement levels depending on the task type, lesson format, and class dynamics. For instance, game-based activities and multimedia-supported tasks were especially successful in sustaining attention and enthusiasm, confirming [Bond et al.'s \(2020\)](#) argument that interactive and emotionally engaging activities foster sustained interest among younger learners.

Nevertheless, there were also periods of disengagement, often associated with more passive tasks such as listening to extended teacher explanations or completing repetitive workbook exercises. These moments highlight a challenge discussed by [Mekki et al. \(2022\)](#), whose study on engagement among EFL learners revealed that prolonged teacher-centred tasks tend to reduce attentiveness.

Among the four measured dimensions, behavioural engagement emerged as the least evident observable behaviour. Although students followed instructions and occasionally volunteered for tasks, signs of distraction, multitasking, or minimal effort were common. Some learners remained silent in breakout rooms, muted their microphones for long stretches, or failed to respond unless directly prompted.

This behaviour contrasts with the self-reported data and reinforces earlier findings by [Philp and Duchesne \(2016\)](#), who note that younger learners often overestimate their effort levels or confuse passive presence with active participation. Furthermore, compliance-based behaviour, such as raising hands or asking permission to leave, while common, do not necessarily indicate deep engagement, since observable actions may not always reflect internal motivation or focus ([Fredricks et al., 2004](#)). Additionally, behavioural engagement may have been influenced by environmental factors beyond the teacher's control, including background noise, internet issues, and lack of supervision. Such limitations, widely reported in online learning literature ([Abbasi et al., 2024](#)), can create inconsistencies in participation affecting the perception and measurement of engagement.

On a more positive note, emotional engagement was the most dominant dimension throughout the lessons. Students reacted enthusiastically to the content and teacher feedback. This emotional responsiveness appeared to be bolstered by interactive tools, such as Kahoot!, emojis, or group-based games, confirming [García-López et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Yuan and Dao \(2025\)](#), who found that gamified and multimedia strategies enhance affective involvement among young EFL learners.

Social engagement also emerged as a strong dimension, particularly in breakout rooms where students collaborated on tasks or bonded through informal conversations. Examples included shared jokes, invitations to play outside of class, and coordinated efforts during poster projects. These interactions align with [Philp and Duchesne's \(2016\)](#) argument that peer-related engagement is often overlooked but critically supports language learning through co-construction and mutual support.

Significantly, although social engagement was not rated highly in self-reported data, classroom interactions revealed rich peer dynamics. This suggests that traditional engagement scales may under-represent this dimension, particularly in online environments where informal exchanges are more subtle or text-based (via chat). Therefore, as [Bowden et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest, observation remains a necessary complement to survey data in fully understanding how social engagement manifests in young learners.

CONCLUSION

This study examined young learners' engagement in synchronous online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes by integrating quantitative self-reported data and qualitative classroom observations across four key engagement dimensions: Cognitive, Emotional/Affective, Behavioural, and Social. The findings indicate that emotional engagement was the highest reported dimension, and behavioural engagement was comparatively lower in self-reports and observed behaviour. Cognitive engagement was moderately reported but highly observed, often associated with active processing and self-correction. In contrast, social engagement revealed a notable mismatch, moderately reported but observed in informal peer interactions.

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how engagement manifests among young learners in digital environments by triangulating data. Emotional responses, the use of emojis, and interactive use of platforms emerged as notable drivers of engagement. However, behavioural engagement remains sensitive to external variables such as home distractions, camera use, and student autonomy, factors that may undermine perceived or actual participation.

The study's main limitation is its small, context-specific sample of 25 students from a single private language school, which may limit the transferability of the findings. The main researcher's dual role as teacher and observer could introduce subjectivity, even though video recordings and structured observation guides were used to mitigate bias. Nonetheless, the study offers valuable implications for online EFL pedagogy. It underscores the importance of multimodal tools, task variety, and structured social opportunities in sustaining engagement. Furthermore, it demonstrates the need to complement self-report scales with observational data to capture a fuller picture.

On a more practical note, the findings of the present study underscore that the emotional environment of the online classroom should be prioritised, favouring game-based activities, visual rewards, emojis, and interactive platforms, all of which were found to sustain students' motivation and enjoyment. Regarding behavioural and cognitive engagement, more scaffolding is needed, which can be done by designing structured routines, asking open-ended questions, incorporating think-aloud activities, and using breakout rooms effectively. As for social engagement, this should be intentionally built into lesson planning; structured pair and group work, classmate feedback opportunities, and class discussion spaces could help deepen this dimension and build a stronger sense of classroom community. Lastly, the study suggests that teachers must actively observe and interpret engagement behaviour, as disengagement may not always be obvious, especially when students are silent or off-camera. Developing strategies for monitoring participation, such as reading chat responses and asking reflective questions, can help teachers better understand each student's engagement.

Ultimately, for online language education, this research reinforces the necessity of context-sensitive, multidimensional frameworks when evaluating learner participation in such settings. As on-

line language learning becomes increasingly common and more opportunities become available for young learners, understanding the dimensions in which engagement is strongest and weakest remains crucial for designing effective and inclusive learning experiences. Future research should examine engagement longitudinally to identify trends and changes in emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social engagement over time. It should also include learners from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to explore how contextual and cross-cultural factors influence engagement across these dimensions.

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