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Behavioral, Cognitive, and Emotional Engagement Across Differing Levels of Language Proficiency in an EFL Speaking Class: A Stimulated Recall Design

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Article info	Abstract
Article type: Research article	<p>There has recently been a burgeoning interest in the realm of English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) education pertaining to the elucidation of the multifaceted determinants that contribute to efficacious language acquisition. Of particular significance was the exploration of engagement, a construct encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. This study aimed to examine the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement of students within an EFL institutional context. The primary objectives were to discern the factors that contribute to engagement and investigate potential discrepancies across different proficiency levels. In doing so, a sample of 21 EFL students ranging in age from 15 to 22 years of age, were selected to participate in the study, with data collection encompassing video recordings of classroom activities and stimulated recall interviews to capture their cognitive processes, affective responses, and behavioral manifestations during specific tasks. The results obtained from the analysis exhibited variations in engagement levels among the diverse proficiency levels. The implications derived from this study underscore the significance of tailoring instructional activities to address the specific engagement requirements of students at varying proficiency levels. Educators should account for individual disparities and language proficiency levels when designing instruction to optimize engagement. By comprehensively addressing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement, educators can foster a more efficacious and captivating learning environment within EFL classrooms.</p> <p>Keywords: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, stimulated recall design</p>
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1. Introduction

Recently, EFL education has witnessed a growing interest in understanding the various factors that contribute to effective language learning. One such area of exploration is the concept of engagement, which encompasses behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Researchers define engagement as the quality of involvement, interest, and motivation that learners bring to educational activities (Fredricks et al, 2004). Studies have shown that engagement plays a pivotal part in language acquisition, as it influences learners' motivation, attention, and overall learning outcomes (Dörnyei, 2009). Engagement has been defined as a multidimensional construct that involves active participation, investment, and commitment in various learning activities (Fredricks et al, 2004). Behavioral engagement refers to the observable actions and efforts of learners during the learning process, encompassing behaviors such as paying attention, participating actively in tasks, and demonstrating persistence in completing learning activities (Zhou et al., 2021). In language learning contexts, behavioral engagement is often operationalized through students' participation in discussions, asking questions, and seeking help when needed (Zhou et al., 2021). It reflects learners' on-task behavior and their commitment to achieving instructional goals, which are critical for successful language acquisition. Recent studies emphasize that behavioral engagement is not only about physical presence but also about the quality of learners' involvement in tasks, highlighting its role as a foundational component of overall engagement in educational settings (Fan & Xu, 2020). Cognitive engagement, on the other hand, refers to the mental effort and strategies employed by learners to understand and process information, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and deep processing of content (Zhou et al., 2021). Emotional engagement encompasses learners' feelings, interests, and attitudes towards the subject matter and the learning process (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). According to recent studies (Shakki, 2022; Sulis, 2022), existing research has primarily focused on isolated aspects of engagement, neglecting the interconnected nature of engagement dimensions. This constraint impedes the attainment of a comprehensive understanding regarding how learners actively participate in and interact with the language learning process within the EFL institutional context, particularly when considering the various proficiency levels. Consequently, there is an increasing need for in-depth investigation that explores the interplay between behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement within this specific context.

Speaking proficiency is a multifaceted skill that requires not only linguistic competence but also active engagement from learners. Engagement, encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, plays a pivotal role in facilitating language acquisition and oral fluency (Dewaele &

Li, 2021). Behavioral engagement refers to observable actions such as participation in speaking tasks, while cognitive engagement involves mental effort and strategies employed during language production. Emotional engagement, on the other hand, pertains to learners' affective responses, such as interest, enjoyment, and anxiety, which significantly influence their willingness to communicate (Wang, 2022; Sulis, 2022). Understanding how these dimensions of engagement interact across differing levels of language proficiency is crucial for designing effective pedagogical interventions that cater to learners' diverse needs.

Recent research has highlighted the dynamic interplay between engagement and language proficiency in EFL speaking contexts. For instance, Dewaele and Li (2021) found that higher-proficiency learners exhibit greater cognitive engagement, as they are better equipped to employ complex language strategies and self-regulate their learning. Conversely, lower-proficiency learners often struggle with anxiety and reduced emotional engagement, which can hinder their participation in speaking activities (Hwang et al., 2020). Additionally, task design and instructional strategies, such as the use of collaborative tasks and multimedia resources, have been shown to enhance engagement across proficiency levels (Shakki, 2022). However, there remains a paucity of research examining how these dimensions of engagement manifest during real-time speaking tasks, particularly through methodologies like stimulated recall, which can provide deeper insights into learners' thought processes and affective states. This research intended to fill this gap by exploring behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement across differing proficiency levels in an EFL speaking class using a stimulated recall design. Previous research has highlighted the positive relationship between engagement and learning outcomes, indicating that engaged learners are more likely to achieve higher levels of language proficiency. Addressing the research gap in understanding engagement at different proficiency levels within the EFL institutional context carries important implications for language education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Engagement

Engagement is a multifaceted construct that holds significant importance within institutional settings. Its multifaceted nature encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, reflecting students' active participation, emotional investment, and deep understanding in the learning process (Eccles & Wang, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner et al., 2016; Sulis, 2022). Understanding the factors that influence engagement and its impact on language learning outcomes is vital for instructors striving to foster productive learning outcomes and optimize students' language proficiency. Engagement

has consistently demonstrated a strong association with positive language learning outcomes. A comprehensive meta-analysis conducted by Wang (2022) and Sulis (2022) revealed a consistent pattern of improved performance among engaged students compared to their less-engaged peers across various language learning tasks, including vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and oral production. Engaged learners exhibit higher levels of motivation, attentiveness, leading to enhanced information processing and greater retention of language knowledge. Moreover, fostering a sense of engagement in the classroom environment cultivates a positive atmosphere conducive to risk-taking, feedback-seeking, and sustained efforts in language learning endeavors (Sang & Hiver, 2021).

Engagement plays a crucial part in language learning attainment in the EFL classroom within institutional settings. It encompasses various dimensions, including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects, and is influenced by factors such as teachers' instructional practices, peer interaction, and task relevance (Appleton et al., 2008). Engaged learners demonstrate higher levels of motivation, attention, and active involvement, leading to better language learning outcomes (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Continued research in this area is essential to further understand the nuances of engagement and its impact on long-term language proficiency in the EFL classroom (Sadeghi & Gangi, 2022). Teacher scaffolding and learners' attitudes, particularly autonomy, have been identified as significant factors in influencing behavioral components of engagement. Research has shown that teacher support and students' perception of autonomy contribute to changes in engagement and disaffection. The effects of teacher support on engagement are mediated by students' self-perceptions (Flowerday, 2004; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). These findings highlight the importance of understanding the dynamics between emotion and behavior within engagement, as well as the motivational dynamics that occur outside of engagement, involving the social context and self-systems.

2.2. Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement holds significant importance in language learning for EFL students in institutional settings. By comprehending and addressing the emotional processes involved in this context, educators can enhance emotional engagement and facilitate better behavioral and cognitive engagement among students at varying proficiency levels (Sulis, 2022). Recent research provides support for the effectiveness of these strategies in enhancing emotional engagement and promoting language learning outcomes among EFL students. It is crucial for educators to establish a positive emotional climate and provide appropriate support to meet the emotional needs of EFL students at different proficiency levels (Liu & Zhou, 2024).

The role of the teacher in promoting emotional engagement is of utmost importance in language learning. Dewaele and Li (2021) conducted a study on the emotional engagement of EFL learners and emphasized the significance of teacher-student interactions. Their findings revealed that positive and supportive interactions with the teacher significantly enhanced students' emotional engagement. They state that teacher-student interactions characterized by support, encouragement, and positive feedback have a considerable influence on students' emotional engagement, leading to increased motivation and active participation in learning.

2.3. Speaking

Speaking in EFL contexts is a multifaceted skill that requires learners to navigate linguistic, cognitive, and emotional challenges. Recent research has emphasized the importance of task design in fostering engagement and oral proficiency across differing levels of language proficiency. For instance, Shamsini and Komeijani Farahani (2016) examined the effects of task complexity on EFL learners' speaking performance and found that tasks with moderate cognitive demands, which balance challenge and support, significantly enhanced learners' fluency and accuracy. Similarly, Shirazifar et al. (2022) explored the use of collaborative tasks in speaking classes, demonstrating that peer interaction and feedback not only improved linguistic performance but also increased learners' behavioral engagement by encouraging active participation. These studies (e.g., Qiu & Lo, 2017) highlight the need for task designs that are tailored to learners' proficiency levels to maximize engagement and speaking outcomes.

In addition to task design, affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, and self-efficacy play a critical role in shaping learners' engagement in speaking activities. Wang (2022) investigated the impact of teacher-student rapport on learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) and found that positive interpersonal relationships reduced speaking anxiety and increased emotional engagement. Similarly, Dewaele and Li (2021) revealed that teacher enthusiasm and supportive feedback significantly enhanced learners' emotional and behavioral engagement, particularly in speaking tasks. These findings suggest that creating a supportive and motivating classroom environment is essential for fostering engagement across proficiency levels. However, there remains a gap in understanding how these factors interact during real-time speaking tasks, particularly through methodologies like stimulated recall, which can provide deeper insights into learners' cognitive and emotional processes.

2.4. Relevant Empirical Studies

Recent studies conducted after 2020 have further explored the factors influencing behavioral engagement in EFL speaking classes. Zhang (2025) probed teacher immediacy and the learner-instructor rapport on learners' motivation. Teacher immediacy can augment student-teacher intimacy and create more involvement on student part. The findings were indicative of the fact that teacher immediacy significantly improved the learner-instructor relations and resulted in more engagement in class activities. The study found that teacher immediacy fully mediated the link between student motivation and learner involvement. These findings highlight the critical role of teacher immediacy in fostering student engagement, emphasizing that warm, approachable, and supportive teacher behaviors can enhance students' participation, emotional connection, and cognitive involvement in learning. This research underscores the importance of teacher training programs that focus on developing immediacy skills to foster more involving and effective learning milieus.

Özdaş (2022) investigated the relations among the instructors' immediate manners, learners' high school involvement, and many other demographic variables. The researcher adopted a mixed methods research design. The questionnaire was distributed among 340 high schoolers and 60 high schoolers were interviewed. Results demonstrated that learners' academic achievement and their overall engagement significantly correlated with one another. Findings highlight the significance of a general and comprehensive consideration of the determining components related with students' academic performance in general and their overall engagement in classroom activities in particular.

Behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement in EFL classrooms can be influenced by a combination of individual, instructional, and contextual factors. Individual factors, such as motivation and self-regulation, play a critical role in fostering engagement. Reeve and Cheon (2021) conducted a longitudinal study involving 1,200 high school students to examine the impact of autonomy-supportive teaching on engagement. Using a mixed-methods design, they collected data through surveys, classroom observations, and interviews. Their findings revealed that autonomy-supportive practices, such as providing clear instructions and structured activities, significantly enhanced students' behavioral and emotional engagement by promoting a sense of competence and autonomy.

Contextual factors, such as cultural influences and peer interactions, shape students' engagement levels. Wang and Eccles (2011) conducted a cross-sectional study from diverse cultural backgrounds to investigate the role of peer support in engagement. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), they analyzed survey data and found that positive peer interactions

significantly enhanced emotional and behavioral engagement, particularly in collaborative learning environments.

Technology has emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing cognitive and emotional engagement. Barua (2023) conducted mixed-methods research on the way digital storytelling could impact language learning in general and student engagement in particular. The researcher found that digital storytelling significantly improved cognitive engagement by stimulating creativity and critical thinking. Similarly, Kukulska-Hulme (2012) ascertained that technology-enhanced instruction in general and mobile application in particular, could considerably increase learners' overall involvement in classroom discussions and activities through the integration of visual aids and games. Integrating technology in classroom activities can enormously augment their emotional engagement and contribute to enhanced learning outcomes.

To further enhance emotional engagement, educators can implement strategies such as mindfulness-based interventions and growth mindset practices. Hwang et al. (2021) conducted a randomized controlled trial with 200 university students to examine the effects of mindfulness interventions on emotional engagement. Using pre- and post-intervention surveys and physiological measures (e.g., heart rate variability), they found that mindfulness practices reduced stress and anxiety, leading to higher emotional engagement.

Additionally, Hiver et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of fostering a growth mindset through teacher feedback and goal-setting activities, which promote resilience and persistence in learning. Building positive teacher-student relationships and using authentic materials also contribute to a motivating classroom climate. In the same vein, Sadoughi and Hejazi (2021) conducted a study to explore the role of teacher-student rapport in emotional engagement. Through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, they found that supportive teacher-student relationships significantly enhanced students' emotional engagement and motivation.

Recent studies have employed stimulated recall design to investigate engagement in EFL speaking classes. For example, Sulis (2022) utilized stimulated recall interviews to examine students' cognitive engagement during role play activities. Their findings highlighted the influence of task structure and teacher feedback on engagement levels. Similarly, Yuan and Kim (2018) explored the impact of autonomy scaffolding on students' engagement demonstrating that such support significantly affected students' involvement in classroom activities. Stimulated recall design serves as a research methodology that allows participants to reflect on their thoughts, actions, and emotions during a specific task or learning experience (Gass & Mackey, 2016).

By uncovering the interplay between the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement, teachers can design instructional

practices that foster engagement and create a supportive learning environment. This personalized approach can cater to individual learners' needs and preferences, leading to enhanced engagement and improved language learning outcomes (Sulis, 2022). In brief, the lack of comprehensive research on the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement in the EFL institutional context necessitates further investigation. By adopting a stimulated recall design, the research intended to fill this gap and provide valuable insights into learners' engagement experiences. Accordingly, the researchers formulated the following question:

1. What factors do learners identify as influencing their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement during foreign language instruction, and how do these factors vary across different levels of language proficiency?
2. How do these factors interact to either enhance or diminish engagement in the learning process, and what implications might these insights have for instructional strategies and curriculum development in foreign language education?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The chosen research design for this study was the stimulated recall design, which combines classroom observations with stimulated recall interviews. This design was selected due to its suitability for capturing the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of engagement. By using real-time observations and retrospective reflections, the stimulated recall design allowed for a comprehensive exploration of participants' engagement in the EFL institutional context. The choice of a stimulated recall design was underpinned by several rationales. Firstly, the design offers the advantage of capturing engagement within a naturalistic and authentic context. By observing participants in real-time during their EFL learning activities, researchers can capture their spontaneous behaviors and interactions, thereby ensuring the authenticity and ecological validity of the data collected. This real-time observation aspect of the design ensures that the data reflect participants' genuine engagement, mitigating potential biases associated with self-reported perceptions or memories. Secondly, the incorporation of stimulated recall interviews adds a retrospective and introspective dimension to the study. Participants are provided with an opportunity to reflect on their engagement after the completion of the observed activities. This retrospective recall enables participants to access their cognitive and emotional processes, thereby providing deeper insights into their subjective experiences and perceptions of engagement (Gass & Mackey, 2016).

3.2. Participants

A sample size of 21 female and male students was chosen, with seven participants selected from elementary level, eight participants selected from intermediate and six participants selected from advanced level. They were from 14 to 22 years old. Participant selection was crucial to this study to ensure the inclusivity and representativeness of the findings. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with a deliberate focus on including students from three proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate, and advanced. This approach acknowledges the potential variations in engagement across different proficiency levels and allows for a comprehensive examination of engagement in the EFL institutional context. By including participants from various proficiency levels, the study aimed to grasp a wider variety of experiences and perspectives, enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Participants were selected based on specific criteria to ensure their suitability for the study. Firstly, participants were required to express voluntary willingness to participate, ensuring their active engagement and commitment to the research process. This criterion aimed to ensure that participants were genuinely interested in contributing to the study and were motivated to share their experiences and perspectives on engagement in the EFL context. Additionally, participants needed to be available during the designated research period to ensure their full participation in the data collection procedures. The unequal number of the participants in each group can be considered a limitation as the research progressed there were three dropouts due to some unpredictable circumstances.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

The Oxford Placement test (OPT) was utilized to evaluate the English language proficiency of participants, thereby ensuring their uniformity in language skills. The OPT is a widely recognized tool for evaluating the language skills of non-native English speakers, encompassing grammar, vocabulary, and listening comprehension. Its reliability has been well-documented, with studies indicating high internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Almutairi, 2023).

3.3.2. Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted over an eight-week period to capture participants' engagement during various EFL activities. This method provided real-time insights into behavioral engagement, such as participation in group discussions and role-playing exercises. The reliability of classroom observations can be enhanced through clear coding schemes and training for observers to ensure consistent interpretations of behaviors (Graziano & Raulin,

2006). Validity was achieved by ensuring that the observations were directly related to the constructs being measured, such as engagement and interaction.

3.3.3. Video Recordings

Video recordings served as a key instrument to capture detailed classroom dynamics and participants' behaviors. This method allowed for repeated viewing during data analysis to ensure accuracy and reliability in coding engagement-related behaviors. The reliability of video recordings was high due to their ability to provide consistent visual data that can be analyzed multiple times (Gass & Mackey, 2016). Additionally, the validity of this method was supported by its capacity to reflect authentic classroom interactions, thereby accurately representing participants' engagement.

3.3.4. Stimulated Recall Interviews

Stimulated recall interviews were conducted to explore participants' cognitive and emotional engagement during the learning process. Using video recordings as prompts allowed participants to reflect on their thoughts and feelings during specific moments captured in class. The reliability of stimulated recall was enhanced by the use of video stimuli that provide a concrete reference point for participants' reflections (Gass & Mackey, 2016). Validity is established as the method captures genuine insights into participants' internal cognitive processes related to their learning experiences.

3.3.5. Top Notch Textbook Series

Top Notch series, developed by Saslow and Ascher (2011), was also utilized in this study as a core instructional material. This series is designed specifically for English language learners at various proficiency levels and includes a range of engaging activities aimed at fostering communicative competence. The reliability of using established textbooks like *Top Notch* lies in their consistent structure and pedagogical approach across different editions (Saslow & Ascher, 2011).

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

To ensure accurate and detailed data collection, video cameras were strategically positioned in the classroom to capture both the participants' behavior and the overall dynamics of the learning environment. The use of video recordings offered several advantages. Firstly, it allowed for a thorough analysis of participants' behavioral engagement, including their level of participation, interactions with peers, and non-verbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions. Video recordings provided a wealth of visual data that could be systematically analyzed to gain insights into the observable aspects of engagement. As the study was data-driven, researchers extracted the recurrent

themes from the observational data gleaned from the video-recorded speaking classes.

Following the completion of the classroom activities, stimulated recall interviews were conducted individually with each participant. These interviews were semi-structured in nature, providing a flexible framework for questioning while allowing participants to reflect on their engagement during the observed activities. The semi-structured approach ensured that all participants were asked the same core questions while allowing for the exploration of individual experiences and perspectives. The interviews were audio-recorded to accurately capture participants' verbal reflections. The qualitative nature of the data collection procedures allowed for an in-depth exploration of engagement. Table 1 outlines the steps involved in the data collection procedures for exploring engagement in the EFL institutional context.

Table 1

Methodological Steps to Explore Engagement

Step	Description
1.	Define the research objectives and research questions related to engagement in the EFL institutional context
2.	Design an eight-week observation period, carefully selecting EFL learning activities that elicit engagement
3.	Position video cameras strategically in the classroom to capture participants' behavior and the overall dynamics of the learning environment
4.	Conduct classroom observations, ensuring accurate and detailed video recordings of participants' engagement
5.	Transcribe and analyze the audio-recorded interviews to gain insights into participants' mental stratagems, decision-making processes, and emotive events
6.	Develop a semi-structured interview guide for stimulated recall interviews, focusing on participants' cognitive and emotional engagement
7.	Conduct individual stimulated recall interviews with participants, utilizing audio recordings to capture their verbal reflections
8.	Transcribe and analyze the audio-recorded interviews to gain insights into students' cognition, and emotive experiences
9.	Combine the findings from classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of engagement in the EFL institutional context
10.	Interpret the findings in relation to the research objectives and research questions, identifying patterns, themes, and key insights
11.	Discuss the implications of the findings, addressing the multifaceted nature of engagement in the EFL institutional context
12.	Consider limitations and potential biases of the data collection procedures and suggest areas for further research
13.	Prepare a comprehensive research report, documenting the data collection procedures, analysis methods, and findings

3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis is a critical component of this study, aimed at uncovering patterns, themes, and sub-themes related to behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. The data collected from both classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews underwent a rigorous thematic analysis. This comprehensive analytical process involved the data-driven coding and subcategorization of the data to determine recurrent themes that emerged from different contexts. Through this methodological approach, the researchers aimed to uncover nuanced insights into how behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement manifest within an EFL institutional setting. Initially, all observational notes from classroom settings were transcribed verbatim to capture detailed interactions between teachers and students. Concurrently, transcripts from stimulated recall interviews were analyzed for depth of insight into participants' experiences and perceptions regarding their engagement levels.

During the coding process, researchers identified categories such as "active participation and interaction," "personal relevance and motivation," and "cognitive engagement and critical thinking." These categories reflect the overarching themes that emerge from the data, capturing the different dimensions of engagement observed in the example. Further refinement of the analysis led to the identification of sub-themes within each category. For example, under the category of "active participation and interaction," sub-themes include "sharing insights," "asking questions for clarification," and "listening attentively to peers." These sub-themes provided more specific insights into the behaviors and actions associated with engagement in group discussions.

Table 2 provides a visual representation of the steps involved in the thematic analysis process, highlighting the systematic and iterative nature of the analysis. It showcases the progression from familiarization and coding to the development of categories and themes, with ongoing collaboration and refinement throughout the analysis.

Table 2*Visual Representation of the Thematic Analysis Steps*

Thematic Analysis Process	Description
Familiarization	Repeated readings and immersion in the data to develop a nuanced understanding of participants' engagement experiences.
Initial coding	Developing codes to identify patterns, themes, and sub-themes related to behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement.
Categorization	Organizing initial codes into meaningful categories based on similarities and relationships.
Refinement of categories	Further refining categories to generate overarching themes that capture the essence of engagement experiences
Identification of sub-themes	Identifying specific sub-themes within each category to provide more specific insights into observed behaviors and actions
Iterative analysis	Iteratively revisiting and refining codes, categories, and themes as new insights emerge from the data

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

At the elementary level, students rely on peer interactions to seek assistance and navigate challenging tasks. Discussions with classmates provide them with an opportunity to share their difficulties and collectively brainstorm solutions. For example, Matin emphasizes the importance of talking to his peers when he doesn't understand something, engaging in collaborative problem-solving. These social interactions foster cognitive engagement by promoting active participation and the exchange of ideas among elementary EFL students. As EFL students progressed to the intermediate level, they continued to rely on social factors, seeking advice and support from both peers and teachers. Shima exemplifies this by discussing difficult topics with her classmates and seeking clarification from her teacher. Peer study groups and classroom discussions became important avenues for cognitive engagement. Through these interactions, intermediate EFL students deepened their understanding, receive feedback, and engaged in meaningful conversations that enhanced their critical thinking skills.

Even at the advanced level, EFL students recognized the value of social factors in promoting cognitive engagement. Mohammad explains how debates and discussions in his advanced English class enabled him to learn from his peers and receive valuable insights from his teacher. Peer debates, group projects, and teacher facilitation created an environment conducive to cognitive engagement. Advanced EFL students engaged in critical analysis, challenge their thinking through exposure to diverse viewpoints, and construct

well-supported arguments. It is noteworthy that while social factors, particularly those related to peer interactions, contributed significantly to cognitive engagement, factors associated with group and classroom dynamics might not have played a prominent role. Social factors significantly impacted cognitive engagement for EFL students at different proficiency levels. Peer interactions and collaborative problem-solving were particularly important for elementary students, while intermediate and advanced students benefited from both peer and teacher support. These social interactions facilitated active participation, critical thinking, and the exchange of ideas, ultimately enhancing cognitive engagement in the EFL speaking class. Understanding these factors can inform instructional practices and help create a learning environment that promotes active cognitive engagement. By employing strategies that challenge students' thinking, fostering intrinsic motivation and effective learning strategies among students, and creating a collaborative and interactive classroom environment, teachers can enhance cognitive engagement and facilitate deeper learning experiences.

Students reported varied emotional experiences in the language learning process. Elementary students expressed excitement, joy, and enthusiasm during interactive activities. Intermediate students reported occasional frustration or anxiety when faced with challenging tasks. Advanced students emphasized the importance of positive teacher-student relationships and a supportive classroom climate in fostering emotional engagement. This section presents the findings related to the factors that influence emotional engagement within the four EFL lessons. In one lesson, the teacher employed strategies such as group discussions, cooperative learning activities, and storytelling to promote emotional engagement. These strategies aimed to create a positive and supportive classroom environment where students felt connected and emotionally invested in the lesson. For example, during a group discussion, students had the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings, fostering a sense of belonging and emotional connection. Furthermore, the use of authentic and relatable materials in the lessons also contributed to emotional engagement. For instance, in a lesson about cultural diversity, the teacher incorporated literature and videos that depicted diverse characters and their experiences. This representation and inclusivity helped students relate to the content on an emotional level, promoting empathy and understanding.

Individual factors refer to the personal characteristics and dispositions of students that influence emotional engagement. For instance, students who felt a sense of autonomy and control in their learning were more likely to experience emotional engagement. These students were given choices and opportunities to express their preferences and interests, which increased their sense of ownership and emotional investment in the lesson. Additionally, students who had positive relationships with their peers and the teacher

demonstrated higher levels of emotional engagement. These relationships fostered a sense of trust and support, creating a safe space for students to express their emotions and thoughts without fear of judgment. For example, one student, Sara, shared her experience, saying, *"I felt comfortable sharing my ideas in this class because I knew my classmates and teacher were supportive and accepting"*.

Intrapersonal factors refer to the individual characteristics and dispositions that influence emotional engagement. For example, in one lesson, students were learning about cultural issues. Those who had a personal interest in cultural conservation and felt a strong connection to the topic reported higher levels of emotional engagement. Similarly, students who had a positive attitude towards learning English and were motivated to improve their language skills were more emotionally engaged throughout the lessons. One student, Leila, expressed her excitement about the lesson by stating, *"I'm really passionate about saving the traditions, so this lesson was really meaningful to me. I felt emotionally connected and wanted to learn more"*.

At the elementary level, the emotional experiences of students were influenced by factors within themselves, known as intrapersonal factors. These factors played a significant role in shaping positive emotions, such as satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. For instance, when elementary students, like Hasan, perceived progress in their foreign language learning, they experienced a rewarding feeling. This sense of achievement and recognition of their progress served as a motivational factor that enhanced their cognitive engagement. Elementary students derived satisfaction from tangible results and improvements in their language skills. Conversely, negative emotional engagement aroused from unclear instructions and expectations regarding task completion. This led to feelings of nervousness and distress among students. For example, Kimia expressed fear of speaking out due to the potential failure to successfully complete a task. This fear acted as a deterrent to their engagement and participation in the learning process.

Transitioning to the intermediate level, intrapersonal factors continued to influence cognitive engagement and emotional experiences for EFL students. Positive emotions were derived from the perception of progress and accomplishment in their language learning journey. Intermediate students, like Elena, described the motivational impact of witnessing their own improvement and successfully tackling more challenging tasks. This heightened self-awareness of progress enhanced their satisfaction and derived them to actively engage in further learning. However, negative emotional engagement can result from a perceived inability to successfully complete a task. This can lead to feelings of distress and a decrease in effort and participation. Tina, for instance, expressed frustration when she believed she was unable to complete

a task successfully. This frustration negatively affected her overall engagement and motivation.

Even at the advanced level, intrapersonal factors remained influential in cognitive engagement and emotional experiences for EFL students. Positive emotions were derived from the recognition of progress and achievements in the broader context of foreign language learning. Advanced students, like Kamran, highlighted the rewarding feeling of continuous learning and personal growth in language proficiency. This sense of accomplishment served as a strong motivation for further engagement in language learning activities. Nonetheless, negative emotional engagement could have been triggered by uncertainties and doubts surrounding task completion. Advanced students might have experienced distress and reduced effort when they perceived a lack of clarity in instructions or expectations. Fatima, for example, expressed anxiety and worry when faced with unclear task requirements. These negative emotions could have hindered her engagement and willingness to participate.

As students progressed to the intermediate level, the influence of social factors on their enjoyment and engagement in the EFL classroom remained significant. The dynamics shaped by peers and teachers had a lasting impact on their appreciation of the lesson over extended periods. For example, Vida, an intermediate-level student, emphasized the positive influence of collaborative group work on her enjoyment of the lesson. Working together with peers not only enhanced her understanding of the lesson content, but also created a sense of belonging and camaraderie, contributing to her overall enjoyment and engagement. However, negative emotional engagement also aroused from social factors at this level. Peer pressure and judgment significantly impacted students' emotional experiences. Hussein mentioned feeling anxious and self-conscious when he perceived that his classmates were evaluating him. This fear of judgment hampered his willingness to take risks and actively participate, ultimately affecting his overall engagement and enjoyment. Fahime, an advanced-level student, highlighted the positive influence of a supportive and inclusive classroom environment on her enjoyment of the lesson. The encouragement and respect shown by her classmates and teacher created a positive atmosphere that fostered her emotional engagement and motivated her to actively participate in classroom tasks. Nevertheless, negative emotional engagement at the advanced level was influenced by social factors. Peer competition, for instance, triggered feelings of anxiety and self-doubt. Kiarash mentioned feelings overwhelmed by the pressure to outperform his classmates that affected his emotional and behavioral engagement in the lesson. This negative emotional experience hindered his ability to fully enjoy and engage with the lesson content.

4.2 Discussion

Social factors, particularly the dynamics within the classroom shaped by both peers and educators, significantly influenced the emotional experiences and overall enjoyment of EFL students across varying proficiency levels. Positive social dynamics—characterized by mutual support, collaboration, and a nurturing classroom environment—served to enhance students' emotional engagement and enjoyment of the learning experience. Conversely, negative social factors, such as peer comparison, judgment, and competition, might have induced anxiety and impeded both emotional and behavioral engagement. It is imperative for educators to recognize these social dynamics and endeavor to establish a positive and inclusive classroom environment that promotes students' emotional well-being and enhances their overall engagement and enjoyment in the EFL learning context. One probable justification for the superior cognitive engagement of advanced EFL learners could be ascribed to their highly-developed schemata and their overhauled cognitive capacity. The better emotional involvement of such students can also be attributed to the interactive nature inherent in advanced speaking classes.

The influence of social factors on EFL students' emotional experiences and overall appreciation of the lesson was a significant aspect to consider at different proficiency levels. Within the classroom, the dynamics shaped by peers and teachers played a pivotal role in shaping students' enjoyment of the lesson. These dynamics, which are more stable compared to task-related factors (Amini, 2015), could have a more far-reaching impact that extends beyond individual lessons and is experienced over longer periods of time, such as weeks or months. For instance, Samin, a student at the elementary level, emphasized the importance of mutual support from peers in enhancing her enjoyment of the lesson. Being part of a small group where students were familiar with each other creates a supportive environment, enabling her to seek help when needed without hesitation. On the other hand, negative engagement can arise from social factors as well. One social factor that has been identified as triggering anxiety among EFL students is peer comparison. When students perceive themselves as less competent than their classmates, they experience a sense of pressure and intimidation, leading to a reluctance to actively participate in class discussions. This negative emotional experience not only affects their emotional engagement but also has consequences for their behavioral engagement.

The findings indicate that behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement are interconnected dimensions that play crucial roles in language acquisition. This aligns with recent studies, such as those by Hemati and Farahian (2024), which emphasize the importance of collaborative learning strategies in enhancing classroom engagement among EFL learners. Their research demonstrated that collaborative writing through tools like Google

Docs significantly improved students' engagement, suggesting that interactive and technology-enhanced methods can foster deeper involvement in language learning.

The emotional dimension of engagement observed in this study further supports the assertion made by Salih and Omar (2022) regarding the role of positive emotional experiences in fostering student motivation and participation. The findings indicate that students who felt emotionally connected to their learning tasks demonstrated higher levels of engagement, which is congruent with previous research highlighting the impact of emotional factors on learning outcomes (Reeve, 2012). This suggests that educators should not only focus on cognitive and behavioral aspects, but also actively cultivate an emotionally supportive classroom atmosphere to enhance overall engagement.

Additionally, the use of stimulated recall interviews as a methodological tool provided unique insights into students' cognitive processes during language learning activities. This approach aligns with contemporary research advocating for reflective practices in education (Gass & Mackey, 2016). By allowing students to articulate their thoughts and feelings about their learning experiences, educators can gain deeper insights into how engagement manifests in real-time contexts. This reflective practice serves to inform instructional design, enabling educators to modify their teaching strategies in order to more effectively address the diverse needs of their students. Furthermore, the findings of this study might add to the expanding corpus of literature that underscores the significance of integrating technology into EFL instruction. Recent research on online learning environments (e.g., Salih & Omar, 2024) highlights that the incorporation of digital tools can significantly enhance students' behavioral and emotional engagement by offering interactive platforms conducive to collaboration. This supports the premise that technology can facilitate more engaging and dynamic learning experiences for EFL learners.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study might have significant implications for EFL educators and practitioners, providing valuable insights into effective strategies for promoting and sustaining student engagement in the classroom. The findings highlight that such activities not only enhance students' motivation but also facilitate their active participation in the lesson. Incorporating student-centered and communicative language teaching approaches allows for a more dynamic and engaging learning environment, where students can actively practice and apply their language skills. By providing opportunities for meaningful interaction and authentic communication, educators can stimulate students' interest and promote their engagement with the language learning process.

Another significant pedagogical implication of this study is the need to cultivate a positive and inclusive classroom atmosphere. The findings emphasize that students' engagement is influenced by their perception of being supported and valued in the learning environment. Educators ought to endeavor to cultivate constructive relationships with their students, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and establishing a secure environment in which students feel empowered to articulate their thoughts and take risks in their language acquisition process. By creating a supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere, educators can facilitate an environment that enhances student engagement and promotes their holistic well-being.

Furthermore, the interrelationships between behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement highlight the importance of a balanced approach to fostering student engagement. Educators should not only focus on cognitive engagement, such as promoting critical thinking and deep understanding of the content, but also consider students' emotional experiences. This balanced approach recognizes the interconnected nature of the different dimensions of engagement and promotes a holistic learning experience for students. In addition, the findings underscore the significance of task design and course structure in promoting student engagement. Educators should carefully design tasks that are meaningful, relevant, and aligned with students' interests and needs. By providing tasks that are challenging yet achievable, educators can stimulate students' curiosity and motivation, leading to increased engagement. Moreover, a well-structured and coherent course with clear learning objectives and progressive content positively influences student engagement.

There are several areas that warrant further investigation. The following recommendations for future research can help expand our understanding of student engagement and inform effective pedagogical practices. Firstly, future research should focus on exploring the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies and interventions in promoting student engagement in the EFL classroom. Comparative studies could be conducted to evaluate the impact of different instructional approaches on student engagement, taking into account variables such as task design, classroom management techniques, and student-teacher interaction. Secondly, it is crucial to investigate the role of individual differences, such as language proficiency and motivation, in shaping engagement patterns. This study has emphasized the multidimensionality of engagement, but further research is needed to examine how these individual differences interact with the different dimensions of engagement. Understanding how language proficiency and motivation influence engagement can help educators tailor their instructional practices to meet the diverse needs of students and enhance their engagement in the language learning process. Thirdly, longitudinal studies could be conducted to examine the stability and development of engagement over an

extended period. Furthermore, future research should explore the impact of cultural and contextual factors on student engagement in different EFL settings. This study has focused on a specific context, but engagement patterns may vary across different cultural and educational contexts. Comparative studies could be conducted to examine how cultural values, educational policies, and classroom dynamics influence student engagement.

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