Factors Influencing Non-English Major Tertiary Students' Engagement in Vietnamese EFL Classes: An Investigation

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ABSTRACT

Student engagement plays a vital role in their performance in in-class activities. The importance of student engagement in a foreign language class has been proved in many prior studies. Most of them have mainly focused on students' and teachers' perceptions towards student engagement in learning English. However, the current paper quantitively analyzed factors affecting student engagement and its correlation between variables. There are two research questions: 1) What factors influence non-English major tertiary students in Vietnamese EFL class; and 2) To what extent do those factors correlate with non-English major students' engagement in English classrooms? The study's questionnaire was delivered to 83 non-English major tertiary students studying in a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The findings found that motivation made a more significant contribution to student engagement than the three others (e.g., teacher-student interaction, family engagement, and peer support for learning). In this paper, the correlations between student engagement and those factors were found to be significantly positive. Based on the results, the present study's implication was that teachers and school managers should form a strong relationship with students' parents to manage their learning process and share education opinions related to boosting student engagement in EFL classrooms. The study also suggested more future research investigating influences of student engagement with different methods to generalize this field.

Keywords: Student engagement, non-English major tertiary students, EFL.

1   Introduction

In learning a foreign language, student engagement is considered one of the critical factors influencing students' learning outcomes (Wong, 2013). Many scholars and researchers from previous studies found that there are strong links between student engagement and their academic performance, e.g., Bakker, Vergel, & Kuntze (2015); Salanova et al. (2010); Dotterer & Lowe (2011).

According to Nystrand & Gamoran (1992), student engagement is defined as "students' willingness to participate in routine school activities, such as attending classes, submitting required work, and following teachers' directions in class" (p.14). Christenson, Reschly, and Wiley (2012) state that engagement is demonstrated by how an individual student gets involved with learning activities. It should be from that student's desire and intention in learning. Students who are more engaged in learning seem to be more academically fruitful. Moreover, with the high level of student engagement, students are less likely to quit their classes (Lei, Cui, and Zhou, 2018). Therefore, boosting student engagement is a fundamental goal that educators attempt to achieve in their teaching.

Especially in second language acquisition (SLA), student engagement plays a crucial role as an individual with strong involvement in their class is ready to participate in purposeful activities, which directly improve their learning quality (Heng, 2014). Philp and Duchesne (2016) assume that engagement in learning L2 requires learners' language awareness and attention to the given tasks. They also suppose that engagement reflects their attention and their participation in three dimensions, including cognitive, social-behavioral,

and affective dimensions. In the same vein, Harper and Quaye (2009a) claim that students' engagement in learning a language is defined to be more than their involvement because it requires their emotions and sensemaking in the tasks. Hiver, Al-Hoorie, and Mercer (2020) also confirm that engagement is considered as "the major force of learning" (p.48); therefore, illuminating factors influencing student engagement has become more necessary for researchers to make a considerable contribution to related theories and practice. Exploring the predictors of student engagement seems to allow school administrators and educators to involve students in learning more successfully (Hiver, Al-Hoorie, and Mercer, 2020).

Consequently, the present study aims to discover influences impacting non-English major tertiary students' engagement in the Vietnamese EFL class. Moreover, the study also aims to investigate the relationship between student engagement and those factors accounting for student engagement. With mentioned purposes, the study has two research questions:

1. What factors influence non-English major tertiary students in Vietnamese EFL class?
2. To what extent do those factors correlate with non-English major students' engagement in English classrooms?

2 Literature Review

2.1 What is Student Engagement?

According to Kuh (2009), the notion of student engagement has been identified as one of the main factors influencing desirable learning outcomes in the last two decades. Nevertheless, there is a variation in the definition and methods used to measure student engagement from study to study. Generally, the term engagement is defined as students' commitment or involvement in purposeful education activities (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Particularly, it is described as their participation in learning, such as attending the class, submitting given assignments, and following the teacher's instructions. Additionally, students' engagement is related to their interest, motivation, and endeavor to complete the task on time (Bulger, Mayer, Almeroth, & Blau, 2008). In other words, student engagement has a positive link with a number of desired outcomes, e.g., perseverance, high academic achievement, and student satisfaction, because the more learners spend time studying a subject and paying attention to accomplish given tasks, the more knowledge they will acquire (Ko et al., 2016). Similarly, the more they interact with their teachers and faculty, the deeper they understand what they are learning in that subject.

2.2 Dimension of Student Engagement

According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), student engagement is described as a multidimensional concept since it directly relates to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. In other words, student engagement is discussed in all these dimensions based on how students think (cognitive aspect), behave (behavioral aspect), and feel (emotional aspect). With different education levels, student engagement is supposed to vary in specific contexts. In the present study, student engagement was investigated in the context of higher education.

Regarding the dimension of behavioral engagement, student participation and involvement in educationally purposeful activities play a vital role in achieving their academic outcomes (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Behavioral engagement is considered one of the most typical indicators which are used in applications and research because it is more easily measurable and observable than cognitive and emotional engagement (Krause and Coates 2008). Behavioral engagement is presented through students' attendance in classes, participation in inside and outside education activities, and their effort to complete their assignments (Appleton et al., 2006; Groccia, 2018). An individual is evaluated to be positively engaged when he is

observed to ask questions, be interactive with his teacher and classmates in-class tasks, pay attention to lessons, and make an effort (Handelsman et al. 2005; Lei, Cui & Zhou, 2018).

In terms of cognitive engagement, Sutherland (2010) states that it has a relation with students' approaches and awareness of their learning. It refers to students' investment in learning, valuing their academic goals, learning motivation, identifying learning strategies, planning, and self-regulating. As Lee (2020) claims, students with cognitive engagement are ones who have "thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills" (p.54). Lee (2020) adds cognitively engaged students are likely to be aware of their learning responsibility, so they often invest their time entirely and make every endeavor in learning to meet academic requirements.

The last dimension is emotional engagement. Kraft & Dougherty (2013) suppose that students' emotional engagement refers to their positive and negative reactions to things directly related to their learning, including school, teachers, and peers. Lee (2020) advocates that emotional engagement impacts students' way they attribute themselves to their school and class. Moreover, this dimension is presented to have a relation with students' willingness to complete their work. Particularly, students with positive emotional engagement seem to have a sense of belonging, excitement, and enjoyment in their learning. In contrast, students who have negative emotional engagement often feel bored and demotivated while studying, and even drop out of school. Altogether, the three aforementioned dimensions play an essential role for scholars and educators in student engagement, which might contribute to their understanding and evaluation of student engagement levels.

2.3   The Importance of Student Engagement

In recent years, understanding student engagement has received significant attention from not only scholars but also teachers and school administrators, which might grow their awareness of the relation between disengagement and the risk of dropping out. According to Shah and Cheng (2019), student engagement is regarded as a fundamental goal of school improvement because there is a positive correlation between engagement and students' achievement. On the other hand, dropping out has been presented to negatively correlate with the tendency of dropping out of school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004). In the report of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2004), there is a dramatic decrease in engagement in the student process from upper elementary grades to high school with a high proportion of 60 percent. Therefore, measuring student engagement levels is necessary to help educators diagnose at-risk students who are disengaged (Chiu, 2021).

2.4   Factors Influencing Student Engagement

2.4.1   Teacher-Student Interaction

Among factors influencing student engagement, teacher-student interaction is considered a significant contribution to in-class engagement because the difference in engagement level depends on the teacher's behavior and teaching style (Coates, 2005). Jang et al. (2010) claim that "when students engage in classroom learning, there are almost always some aspects of the teacher's behavior that plays a role in the initiation and regulation of the engagement" (p. 588). In other words, the influence of teacher-student interaction on students' engagement becomes more explicit through their participation and academic achievement. In Reyes et al.'s (2012) study, it was found that student engagement positively relates to classroom emotional climate and academic performance. Particularly, students seem to get more involved with supportive teachers who will construct a positive emotional atmosphere in the class. Reyes et al. (2012) state students feel "more connected and engaged in learning and become more successful academically" (p.709).

2.4.2 Family Engagement

Regarding influences of engagement, parent involvement is presented as a good predictor of how well students participate in a specific subject's in-class activities since parents play a vital role in shaping the children's behaviors and attitudes in learning (Mutch & Collins, 2012). Wang and Neihart (2015) advocate parents tend to be students' company to praise their efforts and provide various compensation and effective learning strategies, which could "help them persevere through frustration" (p.156). Therefore, family engagement should be indicated as one of the main factors affecting student engagement because it results in the attainment of a harmonious partnership between parents and schools to boost their children's engagement in learning.

2.4.3 Peer Support for Learning

Interestingly, Wentzel (1994) supposes that peer support is necessary for language learners to learn a foreign language as they spend a significant amount of time with their friends practicing. Moreover, learners supported by their classmates are likely to be more actively engaged and make more effort in their academic work (Kiefer, Alley, and Ellerbrock, 2015). Therefore, learners in a supportive environment created by their peers might feel interested in learning, which contributes to the enhancement of learning outcomes.

2.4.4 Motivation

To learn a foreign language effectively, motivation is described as a necessary pre-requisite element to increase student engagement in classes. As Lin, Hung, and Chen (2019) states, the triggering of motivation could initiate students' potentially productive engagement in learning. The more motivated they are, the more engaged they are in studying, participating in-class activities, and completing given tasks, which leads to higher academic achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2009). Reeve and Lee (2014) advocate students who are engaged with learning materials could develop their autonomous motives. Reeve (2012) also found that there is a predictive relationship between a supportive and motivating environment and student engagement in classes. Generally, motivation has a mutual influence on student engagement, so each of them cannot be separated from the other (Akbari et al., 2016).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In this paper, a quantitative approach was employed to analyze the collected data. For instance, to explore the factors impacting student engagement, the data from the questionnaire was be analyzed in the descriptive statistic approach. Moreover, the relationship between factors and student involvement was scrutinized with Pearson coefficient correlation in SPSS version 22.0.

3.2 Sampling

There were 83 non-English students studying at a public university in district 10 of Ho Chi Minh city. In the sample, there were 51 third-year students (61%), 18 first-year students (22%), and 14 fourth-year students (17%). Their majors were mainly logistics, marketing, biological technology, information technology, business management. Those participants have 60 periods of English in their whole semester.

3.3 Research Instruments

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire was employed in this study. The questionnaire was divided into three main parts. Part one with four items related to their personal information. Part two regarding factors affecting student engagement in English classrooms was the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) adapted from Appleton, Christenson, and their colleagues (Appleton et al., 2006; Christenson et al., 2008) with 19 items. The result of SEI's Cronbach Alpha was .952, which refers to this scale's high reliability and validity

(Bonett & Wright, 2015). The last part was about the measurement of student engagement in classrooms, which was modified from the Burch Engagement Survey for Students (BESS) developed by Burch et al. (2015) with 11 items. After running piloting, the Cronbach Alpha result of BESS was so high with the value of .963. Before conducting the main study, the questionnaire was examined related to its content, grammar, and wordings by three experienced English teachers. Then it was piloted by being delivered to 15 non-English major students excluded the sample; therefore, the researcher could have a practical adjustment for her main study.

3.4   Data Analysis

In this study, the descriptive statistics in SPSS were used to analyze the factors impacting student engagement and measure student engagement in classroom activities. The study also used Pearson product-moment correlation to explore the relationship between student involvement and its influences.

4   Findings and Discussion

The primary purposes of the current paper were to illuminate the influences of student engagements and understand non-English major students' perceptions towards student engagement in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. To fulfill the first aim, the data computed in SPSS was presented in the following tables.

4.1   Factor Most Influencing Student Engagement

As presented in the literature, influences were categorized into four factors, including teacher-student interaction, family engagement, peer support, and motivation.

4.1.1   Gap width of Likert scale:

Item description	Score range
Strongly agree	4.21 – 5.00
Agree	3.41 – 4.20
Neutral	2.61 – 3.40
Disagree	1.81 – 2.60
Strongly disagree	1–1.80

4.1.2   Teacher-Student Interaction

Table 1: *Teacher-student interaction*

Item	Content	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Teacher often holds interesting activities in English class.	3.83	.085
2	Teacher often cares about my pronunciation.	4.11	.892
3	Teacher often has a variety of exercises for me to improve my language skill.	4.00	.982
4	Teacher often encourages me to join in communicating activities with my partners.	4.11	.878
5	Teacher often provides feedback about my assignment.	4.00	.030
6	I like my English teacher's teaching method.	3.86	.946
	Average Mean	3.99	.969

As shown in Table 1, the average mean score of this influence was 3.99 (with SD=.969). It means all students agreed that teacher-student interaction influences their engagement in English classrooms. Particularly, item 2 and item 4 with the highest mean score (M=4.11, SD=.892, and SD=.878 respectively) interpreted the participants agreed that their teacher not only focused on teaching students carefully about pronunciation but also stimulated them to work with the partners in the English activities. They were also in agreement that their teacher regularly held various communicating activities (item 3 with M=4.00, SD=.982) and gave them supportive feedback (item 5 with M=4.00, SD=1.030) to enhance their communication competence.

4.1.3 Motivation

Table 2: *Motivation*

Item	Content	Mean	Std. Deviation
7	I want to achieve my academic goal.	4.90	.490
8	I want to use English in my daily conversations with my partners.	4.07	.629
9	I want more opportunities to seek a better job in the future.	4.96	.583
10	I am aware of the importance of English in my life.	4.46	.535
11	I am hopeful about my future with my improved English proficiency.	4.84	.484
	Average Mean	4.67	.544

In Table 2, it is clear that motivation was completely admitted to being an influence of student engagement in the classroom as its average mean score was 4.67 (with SD=.544). The highest mean score (item 9 with M=4.96, SD = 0.583) showed the participants felt motivated to learn English because they wanted to find a better job in the future. Another reason increasing their learning English motivation that the participants strongly agreed with was to gain a high score in that subject (item 7 with M=4.90, SD=.490). Only item 8 (M=4.07, SD = .629) interpreted that those participants agreed to involve in English class due to communicating with their classmates.

4.1.4 Family Engagement

Family engagement, one of the factors impacting student engagement, was discussed in Table 3. The average mean score illustrated in table 3 was 3.73 (with SD=.744), which means the participants agreed that their family plays a crucial role in student engagement in English class. Notably, they strongly agree that they were often supported to learn English by their family (M=4.48, SD= .799). However, they had neutral opinions about their family's encouragement in difficulties of learning English and extra-curriculum activities in English club as their mean score of item13 and item 14 were 3.26 and 3.08, respectively.

Table 3: *Family engagement*

Item	Content	Mean	Std. Deviation
12	My family supports my studying.	4.48	.799
13	My family often encourages me to keep trying when things are tough at school.	3.26	.823
14	My family often encourages me to participate in my school's extra-curriculum activities in the English club.	3.08	.415
15	My family often gives some advice about future jobs related to using English.	4.10	.939
	Average mean	3.73	.744

4.1.5   Peer Support for Learning

Table 4: *Peer support for learning*

Item	Content	Mean	Std. Deviation
16	I enjoy practicing speaking English with my friends.	4.11	.865
17	My classmates respect what I have to say in English.	4.07	.861
18	My partners are enthusiastic about giving me peer assessments.	3.34	.998
19	My classmates are willing to help me when I ask them about English tasks.	4.11	.761
	Average mean	3.91	.871

Table 4 presents that the average mean score of peer support for learning was 3.91 (SD=.871). It refers that the participants agreed this factor affects their engagement in English class. Both item 16 and item 19 had the highest mean score with M=4.11, which means they were in agreement because they felt interested in communicating with their classmates in English and often received peer support for their difficulties in learning that language. In the table, the respondents only had neutral opinions about item 18 regarding peer assessment (with M= 3.34, SD= .998).

4.1.6   The Correlation Between Student Engagement and Factors Accounting for Student Engagement

To investigate the relationships between influences and student engagement, Pearson product-moment correlation in SPSS was employed. The data of those relationships were interpreted in the following Table.

Table 5: *The correlation between student engagement and factors influencing student engagement*

Correlations

		STUDENT_EN GAGEMENT	PEER_SUPPORT	MOTIVATION	FAMILY_SUPPORT	INTERACTION
STUDENT_ENGAGEM ENT	Pearson Correlation	1	.720**	.755**	.603**	.691**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	83	83	83	83	83
PEER_SUPPORT	Pearson Correlation	.720**	1	.658**	.686**	.719**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	83	83	83	83	83
MOTIVATION	Pearson Correlation	.755**	.658**	1	.810**	.569**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	83	83	83	83	83
FAMILY_SUPPORT	Pearson Correlation	.603**	.686**	.810**	1	.595**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	83	83	83	83	83
INTERACTION	Pearson Correlation	.691**	.719**	.569**	.595**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	83	83	83	83	83

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As shown in Table 5, it is clear that the relationship between influences and student engagement was significantly positive because the correlation value (r) was in the range from .603 to .755 with p<.01. Moreover, as Cohen (1988) mentions, the strength of a correlation is identified as strong if the r value is over .5. Therefore, it refers those factors had a great contribution to student participation in English classrooms. Significantly, the correlation between motivation and student engagement was the highest with r=.755, which means that respondents were engaged in their EFL classrooms because of some particular learning goals.

5   Discussion

Research Question 1: What are factors influencing non-English major tertiary students in Vietnamese EFL classes?

Based on the displayed data, the mean scores of those factors were summed up in the table 6. It is clearly illustrated that learning motivation had the highest rank with M=4.67. It refers that the respondents would be more committed and active if they could identify the specific purposes and goals for their English learning. Most of them strongly admitted that they were engaged in class activities because they wanted to have better opportunities in seeking their future jobs. The importance of English in prospective careers

realized by those tertiary students could contribute to student engagement. Moreover, from the calculated data, the participants admitted that they would be motivated to achieve high academic performance. It could lead to the increase in their behavioral engagement in learning through participating in English tasks or completing the assignments. This finding was in the same line with the results of Saeed & Zyngier's (2012) study in which engaged students make an effort to be involved in their task despite challenges and difficulties.

Table 6: *Ranks of influences affecting student engagement*

Categories	Overall mean score	Rank
Teacher – Student Interaction	3.99	2
Family Engagement	3.73	4
Learning Motivation	4.67	1
Peer Support for Learning	3.91	3

The second factor identified to impact non-English major tertiary students' involvement significantly was teacher-student interaction. Based on analyzed figures, it refers those students would be more engaged if their teacher often stimulates them to join English speaking activities or help them improve their pronunciation. They would be more excited about various interesting activities held in the English classroom. While learning a foreign language, the teacher's supportive feedback which could increase their involvement in learning.

Although the rest factors, family engagement and peer support for learning, did not have a considerable effect like the discussed factors, it could not be denied their importance in raising student engagement in learning English. Both family engagement and peer support could become a great encouragement for students in their learning journey as their companies when they encounter difficulties. In the study of Bradley, Ferguson, and Zimmer-Gembeck (2021), parental support and peer encouragement are considered as a foundation for the student to get involved and achieve high performance in their learning process.

In general, the importance of each influence could not be ignored, although learning motivation had a slight dominance over the rest factors in the current study's result. Therefore, to increase student engagement in EFL classes, those factors should not be considered separately, which might provide educators and scholars with a full insight into student involvement.

Research Question 2: To what extent do those factors correlate with non-English major students' engagement in English classrooms?

As computed earlier in table 4, there were significant positive correlations between student engagement and the factors accounting for student engagement. Particularly, the correlation value of learning motivation was higher than the three others. It refers that the more motivated they felt, the higher level of involvement in English activities they have. If they could identify their specific learning goal, they would keep motivated in their learning. They seem to attempt to complete given assignments, actively join in in-class activities, pay attention to lectures, and attend all sessions with motivation. These actions that they perform in learning might interpret that they have high student engagement. This was entirely consistent with the prior studies, such as Saeed & Zyngier (2012), Nayir (2017), Senior et al. (2018). These studies indicate that students with

high motivation had an authentic engagement in group work or individual tasks, which were beneficial for learning.

Similar to learning motivation, teacher-student interaction, peer support for learning, and family engagement also strongly correlated with student engagement. This finding supported the results of previous research. For example, in the study of Kraft & Dougherty (2013), parents' behavior and attitude regarding their children's learning influence student involvement. According to Qudsyi, Sa'diyah, and Mahara (2020), family becomes integral to a child's educational development. The more parents encourage their children to learn a foreign language through explicit actions such as watching English programs or using English in daily communication, the more interest in learning those children could have (Swanson and Collins, 2012).

Regarding teacher-student interaction, Reyes et al. (2012) found there was a positive correlation between classroom climate, student engagement, and academic achievement. Reyes and colleagues (2012) claim that individuals' involvement is often formed if they felt "more connected and engaged in learning, and [became] more successful academically" (p.709). In terms of peer support for learning, Qudsyi, Sa'diyah, and Mahara (2016) claim that supportive peers could influence student engagement behavior. The more assistance students receive from their classmates while learning English, the more motivation they have in improving their English competence.

6   Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to discover the factors affecting student engagement in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. With two research questions, the study employed a quantitative method to identify the influences of student engagement and the correlation between student engagement and those factors. Based on the analyzed data, the present study found that motivation had more significant impact on student involvement than the three others. From the study, it was illustrated clearly what motivated non-English major tertiary students was to seek a promising job in the future. Moreover, the result also revealed that all those factors had a strongly positive correlation with student engagement. It could refer that each factor made a great contribution to students' involvement in English activities. Although motivation was indicated as the most considerable influence among the four, student engagement could not be formed without one of them.

From discussed findings, this paper hopes to provide a full insight about student involvement to students, educators, and school administrators; therefore, they could raise their awareness of student engagement in teaching and learning English. In particular, both teachers and administrators could develop a strong bond with students' family, which might increase student involvement. Furthermore, teachers could consider peer support a dynamic factor supporting students' participation in in-class activities.

In this study, the limitation is the number of participants as they were a convenient sample that the research could approach. Thus, in future studies, other research should employ a great volume of respondents to generalize the results. Moreover, this paper hopes there will have more future research which investigates student engagement in different methods as this element could be regarded as a good predictor for academic achievement.

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7   Appendices

7.1   Factor "Teacher-Student Interaction"

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
F1	30	1	5	3.83	.895
F2	30	2	5	4.11	.892
F3	30	2	5	4.00	.982
F4	30	3	5	4.11	.878
F5	30	2	5	4.00	.030
F6	30	2	5	3.86	.946
Valid N (listwise)	30				

7.2   Factor "Motivation"

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
F7	30	4	5	4.90	.490
F8	30	3	5	4.07	.629
F9	30	3	5	4.96	.583
F10	30	3	5	4.46	.535
F11	30	3	5	4.84	.484
Valid N (listwise)	30				

7.3   Factor "Family Engagement"

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
F12	30	3	5	4.48	.799
F13	30	3	5	3.26	.823
F14	30	3	5	3.08	.415
F15	30	3	5	4.10	.939
Valid N (listwise)	30				

7.4   Factor "Peer Support"

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
F16	30	3	5	4.11	.865
F17	30	2	5	4.07	.861
F18	30	3	5	3.34	.998
F19	30	3	5	4.11	.761
Valid N (listwise)	30				

7.5   Cronbach Alpha of Factors

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.952	19

7.6   Cronbach Alpha of Student Engagement

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.963	11