
8-6-2023

Uncovering University Teachers' Perspectives: Conceptualizations, Factors, and Perceptions of Second Language Learner Engagement

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Recommended APA Citation

Alzaanin, E. I. (2023). Uncovering University Teachers' Perspectives: Conceptualizations, Factors, and Perceptions of Second Language Learner Engagement. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(8), 2230-2257.
<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5996>

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Abstract

Second language (L2) learner engagement has been a key theme in applied linguistics over the past two decades; however, teachers' voices have been largely absent from L2 learner engagement research. In addition, little is known about what learner engagement means to L2 language teachers. Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, this study aims to capture the conceptualizations of learner engagement and the perceptions of the factors facilitating or hindering learner engagement in L2 learning in a Saudi university context, as expressed by 12 English as a Foreign Language university (EFL) teachers. The data analysis method used was inductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that, for the participating teachers, learner engagement is a multifaceted concept, although it was commonly seen in terms of the behavioral and affective dimensions. Teachers' perceptions of the factors that facilitate or hinder the promotion of learner engagement were also explored, and among these, the most salient factors were learners' attributes and behaviors, teachers' pedagogical practices, student-teacher rapport, social context, institutional policies, and broader educational system. This study underscores the urgent need to acknowledge the importance of L2 teachers' perceptions of learner engagement within and beyond the EFL classroom. It emphasizes the crucial role of continuous professional development in empowering teachers to enhance their skills in engaging learners and effectively addressing the challenges they face.

Keywords

L2 learner engagement, student-related factors, student–teacher rapport, contextual factors

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Acknowledgements

The author extends her appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University for funding this work through Small Group Research Project under grant number (RGP1/308/44) I am grateful to the wonderful teachers who shared their conceptualizations about language learner engagement with me.

Uncovering University Teachers' Perspectives: Conceptualizations, Factors, and Perceptions of Second Language Learner Engagement

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Second language (L2) learner engagement has been a key theme in applied linguistics over the past two decades; however, teachers' voices have been largely absent from L2 learner engagement research. In addition, little is known about what learner engagement means to L2 language teachers. Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, this study aims to capture the conceptualizations of learner engagement and the perceptions of the factors facilitating or hindering learner engagement in L2 learning in a Saudi university context, as expressed by 12 English as a Foreign Language university (EFL) teachers. The data analysis method used was inductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that, for the participating teachers, learner engagement is a multifaceted concept, although it was commonly seen in terms of the behavioral and affective dimensions. Teachers' perceptions of the factors that facilitate or hinder the promotion of learner engagement were also explored, and among these, the most salient factors were learners' attributes and behaviors, teachers' pedagogical practices, student-teacher rapport, social context, institutional policies, and broader educational system. This study underscores the urgent need to acknowledge the importance of L2 teachers' perceptions of learner engagement within and beyond the EFL classroom. It emphasizes the crucial role of continuous professional development in empowering teachers to enhance their skills in engaging learners and effectively addressing the challenges they face.

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Introduction

While learner engagement in general education is well-documented, research into learner engagement in the second language (L2) classroom is still underdeveloped (Henry & Thorsen, 2020; Hoi, 2022). Mercer and Dornyei (2020) attribute this neglect in the L2 literature, among other reasons, to the fact that motivation has been the primary construct when discussing students' overall academic commitment and attitudes towards L2 learning. Consequently, this emphasis on motivation has stolen the show and diverted attention away from engagement (p. 5) and its importance in the L2 context. Jang et al. (2010) acknowledge that engagement acts as a behavioural pathway through which students' motivational processes contribute to their subsequent learning and development, encompassing the acquisition of skills and academic performance (p. 588). Thus, what differentiates engagement from motivation is its association with observable actions and behaviours. Mere motivation is insufficient to actively keep learners focused amidst the numerous distractions in their lives. Research shows that “multifarious benefits occur when students are engaged in their own learning, including

increased motivation and achievement” (Sinatra et al., 2015, p. 1). Hiver et al. (2021b) stress that learner engagement is strongly embedded in the paradigms of communicative and constructivist language learning and teaching, which emphasize the importance of language use and interaction in facilitating language development. Thus, the development and mastery of L2 are not possible without genuine L2 learner engagement.

Most L2 learner engagement research has focused on how learners engage in tasks in the context of language classrooms (e.g., Aubrey et al., 2020; Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Sulis, 2022) or has explored engagement with language itself (e.g., Svalberg, 2009, 2018). At times, research has focused on L2 learner engagement with written feedback and the factors that influence uptake of teacher written feedback (Chong, 2019; Coyle & Roca De Larios, 2020; Han, 2019; Han & Hyland, 2019) or on the factors that facilitate or hinder learner engagement (Angelovska et al., 2021; Aubrey et al., 2022; Jang et al., 2010; Kabooha & Elyas, 2015; Pisarenko, 2017; Svalberg, 2018). Teachers' voices have, however, been largely absent from L2 learner engagement research, and little is known about what learner engagement means to L2 teachers. This results in a significant gap in research given the influence that teachers have on promoting learner engagement in the language classroom. Teachers are good judges of student engagement "since they observe its various aspects on a daily basis and, being on friendly terms with their pupils, might have access to emotion and cognition underlying active participation and involvement or its absence" (Skinner, 2016, p. 158).

Hiver et al. (2021b) have called for more research to investigate L2 learning engagement in different sociocultural contexts "to gain a fuller picture of how such engagement is enacted and lived in a range of contexts" (p. 1). In Saudi Arabia, research on university EFL learners' engagement has started to receive growing attention, with a particular focus on the factors that contribute to student engagement in English as a foreign language (EFL) course (e.g., Alkhannani, 2021; Alqarni, 2023; Alzaanin, 2023; Asif et al., 2021). However, there remains a lack of research specifically examining Saudi EFL learner engagement from the perspectives of university teachers. This study contributes to the existing body of L2 engagement research and helps bridge this research gap by interviewing 12 university teachers instructing female English-major students in a four-year EFL program at a female campus of a large public university in Saudi Arabia. The study aims to uncover the participants' conceptualizations of learner engagement and their views on how engagement contributes to L2 learner development. It also seeks to explore their perceptions of the factors that facilitate or hinder learner engagement, both inside and outside the classroom.

Literature Review

Learner Engagement: Definition and Dimensions

Definitions of learner engagement are nuanced and depend on the background of the academic providing it (Mercer, 2019). From an educational psychology perspective, learner engagement is "the interaction between the time, effort, and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions" to meet their respective goals (Trowler, 2010, p. 2). In the classroom, engagement occurs when students demonstrate "energized, directed, and sustained actions" (Skinner et al., 2009, p. 225). From a sociological perspective, engagement is grounded in constructivism, highlighting that knowledge is actively constructed in the student's mind (Piaget, 1968). Within the context of L2 learning and teaching, Hiver et al. (2021b) define engagement as "the amount (quantity) and type (quality) of learners' active participation and involvement in a language learning task or activity" (p. 2). In simpler terms, learner engagement refers to the "dynamic state when learners are actively thinking about,

focusing on, and enjoying their language learning" (Mercer, 2019, p. 1). What these definitions have in common is that engagement is always associated with an action.

As a multifaceted construct, learner engagement is commonly conceptualized to encompass three key dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and affective (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Mercer, 2019). Additionally, less prevalent aspects of engagement include social engagement (Hiver et al., 2021a) and agentic engagement (Reeve & Tseng, 2011), which emphasize "the intentional and transformational aspects of students' interactions with learning activities" (Henry & Thorsen, 2020, p. 7). Among these dimensions, behavioural engagement receives the most attention in the literature, and teachers also put a premium on learners' actions (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022). Indicators of behavioural engagement may include active learning, effort expended, activity completion, and time devoted to tasks (Hiver et al., 2021b). Cognitive engagement, which refers to a student's focused attention (Henry & Thorsen, 2020), is commonly assessed in literature through focus, attention, self-regulation, and the quality of cognitive activities, such as depth of thinking. Emotional engagement, on the other hand, is defined as "positive, willing, and autonomous disposition" (Henry & Thorsen, 2020, p. 457) and is operationalized in literature through emotional responses such as laughter, showing interest in the material, positive evaluations, interest, satisfaction, and enthusiasm (Hiver et al., 2021a). However, in teachers' accounts, cognitive and emotional engagement are not in the forefront, which represents a missed opportunity to promote active participation and involvement (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022). As Skinner (2016) states, "teachers concentrate on practices that ramp up student participation but fail to notice their unintended side effects on emotional or cognitive engagement" (p. 163). The behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of learner engagement interrelate, overlap, and interact concurrently (Fredricks et al., 2004).

For the purpose of this study, the definition provided by Philp and Duchesne (2016) proves most useful: "Engagement refers to a state of heightened attention and involvement," encompassing not only the cognitive dimension but also social, behavioural, and affective dimensions (p. 53). In order to understand engagement, one should also consider its opposite: disengagement. The heightened interest in learner engagement originates from the teachers' concern about learner disengagement (Appleton et al., 2008). Skinner et al. (2009) define disengagement as "the absence of engagement including the absence of effort or persistence" (p. 495).

Learner Engagement in EFL Contexts

L2 learner engagement studies have predominantly focused on student engagement with language tasks in the EFL classroom. Task engagement takes place when students "move from mere compliance with the task itself to actual engagement with it" (Platt & Brooks, 2002, p. 373). Providing well-designed tasks to language learners is crucial for motivation (Van den Branden, 2016) and impacts various aspects of engagement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). For example, being actively involved in a task clearly indicates behavioural engagement. On the contrary, feeling bored with a task negatively influences emotional engagement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). The significance of early task engagement is highlighted by Platt and Brooks (2002), who stated that it represents "a turning point in foreign language development" (p. 365). They observed how L2 students approached a group puzzle task and discovered that initial task behaviour can be messy but is crucial for engagement and the sense of accomplishment and enjoyment. Aubrey et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal study on 37 EFL students at a Japanese university and examined the ways they engage in speaking tasks. Along with the importance of well-designed tasks, they also highlighted the strong influence of the classroom environment on students' speaking activity in front of others. Similarly, Dörnyei and Kormos

(2000) studied an argumentative task assigned to Hungarian L2 university students. Their findings suggested that motivation and initial attitudes toward the task have a prime role in oral task engagement, and these two factors shape self-confidence or the desire for status. Furthermore, Mozgalina (2015) focused on a written task—the development of a presentation by L2 Russian students—and measured engagement in terms of the number of words and time spent on the task. The researcher revealed that those who have less choice in terms of task content or procedure are more engaged in writing.

Philp and Duchesne (2016) suggest that appropriate activities should take place both inside and outside the classroom (Hopkins et al., 2020). Therefore, the teacher needs to select the right content, navigate how the task comes to life, and then use the post-task stage to assess performance and reflect on what happened. The features of an engaging task involve clarity, personalization opportunities, and a "doable" design that produces feelings of competence in the participants (Van den Branden, 2016).

Another line of research has focused on L2 learner engagement with written corrective feedback. Teachers who inspect student written compositions and provide comprehensive written corrective feedback demonstrate competence, diligence, and effort (Lee, 2019). Learners, however, are not necessarily engaged with it (Han, 2019; Han & Hyland, 2019). Among the possible drawbacks are little perceived value of written corrective feedback, often due to its misunderstanding (Han, 2019), or the students' feelings of frustration and anxiety when they face difficulties in closing the feedback loop (Zheng & Yu, 2018). Shen and Chong (2022) concluded that when providing written corrective feedback, L2 teachers should consider the needs of their students and the situation they are in. A universal approach, on the other hand, is not useful in driving learner engagement in the foreign language classroom.

Other studies have examined the multiple factors that play an important role in stimulating learner engagement in various EFL university settings. In Saudi Arabia, learner engagement studies have shown that students are more engaged when they are actively involved in the learning process, rather than simply listening to lectures (Alkhannani, 2021; Asif et al., 2021). Active learning activities, such as group work, problem-solving exercises, and debates, have been shown to be effective in increasing student engagement. Another research study found that Saudi students are more engaged when they feel comfortable and supported in the learning environment (Alqarni, 2023). Student engagement is also influenced by the students' own motivation and interest in the subject matter (Alzaanin, 2023). In Japanese university EFL contexts, Jones (2023) investigated the relationship between teacher characteristics and learner engagement in EFL programs. The findings of the study suggested that several teacher characteristics, including enthusiasm, clarity, and fairness, are positively associated with learner engagement.

Similarly, Karabıyık (2019) explored the relationship between EFL university student engagement and achievement in a Turkish university, as well as the factors influencing engagement. The study surveyed 296 students enrolled in an intensive English language program. The results demonstrated a positive correlation between student engagement and achievement, with motivation, self-regulation, and social support emerging as influential factors. Additionally, Yuyun (2023) investigated student engagement in online learning within an EFL classroom in Indonesia. The study revealed that the quality of learning materials, level of interaction between students and teachers, and students' motivation significantly influence student engagement in online learning.

Furthermore, results obtained by Guz and Tetiurka (2016) through the observation of 45 foreign language learners in Poland demonstrated that engagement is contingent upon the teacher's mindset and pedagogy. For example, the teachers who had a positive mindset and who used a variety of pedagogical techniques were more likely to have engaged learners. Moreover, a task aiming to elicit high learner engagement should involve a familiar context,

where students have some hands-on experience, such as family, school, or the weather (Guz & Tetiurka, 2016).

Learners' relationships with their peers in the learning environment also influence their engagement. In the foreign language classroom, the aim is to elicit interactions with potential for collaboration to improve engagement and achieve learning outcomes. That said, Reyes et al. (2012) gathered data from 63 teachers and 2,000 learners and showed that emotional connections between students create an emotional learning environment where good quality interactions take place. In such a setting, academic achievements are improved, and engagement has a mediating role. Meanwhile, poor social connection can result in disengagement. Aubrey et al. (2022) found that a lack of social cohesion hinders engagement with speaking exercises. Students feel shy and hesitant to speak in a group with low connections, e.g., when students do not know each other well.

At the social level, the family plays a significant role in the promotion of EFL learners' engagement (Nomnian & Thawornpat, 2015). This notion is particularly valid for societies with strong family traditions like Saudi Arabia (Abalkhail, 2017). Of the students who took part in Alsairi's survey (2018), 83% stated that they receive family support to learn English as a second language. Females are also increasingly supported by their families and society to pursue learning goals. Although formal education for women was only recently introduced in the 1960s (Abalkhail, 2017), their participation in the education system is now very high. Female students currently constitute about 50% of the total number of students in the country (Ministry of Education, 2021). Much of this inclusion stems from the high levels of family support. On the contrary, the lack of family engagement can have a negative effect. In traditional Saudi families, males are treated as the breadwinners, and females are expected to perform domestic duties. Therefore, university education is seen by some traditionalists as a threat to the traditional family (Dakhiel, 2017). Thus, academic engagement can be enhanced or hindered based on the role of the learner family.

In the physical context of the classroom, technology plays an important role in facilitating engagement, interaction, and collaboration. For example, Wang (2014) studied the use of wikis in EFL settings and found that their use increases students' motivation to obtain knowledge and to engage in the learning process. The sample provided by Kabooaha and Elyas (2015) consisted of EFL Saudi females, some of whom were involved in video pedagogy using YouTube material. Overall, participants reported positive attitudes, interest in the exercise, and increased engagement with the language learning and teaching process. Moreover, those who were exposed to YouTube videos in English acquired more vocabulary than those who did not participate in the activity. Pisarenko (2017) also studied EFL students exposed to videos in English. However, the researcher detected difficulties with comprehending the audiovisual material. When exposed to videos, learners simultaneously need to engage with materials presenting phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, cultural examples, presenting additional challenges for the instructor (Pisarenko, 2017). These examples demonstrate that technology itself is not the key to engagement; the more important factor is how it is facilitated by the foreign language teacher and integrated into the overall L2 pedagogy.

Gender differences were also found to affect L2 student engagement. King (2016) investigated the relationship between gender, peer attitudes, motivation, engagement, and achievement in a sample of 848 secondary school students in the Philippines. The study found that boys and girls had different perceptions of peer attitudes toward school. Girls were more likely to be motivated to learn and to be engaged in school when they perceived their peers to be positive about school. Boys, on the other hand, were more likely to be motivated to learn and to be engaged in school when they perceived their peers to be negative about school. Similarly, Oga-Baldwin and Fryer (2020) investigated gender differences in motivation to learn languages among primary school students in Japan. Their findings revealed that girls were

more intrinsically motivated to learn languages, driven by the enjoyment of learning new languages and the desire for cross-cultural communication. In contrast, boys displayed greater extrinsic motivation, aiming to enhance job prospects or facilitate travel. However, there is scarcity of research on how gender differences affect L2 engagement among university students.

Summary and Research Gap

This brief review of research on L2 learner engagement highlights the main themes that L2 learner engagement literature focuses on learner engagement definition and dimensions, L2 learner engagement with language itself, with learning tasks, and with written corrective feedback, and the array of factors shaping L2 learner engagement. This review reflects the scarcity of L2 engagement research on teachers' perceptions of this multifaceted construct. This gap in research is rather surprising, as researchers have long recognized the importance of learner engagement (Appleton et al., 2008) as the key to improving student learning and achieving positive outcomes (Bryson & Hand, 2007). The current study aims to contribute to bridging this gap by exploring the conceptualizations of learner engagement and the perceptions of factors contributing to learner engagement or disaffection from the perspectives of 12 EFL university teachers working in a four-year English program in a female campus of a large public Saudi university. The research questions that guided this research study are as follows:

- RQ1: How do EFL university teachers working in Saudi Arabia conceptualise learner engagement?
- RQ2: What factors can enhance L2 learner engagement from the perspective of EFL university teachers working in Saudi Arabia?
- RQ3: What factors can hinder L2 learner engagement from the perspective of EFL university teachers working in Saudi Arabia?

Methodology

Research Design

The methodology employed in this study was guided by a constructivist paradigm, which views knowledge as a human construction and acknowledges the existence of multiple realities. Research is seen as a collaborative process of co-constructing understandings between the researcher and the participants (Hatch, 2002). The choice of the constructivist paradigm was driven by the aim to explore the diverse and rich conceptualizations of learner engagement held by a group of EFL university teachers in Saudi Arabia, as well as their perceptions of the factors influencing it. Interactive engagement and co-construction of meanings between the researcher and participants were fundamental aspects of this approach. Qualitative researchers place significant emphasis on gaining an understanding of the world through first-hand experiences, providing truthful reporting, and incorporating direct quotations from actual conversations to capture insider perspectives (Merriam, 1998). In my study, I employed semi structured in depth interviews and inductive thematic analysis for data analysis due to their ability to yield rich and detailed descriptions and interpretations.

Given the constructivist paradigm, the qualitative approach aimed to develop a nuanced understanding of the problem by considering multiple perspectives, identifying various factors,

and capturing the emerging larger picture. Personal contact and rapport-building with participants were crucial for gaining deeper insights into the research context and the issue under investigation.

The study design evolved flexibly based on the emerging understanding of the research phenomena, without starting with pre-existing theories. According to Merriam (1998), qualitative studies are characterized by an emergent and flexible design, primarily employing an inductive approach that gathers detailed information from a few cases to develop a comprehensive understanding of a context or phenomenon.

The research placed significant reliance on participants' perspectives, as they developed subjective meanings and perspectives on learner engagement based on their experiences. These perspectives, as Creswell (2009) highlights, were diverse, multiple, and prompted the exploration of various views that accurately portrayed EFL learner engagement in a Saudi university context. This qualitative approach also involved selecting a strategy that guided the research questions, participant selection, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. By examining 12 cases, the study obtained a collective perspective on EFL learner engagement and the factors shaping it, facilitated the identification of patterns and relationships, thereby enhancing the credibility and robustness of the findings. The approach respected the integrity of each case while ensuring the protection of the identities of participating teachers, thus upholding confidentiality, and ethical considerations.

The researcher adopted a reflective and transparent process, by considering my background, professional identity, and familiarity with the context, to address potential biases that could influence the research. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the study, involving critical reflection on my own conceptualizations and beliefs that might impact data collection, analysis, and interpretation. A research journal was maintained to document reflections and ensure transparency. Being an insider in the research setting as an EFL university teacher provided insider knowledge, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding and representation of the multiple influences at play. Establishing strong relationships with participants and maintaining credibility facilitated their willingness to share their perspectives. Participants' data confidentiality was ensured, and the purpose and significance of the research were communicated effectively. Ethical approval for this study was deemed unnecessary by the Institutional Review Board. However, to ensure the safety, privacy, and confidentiality of participants, I adhered to a set of ethical guidelines throughout the study. These guidelines encompassed several key aspects, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation, and protecting their identities and personal information. To safeguard participant confidentiality, I employed measures such as concealing any information or details that could potentially reveal their identities. In the research report, for example, participant teachers were referred to by assigned numbers rather than their real names or pseudonyms. Additionally, I maintained the utmost confidentiality of the collected data. All audio and transcript files were securely stored on password-protected systems to prevent unauthorized access. Moreover, as per ethical practices, the data will be securely retained for a period of two years following the completion of the research and will then be appropriately deleted to further protect participant confidentiality.

Study Context

The research was conducted at a female campus of a prominent public university in Saudi Arabia, specifically within a four-year Bachelor of Arts in English language program. Prior to entering this program, English-major students would have dedicated nine years to learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), starting from fourth grade until twelfth grade. The English program comprises 120 credit hours of coursework, encompassing language skills,

linguistics, English literature, translation, and general culture. Upon completion of the program, graduates typically pursue careers as schoolteachers, translators, or public relations officers. In the academic year 2021-2022, a total of 961 female students were enrolled as English majors. The teaching staff-to-student ratio stands at 1:21, with an average class size of 45 students. Within the female campus, there are 36 Saudi faculty members and eight international faculty members occupying various positions ranging from associate professors to teaching assistants.

Participants

This study was designed to explore the conceptualizations of EFL learner engagement held by 12 EFL university teachers and their perceptions of the factors facilitating or hindering learner engagement in their L2 learning. Teaching staff members were invited to participate in the research project via work emails. The invitations included an information sheet and a consent form, which provided details about the research and requested their voluntary participation. Twelve teachers voluntarily took part in the research. The profiles of the participating teachers are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Professional Profiles

Participants	Years of teaching experience	Qualifications	Saudi/Non-Saudi	Native speaker of English
P1	30	Ph.D. in English Literature	Non-Saudi	Yes
P2	33	Ph.D. in American Literature	Non-Saudi	No
P3	15	Ph.D. in Linguistics	Non-Saudi	No
P4	20	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics	Saudi	No
P5	23	M.A. in TESOL	Non-Saudi	Yes
P6	12	M.A. in Applied Linguistics	Non-Saudi	Yes
P7	4	B.A. in English Language	Saudi	No
P8	15	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics	Non-Saudi	No
P9	14	M.A. in English Literature	Non-Saudi	No
P10	6	M.A. in Translation	Saudi	Yes
P11	9	Ph.D. in Linguistics	Saudi	No
P12	31	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics	Non-Saudi	Yes

Data Collection: Teachers' Interviews

For this study, I conducted one-to-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twelve faculty members who teach female English-major students on the female campus. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized as an effective method for gaining in-depth insights into the thoughts, knowledge, information, values, preferences, attitudes, and beliefs of research subjects (Cohen et al., 2007). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews are valuable because "the in-depth nature of an intensive interview fosters eliciting each participant's interpretation of his or her experience" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25). I followed Dörnyei's (2007)

guidance on how to prepare, design, and conduct interviews as a major data collection method in applied linguistics. The semi-structured interviews in this study were conducted using a set of broad, open-ended questions. These questions were developed based on an extensive review of the literature on L2 learner engagement, with a specific focus on Mercer and Dörnyei's (2020) book titled *Engaging Language Learners in Contemporary Classrooms*. The aim was to gather rich and nuanced data from participants by exploring various aspects of learner engagement within the context of language learning. The interview guide helped to "maintain systematic coverage" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 143) of the research topic and aims. Samples of the interview questions are as follows:

1. What does students' engagement in their language learning mean to you?
2. How does students' engagement in their learning contribute to L2 development?
3. Please reflect on the range of contextual factors that might be out of your direct control as an EFL teacher and yet can impede or enhance students' engagement in their EFL learning.
4. How do curriculum and testing policies influence students' engagement in their learning? Does the college/university culture cultivate or hinder learners' engagement?
5. In what ways does your instructional approach promote students' engagement? What aspects can be improved to enhance it even more?
6. What role does digital technology play in engaging your EFL students in their learning during online classes and face-to-face classes?
7. What role do students play in their engagement with their learning?
8. How can student-teacher rapport enhance learners' engagement in their EFL learning?
9. How can task design and what you incorporate into your lessons/tasks trigger engagement and sustain it? (Cognitive challenge, maximizing enjoyment and minimizing boredom, capturing attention, and engaging interest)
10. How do you determine when your learners are engaged in language learning?
11. Why are some learners not engaged while some of their classmates are?

Each interview session had a duration ranging from 60 to 80 minutes, and audio recordings were made to ensure accurate capturing of the discussions. The interview process was marked by a collegial and open atmosphere, as participants willingly shared their insights and perspectives on L2 learner engagement. The interviews were conducted as flowing conversations, following the approach described by Rubin and Rubin (2005) and Choak (2012). To manage and code the qualitative data, the interview transcripts were transcribed and exported as Word document files into Dedoose, a software program specifically designed for managing, coding, and analysing qualitative data. The interview process allowed for flexibility, enabling the researcher to seek further clarification from participants as needed, based on the progress and emerging themes during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data analysis occurred during and after data collection, encompassing a comparison of data from all participants. The analysis followed an inductive approach, where themes were derived directly from the data without attempting to fit it into a pre-existing theoretical

framework. The process adhered to the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, I familiarized myself with the data by transcribing interview recordings and carefully reviewing the content. Subsequently, I meticulously examined each transcript word by word and line by line to identify and categorize relevant codes using Dedoose. The next step involved organizing the codes into themes that captured the essential thoughts and perspectives expressed. Throughout the fourth step, I continuously reviewed and refined the emerging themes. Eventually, the themes were structured into a coherent and internally consistent account accompanied by corresponding narratives. Lastly, I prepared and composed the final report. Notably, certain codes were found to be common across participants, albeit with varying specifics, which led to the development of emerging themes.

Results

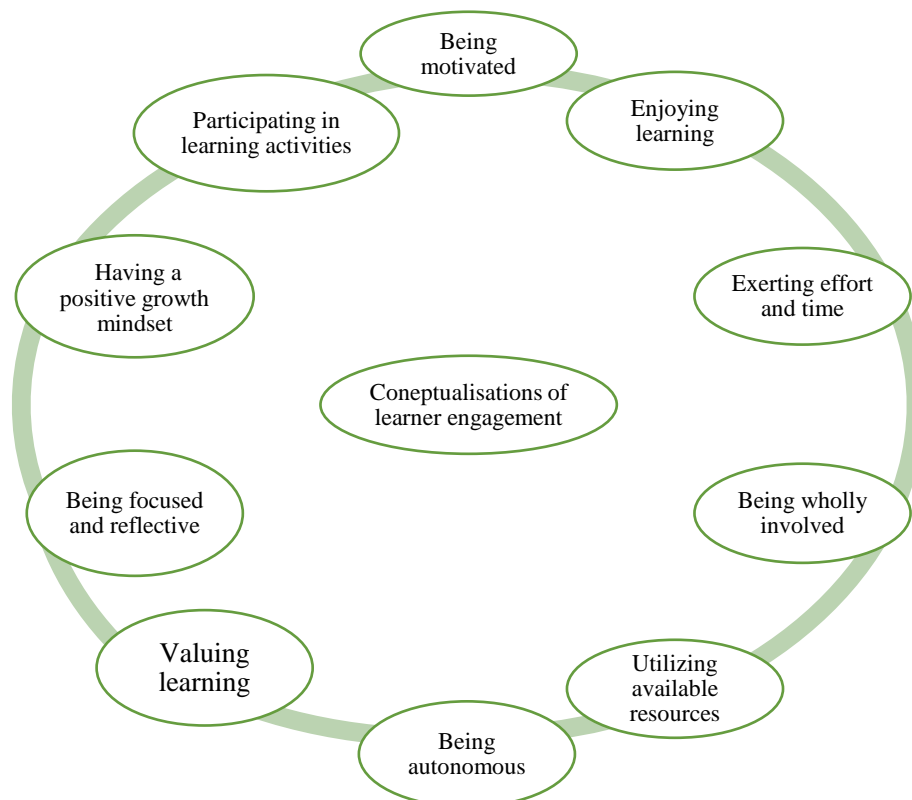
This section presents the key themes that have emerged from the analysis of the interview data and reports the findings, aiming to shed light on the main research questions that guided this study.

Multifaceted Conceptualizations of Engagement

Through the analysis of the participants' conceptualizations of EFL learner engagement, various notions of engagement emerged repeatedly, indicating their frequency of occurrence in the participants' responses.

Figure 1

L2 Teachers' Conceptualizations of Learner Engagement



Learner engagement was commonly seen in terms of participation in class discussions and learning activities (10 times), having motivation (7 times), having a positive growth mindset about learning (5 times), enjoying learning (5 times), exerting sufficient effort and time (4 times), being autonomous (3 times), valuing learning (3 times), being wholly involved in learning (2 times), utilizing available resources to deepen learning (2 times), being prepared for lessons (1 time), and being focused and reflective on their learning (1 time). Participants' conceptualizations of learner engagement are synthesized in Figure 1.

P1 emphasized that student engagement means that "learners are active participants, motivated; they are kept busy all the time. They talk and discuss the topic and prepare it in advance..." Similarly, P4's statement emphasizes the significance of learners being "wholly involved in their learning." They take initiative, enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn, and try to make use of all available resources to excel in their language learning. P11 reflected on the importance of both class participation and a positive mindset about learning: "It's partly about participation in class, obviously, but it's also about having a positive mindset about learning. They ask questions in class if they cannot understand the lecture. They visit me during office hours or send emails." The teachers' conceptualizations strongly align with the behavioral dimension of engagement, mainly active participation in class discussions and learning activities, and utilization of available resources. Their conceptualizations also centered on affective dimensions of engagement (i.e., enjoyment, motivation, autonomy, growth mindset, and valuing learning). Social aspects of learner engagement are also evident in learners' interactions with their peers during group work and when communicating with teachers during class and office hours or via email to inquire about assignments and topics they struggle to understand.

Importance of Engagement for Language Development

Participants stressed that learner engagement is a prerequisite for L2 language development. Language learning requires intensive and extensive practice, interaction, and cognitive analysis, and it will not be possible without the learner's willingness to exert effort and actively participate in various language tasks inside and outside the classroom. Language engagement contributes to developing learners' communicative language skills and enhancing their self-confidence. P8 suggested that intensive practice, interaction, and cognitive analysis, coupled with learners' willingness to exert effort and actively participate, contribute to developing communicative language skills and enhancing self-confidence:

Engagement is extra important for learners so that the target language becomes a part of their thinking and their cognitive abilities. So, if learners want to become fluent and semi-native speakers in the language..., they need to be highly engaged in their learning. (P8)

Similarly, P11 shared that engagement in learning can foster learners' confidence and sense of accomplishment, stating: "Engagement in learning is also valuable for language learners because it can develop learners' confidence and self-esteem."

Factors Facilitating Learner Engagement

The participants identified and highlighted five key factors that can collectively promote learners' engagement. These factors will be reported below and supported with excerpts from the participants' data.

Teachers' Pedagogical Practices Aimed at Engaging Learners

Four participants emphasized that adopting the communicative approach to language teaching can enhance learner engagement. P7 highlighted her commitment to fostering communicative competence and creating an environment that promotes active communication by prioritizing learner interaction: "I try to develop communicative competence through learner interaction." In a similar vein, P2 referred to the value of focusing on communication rather than strict adherence to grammar rules to enable learners to express themselves and gradually refine their linguistic accuracy over time:

My approach has always been to focus on communication as opposed to grammar. I always say that it's important for you to make the effort to communicate, and we can always work on grammar afterwards. I try to get them comfortable just talking, whether it's good English or not—just opening their mouths, basically, and having words come out.

Similarly, an important practice of an engaging teacher's pedagogical approach is to implement student-centered classes, where students are encouraged to communicate in English and engage in collaborative group work through well-designed communicative tasks. The teacher's role would be that of a facilitator who offers necessary support when needed. P4 emphasizes the importance of student-centeredness and designing tasks that minimize direct corrections, instead utilizing indirect feedback and conversational redirection. Furthermore, the incorporation of real-life scenarios in task designs enhances the relevance and engagement of learners. P4 shared:

Students' engagement is all about student-centeredness. I always encourage learners to communicate in English, they can talk with each other. Also, I try to design all tasks where I make very few direct corrections, so I try to use indirect feedback or, for example, conversational redirection. I also base my task designs on real-life scenarios wherever I can.

Another significant pedagogical practice that can enhance learners' engagement is the adoption of project-based teaching. P3 commented, "I do a lot of project-based language learning to give them an opportunity to learn and engage." P8 further stressed that when teachers design interesting tasks and interactive activities, they can easily engage their learners:

As a teacher you have to be well prepared for class with interactive activities and to be ready to actually restrain your desire to speak. A big part of my class is to focus on the students.... you give them guiding questions and scaffold them.

P4 utilized group work to promote learner engagement. She commented, "I usually organize group writing sessions where both the students and I contribute ideas." Preparing study guides and providing support during class can enhance their active participation and comprehension. P10 remarked, "I engage my students by preparing study guides for each chapter before we start, so they can prepare, and I scaffold their learning during class."

Another aspect of teachers' pedagogical practices is to connect language learning to life beyond the classroom by ensuring the relevance and appeal of the curriculum to learners. P9 emphasized the need for interesting and engaging course content, as "students will not be interested in doing a boring task." This connection to real-life contexts can be further

strengthened through the integration of extracurricular activities. By offering learners opportunities to participate in these activities, they can supplement and enrich their language learning that takes place inside the classroom. As mentioned by P6, extracurricular activities create a safe and inclusive environment for students to engage with their peers and "have activities that can ultimately increase their engagement in learning English" and foster a sense of belonging. P4 asked for more funding from the university to support the extracurricular activities:

The more funding that is allocated to social activities and extracurricular activities, the more likely students are to be engaged and develop their language in an indirect way. At the university, there is a room for students to show their creativity; there, they conduct debate competitions, intercultural events, spelling bees, and creative story-telling events.

Furthermore, designing project-based and inquiry-based assessments can effectively connect learning to real-life contexts, promoting learner engagement and triggering positive emotions, especially enjoyment, enthusiasm, and pride. As highlighted by P3, students thrive in project-based assessments that involve active exploration, data collection, and diverse tasks like online research, reading, summarizing, interviewing, and presenting. By allowing students to showcase their creativity and take pride in their work, they become motivated to learn with passion: "They will be creative. Let them show us what they can do and let them be proud of their work" (P3).

Furthermore, offering positive feedback and encouragement is an effective pedagogical practice to engage learners. Such positive feedback can trigger positive emotions. P7 thought:

Students expect positive feedback from their teachers to praise them when they do well in class. It greatly pays off. Even the slow learners need to be praised as well. Sometimes this induces positive emotions and encourages students to work harder. (P7)

P1 mentioned that by acknowledging her students' efforts and emphasizing their accomplishments, students gain confidence in their abilities and become more willing to actively engage in their learning:

I always encourage them, and I tell them that they have done a fantastic job and that it was a very difficult exercise, even if it's not difficult at all... And the more confidence they gain in themselves, the more they will be willing to engage in their learning. (P1)

Moreover, leveraging technology within the EFL classroom can significantly contribute to learner engagement. P3 emphasized that technology enables teachers to expose students to real-world language usage and expand their horizons by accessing various resources. By incorporating technology, lessons become more memorable, interactive, and relevant to students' lives. "Understanding students' interests and preferences is important in leveraging technology effectively to engage them in the learning process" (P3). P10 further underscored the significance of technology in education, noting its pervasive presence in the modern world:

I think technology is a necessary thing in the classroom all the way around, not necessarily because it's better. Technology is so pervasive in the world today as

a whole that to not have technology in the classroom would be a disservice to students.

Integrating technology into the classroom is necessary to prepare students for their future endeavors and to provide them with the skills required in today's digital age. By harnessing the power of technology, teachers can create dynamic and engaging learning experiences that align with students' technological fluency.

Positive Personal Traits and Behaviors of Learners

The positive personal traits and behaviors of learners play a crucial role in facilitating their engagement, as highlighted by the participants. Learners who are interested in language learning, smart, interactive, proactive, enthusiastic, collaborative, attentive, happy, active, hard-working, autonomous, confident, effective communicators, motivated, goal-oriented, having a growth mindset, agentic, inquisitive, and disciplined are more likely to be strongly engaged in their language learning. These characteristics foster a positive learning environment and contribute to students' active participation and dedication. P2 recognized that students "are engaged when they give you all their attention, and they work together so they feel comfortable sitting in the classes. You can see it in their eyes that they are happy, enthusiastic, and want to learn more." Similarly, P4 described engaged learners as being "hard-working, motivated, autonomous, and take initiative, and they are smart in using learning strategies... outgoing, communicative, and respectful... creative... also agentic." P9 added, "Engaged learners have a growth mindset. They lead themselves, are autonomous learners, question everything. They're not afraid to ask questions, and they are determined to succeed. They have a lot of inner motivation."

An interesting insight from P 4 is the role of traveling abroad: "students who travel abroad for vacation have the potential to be confident and to engage more in their language learning than those who have never travelled." The exposure to different cultures and the understanding that language learning enables effective communication while visiting foreign countries can contribute to L2 learners' motivation and engagement.

Positive Student-Teacher Rapport Fostering Engagement

Another important factor contributing to learners' engagement is the positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and their students. Student-teacher rapport has a tremendous amount of power in engaging and nurturing students. Creating a safe classroom environment that is conducive to learning is an important role of the engaging teacher. Also, providing emotional support for students can have a tremendous impact on their engagement level. P8 maintained that establishing a strong rapport and creating a safe classroom environment is key to enhancing students' willingness to participate, take risks, and actively engage in their learning journey: "When I have good relations with my students, they will come happy to my class. If they don't feel that they are threatened, they are likely to engage in their learning and take risks." Besides, P10 suggested that teachers should strive to be available for their students and demonstrate the value and relevance of what they are teaching, making students feel comfortable and motivated to participate: "Be available for them whenever they need you. Try to make them comfortable and show them the value and relevance of what you are teaching."

Listening to students' needs and having meaningful conversations with them play a significant role in enhancing learners' engagement. P9 commented that "Good conversations make a big difference, so listen to your students—what they think of the course and what their

needs are... When students see that they have a say in their learning, they will be engaged and motivated."

Sharing personal learning experiences and stories can bridge the gap between teachers and students, inspiring and motivating students to work hard and develop. P3 maintained that personal anecdotes have a profound impact on student-teacher relationships and can create positive emotions in the classroom:

By being open and sharing experiences, teachers can establish a sense of closeness and connection with their students, and they can be a source of inspiration for their students to work hard and develop and is likely to produce positive emotions in the classroom atmosphere.

Creating a supportive and stress-free learning environment is conducive to engaging learners. P4 advised that teachers should encourage students to take risks and make mistakes, emphasizing that errors are a natural part of the learning process: "It's important to develop in them a growth mindset." P12 stated that when the teacher is labelling students as being incapable, they will not even try. So, it is about encouraging them to help them think more positively (P12).

Contextual Factors Enhancing L2 Learner Engagement

The participants believed that providing a flexible learning space can facilitate learners' engagement. Flexible seating in class enables teachers to organize students into groups, thereby promoting collaborative learning. This arrangement also allows teachers to incorporate interactive activities, exercises, and group projects, which have been shown to increase student engagement more effectively than traditional lecture-style teaching methods. P3 acknowledged the influence of the physical environment on learner engagement: "The seating can be important. Does it allow me as a teacher to put my students in groups... (and) implement interactive activities, exercises, and group projects?"

Furthermore, the beliefs and support of families are important contextual factors that can significantly impact learner engagement. When parents hold high expectations for their children's language learning abilities and actively encourage them to exert their utmost efforts to excel, students are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their language learning journey. P12 thought that when parents view language learning as a long-term investment in their child's future, beyond just obtaining good grades or gaining admission to university, "they will put forth extra effort to help their children achieve this goal by getting them enrolled in after-school activities or programs."

Overall, the participants' comments quoted above highlight the facilitative factors that may contribute to learner engagement.

Factors Hindering L2 Learner Engagement

On the contrary, the participating teachers identified multiple factors that hinder EFL learners' engagement. These hindering factors are associated with the learner, the teacher, the rapport between the student and teacher, the classroom environment, as well as the broader educational and social context.

Student-related Factors Contributing to their Disengagement.

The teachers' data showed that negative student personal traits and behaviors are the primary factor leading to learner disengagement. Disengaged learners are thought of as being passive, shy, lazy, unmotivated, careless, inattentive, easily distracted, dependent, and undisciplined. P1 described disengaged learners as being "very passive. They feel shy; they don't participate," while P5 described disengaged learners as being "unmotivated, they don't have a real goal for being in the classrooms" and easily distracted or preoccupied with non-learning activities.

P2, P4, and P7 identified the lack of commitment and discipline on the part of the learner as the main cause of their disengagement: "They exhibit a lack of initiative, dependency on others, and a tendency to prioritize social media and chatting with friends over their learning." They commented that learner disengagement manifests through absence, unwillingness to communicate, negative body language, lack of eye contact, and creating a negative atmosphere in the classroom. Similarly, P12 felt that disengagement was manifested through their distraction and creation of a negative atmosphere in the class: "They are hostile to you because they give off this sort of energy of hostility if they are not engaged in the class. They actually look outside the window and keep looking at the mobile phone."

The participants identified student lack of motivation as a significant barrier to engagement and enthusiasm for learning EFL. Some disengaged learners may "have mental blocks or fail to recognize the benefits of their degree after graduation" (P6). Others may have joined the language course due to "parental pressure, resulting in frustration, depression, and a general reluctance to engage in class" (P7). Teachers acknowledge their role as facilitators but emphasize that they cannot force students to learn if they lack the desire to do so: "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot force them to drink" (P1).

According to many participants, a fixed mindset, where students prioritize grades over language proficiency and competency, is another hindrance to their engagement. Students may focus solely on achieving high GPAs due to the competitive job market, disregarding the importance of growth and developing their linguistic proficiency and competency (P7 and P9). Additionally, the presence of mixed-ability groups poses challenges, as "some students feel embarrassed or reluctant to express themselves in front of advanced learners, making classroom management difficult" (P3).

The participants recognized that low proficiency levels among students also contribute to disengagement, as some students remain silent due to their limited language skills (P2). P5 suggested that students with linguistically fossilized learning patterns should seek guidance from academic advisors and may not have been suitable candidates for the program. P12 described disengaged students' linguistic proficiency as being poor: "you would find that they struggle to survive the classes and to catch up with the other students. At university, you know the material is really tough and challenging, so they need a good level of language."

Experiencing negative emotions is a big obstacle to engaging learners. In the words of P3, "sometimes, I feel my students are bored, and boredom kills everything. Many students lack self-confidence, are lazy, anxious, or frustrated." These negative emotions can have detrimental effects on their motivation to learn. Additionally, factors such as lack of self-confidence, laziness, anxiety, and frustration do contribute to disengagement.

Furthermore, external factors can also negatively affect learner engagement. P2 identified inadequate sleep, excessive involvement in extracurricular activities, and personal laziness as common triggers for disengagement. Issues at home were also noted to impact engagement levels. By addressing these external factors, teachers can aim to improve class engagement and foster a more conducive learning environment.

Overall, the participants attributed learner disengagement to learner negative intrapersonal traits and behaviors, emphasizing the need to address these factors to enhance learner engagement.

Teacher-related Factors Impeding Learner Engagement

The participants identified several teacher-related factors that negatively impact learner engagement. These factors include the use of Arabic when communicating with learners outside the classroom, the adoption of a lecturing mode of delivery, excessive focus on grammatical forms and accuracy, and an overdependence on textbooks as quasi-syllabi. P8 expressed concern, stating, "Teachers speak English in class; however, after coming out of the classroom, many of them start using Arabic, so we are not creating an environment in which our students can practice their target language."

Another significant factor contributing to disengagement is a boring lecturing style and challenging materials. P12 acknowledged the impact teachers can have on learner engagement, admitting personal responsibility for instances where materials were not appropriately tailored to the students' language level. P12 highlighted the need for "worksheets or some interactive activity where students actually cooperate with each other and talk to each other and feel more engaged."

Textbook dependence is another factor that can hinder learner engagement. P6 expressed concern that some teachers rigidly adhere to textbooks without considering whether the topics and exercises align with the students' needs. This lack of customization and adaptation to the students' specific requirements can lead to disengagement, as mentioned by P6: "Some teachers would use a textbook year after year with no changes... They just follow what is in the textbook, literally, whether the topics and exercises meet the needs of their students or not is not important."

Furthermore, excessive focus on grammatical forms and accuracy in the language classroom can discourage learners from taking risks and expressing themselves. P1 referred to certain teachers as:

Grammar Nazis who create a negative atmosphere by harshly criticizing students for grammatical mistakes. This fear of making errors hampers learners' willingness to speak and inhibits their overall engagement "as this will discourage them from taking risks and expressing themselves, lest they make grammatical mistakes.

Lastly, an overdependence on technology by teachers can also have a demotivating and disengaging effect on learners. P10 highlighted the potential misuse of technology, emphasizing the importance of teachers' competence in English language skills. If teachers rely solely on technology, such as videos, as a substitute for their own English-speaking abilities, it sends the message that language learning can be circumvented through technology alone. P10 expressed:

Technology can also be misused in the classroom to further fossilize the demotivation of learning a language. If you have a language teacher who is using videos to speak in English because that teacher can't speak in English well, then that's the message that you're sending to the students: you can get around this whole English thing just by using technology. (P10)

Recognizing and addressing these challenging factors can help create a more engaging and effective learning environment for EFL learners.

Challenging Contextual Factors Contributing to Learner Disengagement

The participants' data shed light on a range of challenging contextual factors that hinder learner engagement. An unfavorable classroom context, characterized by large class sizes, emerged as a significant hindrance to learner engagement. For example, P5 stated:

Authentic projects will help to engage learners when the number of students is small, but when I have over 45 or 50 in each class, it is very difficult and time-consuming for me to grade and give feedback, especially when I teach more than 180 students in a semester.

Teaching large classes impedes teachers' abilities to implement engaging assessment methods and provide timely feedback, thereby affecting learner engagement. The impact of large class sizes extends even beyond grading and feedback. P7 noted, "I would say that there are times that I drift away from the communicative language approach because of the large class sizes, so I would say to encourage communication, I need an average class size of 30 students" (P7). This comment emphasizes how the presence of many students hinder the effective implementation of the communicative language approach, which relies on active participation and interaction.

The timing of classes also emerged as another contextual factor influencing learner engagement. Participants expressed those late classes, particularly after a long day of attending classes and commuting, can be boring and disengaging for learners. P9 shared, "I noticed that when I teach the same course for three classes, students attending the morning class are much more active and engaged than those who attend the afternoon class. They always complain, 'We are tired, we cannot concentrate.'" Thus, learners' energy levels and attentiveness can be compromised when classes are scheduled at a time when they are already fatigued.

Restrictive institutional policies related to the curriculum also contribute to hindering learner engagement. Participants highlighted the pressure to strictly follow course specifications, primarily driven by unified exams across male and female campuses. As a result, some teachers resort to lecturing to transmit theoretical knowledge efficiently. For instance, P8 explained:

I need to manipulate and actually alter my teaching strategies in order to be able to get my students engaged, but unfortunately, with the curriculum at the university, you have a large amount of knowledge that you have to pass on to your students. So, sometimes you revert to lecturing to pass on as much knowledge as you can.

The examination-oriented educational system emerged in the participants' responses as a significant contextual factor negatively impacting learner engagement. Traditional testing methods create anxiety among students and shift their focus towards achieving high grades rather than genuine learning. P4 highlighted, "Students' main concern is to get high marks. They are more interested in getting high grades than learning. The washback of the exam affects students' engagement negatively."

Related to the impact of the contextual factors, the current socioeconomic status related to knowing English can be an obstacle for learner engagement. In the past, before 2010, if you graduated with an English degree, you were almost guaranteed to have a job regardless of GPA.

It was even easier to get government jobs at the time. English was in high demand, so there was a socioeconomic motivating factor: Whereas today, the jobs available may have increased according to recent data, but those jobs are baristas, coffee shops, and retail merchandisers with minimum wage salaries of 5,000 riyals per month. So, there's not really a motivating factor to learn English to a high level and to an academic level. P7 expressed:

I would say that the current economic conditions and labor market favor the hard sciences and computer science. Students are demotivated because they don't know what opportunities await them after graduation.

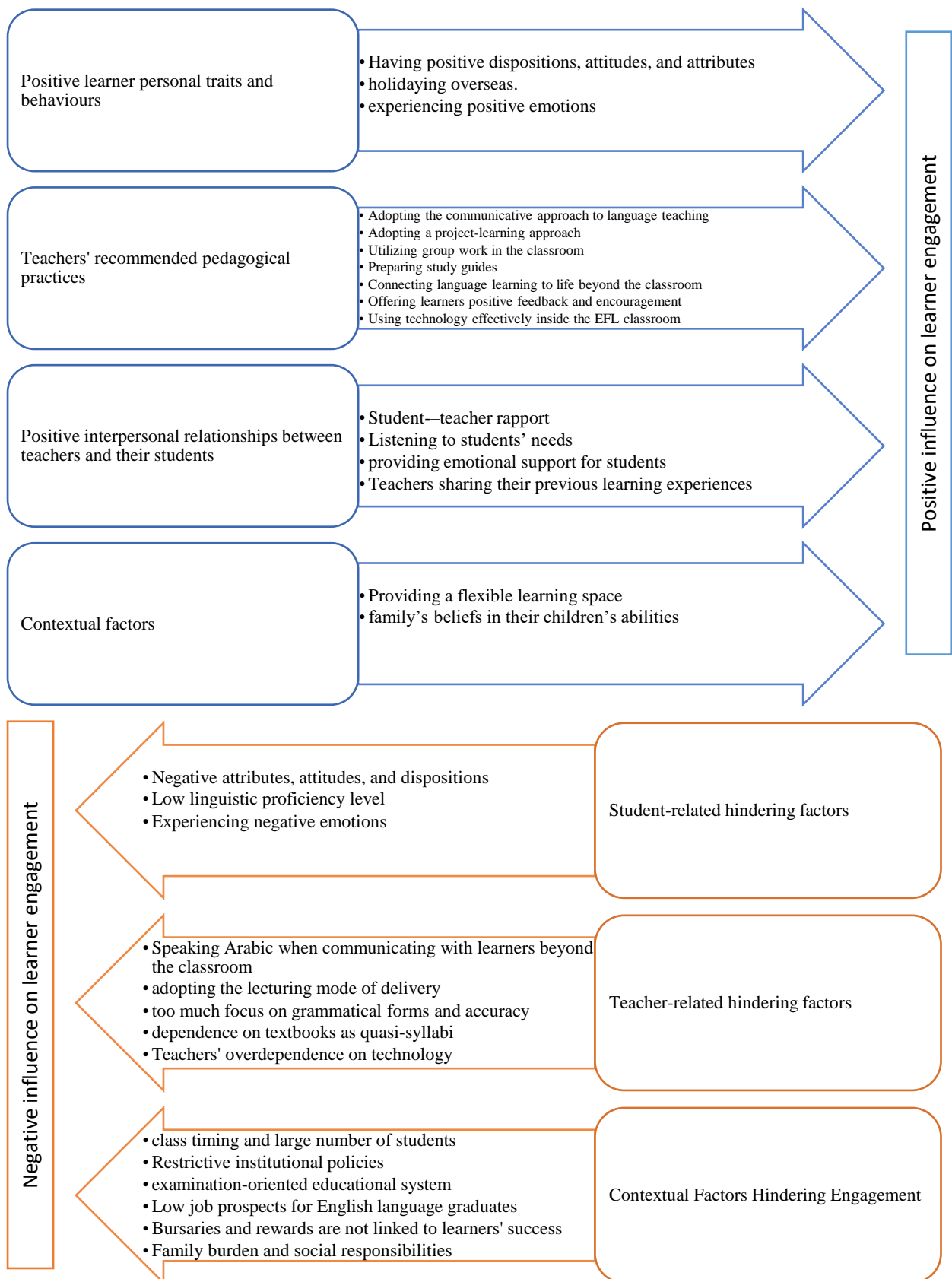
Furthermore, students' bursaries and rewards are not linked to their academic success, which hampers learner engagement. In the Saudi system, students are paid to attend classes regardless of their grades. P1 explained, "So, whether they learn or don't learn is immaterial." This lack of incentive to actively participate in courses when financial compensation is not tied to academic performance diminishes learner motivation.

Family burdens and social responsibilities also impact learner engagement. Female students often miss classes due to family obligations, affecting their preparation and overall engagement. P3 shared, "You find that families usually marry their daughters while they are in the middle of their studies or at the beginning of their studies, so you find that they have other responsibilities, and they are unable to engage in the class." Balancing academic pursuits with familial duties proves challenging for some students.

Lastly, participants emphasized the influence of the educational level and academic culture in the students' surrounding environment. P1 believed that engagement in the learning process at home depends on the family, including the knowledge and conversational abilities of family members. If the environment is not favorable, it negatively impacts learner engagement.

Figure 2 below summarizes the main factors that either facilitate or hinder learner engagement in the foreign language classroom, as perceived by the participants.

Figure 2
Facilitative versus Hindering Factors to Learner Engagement



In conclusion, the findings provide valuable insights into the participants' conceptualizations of L2 learner engagement and the factors that significantly impact learner engagement. Understanding these facilitators and barriers is crucial for designing effective strategies and interventions that promote a stimulating and engaging learning environment.

Discussion

The findings presented in this study have uncovered the multifaceted nature of learner engagement according to 12 EFL university teachers teaching female English-major students in a large public university in Saudi Arabia. Through their narratives, a comprehensive conceptualization of engagement has emerged, although it was commonly seen in terms of the behavioral and affective dimensions. In terms of behavioral engagement, the participants emphasized active participation in class discussions and learning activities. This finding is supported by Hiver et al. (2021b) and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2022), who emphasized the importance of observable behaviors as indicators of engagement. The affective dimensions of engagement, such as enjoyment, motivation, autonomy, and a growth mindset, were prominently mentioned by the participants. These findings are consistent with the definition of affective engagement as a positive and autonomous disposition (Henry & Thorsen, 2020).

Furthermore, results demonstrated a strong link between engagement and motivation. However, rather than viewing engagement as an outcome of motivation (Skinner & Belmont, 1993), the participants measured engagement through motivation.

The social aspects of engagement, including interactions with peers and teachers, were also evident in the participants' conceptualizations. This finding is consistent with research highlighting the role of social engagement in promoting learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Thus, according to EFL teachers, learner engagement is a multifaceted process that encompasses various interconnected components. In line with Henry and Thorsen's (2020) definition, the participants also referred to cognitive engagement as encompassing focused attention, active thinking, and implicit reflection, valuing both the quantity and quality of thinking processes.

Contrary to the argument put forth by Zhang et al. (2015) that "Students as the direct and ultimate agents are undoubtedly the most important factor for successful engagement" (p. 107), the accounts provided by the participants highlighted the significant emphasis they place on teacher-related factors as drivers of learner engagement. Before everything else, it is the teacher's job to build rapport with and among students, establish open communication, give constructive feedback, and use tools and tactics to meet learning outcomes. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies that highlighted the role of the teacher as a facilitator of engagement (e.g., Guz & Tetiurka, 2016; Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

It is intriguing to observe how frequently the participants mentioned the concept of learner-centered teaching. The participants highly valued the significance of positive relationships and aimed to establish connections with their students right from the beginning of the course. The purpose of these relationships extends beyond emotional connections; it also involves gathering feedback regarding topics and activities that learners find interesting. Recognizing that L2 engagement is inherently relational (Mercer & Dornyei, 2020), the participants also sought to influence student-student relationships and interactions. Therefore, the teachers' role in enhancing engagement is closely tied to the social dimension. Researchers such as Aubrey et al. (2022) and Reyes et al. (2012) have provided evidence for the rationale behind this teaching approach, demonstrating that positive and emotional connections between students foster an engaging learning environment conducive to academic success.

According to the perspectives shared by the participants, it is emphasized that during classroom interactions, the establishment of connections and active, communicative practice of the target language hold greater significance than a strict focus on grammatical accuracy.

Some participants admitted that they do not correct mistakes, since the flow of the conversation is what matters. By doing so, they avoid negative, controlling practices and address the learners' need for competence (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022). As Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2022) pointed out, "students' engagement may fade [...] they are confronted with coercion and excess of rules and requirements" (p. 402). In fact, participants appeared to believe that positive feedback is useful either to improve learner engagement or to create an emotional and safe learning environment. Overall, the pedagogical approach described by many of the participants is in line with what Guz and Tetiurka (2016) recommended: those teachers who are looking to inspire positivity among learners and engage them should set an example and demonstrate a positive mindset themselves.

In addition to being facilitators of a communicative and positive environment, the participants viewed themselves as creators of engaging activities. The repertoire of techniques employed to promote engagement in the foreign language classroom encompasses a diverse range of strategies and tools. Notably, project-based and group activities were frequently mentioned, with teachers displaying openness towards integrating technology into their instructional practices. Acknowledging the students' desire for technology-enhanced education, one participant emphasized that it would be a disservice to deprive them of its benefits in the modern English class.

Participants understand their responsibilities do not end in class but extend beyond task completion (Van den Branden, 2016) and outside the classroom (Hopkins et al., 2020). In their accounts, the participants recognized the importance of on-task engagement throughout the entire task development process, encompassing pre-task, task, and post-task stages, as outlined by Van den Branden (2016). Furthermore, they expressed their aim to establish connections between language tasks and the real world, not only to enhance relevance and minimize boredom but also to encourage students' involvement in extracurricular activities. Such participation is seen to foster further engagement, provide hands-on experience, and stimulate creativity among learners.

Nevertheless, even the best teacher alone or the best tasks alone will not be able to drive engagement, as it is the students' decision to transition from a passive to an active role and engage (Hopkins et al., 2020). A student with a growth mindset, who is hardworking, motivated, autonomous, intelligent, communicative, committed, punctual, creative, takes initiative, and is proactive in learning, is more likely to be engaged. These intrapersonal factors constitute the fertile soil for learner engagement, which Mercer and Dornyei (2020) refer to as a "facilitative mindset."

Some researchers suggest that parents' motivation and efforts to encourage children to participate in extracurricular activities positively influence learner engagement. For the participants, language learning does not start and end in the classroom. Instead, their efforts and attention extend beyond the immediate responsibilities in class. It all begins with the family and the parents' role as conveyors of values that shape EFL learning (Nomnian & Thawornpat, 2015).

As expected, the participants also had extensive experience with learner disengagement, an issue that has long been a cause for concern among them (Appleton et al., 2008). While it was widely accepted that teachers have a significant influence on learner engagement, in the case of disengagement, the focus shifts to the learners' negative personal characteristics. Based on participant comments, disengaged students often exhibit a lack of motivation and involvement in their studies. They may be described as less active, displaying reduced diligence, inattentiveness, and susceptibility to distractions. Additionally, they may demonstrate dependence, limited discipline, and a perceived disinterest in interpersonal communication. EFL teachers face significant challenges in working with Arab students, including issues related to low aptitude, motivation, and proficiency levels (Fareh, 2010). It

was evident from the findings that the participants are aware of the signs of a disengaged student, which are often characterized by their minimal eye contact, limited participation in conversations, and a lack of involvement in activities. The description provided by the participants encompasses not only disaffection, which implies passivity, but also emotional withdrawal and negativity (Skinner et al., 2008). According to the participants, even when learners do not openly display their lack of engagement, a sense of hostility can be felt, which they believe permeates the classroom with negativity.

The participants were able to elaborate on a wide range of reasons that contribute to their learners' disengagement. Lack of motivation stood out as the most significant obstacle, resulting from the perceived lack of benefits from their degree or the lack of agency in making course choices, as parents assume responsibility for them. This finding aligns with the observations made by Henry and Thorsen (2020) "Disengagement is particularly likely if students resent coercion, perceive a threat to their identities, or judge practices to be unfair" (p. 14).

A fixed mindset, as opposed to the growth mindset (Mercer & Dornyei, 2020), was another reason participants cited, as some students are more concerned about grades and less interested in long-term development. Furthermore, a low proficiency level is detrimental to engagement in class, particularly in terms of participation in discussions or other interactive activities. Additionally, the participants recognized that intrapersonal factors related to mental and physical well-being can harm engagement (Svalberg, 2018), including anxiety, frustration, or sleep disorders.

The influence of the participants' perception of their students' proficiency level upon engaging them aligns with Canh and Barnard's (2009) findings that teachers' beliefs about students' proficiency levels and motivation strongly shape how they deliver the student-centered curriculum, leading to deviations from the curriculum requirements. Additionally, challenges such as large class sizes, which make it difficult for teachers to maintain discipline, inadequate teacher preparation, and student beliefs and attitudes that resist change, can further limit the implementation of engaging communicative and task-based approaches (Hao et al., 2004).

Teacher-related factors that contribute to disengagement were also identified, including the use of Arabic when communicating with learners beyond the classroom, relying on a lecture-based teaching approach, excessive focus on grammatical forms and accuracy, and over-reliance on textbooks as quasi-syllabi. The participants often felt overwhelmed by the large number of students, which sometimes left them ill-prepared for class. In addition, some teachers may resort to technology as a "shortcut" to compensate for their own shortcomings and cover up inadequate skills. However, what stood out in the data was the notable disparity in accountability for engagement and disengagement. Disengagement was less attributed to the teachers' role, which is somewhat expected given the limited literature available on teachers' viewpoints regarding learner engagement (e.g., Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022; Zhang et al., 2015).

It is important to acknowledge that certain limitations experienced by teachers in addressing student disengagement can be influenced by institutional policies. In Saudi Arabia, the restricted course specifications and examination-focused testing system leave little room for creativity in teaching. While the participants stressed the value of inquiry-based assessment, the system places significant emphasis on tests and examinations. In order to enhance engagement, the participants proposed changes in assessment policies that allow teachers to design their own assessments, providing more opportunities for innovative teaching methods.

On a broader scale, there are socioeconomic and cultural factors that hinder the engagement of EFL learners. For instance, in a competitive labor market, finding a job that requires English proficiency is not always straightforward, which can impact students'

motivation to engage with the language. Additionally, for women, there may be a misalignment between university engagement and their family responsibilities once they are married. Adhering to traditional gender roles where males are viewed as breadwinners and females are primarily responsible for domestic duties (Dakheel, 2017) can negatively impact women's involvement and engagement as EFL students.

To conclude, this study provides a comprehensive overview of a group of highly qualified and mostly experienced English language teachers who possess a theoretical understanding of the fundamental concepts associated with learner engagement. It is worth noting that most of these teachers expressed their efforts in promoting learner engagement to some extent in their classes. However, there was notable variation in the specific practices employed. The teachers identified various factors, including those related to learners, teachers themselves, the institution, and the broader social and educational contexts, that either facilitated or hindered learner engagement. The insights reported in this study are a valuable addition to the literature on L2 learner engagement. As evident in the research gap identified in this article, research on L2 learner engagement has paid limited attention to teachers' perspectives and perceptions. Yet, without such insights, we lack a basis for understanding how teachers interpret the notion of learner engagement and for encouraging them to engage their learner as a top priority in their teaching, when necessary.

It is important to note that the teachers' conceptualizations and perceptions of learner engagement and influential factors are self-reported via interviews, and self-reported data may be subject to bias. However, the comprehensive examination of teachers' perceptions concerning EFL learner engagement, along with the various factors impacting it, can provide readers with valuable insights into the relevance of the findings within their specific contexts. Moreover, this study on uncovering EFL university teacher conceptualizations in the Saudi university context can be replicated in different subjects and educational levels in different contexts. The inclusion of additional data sources from students and policymakers would offer a more comprehensive range of perspectives.

This study emphasizes the urgent need to recognize the importance of L2 learner engagement both inside and outside the EFL classroom. It is crucial to provide teachers with opportunities to express and critically examine their conceptualizations of learner engagement. By doing so, these conceptualizations can be further refined and aligned with evidence-based practices. Also, without a thorough understanding of the factors that shape learner engagement, any attempts to improve their professional development, including training initiatives, may have limited impact. Based on the findings, it is suggested that program leaders and policymakers should prioritize the provision of continuous professional development opportunities for teachers. These opportunities should focus on enhancing teachers' competence in effectively engaging learners and addressing the various challenges arising from factors such as learner characteristics, classroom dynamics, institutional constraints, and broader educational contexts. Offering targeted professional development can empower teachers to overcome challenges and create inclusive and engaging learning environments that foster student motivation and success.

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Acknowledgements: The author extends her appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University for funding this work through Small Group Research Project under grant number (RGP1/308/44). I am grateful to the wonderful teachers who shared their conceptualizations about language learner engagement with me.

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Article Citation

Alzaanin, E. (2023). Uncovering university teachers' perspectives: Conceptualizations, factors, and perceptions of second language learner engagement. *The Qualitative Report, 28*(8), 2230-2257. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5996>
