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**Students’ Optimal Engagement in EFL Large Classes: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study in East Nusa Tenggara**

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in researching students’ engagement in English as foreign language (EFL) classes as students’ language learning achievement is shaped by their engagement in class. Yet, the study of students’ engagement in EFL large classes has received relatively little empirical attention. This qualitative phenomenological study aims at exploring how teachers perceive the factors boosting students’ optimal engagement and what strategies they use to boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. Ten university teachers with adequate experience of teaching EFL large classes in East Nusa Tenggara-Indonesia participated in this study. Semi structured interviews were used to elicit the teachers’ perceptions and interpretations of students’ optimal engagement. The results revealed five factors affecting students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes: teaching strategies, individual motivation, student-teacher relationship, students’ English proficiency, and teaching facilities. Additionally, the teachers applied instructional and affective strategies to boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. Based on the study results, we offered some pedagogical implications for the teachers and their institutions.

Keywords

students’ optimal engagement, EFL large classes, EFL teachers, phenomenology

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Students’ Optimal Engagement in EFL Large Classes: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study in East Nusa Tenggara

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In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in researching students’ engagement in English as foreign language (EFL) classes as students’ language learning achievement is shaped by their engagement in class. Yet, the study of students’ engagement in EFL large classes has received relatively little empirical attention. This qualitative phenomenological study aims at exploring how teachers perceive the factors boosting students’ optimal engagement and what strategies they use to boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. Ten university teachers with adequate experience of teaching EFL large classes in East Nusa Tenggara-Indonesia participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the teachers’ perceptions and interpretations of students’ optimal engagement. The results revealed five factors affecting students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes: teaching strategies, individual motivation, student-teacher relationship, students’ English proficiency, and teaching facilities. Additionally, the teachers applied instructional and affective strategies to boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. Based on the study results, we offered some pedagogical implications for the teachers and their institutions.

Keywords: students’ optimal engagement, EFL large classes, EFL teachers, phenomenology

Introduction

Language teachers are challenged when they have large classes because they do not just organize the content, they must also make sure that students are engaged. When students are engaged, they accomplish more and have more noteworthy academic and social achievement (Harbour et al., 2015). Higher levels of achievement, self-efficacy, motivation, curiosity, and mastery-oriented goals are just a few of the positive educational outcomes that have been linked to high levels of students’ engagement (Christenson et al., 2012). Also, other previous researchers have proved the strong connection between students’ achievement and engagement (e.g., Abid & Akhtar, 2020; K. Han, 2021; Heng, 2014; Karabıyık, 2019).

In the Indonesian context, where English is learned as a foreign language, and students are not open to language learning requirements, teachers have demanding tasks. Their encouraging students to actively practice English in the classroom becomes pivotal because the students lack exposure to English outside the classroom, which is the best place for their participation in meaningful language interaction. However, in private and state universities in East Nusa Tenggara-Indonesia, class-size is large. Hess and Urin in Treko (2013) define a large class as 30 to 50, and the East Nusa Tenggara Universities have 40 to 50. In such a case, teachers find students need to be more engaged to participate by asking and answering questions or discussing with peers. As engagement is the primary step in the foreign language
learning process (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015), students must be actively engaged to create the language they will use. This phenomenon challenges teachers to discover ways to enhance students’ engagement.

Even though various empirical research has been carried out in terms of students’ engagement in EFL settings by numerous researchers (e.g., Al-Bogami, 2020; Cheng & Liu, 2022; Gan, 2021; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2020; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021; Zhang, 2022), research on the issue of students’ engagement, in Indonesia, is still in its infancy. Researchers and experts have introduced students’ engagement in the Indonesian EFL context. Most of the studies had focused on EFL students’ engagement in online teaching and learning (Inayati & Waloyo, 2022; Suharti et al., 2021; Werang & Leba, 2022); learners’ engagement and learning motivation (Imamyartha et al., 2022); students’ engagement with teachers’ teaching style (Rahayu, 2018); effect of gamification, mentimeter and quizizz to students’ engagement (Ardi & Rianita, 2022; Munawir & Hasbi, 2021; Sari, 2021); engagement in academic reading (Yulia et al., 2020); engagement in writing (Miftah & Cahyono, 2022; Nurfaiadah, 2021; Prasetyawati & Ardi, 2020; Tusino et al., 2020); analysis framework of students’ learning engagement (Suherdi, 2018); and technology and engagement (Pasaribu & Wulandari, 2021). However, the theme focusing on students’ engagement in EFL large class is absent. The absence of research on students’ engagement in large classes seems to ignore that teachers face practical problems as class sizes rise, particularly in tertiary level institutions where the number of students is more varied, and the teachers must cope with a range of factors, such as student’s academic competence, background, age, and experience (Aoumeur, 2017), which affect students’ optimal engagement in class as well as the effectiveness of the learning process.

To throw light on this phenomenon, this study was conducted to investigate how teachers teaching EFL large classes deal with students’ engagement. EFL teachers in these settings may have their own experiences in perceiving factors affecting students’ engagement and strategies used to enhance it; thus, it is essential to carry out this study. It is in accordance with what Hiver et al. (2021a) state that engagement is the foundation of all language learning; it is crucial to comprehend if there are empirical variations in how individuals perceive engagement among diverse contexts. Such experiences are expected to be beneficial for all teachers in the possible improvement of some fruitful and appropriate methods to yield the students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes since a growing amount of research indicates that intentional interventions and particular teacher practices can increase students’ engagement (Harbour et al., 2015; Shernoff, 2013).

Furthermore, most of the studies (e.g., Yulia et al., 2020) focused on assessing the four dimensions of students’ engagement separately. However, it is crucial to investigate how teachers enhance the overall dimensions of students’ engagement concurrently since the four dimensions are not independent and are positively interrelated (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Reeve et al., 2019). Likewise, Ogada-Baldwin et al. (2017) argue that promoting the overall dimensions shows the optimal engagement of students. The ideas are in accordance with the research conducted by Conner et al. (2010) as cited in Shernoff (2013), proving that students who are indeed behaviorally engaged and receive good scores but are emotionally and cognitively disengaged display indications of elevated degrees of tension and worry which lead to poor well-being (see also, Lambert et al., 2017). Therefore, the current study is an attempt to fill the gaps and proposed the following research questions to be investigated:

1. How do university EFL teachers in East Nusa Tenggara-Indonesia perceive factors that boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes?
2. How do university EFL teachers in East Nusa Tenggara-Indonesia perceive strategies that boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes?
Related Literature

Importance of Engagement in Language Learning

Engagement can give a comprehensive picture of students’ feelings, actions, and thoughts in educational contexts (Oga-Baldwin, 2019), and it is crucial to predict essential outcomes (e.g., learning, development) and reveal underlying motivation (Reeve et al., 2004). In language learning, students’ engagement is related to their active participation and involvement in a particular activity or task, and meaningful language learning is likely to occur with the active involvement and commitment of engaged students (Hiver et al., 2021b).

The significance of engagement in learning is highlighted by Christenson et al. (2012), “Student engagement drives learning; requires energy and effort; is affected by multiple contextual influences; and can be achieved for all learners” (p. 817). Furthermore, high learner engagement has been associated with numerous successful educational outcomes (Hiver et al., 2021a; Lei et al., 2018; Rajabalee et al., 2020; Wara et al., 2018).

Since the challenges of maintaining students engaged and focused on their learning in the face of a variety of distractions are becoming more and more apparent to educators in language education around the world (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020), investigating teachers’ perspectives on factors affecting students’ engagement and strategies they employ in EFL large classes become indispensable. Moreover, recognizing the importance of students’ engagement, it is salient for teachers to examine how students engage in the overall teaching and learning process (Mandernach et al., 2011).

Four Dimensions of Engagement

Engagement is a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of four separate yet related aspects: behavior, emotion, cognition, and agency (Christenson et al., 2012; Reeve, 2013). Similarly, Philp, and Duchesne (2016) assert that engagement is a state of intense focus and involvement in which participation impacts not only one aspect but also the overall aspects of engagement.

According to Subramaniam and Muniandy (2017), teachers can observe the degree of student participation in a class during an activity connected to the student’s behavioral, agentic, cognitive, and emotional engagement. They reproduced the following figure of the interrelated aspects of students’ engagement (see Figure 1).

According to Sang and Hiver (2021), behavioral engagement is the effort put forth by students on learning tasks, the degree of their involvement, and their level of active participation in the learning process. Examples of learners’ behavioral involvement in L2 learning include their voluntary speaking participation, interpersonal communication initiative, task time, the number of semantic information they produce when on activity, and resilience on task without needing support or direction (Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

Emotional engagement refers to motivated participation in learning activities in which enthusiasm, interest, and enjoyment become its main features (Skinner et al., 2009). The level at which students feel connected to or disconnected from their classroom peers, particularly those they would be working with on their tasks, is another indicator of emotional engagement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

Cognitive engagement is continuous mental effort and attention of which questioning, peer utterance completion, idea exchange, making judgmental remarks, offering information or justification, justifying an argument, defending an argument, and employing nonverbal cues become its markers in classroom settings (Helme & Clarke, 2001).
Agentic engagement is the process through which students actively contribute to the direction of the teaching they receive. Some examples of agentic engagement are students may give contributions, convey a preference, suggest a course of action, ask questions, state their thoughts and needs, suggest a course of action to be pursued, express their level of interest, request materials or learning opportunities, look for ways to add personal relevance to the lesson, request a say in how problems are to be solved, request clarification, generate options, and express likes and dislikes during instruction (Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

These intercorrelated aspects are assessed concurrently in this study to ensure that students are optimally engaged in the EFL large classes.

Method

Research Design

This research used interpretive phenomenological design because we intended to portray the lived experiences of a phenomenon – people – (Hall et al., 2016). The primary focus of phenomenology is on how individuals perceive the world or things as they appear (Langdridge, 2007). This made it best to attain our goal. Interpretive phenomenological design enables the participants to narrate their stories based on their lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This design also enables the investigation of experience in its terms, placed
within the context of the individual, with a complete description of each person’s lived experience and the ability to extract themes to better understand the phenomena across participants (Smith et al., 2022). Thus, in the context of this study, we investigated empirical evidence of how EFL teachers teaching in EFL large classes in East Nusa Tenggara-Indonesia perceived factors affecting students’ optimal engagement and the strategies they employed to boost students’ optimal engagement. In addition, we used interpretive phenomenology design as it works best with a data collection approach that encourages participants to provide a thorough, in-depth, first-person narrative of their experiences (Noon, 2018). This study also utilized inductive analysis, where the themes or concepts in the findings are derived from the data not from earlier presumptions or models (Thomas, 2006).

The first author for this study is a faculty member at the English Department of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Educational Sciences in a private university in East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. As one of the best private universities in this province, the number of students increased, making some classes large. The first author experienced teaching EFL large classes of more than 40 students, making the learning process more challenging. The author faced diverse students with different backgrounds, learning motivations, and English competencies and also some not conducive learning environments, including limited learning facilities, which could affect students’ optimal engagement. This diversity and condition made the author try to help students engage optimally in the classroom.

This phenomenon was also experienced by the participants of the study who are working at the same university as the first author, and those working in public and other private universities in this province. Therefore, this study was done as an attempt to provide information for EFL teachers teaching large classes and university leaders to provide a supportive and conducive learning atmosphere that can boost students to optimally engage in the classroom, as learning engagement is crucial for language learners.

Participants

The most effective way of selecting participants for a phenomenological study is to select individuals who meet specific criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The criteria for selecting the participants were being a full-time faculty member in the English Department in a private or public university in East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia, and having at least three years of teaching English experiences in EFL large classes in their respective universities. In this regard, there were 10 (T1 – T10) EFL university teachers who had plenty of experience in teaching English courses in EFL large classes participating in the study. They included four males and six females whose teaching experiences ranged from three to 14 years.

We contacted the 10 participants via telephone and explained the project overview and the sample interview questions. They also signed the consent form to assure confidentiality of their voluntary participation.

Interview Protocol and Data Analysis

We used a semi-structured interview to collect the data. The interview was conducted online using Zoom. Each online interview lasted from 30 to 40 minutes. By focusing on the overall dimension of students’ engagement, predetermined questions were designed to elicit teachers’ perceptions on factors affecting students’ optimal engagement and strategies they used to boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. The guided questions, developed based on the literature and our professional experiences, involved items to reveal students’ cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and agentic engagement. The questions are:
1. What are the impacts of large classes on students’ optimal engagement (cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and agentic engagement in English lessons?
2. Did you experience facing students who were optimally engaged in the EFL large classes?
3. Did you experience facing disengaged students in the EFL large classes?
4. What factors did you experience that affect students to optimally engage in EFL large classes?
5. How did you experience boosting students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes?

The participants were prompted to provide specifics of a situation in which they have experienced the phenomenon (England, 2012) by giving detailed information for each dimension of students’ engagement. We held the interview in Bahasa Indonesia (i.e., the native language of the participants) to ensure the participants understood the questions and gave accurate responses. The interview data was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before analyzing the data, we translated the transcription into English.

The analysis process started after all the interview data were transcribed and translated. We utilized thematic analysis using a six-phase model proposed by Clarke et al. (2015) to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is appropriate in this research because it is used to identify and interpret data related to participants’ lived experiences (Clarke et al., 2015), which is in line with interpretive phenomenology, which aims to make an interpretation of participants’ experiences (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015) in this case the experiences of the EFL teachers teaching in EFL large classes. In addition, thematic analysis offers accessible and systematic procedures for extracting codes and themes from the obtained data (Clarke et al., 2015). This gave us a foundational grasp of the data collected and provided us with essential insights into how EFL teachers teaching in EFL large classes perceived factors affecting students’ optimal engagement and the strategies they employed to boost students’ optimal engagement.

The first stage of the data analysis was familiarization. We read and reread the verbatim transcribed data analytically, so we became intimately familiar with the details of the data. After getting familiar with the data, the next stage was coding. We created initial codes related to the research questions. We ended this phase by ensuring data was thoroughly coded and the codes relevant to each data. The codes emerged during the analysis; they were not determined earlier. The third stage was theme development. We grouped the identified codes into themes and subthemes. It was followed up by reviewing and revising the themes and subthemes to make sure they were all related to the data and the research questions. The last stage was finalizing for reporting purposes.

Table 2
Samples of Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sample codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching facilities</td>
<td>LCD inventory</td>
<td>Lack of LCD stock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comfortable classrooms</td>
<td>Need AC or fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Printed books in the library</td>
<td>Too few books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching strategies</td>
<td>Group discussion</td>
<td>To ask them to collaborate with their friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Videos</td>
<td>Taking videos from YouTube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Songs</td>
<td>To make the class fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They are happy when singing song</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trustworthiness

To address trustworthiness, we applied the member checking technique by displaying the interview transcripts to the participants to ensure they appropriately reflect on their perspectives, resulting in confirmed data and interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdel, 2015).

Results

Factors Boosting Students’ Optimal Engagement: Teachers’ Perspectives

Based on the results of the theme construction using thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015), we attained five themes that the participants perceived as factors that can boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. The themes are teaching strategies, individual motivation, student-teacher relationships, students’ English proficiency, and teaching facilities.

Teaching Strategies

All the teachers perceived that teaching strategies they employed in the classroom could boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. However, each of our participants held their own perspective on teaching strategies they employed in EFL large classes. Some participants defined teaching strategy as the careful selection and use of specific collaborative teaching strategies that assist students in collaborating in the learning process. They believed that this strategy could enhance students’ optimal engagement. In this regard, one of the teachers noted that:

T8: To ensure that all the students in the large class pay attention, I always choose my teaching techniques carefully. I employ some strategies like group discussions or rainbow technique so students can collaborate with their friends in the discussion.

Other participants associated teaching strategy with careful consideration in choosing more engaging and relevant tasks as well as the use of learning games. They perceived that this strategy would encourage students to engage in the learning process. The following are the participants’ comments:

T3: For the students to practice the four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—I select a few relevant games. Games are effective because all students could participate in the learning process.

T6: The strategies we employ to teach them and tasks we give can occasionally affect how engaged our students are in class.

Other participants highlighted the significance of using English in the instructional process as one of their teaching strategies since they found students feel happier and more enthusiastic when the teachers speak English in the classroom when, for example, they would like to interact with students. The following is one of the participants’ comments:
T3: Sometimes, when I use too much Indonesian in class, I notice some students look unhappy and uninterested………I think they feel more engaged when I use English as the language of instruction.

Our participants believed that the selection and use of collaborative teaching strategies, relevant learning tasks, games, and the use of English as the classroom language could boost students’ engagement in EFL large classes. Rahimi and Ong (2023) state that teaching strategies and learning tasks applied in the classroom can facilitate language learners’ engagement.

**Individual Motivation**

Individual motivation was another factor emerging from the data that could boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. Some teachers perceived that students with high motivation were more engaged. In this regard, one of the teachers stated, “Students with high motivation seem to be more engaged in the learning process” (T4). In addition, some teachers noticed that some less motivated students in their classes seem disengaged in class activities. The participants provided the following comments:

T1: Back to the student’s motivation, I observe that undermotivated students struggle to perform effectively and engage in the learning process. However, as a teacher, I approach the students in various ways to progressively boost their motivation to learn English.

T8: When I asked some disengaged students about their lack of active class participation, some said they did not enjoy learning English. They enrolled in the English department at their parents’ request.

According to the teachers, students’ motivation is central since it can drive them to participate actively and enthusiastically in every classroom activity, as motivation refers to the drive that underpins and maintains learners’ behavior (Schunk et al., 2014; Sinatra, 2005). The study revealed that highly motivated students performed optimal engagement in EFL large classes, but less motivated students were disengaged in the learning process.

**Student-Teacher Relationship**

A positive student-teacher relationship is defined as a tender and affectionate relationship in which the teacher is aware and responsive to the needs of the students (Pianta et al., 2012). The teachers believed that the student-teacher relationship is a crucial factor that can boost students’ engagement in EFL large classes:

It is necessary to build a positive rapport with students because if they like you, they will pay attention to you, want to talk to you, and feel comfortable opening to you. We can reflect on our relationship with others. If we have good relationships with others, we may discuss and share more with them. (T5)

Also, one of the teachers stated: “Positive rapport among students and teachers can create a more positive and conducive learning atmosphere that can make students feel happy to take part in the learning process whether to ask questions or discuss with their friends” (T2). The closeness between students and teachers provides a more relaxing and conducive learning
atmosphere where students are open to share or take part in the learning process. Closeness, encouragement, and affection between teachers and students, which characterize a positive teacher-student relationship, have been linked to improved student development outcomes such as higher psychological well-being and increased charitable behavior (Lin et al., 2022; Longobardi et al., 2020). These better development outcomes play an essential role in boosting students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes.

**Students’ English Proficiency**

Another theme to emerge from our data analysis that could affect the students’ engagement was students’ English proficiency. The teachers shared their experiences facing students with low English proficiency in their classes. Teacher #10 experienced some students chose to sit in the back row and did not participate in the learning process because they have low English competence: “Some students with low English proficiency usually sit in the back row and seem less engaged” (10).

Another teacher experienced students who could not share their learning difficulties or problems in the classroom as they did not know how to express them in English: “Even though they did not understand my explanation, some students are reluctant to raise questions since they do not know how to do so in English” (T9). The participants perceived that students’ adequate English proficiency would help them express their knowledge or ideas, ask questions, exchange ideas in group discussions, or answer teachers’ questions as forms of their optimal engagement in the lesson.

**Teaching Facilities**

The participants believed that the availability of teaching facilities, including the LCD inventory, comfortable classrooms, and printed books in the library, were significant factors that can boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes: “We need a room with an air conditioner or at least a fan when teaching large classes so the classroom is more comfortable” (T1).

According to the participants, sufficient and supporting teaching facilities are vital to help students optimally engage in EFL large classes, as they experienced limited teaching facilities such as LCD or books would hinder teachers from conducting their lessons as planned and made students less disengaged in the classroom discussions. The teachers stated that:

T3: Students are more engaged when playing games or watching videos on an LCD, but occasionally I have to alter my lesson plan because we run out of LCD as other teachers are also using it at the same time.

T5: In our library, there are limited books related to instructional materials. Because students cannot access enough sources outside of the classroom to further their knowledge, it is occasionally difficult for us to ensure that students are engaged in the discussions.

The study conducted by Hanayssha et al. (2023) showed that the availability of facilities becomes significant predictors of students’ engagement and academic performance. Similarly, Lavy and Nixon (2017) noted that providing and maintaining suitable facilities at university campuses is crucial to enhancing students’ academic performance and engagement. The teachers’ experiences become essential findings since university facilities can positively affect students’ engagement levels (Gunuc et al., 2022).
Teachers’ Strategies to Boost Students’ Optimal Engagement: Teachers’ Practices

Based on the results of the theme construction, we obtained two themes that the participants believed as strategy that can boost students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. The themes are instructional and affective strategy.

**Instructional Strategy**

The teachers perceived that instructional strategy is one of the most effective strategies in boosting students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes, including using engaging tasks and activities, applying interactive teaching strategies, and relating course materials to students’ personal experiences. The teachers recommended creating and executing engaging tasks and activities by providing tasks related to the students’ interest: “I usually provide engaging activities to ensure that every student takes part in class. Students are engaged when I provide tasks with funny pictures or tasks related to their football idol” (T10). Also, the teachers perceived that utilizing interactive teaching strategies, including project-based learning, group discussion, games, songs, videos, and creative PowerPoint slides, could facilitate students to engage in EFL large classes optimally. The participants provided the following comments:

T7: To make them enjoy the learning process, I usually begin the class by playing games related to the teaching materials.

T1: I apply the reader-read forms strategy to engage students in reading texts.

Teacher #2 believed that relating students’ personal experiences to the course material would help students boost their optimal engagement as they could actively participate in the learning process:

I typically request students to relate their personal experiences to the course material. For instance, reading and pronunciation class discusses a text about well-known cultures and customs from other nations. I then ask them to reflect on the similarities or differences between the cultures and customs they read about in the text and their own cultures and customs. (T2)

The ideas of teachers creating and providing engaging tasks and activities in EFL large classes to boost students’ optimal engagement can be an effective solution.

**Affective Strategy**

The study found that all the teachers perceived that the motivational support they provide for their students can boost them to optimally engage in the EFL classroom. Some teachers tried to approach disengaged students individually to help them learn: “I cannot deny that there are some disengaged students in the learning process, I usually approach them individually and ask for their problems or difficulties during the lesson” (T4). Also, the teachers believed that providing motivational talk before starting the class would help students to engage in the lessons. In this regard, one of the participants stated: “I always give a motivational talk at the beginning of my lessons to underline the value of studying English” (T7). The teachers perceived that incorporating an effective strategy into the learning process is crucial as it can
create a positive and supportive learning environment that promotes students’ emotional
connection and investment in their learning.

An effective strategy could be a solution to help students engage in EFL large classes
as it is one the most suitable strategies to motivate students to learn a language (Mandasari &
Oktaviani, 2018).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has attempted to widen the discussion of students’ engagements reported by
previous researchers by availing of a different context, i.e., EFL large classes in which teachers
experience factors affecting students’ optimal engagement and strategies they employ to boost
students’ optimal engagement.

Factors Boosting Students’ Optimal Engagement: Teachers’ Perspectives

The teachers believe that teaching strategies they employ in the classroom can boost
students’ optimal engagement as a teaching strategy is one of the most influential factors
impacting teaching quality (Nguyen et al., 2014), and the dynamic and quality of teaching and
learning are seen through students’ engagement on the instructional activities (Mandernach et
al., 2011). In addition, one interesting finding in this study is that the use of English as the
language of instruction in EFL classes can affect the students’ optimal engagement, which
strengthens numerous claims made regarding the importance of teachers having adequate
English proficiency (e.g., Ardi et al., 2023; Elder & Kim, 2014; Nakata, 2010; Wulyani et al.,
2019). This finding also confirms the outcomes reported by other research studies in the field
of student engagements, proving that the design and implementation of lessons considering
students’ needs and conditions maximize the probability that students will be actively engaged
in the learning process (e.g., Gresalfi et al., 2012; Harbour et al., 2015). So, careful
consideration of tasks teachers gives to students and the strategy they use in EFL large classes
becomes central. This implies that teaching strategies are significant factors contributing to
four dimensions of students’ engagement, i.e., behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic,
in EFL large classes.

The second finding shows there is a direct and obvious link between motivation and
engagement, with a focus on how motivation can support or facilitate engagement (Lee &
Reeve, 2012; Reeve, 2012; Skinner et al., 2008; Yin & Wang, 2016). The teachers perceive
that students with high individual motivation are more engaged than those who are less
motivated. A variety of student-internal factors becomes an important determiner that leads
them to engage or disengage (Aubrey et al., 2020). Therefore, the teachers view that the number
of students in the class does not hinder the engagement of highly motivated students since
students’ engagement and disengagement are linked to their personal motivation (Reeve et al.,
2019).

The student-teacher relationship is connected to a positive, trusting, and encouraging
relationship between teachers and their students developed in learning environments
(Verschueren & Koomen, 2012), which the teachers perceive as one salient factor that has an
impact on boosting students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes. Most teachers believe
that students’ engagement is shaped by their teachers’ closeness to them, which improves the
learning experience (Hughes & Cao, 2018) both inside and outside the classroom. Some
teachers shared their experience of creating extra outside activities, for example, watching
movies or doing sports together, that aim at building bonds with their students as they believe
that even if the class size is large, the bond they have made can connect them with their students
who feel open and relaxed to participate in the class. The finding strengthens other researchers
who have proved that student-teacher relationships affect students’ engagement (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2022; Quin, 2017; Wanders et al., 2020). Thus, the research finding implies that teachers discern the importance of establishing positive, trusting, and encouraging relationships with their students since good relationships make students more interested in learning, which affects their engagement and boosts long-term academic success and self-assurance (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

The students’ English proficiency level is an influencing factor in their engagement (Huang et al., 2017; Suryati et al., 2013), and the teachers also perceive this as another factor that impacts students’ optimal engagement in their EFL large classes. The teachers acknowledge that there are varieties of students’ levels of English proficiency in their classes, and they assert that, in their EFL large classes, students with inadequate English competence usually sit in the back row and seem unwilling to engage in the instruction.

The last factor that arose from the data that can boost students' optimal engagement in EFL large classes is teaching facilities. It is essential to provide enough teaching and learning resources and facilities to ensure the success of EFL instruction in the true sense because effective teaching can take place when teachers are supported with physical school facilities (Berry et al. in Werang et al., 2022). Some teachers experience that an uncomfortable classroom with many students result in students’ disengagement since the teachers are always griping about things like the heat or the size of the space. The teachers believe that the quality of their working conditions (Werang et al., 2022) has an impact on how well they perform in the classroom, particularly in their EFL lessons, which also affects students’ engagement. Besides, the minimal requirement to be considered is the availability of high-quality textbooks, an ample supply of authentic materials for each student, dictionaries and reference books in the library that are accessible to both students and teachers (Madya, 2002), and some teachers experience lack of books related to their instructional materials influence the participation of students in the class.

As the first author experienced teaching EFL large classes in East Nusa Tenggara Province, he believed that the factors perceived by the participants could contribute to the optimal engagement of students in EFL large classes. However, the first author perceived peers’ support as another factor that could help students engage in the classroom. The first author experienced that some students enjoyed learning English in the classroom because their classmates supported them. Also, some students were reluctant to participate in classroom activities as their friends usually made fun of their mistakes, for example, when mispronounced English words. In addition, some students preferred to study with their friends since they usually helped each other understand learning materials to engage in classroom discussions.

**Teachers’ Strategies to Boost Students’ Optimal Engagement: Teachers’ Practices**

Dealing with the last research question, the strategies the teachers used are divided into two, namely instructional and affective strategies. The instructional strategy is related to creating and executing engaging tasks and activities and applying proper and interactive instruction techniques to facilitate students’ optimal engagement. The finding also aligns with the ideas of Skinner and Pitzer (2012), who declare that students are more engaged, motivated to learn, and interested in learning when given intrinsically motivating, fundamentally engaging, and pleasurable assignments. The teachers find that students are optimally engaged when they find the task engaging. Additionally, some teachers claim that group discussion can increase students’ engagement in their EFL large class since students can collaborate. On the other hand, the use of English as the language of instruction is seen by teachers as crucial because many students are more attentive to teachers speaking English. As a result, effective
teaching strategies that allow teachers to speak in English may not only encourage students to engage but also improve teachers’ perceptions of their abilities (F. Han, 2021).

Another strategy teachers applied was an effective strategy, providing students with encouragement and motivational talks. It is important:

The teacher explains why putting forth effort during the learning activity might be a personally useful thing for the students to do. This is especially helpful when asking students to engage in a relatively uninteresting activity, classroom procedure, or teacher request, as it helps students motivationally transform “something not worth doing” into “something worth doing” so to realize the otherwise hidden benefit identified by the teacher. (Reeve et al., 2019, p. 90)

Teachers provide students with encouraging examples showing the importance of learning certain subjects so that they will understand and realize the value of the lessons and are eager to get involved. Besides, the teachers also share their experiences of getting scholarships and studying abroad as they believe that the motivating practices, they show can affect students’ optimal engagement (Van den Berghe et al., 2016).

Compared to the participants’ experiences in using the strategies to boost students’ engagement in EFL large classes, the first author usually employed rewarding strategies. He experienced that these strategies effectively boosted students’ engagement in EFL large classes as the students felt valued for their work. For example, the first author gave chocolate to them if they answered questions or gave them a plus if they were active in classroom discussions.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Findings have highlighted that collaborative learning activities play a crucial role in boosting students’ engagement in EFL large classes. As such, teachers are recommended to frequently implement collaborative learning strategies such as group discussion or role play in their lessons.

The findings of the study also reveal that some teachers believe they are not well prepared to deal with disengaged students in their EFL large classes. They could not join teachers’ professional development programs such as training or seminars because of demanding work schedules and lack of programs suited to their needs. Thus, they are recommended conducting reform professional development such as participating in study groups or being mentored or coached (Garet et al., 2001) so they could collaborate with colleagues to share insights and ideas to stay updated on effective teaching practices and strategies for engaging EFL large classes. Additionally, teachers need to gain a better grasp of the nature of engagement and consider the four dimensions of students’ engagement when planning their lessons and learning activities in the EFL large classes.

Another implication concerns the availability of sufficient university facilities. As experienced by the teachers, limited teaching facilities could also affect students’ optimal engagement; university leaders must consider providing more conducive working conditions for teachers including, providing teaching and learning facilities such as air conditioners in classrooms or relevant and adequate books in the library, particularly for those who teach large classes.

**Limitations**

This research has some limitations related to the number of participants, of which only 10 EFL teachers participated, and was conducted only in East Nusa Tenggara-Indonesia. Future
research will, therefore, be encouraged with a larger number of participants and a wider geographic scope. Engagement in second language acquisition will need to widen its foci and degrees of granularity to understand how such engagement is enacted and experienced in various circumstances (Hiver et al., 2021a). Therefore, future research might explore the fluctuation of students’ engagement in EFL large classes in a certain time scale, for example, a cross one academic year. Future research might also explore the factors affecting students’ optimal engagement in EFL large classes from the perspectives of students who also experience the learning process in EFL large classes.

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