

EXPLORING LEARNER ENGAGEMENT IN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY

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Abstract

The study examines the ways in which classroom learning activities, instructional practices, and motivational factors affect EFL learner engagement in higher education in the 21st century. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 55 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in an English program at a Moldovan University. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analysed to determine the current level of learner engagement with the studied material. The findings show that engagement is fostered and sustained through collaborative and communicative activities, creative tasks, gamification and the use of authentic multimedia resources. Additionally, intrinsic motivation, teacher support, student-centred and inquiry-based pedagogical approaches contribute to enhancing learner engagement in EFL higher education.

Keywords: learner engagement, involvement, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, collaborative learning, transmission model, exploration model

Rezumat

În articol, examinăm modul în care activitățile de învățare în clasă, practicile instrucționale și factorii motivaționali influențează implicarea persoanelor care învață limba engleză ca limbă străină (EFL) în învățământul superior din secolul XXI. Folosind o abordare cu metode mixte, au fost colectate date de la 55 de studenți și masteranzi înscriși la programul "Limba engleză" la universitatea din nordul Republicii Moldova. Au fost analizate atât date cantitative, cât și calitative pentru a determina nivelul actual de implicare a studenților în parcursul didactic. Rezultatele arată că implicarea dată este încurajată și susținută prin activități de colaborare și comunicative, sarcini creative, gamificare și utilizarea resurselor multimedia autentice. În plus, motivația intrinsecă, sprijinul profesorilor, abordările pedagogice centrate pe student și cele bazate pe investigație contribuie la sporirea implicării studenților în învățământul superior la programul menționat.

Cuvinte-cheie: implicarea studentului, motivație intrinsecă, motivație extrinsecă, auto-eficacitate, învățare colaborativă, model de transmitere, model de explorare

Introduction

Since the turn of the century, modern educational methodologies and practices have been significantly reshaped by technological innovations and the immediate availability of information via electronic devices, which made print materials less popular among 21st century students. Hence, the instant access to resources on various academic subjects has redefined the role of the educator, who is no longer seen as the primary disseminator or transmitter of

knowledge, and of textbooks, which are no longer considered the main sources of information.

The challenges of the 21st century made educators revise their ways of teaching across various disciplines, moving, from the traditional 20th century transmission model to the 21st century exploration model of teaching. It utterly meant the transition from passive, e. g. rote learning, to active learning, where the educator is not simply regarded as the only reliable source of information delivered through lectures, note-taking, and assigned reading material; the educator takes a different role, that of a coach, defined by R. C. Lent as: "A risk-taker who is comfortable with not always being in control of everything that may happen at the lesson. That kind of person knows how to be a facilitator, considers herself a learner and doesn't let ego get in the way" (Lent, 2012, p. 172).

Accordingly, the 21st century educators should help and inspire learners to become actively engaged in their own learning through exploration and discovery, finding ways to assess their academic growth and reinforce meaningful learning. Thus, the educator should participate alongside with their learners in the learning process, scaffolding learners' knowledge, asking questions and encouraging them to question whatever they study by developing learners' curiosity, critical thinking and last but not least, by channelling their engagement. In such a way, teaching becomes 'authoritative (not authoritarian), participatory, collaborative. The educator acts as a mentor and guide' (Wilhelm, 2007, p. 29).

The educational establishments in Moldova such as schools, colleges and universities have not yet entirely adopted this new form of teaching and learning, although there is much ongoing talk about inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning (PBL), and collaborative learning that reinforce the exploration teaching model of the 21st century. Some efforts are currently being taken to revitalize teaching and increase learner engagement and intrinsic motivation for learning. However, it takes time to erase well-established old habits and adopt a new teaching mindset that is oriented towards providing learners with in-depth learning rather than training them to score well in tests and pass the final exams. What the new generation of learners require is a more profound grasp of disciplinary concepts and the ability to self-manage learning, as well as 'to frame, investigate, and solve problems using a wide range of information resources and digital tools' (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 33-34).

The principles of the 21st century lead us to assume that learners have a different approach to education nowadays. Contemporary education is not limited to the transformation of teaching approaches but also extends to the ways learners themselves engage with learning materials. In many cases, they lack intrinsic motivation to study and they often claim that the texts they read

are boring or incomprehensible. Learners often possess insufficient background knowledge to support comprehension and the predominantly dry texts from the textbooks demotivate them to explore particular characters or events, and in some cases, they may give up reading altogether. This is when engagement becomes key to learning (Brozo *et alii*, 2007; Lent, 2012), as it is manifested through learners' interest, enthusiasm, and active participation in learning (Axelson & Flick, 2011).

Over the last decades, student engagement has been considered a key factor in academic success. Initially introduced as involvement by Astin (1984), it was defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 518). This definition provided a valuable starting point; however, it was limiting in scope, focusing only on the individual learner effort. Subsequently, Kuh, broadened this concept by adding that engagement is a reciprocal process between learners and institutions, bringing into focus the time and energy they invest in academically meaningful activities, on the one hand, and the institutional commitment to provide support, books, teaching quality and engagement to increase learning, on the other (Hu & Kuh, 2002).

More recently, student engagement has been seen as a multifaceted construct encompassing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of learning, reflecting the interplay of learners' thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and actions in both academic and non-academic environments, influencing learning outcomes, motivation and achievement (Fredericks *et alii*, 2004, Furlong & Rebelez-Ernst, 2014). J. D. Finn and K. S. Zimmer (2012) point out that engagement behaviours, such as attending classes, following instructional guidance, completing assignments, and maintaining positive attitudes towards subjects and schooling are central to supporting active participation in learning. Taken together, these approaches suggest that engagement as a growth-oriented and dynamic process is influenced by both internal dispositions and various contextual factors.

In "Engaging Adolescence in Reading", Guthrie (2008) presents a model for fostering reading engagement, which can motivate learners to learn more from the assigned reading selections. Based on five core engagement principles: setting mastery goals, providing students with control and choice, infusing social interaction, encouraging self-efficacy and cultivating learners' interest (pp. 133-134) the model offers empirical strategies, designed to enhance learner motivation and create a sustained reading and participatory learning environment.

Guthrie emphasizes the importance of mastery goals in learner engagement, as they define the meaningful learning outcomes and foster learners' autonomous learning. Consequently, educators are encouraged to provide relevant and useful information that aligns with their learners' needs and

interests. When learners perceive tasks as personally significant, they often adopt a mastery-oriented mindset, setting their own learning parameters and frequently exceeding the learning objectives established by teachers (Pink, 2011).

An important dimension of student engagement concerns the balance between control and choice in the learning process. Although these concepts may initially appear at odds with the principles of student-centered learning and engagement, scholars such as hooks (1994) and Guthrie (2008) argue that both remain central to fostering learners' intrinsic motivation to learn. Allowing learners to select activities, assessments, texts, forms of presentation, content, or deadlines provides autonomy and opportunities to exercise choice. Pink identifies autonomy as "a powerful effect on individual performance and learning" (2011, p. 90). This argument is consistent with Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985, 2000), which identifies autonomy as a fundamental psychological need that drives intrinsic motivation. Consequently, offering meaningful and flexible choices may contribute more significantly to student engagement than traditionally assumed. When learners take responsibility for their educational experiences, they gain a sense of control over their actions, which makes learning purposeful and enhances their motivation to participate actively during the lessons.

In examining the dynamics of learner engagement, particular attention should be given to social interaction, which is rooted in collaborative learning. Collaboration highlights interdependence and the social aspect, where learners work collectively to exchange ideas, strengthen conceptual understanding, and design common products (Smith & MacGregor, 1993). Empirical evidence suggests that such teaching and learning practices enhance academic performance, as each group member assumes responsibility for thinking out, executing, and sharing findings to peers (McClenney *et alii*, 2007; Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Harrington, 2021). Notably, collaborative learning extends beyond peer interaction by involving educators and learners in co-constructing knowledge, setting clear research objectives, and applying creative learning strategies, thereby enhancing students' self-efficacy.

Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1977, 1986, 1997) is seen as an essential component of learner engagement. In education, it refers to the learner's belief in their ability to accomplish any academic task efficiently (Schneider & Preckel, 2017; Bhati & Sethy, 2022). Given its central role in motivating students and enhancing achievement, self-efficacy has increasingly been examined in relation to the factors that shape it, such as social interaction, instructional practices, and collaborative learning. Hence learners with increased self-efficacy demonstrate greater understanding of new material and a stronger inclination toward autonomous study.

Keeping learners consistently engaged throughout a lesson still remains a daunting task for many educators. Therefore, it is critical to use strategies

that both capture and preserve learners' interest across all stages of the lesson, particularly when addressing complex reading assignments restricted to textbooks only. Within this framework, Lent underlines that 'interest is the precursor of curiosity' (2012, p. 25), while Barrel (2003) highlights the importance of cultivating an environment of inquiry to enhance learning. Both perspectives convey that boosting curiosity not only enhances learner motivation and engagement but also contributes to the development of self-efficacy and deeper learning. Based on these theoretical insights, the present study sought to investigate how such principles are applicable in classroom practices by examining what practices, factors and classroom activities in EFL classes foster or constrain learner engagement.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed to research learner engagement in higher education environment aimed at developing the 21st-century skills of EFL learners. The research was conducted in an academic setting using a convenience sampling strategy. The participant pool consisted of 55 students enrolled in the third and fourth years of the English program, bachelor level, at "Alec Russo" Balti State University, Republic of Moldova. All respondents were full-time students attending in-person classes.

Data were collected using observation and a survey based on the three dimensions of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, incorporating both Likert-scale items for quantitative analysis and open-ended questions for qualitative analysis to shed light on learners' perspectives on engagement levels. Data were analysed within the chosen target group without extrapolating the findings to other learners from Republic of Moldova with the same age.

The survey addressed several research questions: How do classroom practices influence student engagement in EFL classes at the university level? What intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivate students to remain engaged in learning? Which classroom activities are seen by students as the most effective in sustaining their engagement in EFL classes? These research questions were based on the assumptions that active participation during English classes would better reinforce overall engagement than passive learning. Additionally, the 21st century teaching practices, which rely on real-world and authentic materials, are expected to increase learners' curiosity and engagement beyond classroom instruction.

The following section discusses the findings, revealing the learners' needs and expectations to foster the learning relevance and curiosity in the 21st-century and ultimately, strengthen student engagement in EFL classes.

Discussion

The survey has gathered important demographic information (age, gender and the year of study) of the target group of learners to understand bet-

ter their academic needs and expectations. The findings indicate that the majority of participants are undergraduate and graduate students between the ages of 20 and 23. The largest group consists of 21-year-olds, who account for 38.4% of the sample (n = 21). This is followed by 20-year-olds (20%, n = 11), 22-year-olds (16.4%, n = 9), and 23-year-olds (14.5%, n = 8). Together, these four groups comprise 87.3% of the total sample, suggesting that the survey primarily reflects the perspectives and voices of young adults.

In contrast, respondents aged 24 and above 25, 26, 30, 31 and 34 appear only sporadically and are represented by a single individual (1.8% each). This minimal representation highlights a significant underrepresentation of older adults within the sample.

An analysis of gender distribution of the 55 respondents showcases a female majority (84%, n = 46) and a male minority (16%, n = 9), which suggests the existence of strong gender imbalance among learners enrolled in the English university program, which is not surprising at all. Most female students choose this study program for their career.

The survey data also revealed that out of the 55 respondents, 61.8% (n = 34) were third-year students, whereas 38.2% (n = 21) were students in the fourth year of study. We focused on investigating the voices of these upper-level undergraduate and graduate students, as they had a richer academic experience and developed more skills while they were engaged in in practical classes, research projects or pre-service activities.

Further, the study aimed to assess whether the curriculum content and the topics covered during the English classes were perceived as relevant and engaging for learners. The responses to the statement: *'I find the topics we study in English classes interesting and relevant to my life'*, were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Strong agreement was expressed by 52.7% (n = 29) learners and an additional 27.3% (n = 15) learners chose only 'agree'. Put together, these two more represented categories account for 80% of the sample, indicating that most participants perceive topics discussed in English classes as both interesting and personally relevant. It may be assumed that English educators incorporate authentic materials and themes during the lessons that satisfy the majority of learners' needs and goals.

However, neutral participation was reflected by 16.4% (n = 9) of learners. These respondents may not always consider some topics engaging or relevant, thus pointing to potential areas for improvement in the pedagogical approach. Additionally, only two respondents (3.6%) communicated clear dissatisfaction, selecting disagreement or strong disagreement. Though this is a very small proportion, these responses are significant, as disengagement can negatively influence classroom dynamics, participation rates, and overall learning outcomes. The existence of this minority group suggests that while the pedagogical approach is broadly effective, it may not fully accommodate the interests or expectations of all learners.

Next, active engagement in classroom activities was analysed, showcasing learners' self-reported levels of participation during the English lessons, based on the statement: '*I actively participate in classroom activities and discussions.*' The findings reveal that the majority of participants have exhibited relatively high levels of engagement. More specifically, 43.6% (n = 24) of respondents selected "agree" while a further 18.2% (n = 10) chose "strongly agree" indicating that over 60% of the respondents see themselves as actively involved in classroom interactions, eager to contribute to the learning processes.

Conversely, a smaller proportion of students reported limited participation. Only 3.6% (n = 2) selected "strongly disagree" and 10.9% (n = 6) selected "disagree" representing a minority who may struggle with or refrain from classroom involvement. Additionally, 23.6% (n = 13) identified with the midpoint "neutral" suggesting moderate participation that could be influenced by contextual or situational factors, such as task complexity, group dynamics, or individual confidence levels. It suggests that these learners need more inclusive pedagogical strategies to increase their participation level in classroom activities and discussions.

Another significant aspect addressed in this research was the examination of learner motivation during collaborative group work, in response to the statement: '*I feel more motivated when I collaborate with classmates.*' The results delineate that the majority of participants expressed positive attitudes toward collaboration: 36.4% of students selected *Agree* (n = 20) and 34.5% selected *Strongly Agree* (n = 19), which represent 70.9% of the sample under consideration. Thus, the findings show that collaborative learning significantly enhances learner motivation and collaborative activities could be considered valuable pedagogical tools to engage in the learning activities.

A smaller portion of respondents opted for a *Neutral* stance (23.6%, n = 13), indicating that while collaboration may not negatively impact their learning experience, it is not necessarily a primary motivational factor for this group. Such choices denote that some learners are more comfortable with working on their own as they understand the material better in this way or they have different learning styles (Taylor, 2011), or they have a different pacing of learning.

Finally, only 1.8% (n = 1) of participants reported *Disagree* and 3.6% (n = 2) reported *Strongly Disagree*, representing a minimal proportion (5.4%) of the total sample.

Responses to the following research statement '*I am curious to learn more about the topics once they are introduced in the class*' have demonstrated a strong learner engagement with the educators' choices of materials and themes for discussion. Thus, none of the participants opted for '*Strongly disagree*' and only a small minority selected '*Disagree*' 5.5% (n = 3) or '*Neutral*' 9.1% (n = 5) options. Instead, more than 85% of respondents reported high engagement

with classroom activities: 38.2% (n = 21) chose 'Agree', while 47.3% (n = 26) indicated 'Strongly agree'.

The findings indicate that learners consider the topics interesting and stimulating and the percentage displayed could indicate learners' intrinsic motivation to engage with the suggested material for study.

In addition to the previous aspect, the survey also examined whether learners would continue exploring the topics beyond the completion of a unit, as reflected in the statement: *I am likely to continue reading or researching about a topic after the unit is finished*. The data outlines that only a marginal proportion of respondents 1.8% (n = 1) strongly disagreed, while 21.8% (n = 12) expressed disagreement. A more substantial number of participants 25.5% (n = 14) adopted a neutral stance, indicating indecision in continuing independent research. It may be accounted for by the fact that sustained motivation depends on contextual or instructional factors.

However, the largest proportion of students 34.5% (n = 19) agreed with the statement, showcasing a preference for pursuing further exploration of course topics. Additionally, 16.4% (n = 9) strongly agreed, emphasizing learners' intrinsic motivation for extended out of the classroom learning. Yet, more than half of the respondents (50.9%) selected either agreement or strong agreement, indicating that classroom content stimulates ongoing intellectual engagement.

Having previously examined manifestations of learner engagement in an academic context, the research then shifted to consider how English textbooks function as a tool for reinforcing and preserving engagement in the learning process in response to the following research statement: *I am happy with the textbook we use to learn English*.

The findings reveal that more than half of the respondents 58.2 % (n = 32) provided favourable responses concerning their English textbooks; whereas 29.1% (n = 16) could not clearly state whether the textbooks fostered or diminished their motivation to engage in classroom activities. Additionally, the relatively high number of neutral responses pinpoint that while textbooks may support learning, they do not fully meet all students' motivational needs, emphasizing the importance of complementing them with more interactive and contextually relevant teaching strategies. The data also indicated that only 12.7% (n = 7) of participants conveyed their dissatisfaction with the educator' choice of textbooks, highlighting that they do not fulfil the learners' needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, described by Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory.

The preceding results measured learners' degree of involvement and awareness in relation to learner engagement scale. However, the study also aimed to identify the principal factors that drive both learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and effective practices that support their engagement in English classes. For this reason, learners were asked to provide full comprehensive responses to the following open-ended question: *What motivates you*

most to stay engaged in learning? The following pie diagram classifies the respondents' reflections into thematic clusters and displays the approximate percentages of their responses:

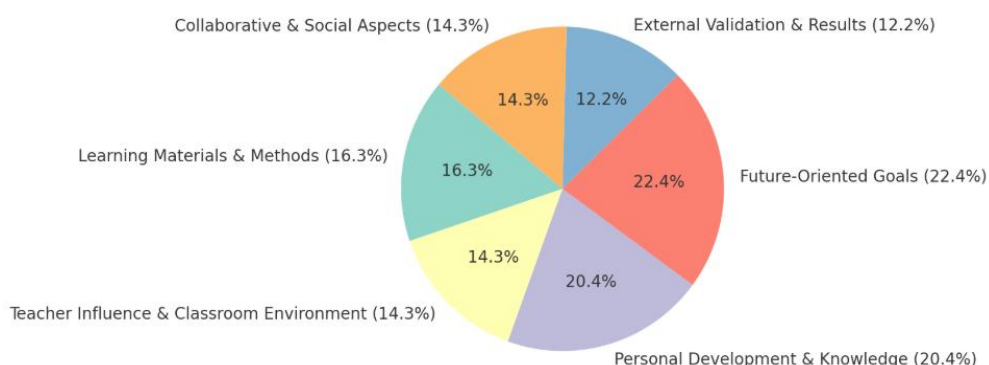


Figure 1. *Learner engagement motivators*

Upon observation and thorough analysis of the findings, it became evident that motivation is stimulated by a balance of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, which highlights the idea that learner engagement is complex and multidimensional.

The largest cluster refers to future-oriented goals (22.4%), which showcases learners' desire for graduation, career development and scholarship opportunities. These intrinsic motivators include becoming teachers or successful professionals, studying or working abroad, obtaining a diploma, and acquiring English as a tool for future employment, travel, and intercultural exchange.

A similar key dimension is the personal development and knowledge acquisition cluster (20.4%), which underlines learners' intrinsic passion for English and intellectual growth. Intrinsically, learners consider cognitive and emotional engagement as powerful indicators of curiosity, discovery and self-development. They emphasized the importance of advancing their knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms, and cultural aspects, experiencing progress, cultivating a love for languages, developing intercultural communication skills, and pursuing lifelong learning.

Extrinsic factors are also central to sustain learner engagement. Learning materials and methods (16.3%) demonstrate the importance of modern digital resources, interactive tasks, and blended approaches that combine traditional and contemporary tools (e.g., PPTs, videos, and multimedia). Likewise, teacher influence (14.3%) emerged as a crucial determinant of sustained engagement, with learners stressing the role of educators' attitudes, constructive feedback, fairness, classroom atmosphere, respect, encouragement, and avoidance of discriminatory practices.

In addition, collaborative and social aspects (14.3%) emphasize the value of peer interaction and authentic communicative practice. Learners expressed

greater engagement when involved in group projects, presentations, and real-life applications of English in communication, media, and cultural exploration.

Finally, although the smallest cluster, external validation and results (12.2%) are also relevant. Learners in this group reported being motivated by tangible outcomes such as progress, grades, diplomas, and recognition, reflecting the role of extrinsic, instrumental motivators in sustaining engagement.

All in all, the findings reveal that learner engagement results from the interdependence of personal aspirations, instructional quality, goals and social collaboration. Additionally, learners expressed their needs for teacher influence and supportive feedback, for flexible teaching approaches that incorporate modern digital materials, for personal growth and visible progress.

As learner engagement is the core component of the learning process, it highly determines the extent to which learners actively participate in classes and how much they benefit from these learning practices. In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), approaches that promote communication, teamwork, and individual expression are generally believed to boost motivation and involvement. This section analyses the findings from the same pool of participants who answered another open-ended question: *What activities keep you engaged in the English classes?* The responses were thematically grouped with approximate frequencies of mention and they are represented in Figure 2:

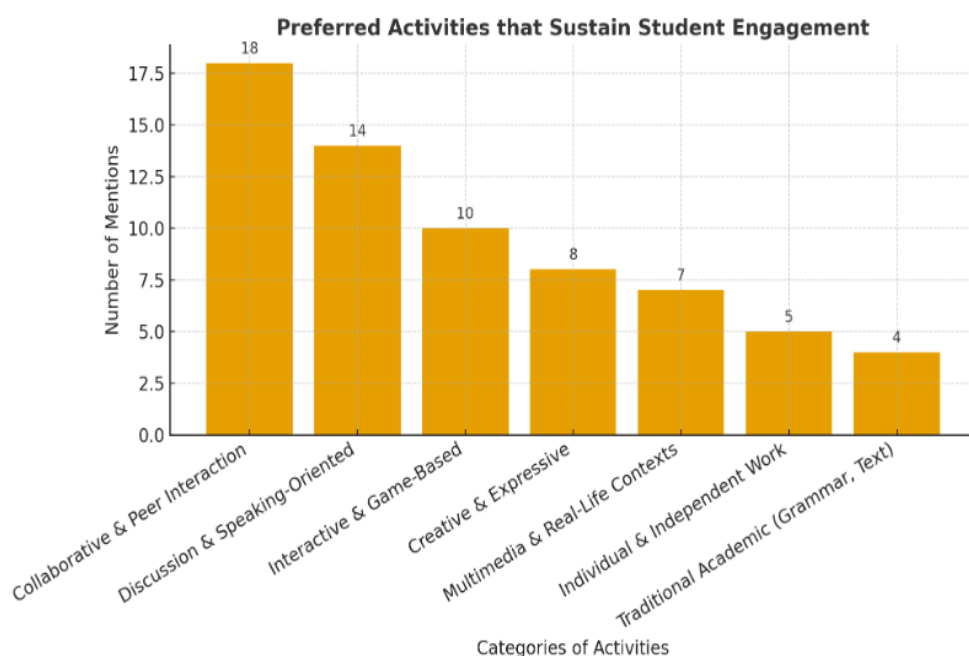


Figure 2: Activities that Sustain Learner Engagement

The learners' preferences are visually distributed in a decreasing line. Obviously, the most favoured option (32%) that maintains engagement was group work and collaboration among peers, demonstrating the significance of social learning settings, where learners can share insights, gain different perspectives, reduce anxiety and build knowledge together.

Discussions on the studied topics, debates, and role-plays, among other speaking-oriented activities (25%), were similarly considered very important. As a rule, such exercises reinforce the communicative competence, providing opportunities for authentic language practice. They do not only develop linguistic skills, but also keep active the social engagement focus. Both collaborative and speaking-oriented practices in EFL classes are essential components of communicative language teaching approaches which constitute the goal of language learning.

Interactive and game-based activities, such as Kahoot! and other digital games were frequently stated in the participants' responses (18%). Digital game-based activities, introduced in the classroom, align with learners' desire to compete and interact in a new, interesting and fun way and technology actively enables this engagement.

Participants emphasized that creative activities such as storytelling, projects, self-expression tasks (14%) contribute to their engagement level. It is a way for them to make learning more personal, express their individuality and explore creativity. All these elements put together are strong drivers of engagement.

In a similar way, the use of multimedia and real-life contexts (13%) was considered engaging as they connect classroom learning with the outside reality. Short instructional videos, online articles, images and news give the possibility to use English in authentic and practical ways in everyday contexts. Thus, contextualizing learning enhances learners' intrinsic motivation.

Few respondents chose individual and independent work (9%) and traditional academic tasks (e.g., grammar, texts) (8%), because they prefer structured, guided, traditional approaches to learning to track their progress.

On the whole, the findings demonstrate that learner engagement in EFL classrooms is primarily maintained through collaborative, communicative, and interactive activities, supplemented by creative expression and authentic, real-life contexts. The evidence suggests that a balanced, multimodal pedagogical approach (group work, speaking tasks, gamification, creativity, multimedia) and structured academic practice can sustain high levels of engagement.

The study further addressed learners' perspectives on how classroom practices could be improved to increase engagement. Learners were asked: *What changes would make your learning more engaging and relevant?* The responses are summarized in Figure 3:

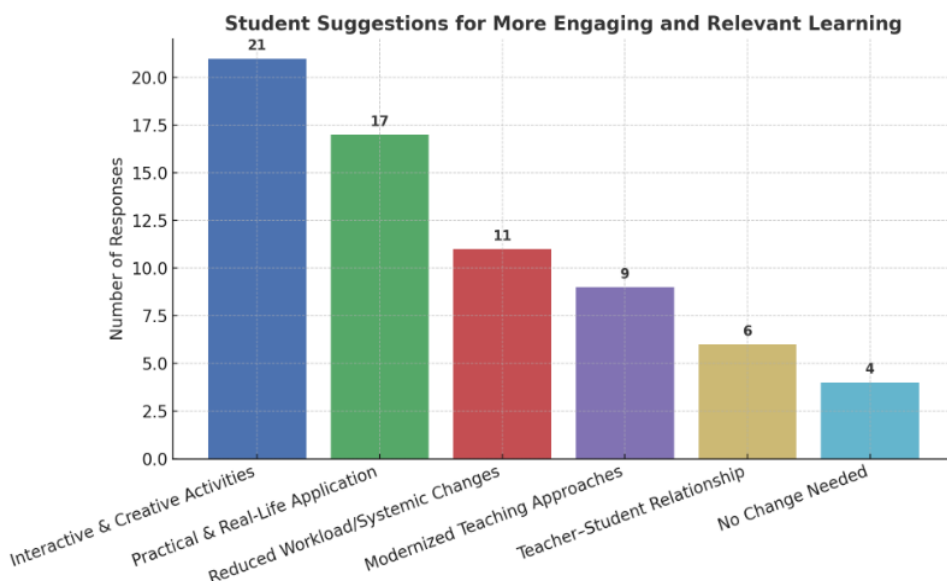


Figure 3: *Suggestions for More Engaging and Relevant Responses*

All fifty-five answers were distributed in six uneven categories, as illustrated in the chart. The data indicates that learners' need for interactive and creative activities such as quizzes, games, debates and collaborative projects and communication is very significant (21 responses). Thus, it may be concluded that learners associate active engagement with enhanced learning relevance.

The second most prominent theme relates to practical and real-life applications, where learners expressed a preference for lessons that connect directly to everyday experiences, professional contexts, or future goals (17 responses). Such findings highlight the importance of experiential and applied learning pedagogies that keep learners motivated and engaged.

The next category deals with academic rigor and home assignments which actually demotivate learners to continue independent work (11 responses). They would frequently mention the need to reduce the workload, have shorter lessons, and fewer non-essential subjects. Finding a good balance between classwork and homework may improve learner engagement.

Furthermore, other responses called for changes and modernization of teaching approaches, stressing the necessity of moving beyond traditional methods toward innovative practices (9 responses). Such references indicate a mismatch between learners' expectations and some educators' teaching practices.

Some students reported that teacher-student relationship affects engagement. A positive learning approach based on "*loyalty, respect, attentiveness, and constructive communication*" is vital for the learning environment (6 responses), because it contributes to both motivation and perceived relevance of content.

Finally, a small group of participants (4 responses) stated that though changes are desired, the current teaching system already offers some basis of engagement for them. This diversity of perspectives draws attention to the necessity of adopting flexible and differentiated teaching approaches that address learners' needs.

Generally, the evidence suggests that learner engagement in EFL classrooms is primarily sustained through collaborative, communicative, and interactive practices, supplemented by creativity and authentic real-life contexts. While primary structured academic tasks remain relevant for some learners, they are not sufficient on their own to maintain high levels of motivation. Instead, a balanced pedagogical approach that blends traditional elements with innovative strategies and digital tools appears to best meet learners' diverse needs and aspirations.

Equally important are learners' responses that emphasize a strong desire for more practical applications, interactive activities, and positive teacher-student relationships, all of which reinforce the importance of aligning teaching with both personal relevance and professional goals. These insights indicate that engagement is not static, but rather a dynamic process shaped by individual motivations, institutional support, and pedagogical design.

Taken together, the findings highlight the need for a shift in classroom practices toward approaches that value inquiry, autonomy, and real-world application. Observation also shows that such practices not only stimulate curiosity and critical thinking but also provide the foundation for sustained motivation and lifelong learning.

Conclusion

The findings of the study validate the research assumptions that active participation in EFL classes enhances learner engagement more effectively than passive learning and that 21st century instructional approaches stimulate learner engagement and curiosity beyond classroom use, especially when they are drawn from authentic contexts and experiences. Learner engagement is seen as a complex and multidimensional construct shaped by pedagogical practices, motivational factors, and educator scaffolding. Instruction that integrates collaboration, communication, creativity, gamification, and digital tools tends to foster learner autonomy, active involvement, and knowledge acquisition. In the Moldovan educational context, where conventional instructional practices still prevail, these findings suggest the need to adopt student-centred and inquiry-based methodologies to promote meaningful learning and increase learner motivation.

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