A Case Study of Student Engagement in Online EFL Courses for Young Learners in China

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Student engagement has received considerable attention in the traditional classroom context for the purpose of good academic achievement and low dropout rates. The emerging and popular online EFL context, especially for young learners, also needs to be examined. Therefore, the present study investigated student engagement in online EFL courses for young learners on two platforms, based on an integrated framework that features emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and agentic engagement. A case study approach was adopted to look at two nine-year-old learners' engagement in online EFL courses and the multi-dimensional reasons underlying such engagement. Data were collected from four different sources, including interviews with the learners and their mothers, a questionnaire, class videos, and stimulated recalls. The major findings include: 1) the two young learners with distinctively different levels of engagement in this study both showed a low level of agentic engagement; 2) a complex relationship existed across the four aspects of engagement and one case showed that behavioral engagement may not be able to predict cognitive engagement; 3) students' motivation and goal orientation, teachers' praise, and parent involvement play crucial roles in student engagement in online EFL courses. Furthermore, the findings offer insights into the potential influence of students' assumptions towards non-Chinese teachers on their engagement, especially the emotional dimension, as well as the three-fold effect of parent involvement on student engagement.

Introduction

Living in the information era, students are increasingly able to access diverse online courses, especially after the outbreak of COVID-19, where online courses are favored due to their convenience and safety. Online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses, particularly for young learners, became prevalent in China. According to the Research Report on the Industry of Online English Education for Children in China (2018), the number of online English educational institutions in China had surged to 27 since 2011, which attracted more than six billion RMB investment. These online EFL courses featured non-Chinese teachers as instructors. It is believed that children would improve their oral English proficiency through communication with authentic partners in an environment where only English is spoken (McDonough, 2004). In addition, instead of being exam-oriented, these courses aim at arousing learners' interest in English learning and enhancing their communicative competence by means of multimodal texts and real-time interaction.

The current research was conducted before the "double-reduction" policy was implemented, while a dramatic change in the industry was witnessed after July 2021, when most online English courses were forced to retire (Guo, 2021). As a result, online courses oriented toward essential qualities (such as PE, arts, reading, communication, and STEAM) became the new norm in place of the online language training courses taught by overseas foreign teachers (Duojing Capital, 2022). Parents tend to seize all the available opportunities to assign extracurricular training for their children in order not to "fall behind." In the case of English learning, they believe that the earlier children start learning English, the more likely they would obtain native-like proficiency, in accordance with the Critical Period Hypothesis (Birdsong, 1999).

The prevalence of online EFL courses for young learners has led to burgeoning research investigating their engagement in these courses, yet more research is still needed to understand the topic in greater depth. A recent review pointed out that most research on engagement was conducted in conventional (i.e., face-to-face) instructed language settings and only 19.6% were conducted in the online context (Hiver et al., 2021). Among these studies, young learners (below 12 years old) as participants only accounted for 10%. Investigation into young learners' engagement in the online language learning context is important as it is

closely linked to their learning outcomes. It may also help parents, course developers, and teachers to understand the effectiveness of these courses.

Literature Review

Student Engagement

Student engagement studies first appeared in the 1980s and have received increasing attention from researchers studying learning motivation and academic performance in the past few decades (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Student engagement, also known as learner engagement and learning engagement, refers to the energy and effort invested in the learning process by a learner to achieve certain goals (Fredricks et al., 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Instead of viewing it as a grand theory like the self-determination theory, the expectancy-value theory, the control value theory and so forth, "it is best considered as a flexible set of constructs with many measurement possibilities… to explain learning processes" (Oga-Baldwin, 2019, p. 2).

Student engagement has been approached from different angles. Based on the objects the students engage with, Svalberg (2018) distinguished between three types of engagement: 1) contextual engagement, 2) task engagement, and 3) engagement with language (EWL) (see Figure 1). Contextual engagement is the most general term, which involves connection and involvement with various actors and elements that make up schooling. The definition of EWL is the narrowest, referring to the process through which language awareness is developed. Task engagement seems to fall between the two, including not only different forms of EWL but also paralinguistic behaviors (e.g., sitting with a straighter posture). It can also be manifested by fewer non-functional behaviors (e.g., pencil tapping). It is notable that these three types of engagement are interdependent and interacting. The present study viewed student engagement as engagement with tasks and meanwhile acknowledged the influence of wider contexts such as schooling and society on engagement. It is because, for young learners (also the participants in the study), engagement with language cannot be easily separated from engagement with L2 learning tasks and the wider contexts (Kearney & Barbour, 2015).

Figure 1. The relationship among different types of engagement (Svalberg, 2018, p. 27)
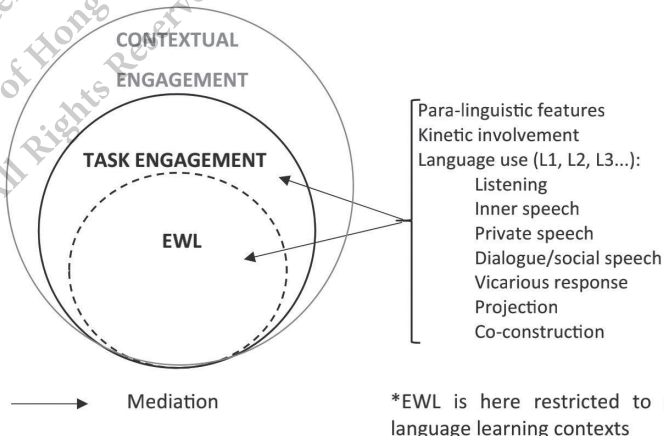
Regardless of different definitions of engagement in the existing literature, scholars seem to agree on a three-dimensional model of engagement featuring emotional/affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Platt & Brooks; 2002). Specifically, emotional/affective engagement refers to students' emotions (e.g., excited and happy) and attitudes (e.g., like and appreciate) towards their teachers, peers, and learning materials. Behavioral engagement is defined as the physical response to learning activities, including paying attention, answering questions, and participating in class discussions. Cognitive engagement can be viewed as something beyond explicit behaviors, that is, thoughtfulness in the learning process in order to learn, comprehend, and master knowledge. It usually involves students' use of learning strategies: memorizing, summarizing, and elaborating, as well as persisting and suppressing distractions. Students who exert more mental effort to understand the learning content and generate more internal connections among them (i.e., deep-level strategies) are more cognitively engaged than those who learn by rote (i.e., surface-level strategies).

Reeve and Tseng (2011) considered students' constructive contribution to the learning process and accordingly proposed the fourth dimension, agentic engagement, to the existing model. It is defined as "students'

intentional, proactive, and constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive" (p. 258). These four dimensions of engagement are not isolated but are intercorrelated and mutually supportive (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Reeve, 2013). Additionally, they tend to follow a hierarchical structure, with behavioral engagement predicting engagement in the other three dimensions (Oga-Baldwin, 2019). However, Han and Hyland (2015) argued that discrepancies may exist between behavioral and cognitive engagement.

In terms of student engagement in language learning, in a systematic review, Hiver et al. (2021) summarized four core dimensions of engagement in L2 learning, including behavioral, cognitive, social and emotional/affective engagement, which are, for the most part, similar to the framework from earlier research in psychology. Under Hiver et al.'s (2021) framework, social engagement has a wider implication than agentic engagement, which is related to the quality and quantity of interactions with interlocutors, as well as the extent of learners' willingness to participate in collaborative activities with others, turn-taking, and topic development. In Egbert et al.'s (2021) empirical research, they further developed and validated a model of language task engagement. In their model, five indicators of engagement were listed: 1) behavioral, 2) cognitive, 3) emotional, 4) agentic, and 5) social engagement.

Taken together, most researchers in this area have reached a consensus that engagement is a multi-dimensional construct comprised of at least three core dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and affective/ emotional engagement. Many second language researchers posited social engagement as the fourth dimension, since language learning often involves communication and social interaction. The present study adopted the construct of engagement drawn from the wider educational research literature, that is, engagement with behavioral, cognitive, affective, and agentic dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004; Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). The social dimension was excluded in the current study due to the online one-to-one learning context, where peers are absent and social engagement is probably limited to teacher-student interaction.

Based on the fact that engagement is not necessarily observable and that some signs of engagement can be misinterpreted, it is important to collect data from different sources, including learner interaction, journal

entries, stimulated recall, direct observation, focus groups, questionnaires, and tests (Svalberg, 2018). Previous research has formed a promising trend where multiple measurements and complementary data sources were combined to tap into the dimensions of engagement (Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Zhou et al., 2021). The present study aims to follow such a trend with multiple data sources, and this will be explained in detail in the Methodology section.

Factors that Influence Student Engagement

The existing literature has indicated numerous factors affecting student engagement, including contexts beyond the language classrooms (i.e., the sociocultural status of the language, school policies, and family settings), learners' motivation, beliefs and feelings, the teacher-student relationship, peer relationships, and learning tasks (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). These affecting factors will be explained below.

Regarding individual factors, there is a strong connection between students' motivation and engagement. According to Reeve (2012), motivation is an unobservable property involving inner psychological processes, whereas engagement contains observable behaviors, and the former acts as an antecedent cause to the latter. In order to fulfill their potential, individuals are energized and driven by motivation and subsequently take action (Martin, 2008). Moreover, interest is a specific type of motivation, and students "seek opportunities to engage and reengage with content from their interest domain" (Ainley, 2012, p. 298).

In addition, students' goal orientation, which includes mastery and performance, has been found to affect their engagement (Anderman & Patrick, 2012). Mastery goal orientation refers to students' interest in truly mastering the task and gaining competence in a specific area. Research has shown that it is positively related to academic behaviors, such as putting extra effort into the work and seeking help when needed, and the adoption of effective academic strategies, such as making connections with prior knowledge (Graham & Golan, 1991; Nolen, 1988). In contrast, performance goal orientation means students are interested in demonstrating their ability relative to others and expect to outperform others. Ryan and Patrick (2001) found that performance goals are connected to both avoidance of seeking help and disruptive behaviors. Most recently, Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) enumerated five

learner-internal factors that can facilitate engagement, including a sense of competence, a growth mindset, a sense of ownership and control over the learning process, and confidence.

Apart from individual factors, contextual factors also influence student engagement. It has been suggested that language classrooms are embedded in a wider ecology and, therefore, the complexity of engagement lies in the sociocultural status of the language, family settings, whole-school culture, and the testing policies (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Besides, engagement can be boosted by teachers' positive attitude and feedback (Pineda-Báez et al., 2019) as well as a psychologically safe environment for peers to develop a sense of belonging and collaboration (Kindermann, 1993; Nguyen et al., 2018).

Moreover, higher levels of engagement have been found to result from authentic and interesting tasks, as well as those in which students have enough opportunities to collaborate (Newman et al., 1992). Specifically, in terms of L2 learning tasks, Lambert and other researchers differentiated between teacher-generated content (TGC; content that consists of fictitious ideas and events created by the teacher to provide a chance to use the language meaningfully) tasks and learner-generated content (LGC; content that learners choose and tailor to a particular classroom context) tasks (for a more detailed definition, see Lambert & Zhang, 2019), and discovered that LGC tasks have positive effects on learners' behavioral, cognitive, social, and affective engagement (Lambert et al., 2017). Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) then proposed five principles to initiate student engagement in language learning tasks: 1) understanding the needs and actual abilities of learners, 2) galvanizing students emotionally, 3) creating curiosity, 4) clarifying the expectations from teachers, and 5) keeping learners active. They also highlighted the importance of sustaining engagement by providing cognitive challenge, maximizing enjoyment, grabbing attention, creating unpredictability, and acknowledging achievements.

Taking all the aforementioned factors into account, Zhang's (2022) study of a successful language learner showed that the combination of individual and contextual factors facilitate the learner's engagement with language learning. The individual factors include strong motivation to improve the linguistic and communicative competence in the target language (TL), mastery goal orientation as well as diligence, and the contextual factors include a living and study environment where the TL

is spoken as well as peer support and encouragement are available. In a model of language task engagement recently developed and validated by Egbert et al. (2021), six engagement facilitators were put forward: 1) authenticity, 2) social interaction, 3) learning support, 4) interest, 5) autonomy, and 6) challenge. This, again, implies that student engagement is affected by both individual and contextual factors.

A more interesting finding by Aubrey et al. (2022) is that the main factor leading to learners' successful engagement with English speaking tasks is related to the learning contexts (e.g., relaxing group atmosphere) while learner-internal factors seem to be a more important determiner of disengagement than engagement.

Student Engagement in the Online Language Learning Context

Although language engagement studies have increased exponentially in the past two decades, most of them were conducted in conventional (i.e., face-to-face) instructed language settings and only 19.6% of them were based in online, app-based, or virtual learning contexts (Hiver et al., 2021). With the prevalence of online education, research based on these contexts is emerging. For instance, Fryer and Bovee (2016) examined 975 first-year Japanese university students' engagement in e-learning of English and found that e-learning completion was chiefly predicted by students' beliefs about their own ability and that perceived teacher support affected students' motivations for e-learning. Since the existing literature suggested that motivation is closely linked to engagement (Martin, 2008), such a finding implies that perceived teacher support can influence engagement in online language learning. Qiu and Bui (2022) explored Hong Kong university students' learning task engagement in both face-to-face and online modes. They found that pre-task planning had no obvious impact on the learners' behavioral, cognitive, and social engagement in either the face-to-face condition or the one with synchronous computer-mediated communication (SvCMC).

Fryer et al. (2014) specifically looked into unmotivated students' engagement in online learning of English vocabulary. Combining data from surveys and interviews, they concluded that disengagement could result from students' low valuation of the online learning mode. Such disengagement can be long-term if they continue to be discouraged by its difficulty and perceived value over time.

In order to reengage unmotivated students in English learning and to improve their spoken and written communication skills, Chen and Kent (2020) developed an English support program using an online task-based 3D approach. The authors found these participants demonstrated active participation and attention in 3D virtual language learning because these tasks stimulated them to use English for meaningful and communicative purposes. Another significant reason for their engagement is the gamified elements of 3D virtual learning, which enabled learners to perform real-world tasks in a simulated, immersive playground just with the click of a mouse. Likewise, Yang (2011) developed an online situated language learning environment to engage undergraduate students to learn English as a foreign language. The research showed that student engagement in terms of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions was enhanced during online student-teacher interactions. This research also demonstrated the importance of teacher support in enhancing engagement.

Although the online language learning context is gaining ground, the participants in the existing literature were limited to adult learners, leaving young learners' engagement in such a context unknown. Given the fact that young learners may be less self-disciplined and more easily distracted, their engagement may be quite different from that of adults. Therefore, young learners' engagement needs to be closely examined to explore the effectiveness of these online EFL courses.

The present study tried to fill this gap by looking into online EFL courses for young learners and sought to answer the following two questions:

1. How do the two young learners in this study engage in the online EFL courses (based on the four-dimension engagement framework: behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and agentic)?
2. Why do they engage in distinctively different ways (i.e., What are the possible factors affecting their engagement)?

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to understand "how" young learners engage in online EFL courses and "why" they show distinctive levels of engagement. Due to its exploratory nature, a case study approach was

employed in order to study complex phenomena in a specific context (Yin, 2009). It was hoped that we could explore and delineate as many variables as possible that might potentially influence the learners' emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and agentic engagement in online EFL courses, as well as the reasons behind such engagement. Therefore, only two participants of outstanding engagement/disengagement level were selected for rich and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1993), and triangulation of data from different sources was ensured. Class videos, a questionnaire, and stimulated recalls with the young learners were used to investigate their engagement in the four dimensions, and semi-structured interviews with both the young learners and their mothers were held to explore the reasons for outstanding signs of engagement/disengagement. The researchers acted as observers throughout the study.

Context and Participants

Prior to data collection, we intended to select participants learning on different online platforms and with different levels of engagement in the course while at a similar age. We first approached the mothers known by either of us, whose primary school children had been taking online EFL courses and introduced to them the general purpose of the study. After a short conversation with the mothers, we had a preliminary understanding of the learners' general engagement levels according to their mothers' observations. To confirm it further, we then gained consent from the mothers and the children to watch the video recordings of the course. We roughly examined the videos and selected two young learners (both nine years old) with the most and least engagement to participate in the study.

As the participants were younger learners who were relatively "vulnerable," in order to make sure that their mothers did not enforce the task on them, we developed informed consent forms for both the mothers and the children themselves (BAAL, 2021). The consent from the children was done orally face to face with detailed explanations to ensure that they understood all the procedures of the research and agreed to participate. We tried our best to create a safe and free environment for them to talk. For example, they were told that the participation was not related to their educational grading and assessment. We also asked for their permission to be alone with us so that they could express whatever

interested them without worrying about their mothers' reactions, as we guaranteed that everything we talked about was "just between us and confidential to all including their mothers." In the consent forms, we emphasized that they did not have undue pressure to participate: they could stop whenever they did not feel like talking or say "no" to any question they felt uncomfortable with. Their mothers were also recruited to participate, in order to gain supplementary information on their children's engagement and their attitudes towards the online course. More information about the two young learners, Carrie and Allan (pseudonyms), will be discussed in the Results section.

The two young learners took an online EFL course on *Platform A* and *Platform B* respectively. Both *Platform A* and *Platform B* are popular online education platforms in China, providing one-on-one English language training through the internet. The training provides synchronous online-only sessions, which means that the teacher and the learner interact in real time online via the platform. Figures 2 and 3 provide screenshots of the layout of the online classrooms on the two platforms. There are also several differences between these two platforms (see Table 1). Teachers on *Platform A* come from more diversified backgrounds around the world while those on *Platform B* are mostly from the Inner Circle (English as a native language) according to Kachru's (1986) classification. Additionally, *Platform A* provides more diverse and cheaper curricula.

Figure 2. Screenshot of the online classroom on Platform A

Figure 3. Screenshot of the online classroom on Platform B

Table 1. Differences between Platform A and Platform B

	Platform A	*Platform B*
Teachers	From European, North American and some Southeast Asian countries	From North American countries
Provided curricula	English for K-12 education, academic exams, business, and overseas study	English for K-12 education
Average price (per lesson)	4 US dollars	15 US dollars
Duration of each lesson	25 minutes	30 minutes

Data Collection

The data reported in this study were collected from class videos, stimulated recalls, a questionnaire, and interviews. Before formal data collection, the whole procedure was piloted with two young learners resembling the ones in the study and the wording in the questionnaire and interview was slightly modified to be more comprehensible.

In the main study, first of all, all the class videos automatically recorded on the platforms were collected and carefully observed to gain basic information about each young learner's behavioral engagement in the online EFL course. Both the teacher's and the student's actions and the learning materials (slides) could be seen in these videos. There are in total 10 class videos for each young learner taking place within a consecutive period (around two months). While watching the videos, both researchers took notes on notable moments with notable behaviors of the young learner based on a semi-structured observation protocol (see Appendix A). We then discussed, evaluated, and integrated our notes into one worksheet that summarized the typical behavior patterns of these two learners. We also kept detailed notes of each lesson we observed in preparation for the stimulated recall. Among the 10 videos we examined, the most recent video was selected for stimulated recall, for the reason that 1) their memories were still fresh about this lesson, and 2) the stimulated recall was only used as a prompt leading us to the more general questions in the interview about their engagement pattern in this course as a whole.

One stimulated recall session was implemented to enquire about each learner's cognitive engagement, during which he/she was asked to watch the selected video from the beginning to the end and retell what he/she was thinking at that moment when it was paused (Gass & Mackey, 2000). Each stimulated recall was conducted one week after the recorded lesson due to some practical constraints (although preferably it should be conducted within one day). However, this did not invalidate the findings since we had taken some measures to minimize the potential problems for memory retrieval. First of all, we asked them to review the lesson by watching the complete video recording from the beginning to the end to refresh their memory. Secondly, several questions based on our class observation notes (see Appendix B) were presented to help them retrieve the specific information and describe their thoughts verbally. It was found that they were able to successfully recall all the details since there was limited subject content in the online class and in most cases, they were simply regarding it as a "relaxing time (free chat)" compared with the formal and intensive English classes at school. Their verbal reports were recorded and transcribed.

A questionnaire was subsequently distributed to each of these two young learners to investigate their engagement level in the online course.

The questionnaire (see Appendix C) included two sections, personal information and four five-point Likert scales concerning behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic engagement (each contained five items). For the scales measuring behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, we adapted the Engagement Scale (Sun & Rueda, 2012). For agentic engagement, we adapted the Agentic Engagement Scale (Reeve, 2013). The adaption was based on the actual learning situation on the two platforms. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the self-report questionnaires, when we presented the items to the young learners, we read aloud each item in Chinese and explained the meaning of each statement before they ticked the answers. After they completed several questions, we also double-checked that the answers matched the reality. For example, Allan ticked "strongly disagree" for item 13, so we asked him "Does it mean that you almost never take notes?" This self-report questionnaire was also used in combination with the interview. We would probe into the underlying reasons for their choices and their own evaluation of engagement.

During and after the questionnaire had been completed, a semi-structured interview was conducted to probe deeper into engagement and the reasons behind it. The interviews included both prescribed questions (see Appendix D) and non-directional open questions based on their responses. The learners were also asked to provide reasons for their answers to the questionnaire, especially for the items they responded with "strongly disagree" or "strongly agree." After that, their mothers were also invited to a short interview about their attitudes towards online learning and their children's engagement.

All the above procedures were conducted in the participants' L1 (Chinese) to ensure they could comprehend and express themselves more easily. These procedures took place in a quiet, private room of each participant's house sequentially within one session, taking each of them roughly one hour to complete. In addition, the sessions with the young learners were conducted without the presence of others, except the researchers, for them to disclose their genuine feelings without any pressure. From our pilot study, most kids preferred the absence of their mothers during the interview for potential confidential information. They tended to behave differently in front of their parents in order to keep a positive image and avoid blame. In the main study interview, we also confirmed our assumption that Allan was not interested in the English online course because of its "boring" content. What interested him were

military affairs and history, but his mother "supervised" him by sitting next to him throughout the online class to make sure he was listening and behaving well. This information would not have been available if his mother was present. Nonetheless, at the very beginning, Allan was not responding actively, so we then put aside our agenda and chitchatted with him about a book on military affairs that he was holding in his hand. He was very well-informed and excited about this subject, and we spent about 15 minutes warming up. He was then able to talk freely about his engagement, including why he disliked the course, and why he was disengaging.

In sum, for each young learner, a completed questionnaire was collected, a stimulated recall and an interview were recorded; for each mother, an interview was recorded.

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis was one young learner as a case, and the analysis of each case included the following steps. First, the engagement level was calculated based on each young learner's answers to the four scales in the questionnaire. It included the rating of behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic engagement (i.e., the mean score of the five items in each dimension), as well as the rating of overall engagement (i.e., the mean of the previous four ratings).

Then, the notes of outstanding behaviors, taken from the observation of the class videos, were categorized into different dimensions of engagement based on the definition by Fredricks et al. (2004) and Reeve and Tseng (2011). As cognitive engagement is difficult to observe through videos, data collected from stimulated recalls were transcribed verbatim and analyzed. The validity of the analysis was ensured by the two researchers' inter-coder agreement, which reached 95.3%. The engagement forms occurring once (unique) or more than three times (typical) in each dimension will be reported in the Results section.

Last, data collected from interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author. Following the thematic analysis approach (Merriam, 2009), we first read through the transcripts to gain familiarity with the contents and individually identified words/phrases (from the raw data or created by ourselves) as preliminary codes to represent the main idea of different content. Then, these preliminary codes were grouped and categorized into higher-level themes through multiple readings of the

data. The themes were confirmed after constant revisions for ensuring that all the preliminary codes were included in the generated themes. Finally, we discussed the themes, resolved differences in themes, and reached a consensus regarding the final version of the themes. An example of how the codes and themes were generated can be found in Appendix E. We also brought the drafts to the participants to review (i.e., member checking) in order to minimize the discrepancy between their thoughts and the themes generated from their interviews.

Results

The present case study explored student engagement in online EFL courses for young learners based on the four-dimension construct (i.e., emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and agentic engagement) (Fredricks et al., 2004; Reeve & Tseng, 2011), as well as the factors that influence their engagement. Four sources of data, including class videos, stimulated recalls, a questionnaire, and interviews, were collected to answer the research questions. In this section, the two cases of two young learners who took online EFL courses will be introduced separately. In each case, the engagement levels and forms in each dimension as well as the reasons for such engagement will be unfolded.

Case 1: Carrie

Carrie is a nine-year-old girl who took an online EFL course on *Platform A* from September 2018 to July 2021. The course she took was about English speech, which aimed to improve learners' oral English. Each lesson's topic in the course was related to real life and included a speech, through which she was expected to learn words and expressions and applied them to real-life conversations. Her class arrangement depended on her schedule at school, normally three times a week. Fewer classes were taken when the schoolteachers assigned too much homework or more classes with less homework. Each class lasted for 25 minutes.

In the meantime, Carrie studied at a key primary school in a developed city in China. She did well in every subject at school including English and was often ranked top 10 in her class. Besides, she was self-disciplined and always took the initiative to ask her mother to help her arrange lessons on *Platform A*.

Deeply Engaged with Relatively Less Agentic Engagement

Generally, Carrie was highly engaged in the course on *Platform A*, with a rating of 4.24 (Max = 5.00) in overall engagement, and 4.80, 5.00, 3.75, and 3.40 in the emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and agentic dimension respectively.

Regarding emotional engagement, Carrie evinced curiosity, interest, and happiness towards the course: "I am interested in it (the course on *Platform A*). It is novel and attractive, and I feel happy when I am having classes" (interview). However, there was one exception: she manifested much less emotional engagement when receiving praise from the teacher. In one lesson, after hearing the teacher's praise for one minute (e.g., "From the bottom of my heart, I am very proud of you"; "You can read the sentences perfectly, good job!" [class videos]), Carrie displayed no facial expression, nor did she feel a surge of excitement. Instead, as is evident in the following excerpt, she valued feedback more highly than praise:

> Excerpt 1 (Interview)
> Researcher: How did you feel after hearing the teacher's praise?
> Carrie: I had no special feeling.
> Researcher: What about suggestions from the teacher? How did you feel about that?
> Carrie: I focus more on suggestions offered by my teacher. For example, when she pointed out some words that I mispronounced, I would read them again for several times after class.
> Researcher: So, you consider suggestion more important than praise?
> Carrie: Yes, but I still want to listen to her praise.

Carrie fully engaged in the course concerning the behavioral aspect. She logged in on *Platform A* to attend classes on time by herself. In class, she answered almost every question correctly and even elaborated on her answers, unless she failed to catch what the teacher asked. In addition, she concentrated on the class, focusing on the screen and sitting straight all the time.

Carrie also engaged cognitively in the online EFL classes. For example, when required to read the sentences out loud, she not only read them correctly and fluently but also understood their meaning. Once when reading, she came across a sentence uttered by her teacher using "he" to refer to a dog. She tried to correct the pronoun in the sentence, though

aloud, with the help of prior knowledge: "I think 'he' should be replaced by 'it' here, since my schoolteacher has emphasized several times that we should use 'it' to refer to an animal, but perhaps personification is used here" (stimulated recall). Additionally, she exerted extra effort to facilitate her learning in this course, such as previewing the course materials before class and taking notes of new words in class. These strategies, according to her report, were taught in school and subsequently transferred to the online learning context. Nevertheless, she sometimes adopted rote learning instead of deeply processing the materials, which indicates a rather low level of cognitive engagement. For example, when memorizing the pronunciation of the word "unique," she mechanically repeated it after the teacher several times and still mispronounced it later in class. Although rote learning was occasionally used by Carrie, these findings still show evidence of her relatively high level of cognitive engagement in online learning on *Platform A*.

Carrie had the lowest level of agentic engagement among the four aspects. Agentic engagement was only manifested in her request for further explanation when she was confused about the materials. For instance, when her teacher asked her to read a short passage out loud but she was uncertain about the pronunciation of the word "unique" in it, she asked the teacher before she started to read: "I don't know the third word. How to read it?" (class video). However, she seldom expressed her interest and opinions unless her teacher asked her. Once the teacher asked about her plan for the coming weekend, and she briefly talked about her schedule for different classes and her interest in these classes. Yet based on the analysis of the videos observed and the interview, she did not take the initiative to mention her interest and thoughts towards certain issues. Moreover, it is crucial to note that Carrie had not thought about putting forward suggestions for course improvement, since she considered the platform, the course, and the teachers good enough.

Engagement Driven by Intrinsic Motivation and Mastery Goals

From the interview, two major reasons could be summarized to explain Carrie's high level of engagement in the course: 1) she was intrinsically motivated to learn English, and 2) she set mastery goals for her learning on *Platform A*.

First of all, her high level of engagement in the course, emotional engagement, in particular, could be attributed to her intrinsic motivation in English learning. Interest was one of her reasons for signing up for this course. She considered English as a novel foreign language (she had no exposure to other foreign languages), which contained something new and interesting that could not be found in Chinese. Therefore, she evinced positive feelings towards the course on *Platform A*, showed interest in the course content, and attended classes with a sense of happiness:

> Excerpt 2 (Interview)
> Researcher: What generated your interest in English learning?
> Carrie: Probably because English was the only foreign language to learn at school in the very beginning. I did not know other foreign languages such as Japanese before. At that time, I just thought that English was very novel to me and I was curious about everything in English.
> Researcher: Do you find it interesting to speak and understand materials in English?
> Carrie: Yes. Learning English helps me get access to and understand something I did not know previously.

In addition, she set mastery goals rather than performance goals when learning on *Platform A*, which in turn boosted her engagement. Before studying the course, she had already set a goal, that is, to improve her English proficiency especially in speaking. This prompted her to behaviorally engage in the course, such as listening carefully and actively answering questions raised by the teacher; cognitively engage, such as previewing and reviewing course materials and jotting down key points; and agentically engage, such as asking for further explanation when confused, since she considered these activities essential to improving her English language competence. However, it is worth noting that she seldom displayed emotional stimulation regarding the test result on the platform. This can also be explained by her mastery goal orientation. Since improvement was her primary concern during her learning on *Platform A*, she did not attach much importance to the test result, neither excited when achieving high scores nor upset when achieving low scores. Instead, every time after a test, she would introspect, carefully analyze the exercise she had completed incorrectly, and try to avoid making the same mistake next time.

Different attitudes towards English learning on Platform A and in school

Carrie tended to have different emotional engagements on *Platform A* and in the public school where she currently studies due to her different assumptions towards the two teachers. As illustrated in the following instance, Carrie assumed that non-Chinese teachers' praise was like *a matter of routine* regardless of students' performance, whereas praise from the English teacher in school was less frequent and only given to outstanding students:

> Excerpt 3 (Interview)
> Carrie: Foreign teachers (*waijiao* 外教 in Chinese, which means "non-Chinese teachers") often praise students. It seems that they would praise you no matter whether you are well-performed or not. If you perform well enough, they would praise you more; they would still praise you if your performance is just so-so.
> Researcher: So you care little about the praise from foreign teachers?
> Carrie: Yes, I get accustomed to it.
> Researcher: What if your English teacher in school praises you? Will you be happier and more excited?
> Carrie: Yes, of course, but she seldom praises us.

Consequently, although Carrie kept receiving praise from the non-Chinese teacher on *Platform A*, her emotional arousal was less activated.

The reason for Carrie's engagement on the platform and at school appears to differ as well. She mentioned: "School learning is closely related to the middle school entrance exam while the course on *Platform A* is not, so I care more about my scores in school" (interview). Compared with her attitude towards online courses where she cared little about her test results, it can be inferred that Carrie's deep engagement in school learning may be driven by, more or less, performance goals.

Case 2: Allan

Allan is a nine-year-old boy. He took an online EFL course on *Platform B* from January 2019 to July 2021. The course he took was based on an American material called *Wonders*, in which students were expected to accumulate words and expressions, master reading strategies, and communicate effectively by learning the texts on the material. Allan had classes twice a week (every Monday and Thursday), and each class lasted for 30 minutes.

Allan was an average student at school. His mother wanted to give him more exposure to an English language environment regularly and therefore enrolled him in this online EFL course. His mother was responsible for helping him arrange lessons.

Disengaged with little cognitive and agentic engagement

Compared with Carrie, Allan was much less engaged, with a rating of 2.45 (Max = 5.00) in overall engagement, and 3.20, 3.20, 1.20, and 2.20 in emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and agentic engagement respectively.

Allan's emotional engagement largely depended on the situation. Most of the time, he was not interested in the learning content and perceived a sense of boredom while having lessons. However, when he completed a task successfully or received praise from the teacher, he felt extremely excited. Additionally, his teacher sometimes would give him a distant high five after he answered the questions correctly and pretended to be defeated by him with an exaggerated tone and facial expression. At this time, he displayed a triumphant smile and felt exultant: "I think I am much stronger than the teacher, since whenever I responded to her high five by clapping the camera energetically, she said she was hit by the force of my clapping" (interview). This reflects that he had a positive emotional response when he was proven to be better than others.

Considering forms of behavioral engagement, Allan obeyed the class rules, attending classes on time and not dropping out before the end. This could be explained by his mother's supervision. Whenever Allan had a class on *Platform B*, his mother would help him start the computer, log onto the platform, and ask him to come into the study to attend the class five minutes in advance. She also sat beside and accompanied him while he was taking classes, so he did not dare to violate the rules. Besides, he frequently answered questions in class; otherwise, his mother would scold him for not paying attention to the teacher. However, Allan was still sometimes behaviorally disengaged in class, such as fiddling with his chair and not focusing on the screen.

As for cognitive engagement, Allan often behaved without the involvement of thoughtfulness. An example is that when answering questions, he would make a wild guess and speak out even if he did not understand what the teacher asked. Additionally, once when the teacher differentiated the words "cook" and "bake," he mechanically nodded his head, saying "okay" to pretend he had understood. However, he

confessed: "I did not understand what she (the teacher) meant at that time as she used many words that I did not know" (stimulated recall).

Allan also displayed extremely little agentic engagement in the course. For example, although he was uninterested in the learning content on *Platform B*, he did not intend to put forward suggestion on the course to suit his needs, nor did he ask his teacher to teach something of his interest. Only one form of agentic engagement was found throughout the investigation: he would predict what he was going to learn before class, but this was due to the command from his mother. This action actually went against his will, but he still complied because he was afraid of being scolded by his mother.

English learning without interest but performance goals

It can be inferred from what was reported by Allan that the most fundamental cause of his little engagement in the course on *Platform B* was his lack of interest in English learning. During the interview, he displayed enormous interest towards history and admitted that he would be more deeply engaged if the course were history related (see the excerpt below). However, it was not. He was somewhat "forced" to take the course by his mother. Yet his mother had never deliberated on whether he liked it (interview with his mother). Nor did Allan confess to his mother that he disliked the course, since he dared not do so.

> Excerpt 4 (Interview)
> Researcher: If the course contents are changed into history related, will you like it?
> Allan: Of course! (with a cheerful facial expression)

Although Allan was generally disengaged in the course, he still engaged, especially emotionally, under certain situations where his performance was recognized. This could be attributed to his performance goal orientation. Specifically, he attached great importance to the successful completion of a task and the praise from the teacher, for he deemed it a way to demonstrate his competence. Therefore, when accomplishing a task correctly and receiving praise, he felt extremely excited.

Allan's relatively more behavioral engagement with much less cognitive and agentic engagement can be explained by his performance

goal orientation as well. When the teacher asked whether he understood or not, he always nodded his head saying "yes." Even if he experienced confusion over certain words, he neither contemplated for a while to figure it out nor asked the teacher to clarify, because he wanted to show to both his teacher and mother that he was smart enough to grasp everything in class quickly.

Multiple roles taken by Allan's mother

Allan's mother is a college English teacher. Surprisingly, she herself rarely helps her son with English learning; instead, she often resorts to educational institutions and online platforms, including *Platform B*. The chief reason for this is her different role orientation that she acts as an English teacher at the workplace and a mother at home: "Although I am an English teacher, I seldom teach him (Allan) English.… Anyway, I hardly put my mind upon teaching English to Allan." (interview). As a mother at home, she distributes her time to the domestic chores and taking care of her one-year-old second son, with little time and energy left for teaching Allan. Yet she still wants to improve Allan's English language ability. Therefore, she carefully evaluated the pros and cons of different online EFL courses and eventually selected the one on *Platform B* for Allan to learn English.

Most surprisingly, even after noticing Allen's disengagement, his mother still intended to continue with the course. She explained: "It is good to have an online course that pushes him (Allan) to learn English weekly at a specific time. It enables him to improve his English proficiency and facilitates his school learning as well." (interview). This indicates her belief about learning, that is, having something to learn is better than nothing.

Given that Allan generally disengaged in the course, his mother accompanied him during the class, taking on three main roles. First, she supervised Allan's learning by checking whether he sat nicely with eyes focusing on the screen, listened to the teacher carefully, and participated in the class activities. If Allan performed poorly in these aspects, she would immediately urge him to adjust. Second, she guided Allan to interact with the teacher. For instance, after Allan responded to the teacher's greeting of "How are you?" by saying "I am fine," she prompted him to elaborate upon it: "What did you do at school today?"

(class video). Third, she was complementary to the online teacher. According to her comment in the interview, the teacher's teaching sometimes went beyond her son's current cognitive level, and she had to further explain in Chinese afterwards so as to help him comprehend (see also Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5 (Interview)

Allan's mother: This teacher sometimes says something that he (Allan) fails to understand. Yesterday, for example, she mentioned "pants" but he only knew "trousers." Hence, he did not understand what she was saying and I needed to explain it to him.… Perhaps she does not know how to teach children and which particular level my child is at. She does not simplify her speech and directly adopts words used in her daily life to teach.

Discussion

By exploring student engagement from multiple sources of data, the present study contributed to the existing literature in two ways. First, it combined Fredricks et al.'s (2004) and Reeve and Tseng's (2011) construct of student engagement, which featured emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and agentic engagement. Such theoretical frameworks helped probe deeper into student engagement from a more holistic and systematic perspective. Second, this study focused on online EFL courses for young learners, which are newly emerging but increasingly popular in China and have not been studied fully by researchers. A detailed discussion of the findings related to the research questions will be presented in this section.

Student Engagement in Online EFL Courses

Although the two young learners engaged in the online EFL course at different levels (i.e., Carrie was more engaged than Allan), they both showed certain types of engagement, as is shown in the Results section. Consistent with previous findings (Yang, 2011; Zhang, 2022), both cases in the current study demonstrated learners' integration of different dimensions of engagement in the online language learning context. However, their rating of agentic engagement was comparatively lower than the other three dimensions. Specifically, neither of them had put forward suggestions for course improvement by telling the teachers their

needs and likes; worse still, Allan did not have the intention to do so despite his boredom towards the learning contents. Such a result can be interpreted in two ways. First, a modest and defensible, yet not very meaningful interpretation is that these two young learners are not mature enough to develop a sense of agency which involves a higher level of thinking. Therefore, they may not be able to display much agentic engagement in the course. Research into agentic engagement, however, predominantly investigated adults (Reeve, 2013) and middle school students (Pineda-Báez et al., 2019; Reeve & Lee, 2014), with little attention paid to primary school children, so there tends to be little support with this interpretation from the existing literature. More research is needed to investigate the agentic dimension of engagement of young learners.

It is suggested that student engagement should be understood in broader contexts and that sociocultural factors can play a role in affecting student engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Therefore, a stronger interpretation of the above phenomenon would be that both young learners get accustomed to the traditional mode of learning in China, that is, teachers transmitting knowledge with students passively receiving it. Under this mode, students perceive teachers as the authority responsible for initiating questions and therefore tend to keep silent unless they are required to speak up (Liu, 2002). This long-lasting pattern in school could be transferred to the online learning context. Accordingly, these two young learners did not take the initiative to express their needs and likes for the purpose of creating a more favorable learning environment for themselves, since they were not asked to speak up. Similarly, Pianta et al. (2012) also found that restrictive and teacher-centered classrooms could hinder students' natural traits including creativity and inquiry-oriented dispositions.

Moreover, complexity was shown across the four aspects of student engagement: a student who engaged in one aspect did not necessarily engage in other aspects at the same level and vice versa. Carrie, for example, was deeply engaged in the course in almost all aspects but was not stimulated to any emotional changes when receiving praise from the teacher (i.e., little emotional engagement under certain situations). Additionally, Allan sometimes mechanically listened and responded "okay" to the teacher (i.e., behavioral engagement), though he did not process the information received from the teacher in his mind and

therefore failed to understand it (i.e., no cognitive engagement). This finding corroborates Han and Hyland's (2015) claim that discrepancies exist between behavioral and cognitive engagement. However, while Oga-Baldwin (2019) suggested that behavioral engagement would predict other aspects of engagement, the findings of the present study direct to the contrary: one's behaviors could not indicate cognitive engagement, as is evident in Allan's case. Due to the conflicting results, additional research is needed to make a sounder judgment about the relationship across these four aspects.

Influencing Factors in Student Engagement

In agreement with previous studies (Ainley, 2012; Graham & Golan, 1991; Nolen, 1988; Ryan & Patrick, 2001), the current study found that students' motivation and goal orientation play a crucial role in their engagement. On the one hand, Carrie was interested in English learning and considered the online EFL course as an important way to improve her overall English proficiency. Therefore, she was deeply engaged in the course. Carrie's case is very similar to that in Zhang's (2022) study, which depicted a language learner with mastery goal orientation and strong motivation to improve linguistic and communicative competence in the target language and eventually achieved high proficiency in it. Allan, on the other hand, did not exhibit a personal interest in English; nor did the course contents engender his situational interest. Hence, he engaged in the course at a much lower level. Notwithstanding lacking interest in English, he aspired to win positive feedback from the teacher. Such performance goal orientation contributed to his engagement in answering questions and gaining a sense of excitement when receiving praise from the teacher.

Notably, the two online platforms being examined in the present study share many commonalities, as shown previously, yet the two young learners demonstrated hugely different levels of engagement. Allan, in particular, showed certain forms of disengagement. Such an individual difference, to some extent, supports Aubrey et al.'s (2022) view that learner-internal factors tend to be an important determiner of disengagement. Since disengagement is a long-term problem that may be worsened over time (Fryer et al., 2014), certain intervention to reengage Allan is urgently needed. Research has shown that authentic tasks

combined with advanced technology (e.g., 3D) can help disengaged students reengage in language learning (Chen & Kent, 2020). Therefore, future research can explore ways to reengage disengaged students in online language learning, so that more pedagogical implications can be offered.

Besides, teachers also play a significant role in student engagement in the course, which is congruent with findings from prior studies (Fryer & Bovee, 2016; Pineda-Báez et al., 2019). Prior studies have revealed that students' perceived teacher support contributes to their academic success and prevents them from harmful behaviors and depression. Likewise, in Allan's case, his "foreign" teacher frequently praised him with an exaggerated tone and facial expression, therefore stimulating his emotional reaction and motivating him to participate in the course (i.e., emotional and behavioral engagement). All these findings point to the significance of teacher support in both traditional face-to-face classrooms and the online learning context.

What is new in the present study, however, is that there may be no or weak relationship between teacher support and student engagement when students do not attach importance to the support. In Carrie's case, since she held assumptions, based on her own experience, that "foreign" teachers gave praise like *a matter of routine* regardless of students' performance, she did not highly value the online teacher's compliments and therefore displayed little emotional engagement when being praised. This interesting finding suggests that students' valuation of teacher support, engendered by cultural stereotypes towards "foreign" teachers, may mediate the relationship between perceived teacher support and student engagement. Future research can be done to further substantiate our understanding of the relationship among these three variables.

Furthermore, the case of Allan indicates that parent involvement could influence student engagement as well. The existing literature has merely revealed the indirect relationship between these two variables: children's perceived authoritarian parenting contributes to their performance goal orientation (Chan & Chan, 2005), and performance goal orientation is associated with misbehaving in class and avoiding seeking help (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). What has not been found is that parent involvement can directly influence student engagement in online courses. This difference could be explained by the fact that participants of prior research were predominantly adults (Hiver et al., 2021), who are

likely to obtain enough autonomy and attend classes without parent involvement. In Allan's case, however, since he is only nine years old and lacks self-discipline, his mother is highly involved in his online learning, taking three roles, namely, to supervise Allan, guide him, and complement the online teacher. This, on the one hand, promoted Allan's behavioral engagement, such as obeying the class rules and answering questions actively. On the other hand, it might hinder his agentic engagement. Due to his fear of his mother's authority, he was afraid to speak too much beyond the topic in class, which probably means that he seldom mentioned his interest in history or expressed his personal opinions. It should also be noted that parent involvement may have no obvious influence on cognitive engagement: Allan sometimes pretended to understand the teacher's instruction without processing the information in his mind, as the cognitive process was not visible to his mother. Such findings, taken together, suggest that there may be a threefold impact of parent involvement on student engagement.

Nonetheless, the above findings may be specific to cases in which the parent is equipped with knowledge of English language teaching. Allan's mother is an English teacher, equipped with certain expertise in English language teaching. She, therefore, knows whether the learning materials and the instructions used in class are appropriate to Allan and how to teach him in a readily comprehensible way. Accordingly, she guided Allan and complemented the online teacher when necessary. Nevertheless, the majority of parents are not experts in English teaching and may not know how to effectively promote their children's engagement apart from supervising them during the online classes. Since research in this area is still lacking, additional research is vitally needed to examine the relationship between student engagement in online courses and parent involvement, with a particular focus on young learners.

Lastly, it is important to note that the quality of the platforms, including the teacher's qualifications and teaching approach, did not stand out as key themes for influencing student engagement. Both mothers had positive feedback (no complaint) towards the platforms, which shows that average institutions are able to hire qualified TESOL teachers with enough funding. They have also developed a systematic curriculum by consulting experts to ensure the quality of the online EFL courses. Carrie also remarked in her report that the content of the online course was interesting and novel, closer to life, which was absent in the

English learning at school that focused on textbooks and exams. The teaching approach on the platform was also more interactive and she was able to speak more.

Taken together, the above findings imply that student engagement is a complex construct which can be affected by a series of factors including learner-internal ones (e.g., motivation and goal orientation), teacher support, and parent involvement. In line with the existing literature (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020), the findings also show the possible influence of cultural contexts on the agentic dimension of engagement (see Excerpt 1 as an example).

Conclusion

The present study investigated students' emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and agentic engagement in online EFL courses for young learners on two platforms and the influencing factors in student engagement. The two cases demonstrated that 1) the two young learners engaged in the online course at different levels with a comparatively lower level of agentic engagement, that 2) a complex relationship existed among the four dimensions of engagement, especially regarding the one between behavioral and cognitive engagement, and that 3) students' motivation and goal orientation, teachers' praise, and parent involvement played important roles in student engagement in the online course. Furthermore, the findings offer insights into the influence of students' assumptions towards "foreign" teachers on their engagement, especially the emotional dimension, as well as the threefold effect of parent involvement on student engagement.

It is also crucial to point out the limitations of this study. First, as it only focused on two cases, the findings cannot be representative of students in other contexts. Second, the present study adopted a four-dimension construct of engagement. Due to the one-on-one nature of the two online platforms examined in the study, the social dimension proposed by Egbert et al. (2021) was not taken into consideration. In order to capture a more holistic picture of student engagement in the online language learning context, future research can investigate all five dimensions (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, agentic, and social engagement). Third, the scales used in the study are adapted from previously validated ones based on the actual situation of the participants' learning on the platforms, and their reliability and validity

have not been analyzed, due to the exploratory nature of the study and the extremely few (only two) participants involved. Since the questionnaire merely served as the preliminary step to gain basic information of their engagement and aid the subsequent interviews, the absence of reliability and validity analysis should not become a fatal limitation.

Taken together, this study offers valuable implications. For online course teachers, especially the "foreign" ones, although praise could somehow promote student engagement, they should not consider it as a mere routine, but praise the students sincerely by acknowledging their target behavior in detail. They should also offer students suggestions for improvement. For parents, they need to be cautious about the roles they take in the online course. It is unwise to blindly sign children up for courses without considering their interests. If children themselves are not interested in the course, to some extent, they would be forced to engage behaviorally under the supervision of their parents, but not cognitively or agentically. For researchers, more studies can be done within online EFL courses for young learners on different platforms to further substantiate our understanding of this area, as well as to promote the development of emerging online EFL courses.

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Appendix A.   Class Observation Protocol

Class Observation Protocol
(With sample field notes of Carrie)

Date: December 6, 2019
Time: 21:30–21:55
Name of the course: English speech for kids
Topic of the lesson: My favorite pet

- **General pattern of engagement in this lesson:** attentive with eyes focusing on the screen; 95% of the time Carrie was able to provide the right answers that the teacher was looking for.

- **Outstanding and notable moments**

What is happening? (outstanding and notable moment)	Teacher's behavior	Student's behavior	Engagement dimension (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, agentic)
21:36:45 Presentation of the passage (the learning material of today's lesson)	The teacher presented part of the passage where the opinion that "dogs are humans' friends" was included and asked Carrie whether she agreed or not.	Carrie said "yes" but did not give further explanation. (She said lots of "yes" in this class without elaborations.)	Behavioral engagement
21:38:30 Reading aloud the passage	The teacher asked Carrie to read the passage aloud and demonstrated the pronunciation of "unique" for her.	Carrie asked the teacher, *"I don't know the third word* ("unique"). *How to read it?"* After the teacher told her the pronunciation, she murmured the word for several times. Then she read aloud the passage quite fluently, but still stuck on the word "unique".	Agentic engagement & behavioral engagement

What is happening? (outstanding and notable moment)	Teacher's behavior	Student's behavior	Engagement dimension (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, agentic)
21:42:30 Free discussion about the passage	The teacher said, *"Dogs are very friendly and they have their own way of saying 'thank you'. They will wag their tails."* Then she immediately moved to another idea that appeared in the passage.	Carrie nodded her head and said a few words (can't hear clearly) but was interrupted by the teacher. She remained silent after that.	Agentic engagement (but quickly hindered by the teacher)
21:46:45 Presentation of the new words and expressions	The teacher explained the new words one by one, followed by a sample sentence containing each new word.	Carrie remained silent with her eyes focusing on the screen. For some words, she took notes on her notebook.	Behavioral engagement (cognitive engagement to be checked via stimulated recall)
21:50:00 Detailed analysis of the text	The teacher first explained the newly learned words and analyzed their relevant language features in detail. Then she asked Carrie to paraphrase the sentences or to do some exercises on these words and language features. Sometimes she paused and let Carrie answer while sometimes she presented the model answers directly without giving Carrie the opportunity to do it independently.	Carrie answered correctly when the teacher asked her to answer. However, she remained silent with her eyes focusing on the screen if the teacher didn't let her answer. Sometimes she nodded her head after the teacher presented the model answers (to show that she understood?).	Behavioral engagement (cognitive engagement to be checked via stimulated recall)

What is happening? (outstanding and notable moment)	Teacher's behavior	Student's behavior	Engagement dimension (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, agentic)
21:54:30 Free discussion beyond the passage	The teacher asked several questions based on the topic of today's lesson, "*Do you like keeping dogs as pets? Why or why not? What's your favorite pet?*"	Carrie thought for around half a minute and replied, "*I like dogs. They are very cute. My uncle have* (should be 'has') *a dog and I often play with it at the weekend.... My favorite pet is a cat. My mum buy* (should be 'bought') *it for me. I will play with it when I finish my homework. I like it very much.*" (with a smile on her face)	Behavioral engagement & emotional engagement (cognitive engagement to be checked via stimulated recall)
21:56:00 Summary and feedback	The teacher kept praising Carrie for a whole minute (e.g., "*I am very proud of you*", "*You always participate during the lesson and you are very attentive*", "*Great job*", "*I love you*", etc) and offered feedback on today's performance (e.g., "*You mispronounced the word 'unique'. Practice reading this word more after class.*"). Then, she ended the class.	Carrie remained silent when the teacher praised her. She murmured "*okay*" after the teacher gave feedback and said "*bye bye*" in the end.	No sign of any dimension of engagement

Notes.

1. Most of the notes taken during the class observation are about behavioral engagement, since other dimensions can hardly be seen through observation. Other dimensions of engagement were investigated by means of stimulated recalls and interviews.

2. Words in italics are original words said by the teacher/Carrie, but repetition, redundancy (e.g., well, hmm) and pauses between words were removed.

Appendix B. Prompts for Stimulated Recalls

(a) For Carrie

Note: The lesson we chose took place on December 6, 2019, the topic of which was "my favorite pet."

(06:45 The teacher presented part of a passage where the opinion that dogs are humans' friends was included and asked whether Carrie agreed or not.) Did you really agree with the opinion? Why didn't you say much about it in that class except "yes"?

(08:30 Carrie asked the teacher how to read the word "unique" and then read the passage out loud.) Did you know the meaning of "unique"? When you were reading, did you try to understand the meaning of the whole passage?

(16:45 The teacher explained the new words.) Did you memorize these new words at that time? How did you memorize their pronunciation, meaning, and spelling?

(20:45 The teacher presented the model answers without giving Carrie the opportunity to answer on her own.) Did you ponder over how to answer the questions after the teacher posted them?

(26:00 The teacher kept praising Carrie for a whole minute and offered feedback as well.) How did you feel after hearing the teacher's praise? What about suggestions from the teacher? How did you feel about that?

(b) For Allan

Note: The lesson we chose took place on November 25, 2019, the topic of which was "now and then (the contrast of life between the past and the present)."

(01:30 The teacher greeted Allan by saying "How are you?" and Allan answered with "Fine.") If you had answered in Chinese, would you have said more?

(16:35 The teacher explained the difference between "cook" and "bake".) Did you understand what the teacher said at that time?

(20:00 After learning the new word "how," Allan was asked to complete a sentence by filling in with "how" and he answered correctly.) How did you know that "how" was the answer?

(25:30 The teacher explained the new word "same.") Without the Chinese meaning of "same" shown on the screen, how did you know its meaning? How did you memorize its pronunciation, meaning, and spelling?

Appendix C. Questionnaire

Student Engagement Survey

Dear student,

Thank you for taking the survey. Its purpose is to understand student engagement in online EFL (English as a Foreign Language) courses for young learners in China. It includes two sections: basic information and scales about your engagement containing 20 items. There is no right or wrong answer. The collected data are only for academic research and will be kept confidential. Thank you for your cooperation!

I. Personal information

1. Age: _____
2. Grade: _____
3. The platform where you take the online course: _____
4. The name and the main contents of the course:

    _____
    _____

5. Duration of each lesson: _____
6. Lesson arrangement: _____ (e.g., once a week)

II. Scales

(Note: The "course"/"class" mentioned in the following items only refers to the online EFL course/class for young learners that you take. Please tick the box according to your actual situation.)

No.	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I listen carefully in class.					
2	I complete my homework on time.					
3	I follow the class rules (e.g., log in on the platform on time, not quit before the class ends).					
4	I actively answer questions raised by my teacher in class.					
5	I sit nicely with my eyes focusing on the screen during class.					

No.	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
6	I like taking the course.					
7	I am interested in the learning contents in the course.					
8	I feel happy when taking the course.					
9	The online classroom is a fun place to be.					
10	I feel excited when I complete a task in class.					
No.	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
11	I talk with my parents and/or classmates about what I am learning in class.					
12	I preview and/or review the contents learned in class.					
13	I take notes of the important points mentioned in class.					
14	After class, I read extra materials to gain more information about what has been taught in class.					
15	If I fail to understand something in class, I re-watch the recorded video and learn again.					
No.	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
16	I predict what the teacher is going to teach before class.					
17	I ask the teacher to clarify what I do not understand in class.					
18	I let the teacher know what I am interested in.					
19	I express my opinions in class.					
20	I put forward suggestions for the improvement of the course.					

Appendix D. Semi-structured Interview Guide

(Note: the following questions do not include all the probing questions that we added on the spot or emerged based on the participants' responses during our conversations.)

(a)   Questions for Carrie

1. Are you interested in the course? Why?
2. Why do you take the course? Did you set goals for yourself in the course?
3. Is the course helpful? What have you gained in the course?
4. What do you think of your teacher?
5. What do you do to get yourself ready for the class? During the class, do you think you listened attentively? Do you spend time on the completed lesson after class? Why?
6. Why did you use QQ to attend classes before? Which medium do you prefer, the platform or QQ? Why?
7. Compared to English classes at school, what do you think of the course online?
8. If you have the opportunity to put forward some suggestions to improve the course (including the platform, the course contents, and the teachers), what would you like to say?

(b)   Questions for Carrie's mother

1. How is Carrie's performance in English at school? At what level is her English proficiency?
2. Why did you choose this course and this platform for Carrie?
3. Are you aware of how she is engaged in the online course?

(c)   Questions for Allan

1. Are you interested in the course? Why?
2. Why do you take the course? Did you set goals for yourself in the course?
3. Is the course helpful? What have you gained in the course?
4. What do you think of your teacher?

5. What do you do to get yourself ready for the class? During the class, do you think you listened attentively? Do you spend time on the completed lessons after class? Why?
6. Do you want your mother to sit beside you when you have a class? Why or why not?
7. If you have the opportunity to put forward some suggestions to improve the course (including the platform, the course contents, and the teachers), what would you like to say?

(d)   Questions for Allan's mother

1. How is Allan's performance in English at school? At what level is his English proficiency?
2. Why did you choose this course and this platform for Allan?
3. Why do you sit beside Allan every time when he has a class?
4. Do you want Allan to continue with the course? Why or why not?

Appendix E. An Example of Coding and Themes Generation (Interview with Allan's Mother)

High-level theme	Codes	Excerpts (Original data)
Multiple roles taken by Allan's mother	Different role orientation at the workplace versus at home	*Although I am an English teacher, I seldom teach him (Allan) English.* *Anyway, I hardly put my mind upon teaching English to Allan.* *I need to look after the younger brother. He is just one year old.* *I have lots of chores to do at home, preparing for meals, cleaning the house, etc. I am really busy with these.*
	Supervise Allan	*I always sit beside him. Sometimes he does not perform well, and I need to urge him to re-concentrate on the lesson.* *I need to supervise him because he is not that well-behaved.*
	Guide Allan	*I gave him hints, like, 'What is the first word? The word starting with letter w.'* *It is hard for him to say much… I need to guide him, asking extra questions.* *Sometimes I help him say a few words.*
	Complement the online teacher	*This teacher sometimes says something that he fails to understand. ... and I needed to explain it to him.*