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Research article

Investigating Factors Affecting Student Course Engagement at University: The Case of Third Year Undergraduate EFL Students at the Department of English, University of Algiers 2

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Abstract

Issues relating to student engagement with their studies have become high on the agendas of higher education institutions both locally and globally. This paper reports on a research aiming to investigate the factors that determine student engagement in the different degree courses within a sample of 50 third year undergraduate EFL students in the Department of English, University of Algiers 2 during the first semester of the academic year 2024/2025. Data for the study were collected using a mixed questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The findings have shown that course credit, interest in course content, attendance policy, career pressure, campus environment, use of technological tools, classroom tasks, perceived usefulness of the course, assessment mode, students' rapport with the teacher, along with classroom interaction and intrinsic motivation are factors that influence student engagement. Although these factors were found to affect student engagement to greater or lesser extent, the teacher's instructional style was found to be the most determining factor. Based on the findings of this study, some suggestions are made to students, teachers, and policymakers in order to help students engage more deeply with their courses. It is recommended that future research examines the impact of such factors as intrinsic motivation, as well as interaction on student course engagement at university in more detail in order to advance related scholarship and practice in this area.

Keywords:
EFL students, factors of student engagement, student engagement, university courses

1. Introduction

Student engagement in their learning is gaining momentum in recent decades because no matter how hard teachers work to provide the learning opportunities in the classroom, meaningful learning may still not occur if the students are not willing to take advantage of these opportunities by actively engaging with and committing to their learning (Egbert, 2020). However, with the rise of mass forms of higher education (HE) at local and global levels, student engagement has become problematic now more than ever (Larson & Larson, 2013). Students today are facing the challenge of competing with thousands of other students to meet the complex demands of the job market which is looking for even more skills and attributes in college graduates. This challenge is making it harder for students to engage authentically with their studies.

Due to the complexity of the classroom system as well as the intricacy and variety of student-teacher relationships, and other factors external to the classroom, engaging students is not always guaranteed. As Mercer (2022) rightly points out, "even the most effective instructional method or technique cannot be expected to work in all situations or to engage all learners" (p. 52). Researchers have been seeking to identify factors related to high levels of student engagement at school level, but the underlying reasons for student engagement with degree courses at university level are weakly explored.

The present paper attempts to investigate the factors that influence third year students' engagement in the different degree courses in the Department of English, University of Algiers 2.

Towards this aim, a research question was devised to frame the study:

What are the factors that affect EFL student engagement with the different degree courses at third year undergraduate level?

2. Theoretical foundation

There has been a growing body of research in the last two decades about student engagement, its different dimensions, and its factors. Definitions of these key concepts are provided to set the ground for the empirical part of this study.

2.1. Defining student engagement

There appears to be a wide array of studies highlighting the importance of student engagement for the success and the continuity of the learning process (Egbert, 2020; Fredricks et al., 2004; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of consensus among researchers regarding what student engagement is and what factors influence it. Therefore, understanding the term is crucial in advancing research and practice related to student engagement.

Rooted in educational psychology, student engagement refers to the time, effort, commitment, and resources that students contribute with towards their learning (Krause & Coates, 2008). Instances of authentic student engagement at university can be found in the effort students invest in their studies, the time they spend studying, their degree of interest in the courses, as well as their adoption of good study habits (Almarghani & Mijatovic, 2017).

Student engagement can therefore be conceived of as the active participation, meaningful involvement, and persistence of students in classroom-related activities, within the curriculum or outside it, both in face-to-face and online environments, for the purpose of learning.

2.2. Dimensions of student engagement

Student engagement is acknowledged to be a multi-faceted term. Drawing on evidence from the literature and empirical studies, most theorisations of student engagement associate it to its dimensions. In this respect, three dimensions are most commonly prevalent: the behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). Yet, two other dimensions, namely the agentic and social dimensions, are also proposed (Egbert, 2020; Egbert et al., 2021).

Behavioural engagement refers to students' participation in their own learning through actions (Sinatra et al., 2015). This includes students' participation, effort, persistence, and obedience to classroom rules (Fredricks et al., 2016). *Emotional engagement* relates to students' reactions to the tasks, teachers, or peers. This can be detected through their level of interest and enthusiasm, and their sense of boredom or anxiety (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kong et al., 2003). It can also refer to the students' identification with the educational institution or the subject domains (Fredricks et al., 2016). *Cognitive engagement* is closely related to students' attention and thinking (Philp & Duchesne, 2016), mental processing (Egbert et al., 2021) and students' effort to use cognitive learning strategies and self-regulation (Sun & Rueda, 2012; Appleton et al., 2006). It draws on the idea of student's investment in comprehending complex ideas and mastering difficult skills (Fredricks et al., 2004). As for *agentic engagement*, Egbert et al. (2021) assert that "[w]hile cognitive indicators address mental processes, this indicator focuses on student action upon the learning activities" (p. 14). This means that the students embrace a proactive approach towards learning by taking initiative, making constructive contributions to the flow of the learning activity, and expressing preferences so that the teacher calibrates the lesson in a direction that is more relevant to their interests and goals (Reeve, 2012; Reeve & Shin, 2020). At last, *social engagement* can be detected through students' prosocial behavior in the classroom or outside it through interactions and collaborations with peers around instructional content (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2016; Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

In short, a fuller appreciation of student engagement should imply that students are behaviourally involved, show high levels of cognitive awareness, and are emotionally and socially invested in the activity, and are proactively orienting the teacher towards their learning needs.

2.3. Factors affecting student engagement

Whether or not students engage in a course, and the degree to which they engage in it is dependent on a multiplicity of factors, which operate at six levels: course-level, teacher-level, student-level, classroom-level, task-level, and institution-level. A brief account of these factors is provided below.

2.3.1. Course credit

The credits the students expect to accumulate in a course have been stated to affect student engagement. Rust (2002) claims that students at university study strategically; they often choose to engage seriously with tasks if they receive credits on them. This strategic approach that students may take towards their learning has been highlighted by Caulfield's (2010) study which revealed that students were less likely to complete assignments which accounted for a low percentage of the overall course grade.

2.3.2. Interest in course content

According to a study by Günüç and Kuzu (2014), many of the respondents reported that interest in the course was one of the two essential factors that lead to their engagement with the course, the other factor being the teacher.

2.3.3. Perceived usefulness of the course

According to a longitudinal study by Fan et al. (2021), it is the relevance and quality of the course content material that seem to favorably affect student engagement, rather than the quantity. This study also revealed that course content that is not perceived as applicable to real life, and thus useful, may even decrease student engagement.

2.3.4. Teacher's instructional style

Teacher's instructional style has been acknowledged as a determining factor in student engagement. This refers to a stable pattern in a teacher's method of teaching, classroom management, and interaction with students (Schultz, 1982, as cited in Jang et al., 2010). Klem and Connell (2004) stress the role of teacher support in engaging students at school. Likewise, DeVito's (2016) investigation further revealed that a teacher's style which provides autonomy support and clear structure of the learning activity was found to boost engagement. Furthermore, Günüç and Kuzu (2014) concluded that regardless of whether the student liked the teacher or not, the method s/he uses in class was found to be a significant factor for their engagement, which is also supported by Groves et al. (2015) whose findings concurred with the crucial role of the lecturer's way of teaching in student engagement, which can extend to making the subject interesting.

2.3.5. Students' rapport with the teacher

A study by Shakki (2022) revealed that students' L2 engagement can be positively predicted by teacher-student rapport, which was also supported by Derakhshan et al. (2022, as cited in Shakki, 2022) who concluded that a close teacher-student relationship, built on respect and trust, can dramatically predict language learners' academic engagement. However, a study by Estepp and Roberts (2015) indicated a much stronger relationship between teacher-student rapport and motivation than with engagement which may correspond to the idea that motivation is the gateway to academic engagement.

2.3.6. Motivation

Described by Hiromori (2021) as "an antecedent or precursor of engagement" (p. 88), motivation has been recognised to play a substantial role in student engagement. For example, Saeed and Zyngier's (2012) study revealed that students who are intrinsically motivated are more engaged in their learning than students who are not intrinsically motivated. Similarly, intrinsic motivation has been found to lead to engagement by Wigfield and Wagner (2005, as cited in Singh et al., 2022). In the same vein, Appleton et al. (2006) assert that motivation can be seen as an antecedent, which is an influential but insufficient condition for student engagement.

Nevertheless, with the changing roles of the teacher from a "sage on the stage" to a "guide on the side" (Morrison, 2014, p. 1), learners' contribution to their own learning has become indispensable. As Witkowski and Cornell (2015) rightly remark, "It is their responsibility to learn as much as it is our responsibility to teach". (p. 63).

2.3.7. Interaction with peers and teachers

The student's connection or disconjunction with their peers and teachers was reported to affect their engagement favourably or adversely (Egbert, 2020; Kahn, 2014; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). For Wang et al. (2022), of the factors affecting student engagement, including in online contexts, interaction is a key influencer as it drives students to construct meaning individually and with their peers or teachers. Kuh and Hu (2001) reported that the interpersonal interaction of college students with faculty members positively influenced student effort related to educationally purposeful learning activities.

2.3.8. Assessment mode or procedure

Assessment is also said to affect student engagement (Sambell, 2013; Sebbah, 2021; Yerboub & Bensemmane, 2024). Sambell (2013) explains that formative assessment can play an important role in supporting or obstructing students' degrees of engagement with academic study and their experience of belonging at university. She also argues that for students to be committed to their learning, they have to be enabled to do assessment by accompanying them in their assessment literacy. In the shifting technological landscape, Sebbah's (2021) investigation of second year EFL degree students' perceptions of continuous formative assessment (CFA) in a blended writing class concluded that the timely feedback, which was given either onsite or online, helped engaging the students in the learning process.

2.3.9. Typology of classroom tasks

There is a general belief that the nature of the task the students are assigned can enhance their engagement (Mitchell & Carbone, 2011). For example, Doyle (1983) suggests that tasks influence learners by "directing their attention to particular aspects of content and by specifying ways of

processing information." (p. 6). Thus, unless the assigned tasks are engaging enough for students, they would not be willing to invest time and effort on them.

It has been argued that students engage deeply with classroom activities when they make meaningful connections to the material as these connections "blur the line between classroom and community" (Perry, 2022, p. 1312). This claim is supported by Newman et al. (1992, as cited in Shernoff et al., 2003) and Egbert (2020) who highlight that students are more likely to be engaged with authentic academic work that is relevant to real life problems. Caulfield (2010) further adds that students are more likely to complete tasks which are applicable to their lives, even when they are difficult.

2.3.10. Use of technological tools in teaching

The use of technology inside or outside the foreign language classroom has been found to extend substantially the set of approaches a teacher may employ to engage students both onsite and online settings. A study by DeVito (2016) showed that the participants were more engaged by in-class tasks involving the use of computers. Besides, technology was reported to positively affect teacher-student communication via online teaching channels. A study conducted by Parkin et al. (2012, as cited in DeVito, 2016) revealed that the posting of grades and feedback online helped students to take ownership of their learning, and thus encouraged them to set personal goals and to plan ahead, which attests to their agentic engagement.

2.3.11. Attendance policy

There is an ongoing debate over class attendance at university and its impact on student engagement. On the one hand, compulsory attendance rules are seen as promoting higher levels of engagement by many student engagement supporters (e.g. Corbin et al., 2010) mainly because of its positive impact on student achievement. On the other hand, they are viewed as a form of infantilisation (e.g. Macfarlane, 2013), which prevents students from making informed choices especially at HE level, which is normally a "voluntary phase involving the teaching of adults (rather than children)" (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 16). These rules can affect the students' emotional engagement.

2.3.12. Career/Employability pressure

The effect of career thinking on student engagement at university has been underexplored. Vilhjalmsdottir (2010, as cited in DeSua, 2015) claims that "increased occupational thinking may promote engagement" (p. 14). Educating students about potential career opportunities and requirements may help them engage more genuinely in their learning by setting learning goals that relate classroom tasks to future professional accomplishments (DeSua, 2015). That is why, it is crucial for curriculum designers to consider the skills and attributes that employers look for in their employees when designing classroom activities (Dickinson & Griffiths, 2015).

2.3.13. Campus environment

Campus buildings and the communal spaces in the university environment are said to play a positive role on student involvement with learning (Bonfiglio, 2004). Also related to campus environment, Marx et al.'s (2016) research has shown that class sizes of less than 30 students affect student's overall course engagement positively. Likewise, campus activities are reported to emotionally engage students with their courses and to reinforce their sense of valuing of university life, as they allow them to spend out-of-class time in campus, according to Günüç and Kuzu's (2014) study. Moreover, issues threatening campus security had a negative influence on engagement (Günüç & Kuzu, 2014).

Having examined the different factors leading to student engagement in university courses, it can be concluded that these factors can have varying degrees of influence on different students. That is why, identifying these factors and the way in which they influence Algerian EFL undergraduate students sounds crucial.

3. Research methodology

To answer the research question of the present paper, a descriptive study involving a mixed-methods research design was conducted in the Department of English at the University of Algiers 2. The study consists of two variables: one dependent variable, which is student engagement, and one independent variable, which is the factors determining student engagement.

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 50 third year undergraduate students reading for a Licence (Bachelor's) degree in English. They were 11 males and 39 females aged between 20 and 37, with one participant holding a university degree in another speciality. The choice of this particular level was motivated by the fact that these students had already completed two years of undergraduate studies, and

may thus have more experience on campus than novice students. Of the 50 participants, 4 (3 females and 1 male) participated in the follow-up interviews.

3.2. Data collection tools

Two research instruments were used in the present study: a mixed-questionnaire and follow-up interviews with four students (three males and a female).

The mixed-questionnaire was meant to identify the factors determining the participants' engagement with the degree courses. It consisted of two questions preceded by a demographic information section inquiring about the participants' age, gender and the degrees they held. The first question included a closed-ended question that sought to obtain the participants' responses on a given number of factors determining their engagement in the courses; and the second was an open-ended question that intended to collect verbal responses from the participants about the suggestions they would make to improve their engagement.

The follow-up interviews, however, aimed at backing up the findings obtained from the questionnaire by digging more deeply into the participants' explanations of how the factors affected their engagement.

It is important to note that the research tools used in this investigation were piloted before their final implementation to check the clarity of the language used.

3.3. Data collection procedure

The questionnaires were administered to the participants onsite in the last week of October, 2024, i.e. a month after the beginning of the first semester of the academic year. The follow-up interviews, however, were conducted onsite about a week after the administration of the questionnaires. All the four participants consented to participate in the interviews and to be audio-recorded.

3.4. Method of data analysis

The quantitative data yielded by the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics. The follow-up interview data, along with the qualitative questionnaire data, were analysed qualitatively through content analysis.

4. Results

The results of the investigation revealed a variety of course-level, teacher-level, student-level, task-level, classroom-level, and institution-level factors contributing to varying degrees to learners' engagement in university courses. These results are presented in two sub-sections.

4.1. Presentation of the questionnaire results

The data obtained from the first question of the questionnaire are presented in the table 1. A brief analysis of the table is provided later to highlight major or intriguing findings.

Table 1
Factors affecting student course engagement (in descending order)

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Teacher's instructional style	42	**84%**
Course credit	34	**68%**
Interest in course content	31	**62%**
Career/Employability pressure	26	**52%**
Campus environment (infrastructure, facilities, activities)	25	**50%**
Attendance policy (compulsory/non-compulsory)	25	**50%**
Use of technological tools (phones, computers, online platforms)	21	**42%**
Typology of classroom activities and tasks	19	**38%**
Perceived usefulness of the course	18	**36%**
Assessment mode or procedure	12	**24%**
Rapport with the teacher	11	**22%**
Other factors: - Homework assignment	1	**2%**
- Timetabling of the class-	1	**2%**

(Total number of participants= 50)

As can be seen in table 1, the leading factor behind the participants' course engagement is the teacher's instructional style as indicated by the majority of the responses (84%), followed by course-related factors as the credit of the course and the student's interest in the content of the course with 68% and 62% of the responses respectively. Statistically significant as well are institutional factors like employability pressure with more than half of the responses (52%), and campus environment and attendance rules with both half of the responses (50%). With regard to other course or classroom-related factors, 42% of the respondents reported the use of technological tools in the classroom as an engagement factor, and 38% referred to the types of classroom tasks used in the course, while 36% of them pointed to the perceived usefulness of the course content. Nevertheless, assessment mode and procedure was reported by nearly a quarter of the participants (24%), which is still a non-negligible percentage. Yet, another teacher-related factor, namely the student's rapport with the teacher, was checked by 22% of the respondents. Two other factors were added by two of the participants, and they included the assignment of homework by the teacher which encourages the student to practise

(N=1), and the afternoon classes that make the student less engaged (N=1).

In the second question, the students were requested to make pedagogical suggestions that would help increase their course engagement. Given that the data obtained from this question is qualitative in nature, content analysis was used to analyse them. After a careful reading and examination of the respondents' verbal responses, emerging themes were sorted out and corresponding responses were reported verbatim. The findings of this question are presented in table 2.

Table 2
Student's suggestions for more student course engagement

Theme	Participants' verbatim responses	Frequency
Institution-related suggestions	*"University must provide students with more comfortable seats."* **(P1)** *"Using more technological tools may help students with the courses more flexibly."* **(P2)** *"We need more security on campus."* **(P3)** *"Improve university environment, provide necessary things for teachers and students for better learning."* **(P4)** *"The university clubs should play a more engaging role. There are maybe two or three clubs, but they are always doing the same thing. It's very repetitive….always the same over-consumed topics."* **(P4)** *"Even the movie projections we have once week…. It's always movies that are not intellectual. Movies that you could find on any TV channel on a random evening."* **(P4)** *"I think they should start marketing useful content on campus and to encourage students make useful content. It's the age of content creation and content consumption."* **(P4)** *"I think the most important thing to increase student engagement is the time of the courses. Most of the time we are studying in the afternoon and this is not suitable for the people who live far."* **(P5)** *"Reduce gaps between sessions so that students don't skip classes."* **(P6)** *"Do not make attendance compulsory."* **(P6; P7)** *"Teachers should not oblige students to attend all the classes."* **(P8)** *"I would offer them an easy transportation because everyone has the right to go comfortably to university and to comeback home comfortably."* **(P9)** *"I suggest using data-shows for teachers to explain for students."* **(P10)** *"Lack of transportation, lack of bathrooms is an issue."* **(P4)** *"I suggest to the higher authorities to give more importance to the facilities and infrastructure because it affects the engagement of students deeply."* **(P11)**	**20**
Teacher-related suggestions	*"Teachers should encourage students through their studies."* **(P11; P12)** *"Creating a bond between the teachers and the students is very helpful to increase the students' motivation and engagement. They feel that they are working together and benefitting from each other, instead of feeling that they are against each other."* **(P13)** *"If the teacher was harsh, this will lead me to avoid his classes. Teachers need to be a bit tolerant and give the chance to students to make mistakes."* **(P14)** *"Teachers should use methods other than standing up and talking for one and a half hour. It gets boring quickly."* **(P15; P16; P17; P18)** *"Teachers should be more understanding because some students are struggling with their situation and this affects their focusing."* **(P19; P20; P21)** *"Teachers need to comprehend that some modules can be difficult to handle. They should be more understanding."* **(P22)** *"I suggest class discussions as they are enjoyable."* **(P23)** *"Teachers sharing their experiences will help students in their learning journey."* **(P24)**	**14**
Student-related suggestions	*"I would suggest that students prepare lessons that teachers send before class."* **(P1; P25)** *"I suggest for students to be more committed."* **(P25)** *"Students should always choose the studies they like before studying something you are forced to because this will officially decrease your engagement."* **(P26)** *"I suggest students cooperate together. It will be less stressful."* **(P11; P27)** *"Students should make more efforts to understand all the courses."* **(P13; P28)** *"I suggest for students to give the time and effort for each course."* **(P29; P30)**	**11**

Table 2 illustrates the suggestions made by some participants. Three major themes emerged after the analysis.

The first theme is labeled "*institution-related suggestions*". Herein, the participants suggested that the campus environment needs to be made more inviting for the students to enable them engage with their studies at university. This can be achieved, according to the participants, through investing more on modern facilities, technological tools, and means of transportation (P1, P2, P3, P4, P9, P10, and P11). Besides, as highlighted by P4 above, the current university clubs should play a more efficient role by promoting more creative and thought-provoking content, and the university should encourage students

to make useful content. The revision of compulsory-attendance rules and the rescheduling of some courses were also suggested by P5, P6, P7, and P8.

The second theme is labeled "*teacher-related suggestions*". A common suggestion expressed by the participants is that teachers need to develop a closer relationship with their students in order to enhance the teacher-student rapport (P11, P12, P13, P14, P19, P20, P21, and P24). This, they claimed, can help them avoid confrontational attitudes that can disengage them from the courses. In addition, they recommend teachers to put more efforts into making their lesson delivery approach less controlling and more interactive (P15, P16, P17, and P18).

The last theme of this question is titled "*student-related suggestions*". The participants recommended that students be more committed and make more efforts to understand their lessons (P13, P25, P28, P29, and P30). They also suggested lesson preparation and group work strategies which can help them in understanding and in connecting more with course content (P11 and P25).

4.1. Presentation of the follow-up interview results

In order to protect respondent confidentiality and to avoid compromising their identities, the real names of the interviewees are replaced with the pseudonyms Leila (19 years old), Amine (19 years old), Youcef (20 years old), and Riad (20 years old).

The analysis of the qualitative interview data allowed us to identify eight themes related to the factors contributing to the participants' course engagement: *1) The teacher's instructional style; 2) Interest in course content; 3) Rapport with the teacher; 4) Classroom interaction with peers and teachers; 5) Course credit; 6) Attendance policy; 7) Career/Employability pressure; and 8) Intrinsic motivation.* It should be noted that the themes of "*classroom interaction with peers and teachers*" and "*intrinsic motivation*" emerged only in the analysis of the interview data.

Theme 01: *The teacher's instructional style*

This factor was reported as one of the top factors by three interviewees, namely Riad, Youcef, and Amine. The following statements illustrate their views more clearly.

Riad: *"If the teacher just reads from the paper, I'm not engaged."*

Youcef: *"The way the teacher teaches it is what engages me in the course. I think some teachers kwow how to make the lesson interesting. The problem is when the teacher reads from the paper, and when she finishes to read, it's over. She moves to something else, without any explanation."*

Youcef also highlighted the powerful impact of the teacher's method on how the students perceive course content:

"If the content of the course is not interesting to me, to be honest, I want the teacher to sell it to me. If the teacher is competent and doing a good job, I would engage with the course even if the teacher is distant."

The significance of this quote lies in its ability to shed light on the overarching role of teacher in the classroom, which can expand to its impactful effect on the content of instruction, as Leila also remarked:

"I would love to see the teacher attract the students' attention but also engage them in classroom activities in which there is class discussion."

Nonetheless, the following statements by Amine emphasises another aspect of the relationship between the teacher and student engagement.

Amine: *"Sometimes I feel like the teacher doesn't know the way that will make the idea enter my head. If the teacher's method is not into my liking I will be less engaged."*

This extract reveals that while Riad and Youcef agree that the teacher's instructional style can determine their engagement in or disengagement from the course in a radical way, Amine's view is less radical as it relates to the degree and intensity of the engagement in a course, rather than the decision to engage or disengage in it.

Theme 02: *Course credit*

The comments made by the participants regarding the impact of course credit on their engagement with a course are illustrated below.

Riad: *"Because of the credit, I can force myself even if I don't like the teacher, to attend the class just because I need the credits."*

Youcef: *"When a course's credit is high, we give it more attention compared to the other courses."*

These statements come to reinforce the view that students usually have a strategic approach towards their studies.

Theme 03: *Interest in course content*

Three of the interviewees stated that the content of the course helps them engage more deeply with the course when it is interesting:

Leila: *"(…) for example in the writing module, when the same course is just repeating itself, it becomes boring at some point. You may lose interest."*

Youcef: *"I think if the content is something new, we want to know more. We ask questions. We are curious and interested."*

Amine: *"The content of a course is a determining factor for me. If this is missing, I would be a bit out."*

The last quote may suggest the relatively dominating nature of the interesting content factor on the respondent's course engagement experience.

Theme 04: *Career/Employability pressure*

Another factor that was reported to affect the participants' engagement is career thinking. The following statements clarify how the respondents perceived its effect.

Leila considered it as impacting her engagement negatively when she said,

"It's the confusion about future career that decreases my engagement. I sometimes want to pursue a university career, then think about working in foreign relationships. I have no idea about what I actually want to do."

Conversely, Riad stressed that it plays a facilitative role in a particular course:

Riad: *"I am for example engaged in the Didactics course because it teaches me how to teach. I am already teaching, so it's useful for me."*

Theme 05: *Attendance policy*

As for the compulsory attendance rules, the participants Riad and Youcef highlighted their negative effect on their course engagement by saying:

Riad: *"If the teacher is not very strict about attendance, I would attend. I wouldn't miss his course on purpose. But if the teacher, on the other hand, is strict about it, my engagement would decrease and, out of pride, I wouldn't go to his class."*

Youcef: *"We, as students, we like to break the rules."*

Theme 06: *Rapport with the teacher*

The relationship between the teacher and the student has been reported to play an important role in the participants' desire to attend a course. Their comments in relation to this factor are the following:

Riad: *"I have the desire and will to attend the class just because sometimes the teacher is inviting. If I learn something, I'd rather learn it with a nice teacher. When the teacher is friendly and kwows how to set the barrier respectfully, the course becomes engaging."*

Youcef: *"It is engaging when the teacher knows how much attention she needs to give to someone. When we see that the teacher is passionate, we help her give her lesson."*

He also emphasised that,

"The engagement needs to be both ways. The teacher needs to be as engaged as the students."

This last comment becomes very insightful when we understand the reciprocal nature of the teaching and learning process, in which the teacher has to play the initiating part.

Theme 07: *Classroom interaction with peers and teachers*

As far as this theme is concerned, Leila referred to the presence or absence of interactivity in the classroom as the most determining factor for her course engagement by stating that,

"What engages me is the classroom atmosphere with the students and the teacher".

On the one hand, she stressed the role of the peers in the interaction by saying,

"(…) when it's a speaking class, the teacher discusses a certain topic, I would love to listen to other people's opinion regarding that topic since I don't really like to be the only person talking. If the students are very passive, I'd rather stay at home than come here to just listen to nothing. I feel very uncomfortable speaking when the atmosphere is awkward and quiet."

On other hand, Leila emphasized the role of the teacher as a partner in the interaction,

"I think personally that if you're just reading from the paper, I could just do it at home…alone. Especially nowadays that we have internet and AI tools. You have the handout, you can just ask the AI for elaboration on the topic. There is no added value from the part of the teacher."

She suggested a more interactive approach from the teacher, as she pointed out,

"What actually may help my engagement would be, for example, when the teacher asks questions, when the teacher tries to keep up with the students' attention because in our generation, we all have a problem focusing, and that's all because of ...you know...short content that we consume in daily life. When the teacher is just reading, you lose your attention. You're just being a passive consumer of the course in this situation."

In the same vein, another participant, Amine, seems to reinforce the classroom interaction factor by declaring,

"I like to debate with others. I like to hear other people's opinion and give them my own opinion as well. Interaction is something that would increase my engagement because I like to learn from others."

Theme 08: *Intrinsic motivation*

The last factor did not emerge in the questionnaire data and it is related to the participant's intrinsic motivation to learn. This factor is explained in Leila's comment below:

"I'm the type of person who listens even when people talk about some experience or something... For other students, I think it's the lack of motivation. They are here because this is all what their average allowed them to do."

This quote highlights the personal drive the participant has for learning which stimulates her to engage with her courses.

5. Discussions

At this stage of the investigation, the questionnaire and interview data are fused in order to answer the research question.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire have shown that many of the factors identified in the literature and suggested in the questionnaire affected student course engagement in the sample surveyed, and that they vary across students. Besides, these factors were found to operate at six levels: teacher-level, student-level, course-level, classroom-level, task-level, and institution-level. These factors are discussed in the order of their frequency in the participants' responses.

The questionnaire data revealed that the most predictive factor for the participants' engagement in university courses was the teacher's instructional style as it strongly affected the degree to which they are willing to make efforts, interact with their peers or the teacher over course content, which are often indicators of the behavioural, affective, social, and agentic dimensions of engagement. This finding is supported by Groves et al. (2015) whose research findings converged toward the dominant role the teacher played in the participants' engagement, compared to other factors like student motivation and agency, interaction with peers, institutional support, active citizenship, and family support.

The participants complained about teachers who read the lecture handout without any explanation as this leaves little room for learning and reduces them to passive consumers of the course content. The interactivity in a teacher's pattern of lesson delivery may also overlap with the classroom interaction factor in general, which is also reported by the interviewees to affect their engagement. This is supported by Kuh and Hu (2001) who claim that the interaction of students with their teachers at university can boost them to make more efforts in their studies.

In addition, the participants emphasised the autonomy-supportive and the structuring role of the teacher, which aligns with DeVito's (2016) research findings. This can suggest that the less the teacher is controlling and the less s/he is chaotic in his teaching style, the more the students are engaged.

Some participants extended the importance of the teacher's method to the fact that it could even help them overcome other disengaging factors like uninteresting course content or lack of rapport with the teacher. This finding is congruent with Groves et al.'s (2015) research which highlights the power a teacher's delivery way has on making the lecture content more interesting. In the same respect, Günüç and Kuzu's (2014) findings suggest that the way the teacher delivers the lesson was found to be a significant factor for student engagement regardless of whether the former is to the student's liking.

The second factor in the order of frequency was course credit. This factor seems to affect the participants' course engagement significantly. The participants stated that because of the high credits they can score in some courses, they tend to be more engaged in them, compared to low credit courses. This can be related to fact that the students at university study strategically. This corroborates Caulfield's (2010) study which emphasized the students' unlikeliness to complete tasks which are not contributing much to the overall course grade. Worthy of note is that this strategic approach may sometimes lead students to engage in a course despite their lack

of rapport with the teacher, which can be one of their self-regulation strategies.

The third factor affecting the participants' engagement is the interest in the course content. The participants reported that they may lose interest when the content of a course is repetitive. But when the content is new, it usually triggers their curiosity. One of the participants reported being engaged essentially in courses involving content that is appealing to him. Günüç and Kuzu's (2014) study supports this view as some participants regarded interest in the course as a crucial engagement factor.

The fourth factor reported is the employability pressure. The participants' views were divergent with regard to this factor. While one of the participants said that this affected her negatively because she is still indecisive about her future career, the other said it affected him positively as he is already working as a teacher. This reinforces Vilhjalmsdottir's (2010, as cited in DeSua, 2015) claim that students who have employability thoughts may engage better with their courses.

Campus environment is the fifth factor reported by the participants. The qualitative data from the questionnaire revealed some participants' dissatisfaction with the overall campus environment which may prevent them from engaging with their courses fully. Issues like insufficient university buses, lack of communal spaces and technological tools, lack of efficient and innovative club activities, and lack of security on campus do not make it easy for students to connect with the university. These campus-related factors have been reported to affect student engagement positively or negatively (Bonfiglio, 2004; Marx et al.'s, 2016; Günüç & Kuzu, 2014).

The sixth factor related to the participants' course engagement is the attendance policy. Compulsory attendance rules, according to the participants interviewed, have a disengaging effect on them at emotional level. This is due to the fact that they do not want to be forced to attend classes. In this respect, Macfarlane (2013) sees compulsory-attendance policies as a form of infantilisation, which denies the students' right of making informed choices.

The seventh factor is the use of technological tools. According to the participants' comments in the questionnaire, the use of modern technology can help make the learning more flexible. DeVito (2016) points out that students are more engaged by in-class activities involving the use of digital devices. Yet, to date, the debate over whether technology plays an engaging role is still ongoing.

The typology of classroom activities is the eighth factor affecting the participants' course engagement. The interviewees highlighted that classroom tasks involving classroom interaction are very engaging for them in the course. This interaction is needed to understand the course content and to develop open-mindedness and critical thinking. The presence or absence of interactivity in the classroom was the most determining factor of course engagement for one of the interviewees. This is in line with Wang et al. (2022) and Egbert (2020) who view interaction as a fundamental factor because it enables students to construct meaning with their peers or teachers.

The ninth factor reported is the perceived usefulness of the course content. Although it is not considered as a determining factor by the majority of the students, it can still contribute to the degree of course engagement. Implied in a participants' justification in relating to career pressure, it was seen as positively affecting course engagement. As confirmed by Fan et al. (2021), it is the relevance of the course content that seems to positively affect student engagement, rather than its quantity.

The last two factors of course engagement reported by the participants are assessment mode or procedure and rapport with the teacher. These two factors do not seem to have a significant impact on student engagement. Yet, the participants in the interview pointed that the relationship between the teacher and the student can play an important role in the participants' desire to attend and focus in a course, which is consistent with Shakki (2022) and Derakhshan et al. (2022).

Two other factors, which were not initially investigated in the questionnaire, were revealed by the qualitative interview data: intrinsic motivation and classroom interaction with peers and teachers. Intrinsic motivation was seen as the drive behind one of the participants' engagement in her courses as she looks at any course as a potential opportunity of learning. In this respect, Appleton et al. (2006) posit that motivation can be an influential but insufficient condition for student engagement. As for the interaction with peers and the teacher, this participant expressed the view that the absence of classroom interaction, specifically with peers, is more likely to disengage her from a course than other factors. This is related to the fact that students' passivity makes her participation awkward, in addition to the fact that she

wants to exchange opinions with others, which is also enmphasised by another participant. This view is also supported by Egbert et al. (2021) who affirm that social interaction is one of the most fundamental facilitators of engagement as it allows students to process language input and produce output, to negotiate meaning and form, and to establish new identities.

When examining the quantitative questionnaire data, factors like employability pressure, campus environment, and attendance policy had a lower frequency rate compared to the top three course engagement factors mentioned above. Yet, these two factors still have some statistical significance, and thus they are worth considering.

6. Conclusions

Engaging students in university courses is a complex issue that involves many parties: students, teachers, and policy makers. Engagement is often claimed to result from the interplay between the factors leading to it. Triggered by this view, the main aim of this study was to investigate the factors determining undergraduate EFL students' engagement with their university courses. To this end, a mixed-methods research design was used to conduct the investigation with a sample of 50 third year undergraduate students majoring in an English Licence degree at the Department of English in the University of Algiers 2.

The results indicated that the factors that influenced student engagement in the context of the conducted study operate at six different levels: teacher-level, student-level, course-level, classroom-level, task-level, and institution-level. Of these factors, the teacher's instructional style, course credit, and the interest in course content were found to be the most prevailing course engagement factors among the participants, and assessment mode and procedure and rapport with the teacher were the least cited factors. Each of these factors was found to affect to greater or lesser extent students' desire to invest effort in their courses, yet all the factors reported by the participants in the investigation corroborated those acknowledged by prior research reviewed in the theoretical background of the study.

This study looks forward to support and extend the existing body of research on student engagement. It suggests that in order to promote student engagement, it is necessary to develop interventions that address each of the outlined factors. This can be achieved by encouraging good teacher-student relationships, implementing more relevant and more interactive learning activities, involving students in course evaluation and design, harnessing the potential of hybrid instruction and assessment, reviewing attendance policy, and improving the facilities and the security on the campus. One thing worthy of note is that the enhancement of student engagement may require from teachers and other stakeholders to act upon teaching more agentically, but the fact remains that students too have to adopt a more proactive role towards their learning and to take responsibility for it. Teachers, students, and policymakers are all accountable for the success or failure of the student engagement mission. Given that the factors of intrinsic motivation and social interaction with peers and teachers were revealed inadvertently by the qualitative data of this research, and thus were not measured quantitatively, it would be more insightful to account for them in future research.

Authors note:

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