



## **Exploring EFL Learners' Engagement and Disengagement in Synchronous Online Classes**

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### **Abstract**

*Notwithstanding the benefits online learning offers, some technical and educational problems still exist. One of the recent issues is the quality of learners' engagement in synchronous online classes. Student engagement in the context of online education pertains to the amount of time and effort that students invest in the learning process conducted online. It is one of the pivotal constructs that, if enhanced, may encourage students to stay on the courses and if ignored may lead to students' dropping out. However, keeping students engaged is arduous because of the distractions that technology-mediated learning may cause. This study uses a survey and a semi-structured interview to examine EFL learners' engagement characteristics in online courses and the reasons for their disengagement. The participants included 120 EFL learners, with the age range of 15-18, in a popular English Institute. Dixon's Online Student Engagement Scale (OSE) was used to collect data. The questionnaire included four categories: skill engagement, emotional engagement, participation engagement, and performance engagement. Having been gathered, the data was transferred to SPSS 17.0 for statistical analysis. 18 volunteers from among the participants were invited to be interviewed. The results of the quantitative analysis revealed that all engagement types were rated as average by the students except for the participation engagement, which was lower than average. Five themes emerged as the result of content analysis of the data gathered through the semi-structured interviews for the reasons for the learners' disengagement in synchronous online classes: (1) Lack of close interaction with class members (2) Lack of discipline (3) Technology-related issues and (4) Unconventional learning environment. The findings might offer several practical implications for teachers, technology designers, and material developers.*

**Keywords:** *skill engagement, emotional engagement, participation engagement, performance engagement*

### **1. Introduction**

Computer-mediated education, which began before the Covid-19 pandemic, has become a crucial aspect of education due to its adaptability and the challenges faced by teachers and learners. These include lack of equitable access, absenteeism, student dropouts, lack of motivation, satisfaction, and engagement. Engagement, which encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, is crucial in education as it predicts academic achievement. In online classes, highly engaged learners are more successful in absorbing knowledge and skills.

The lack of physical contact and physical cues in online classes can lead to students being distracted or disengaged, leading to low achievement, dissatisfaction, demotivation, and ultimately, dropout. While numerous studies have investigated the links between engagement, satisfaction, and motivation, few have focused on the relationship between engagement, motivation, and satisfaction. The issue of disengagement has also received little attention from the scholarly community. This study aims to address these research gaps by applying a mixed method and obtaining data to address these research gaps.



## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

Convenience sampling was used to choose 120 intermediate and upper intermediate students from Iran Language School in Tabriz, Iran. They were enrolled in online general English courses and ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen. Following COVID-19, the school provided a combination of in-person and online instruction.

### **2.2. Instruments**

A questionnaire was used to evaluate students' engagement and satisfaction with online language learning. The scale, adopted from Dixon [1], measured skills, emotional, participation, and performance engagement. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: measuring engagement, investigating the relationship between engagement, motivation, and satisfaction, and examining attitudes toward online learning.

### **2.3. Procedures**

The questionnaire underwent pilot testing and modifications and was translated into Persian for easier comprehension. It was emailed to students during the term, and data was analyzed using SPSS 17.0. Participants were asked if they wanted to be interviewed.

## **3. Results of the Study**

### **3.1. Results of the Quantitative Study**

The students' level of engagement, motivation, and satisfaction was measured. Students were asked to respond to their engagement level by rating the linked items in the questionnaire on a scale of 1 to 10.

A score of 1 represented no involvement at all and 10 indicated complete engagement in the student's learning process. The data suggests that students' level of engagement is only moderate, with a mean score of 4.97 (SD =.86). The same rating system was used to measure the students' level of satisfaction and motivation and the results were once more below average, with a mean score of 4.27 (SD=.82).

The correlation among the three variables of satisfaction, motivation and engagement revealed a strong correlation between student engagement, motivation, and satisfaction levels, suggesting that poor engagement in online learning negatively impacts motivation and satisfaction, indicating a need for improved strategies.

The purpose of the second section of the questionnaire was to evaluate the various levels of student involvement, such as skill, emotional, participation, and performance engagement. A 5-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting not at all my characteristic and 5 denoting extremely like my characteristic, was used to score the items pertaining to this section. The survey found that students generally rated all engagement types as average, except for participation engagement, with a mean score of 4.97 on the skills, emotional, participation, and performance engagement scales, with performance engagement yielding the highest score.

### **3.2. Interview Results**

The last research question addressed the students' reasons for their disengagement in online classes. After the content analysis, four themes surfaced: (1) Insufficient communication with classmates (2) Insufficient self-discipline (3) Concerns about technology, and (4) An unconventional setting for learning.



#### Insufficient communication with classmates

Students reported that lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers hindered their engagement in class, leading to behavioral disengagement. They felt uninterested in online classes, as they didn't see their classmates or teachers, and the atmosphere was unfriendly, causing them to unconsciously feel bored and withdraw.

#### Insufficient self-discipline

60% of interviewees found online courses lacking discipline compared to face-to-face classes, leading to students engaging in irrelevant or off-task activities such as eating, homework, and shopping. Cameras are often off, limiting teacher monitoring.

#### Concerns about technology

Online classes have faced persistent technology issues, with 43% of students using cell phones, frequent notifications, internet disconnections, and poor voice quality causing disruptions and frustration.

#### An unconventional setting for learning

Online classes are increasingly popular, but students still don't take them as seriously as on-site classes. Some feel distracted and lack real classroom elements, while others feel they don't feel like they're attending a class due to home life.

### **4. Discussion**

This study aimed to investigate Iranian high school students' engagement, satisfaction, and motivation in synchronous online classes using Dixon's (2015) framework. The research found that the students' engagement level was below average, which might be due to factors such as learner internal factors (motivation, ICT skills, knowledge, self-regulation, prior ICT experience, etc.) and external factors (access to technology, usability, design, accessibility, etc.) contributing to disengagement.

The students' motivation level was also below average, possibly due to factors such as Adobe Virtual Classroom and LMS tools, which enabled real-time interaction, instant feedback, and encouragement. Lecturers' presence and instructional strategies also impacted students' motivation and participation.

Satisfaction in online classes was also below average, which may be due to factors such as sense of teaching presence, cognitive presence, course structure/organization, course length, discipline area, and social presence influencing satisfaction. The interrelationship between motivation, satisfaction, and engagement was found to be significant, with higher satisfaction leading to decreased dropout rates, increased perseverance in learning, and increased motivation to take more online courses.

The study also examined the "how" of high school students' engagement in synchronous online foreign language classes using Dixon's [1] questionnaire. The results showed that all engagement types were rated as average by the students except for participation engagement, which was lower than average. Student performance engagement yielded the highest engagement score, which is consistent with previous research.

The students' reasons for disengagement were related to both learner internal and learner external factors. They mentioned the lack of face-to-face interaction, which led to a lack of emotional and social engagement, leading to withdrawal and demotivation. This distant relationship was the main reason for their boredom and disengagement, corroborating Pawlak et al's [2] study and Wilging and Johnson [3].

Technology choice was another factor contributing to disengagement, with students using smartphones to attend class as a main distractor and behavioral disengagement due to easy access to social networks



and gaming tools. However, lack of access to the right type of technology due to high costs can also be a reason for passive attendance in the class.

The unusual learning environment, as one of the external factors, was also identified as a determining reason for behavioral disengagement. In a face-to-face classroom, students conform to rules and disciplines, while online classes often provide greater freedom and autonomy, which can be both advantageous and disadvantageous.

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