

Original Paper

Enhancing Young Learner Engagement in English Classes in Post-Pandemic Times: Current Practices at a Center of Foreign Languages in Vietnam

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Abstract

Getting learners engaged in the classroom is the desirable goal of most teachers yet it is usually the most challenging task, especially with young learners after the pandemic period as these learners responded differently to changes in course delivery and other stresses posed by the crisis. To keep young learners engaged in their learning, teachers need to implement various engaging strategies to increase learner engagement. This study aims to explore EFL teachers' evaluation of young learner engagement in the new normal compared with that before the Covid-19 pandemic. The descriptive method was employed with a group of 23 EFL teachers of young learners at a center for foreign languages in the South of Vietnam. The results revealed that the learning environment in post pandemic times is much safe and positive, and learning engagement of young learners is still much emphasized in the behavioral, affective and cognitive development. However, it is important to note that the Covid-19 pandemic has created a new opportunity for appropriate adaptations of engagement practices in classrooms. These adaptations can redefine engagement in the new normal in which teachers and learners can have more flexibility in learning modes, in interactions and in learning materials. The study can provide important information for both educators and teachers to identify and implement more engaging and interactive methods to enhance the level of learner engagement.

Keywords

Covid-19, engaging strategies, learner engagement, young learners

1. Introduction

Learner engagement is an important aspect of teaching and learning that both educators and teachers aim to develop. Research has demonstrated that engaged learners in both physical and virtual learning

environments are more likely to enjoy learning, thus stay committed to completing their courses (Rajabalee et al., 2020). There is no doubt that engagement is predictive of learners' success, and engaging young learners is more significant as literature on engagement has emphasized that children can gain better performance when they are focused and motivated. Good engagement with learning can help a child to develop skills to succeed academically and build and maintain social relationships (Kjellin & Granlund, 2006).

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a renewed need to focus on learner engagement as after almost a year of social distancing with online learning, it is reported that many learners have become more passive, have a lesser sense of social belonging, and feel disengaged from their learning (Neuwirth et al., 2021). During the lockdown, most learners changed their daily routine considerably including a significant increase in their duration of sleep, extended time of Internet use for online learning and entertainment (Ulrike et al., 2022). It is also anticipated that there was a significant decline in physical social interaction with friends and teachers (Azmat & Ahmad, 2022). A thorough examination of current situation of learner engagement after the pandemic is necessary for both teachers and institutional managers in order to implement appropriate strategies to enhance successfully. This study aims to explore EFL teachers' evaluation of young learner engagement in the new normal compared with that before the Covid-19 pandemic. The results will serve as a foundation for implementing appropriate classroom strategies for enhancing learner engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Learner Engagement and Its Characteristics

In general context in education, learner engagement refers to the level of active involvement in their courses through various measurable activities like completing assignments, participating in class activities, and producing good performance like test scores (Ali & Hassan, 2018). For a course to be successful, learners should be fully engaged. The concept of learner engagement is based on the belief that learning improves when students are interested and motivated (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012).

Learner engagement is a multidimensional concept, meaning that there are different types of engagement. Conventionally, learner engagement can be divided into three types consisting of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement (Hiver et al., 2021). Behavioral engagement is easily observable, referring to learners' active involvement and participation in learning activities. Some typical example of learners' behavioral engagement may include frequency of class attendance, frequency of asking question in class, and frequency of pair or group participation (Latipah, 2020). Affective engagement referring to learners' emotional reactions is personal attitudes learners may have towards their school, classroom, classmates, and teachers. Common examples of this type of engagement may include the learners' desire or motivation to participate in class activities, tendency to be prepared for class, and effort to work to meet teachers' expectations (Mandernach, 2015). The last type of learner engagement is cognitive engagement which includes typical features such as

self-regulated learning, task focus, and the amount of efforts in mastering new knowledge and skills (Li, 2021).

It is worthy to note that these three types of engagement are closely linked and mutually benefited. When learners can build a good relationship with their teachers and classmates and feel a sense of belonging towards their class (affective engagement), they may be more likely to participate in class activities (behavioral engagement), and over time this can lead to a stronger commitment and investment in their learning (cognitive engagement). Teachers, therefore, should be aware of these behavioral, affective, and cognitive types of engagement to enhance learners' active learning process.

2.2 Learner Engagement During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

During the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic and the implementation of social distancing across the country for the past two years, most educational institutions quickly shifted from onsite classrooms to online teaching and learning. This emergency learning environment significantly changed the way in which students communicated, engaged, and learned as learners were not completely ready for the new mode of learning (Xie, 2021). Also, the added stress of the pandemic caused many learners to disengage from overall academic activities; therefore, engaging students became a major challenge during and after the pandemic crisis. According to a report with teachers and students by the Education Week Research Center (2021), learners' motivation and morale after the pandemic were significantly lower than they were prior to the pandemic. In this self-report, students reported less motivation (50%) and lower morale (49%) as compared to their motivation and morale before the pandemic period. As for teachers' report, an even larger majority of teachers perceived less student motivation (87%) and lower student morale (82%).

2.3 Measurement of Learner Engagement

A common way to measure engagement of learners is to simply record or observe how they participate in the classroom (Mandernach, 2015). There are a number of observable indicators that provide a quick, visual assessment of learners' level of engagement in a given course. Based on the characteristics of the three types of engagement, teachers may informally monitor learners' behaviors in response to various instructional strategies within a given class.

3. Method

3.1 Research Context and Research Aims

The Center of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University (hereafter referred to as the Center or CFL) has provided two major programs of General English for adult learners and General English for young learners. Currently there are 51 children's classes of three levels from young kids, kids and teenagers. The children's classes meet two times per week, on Saturday and Sunday in the morning or afternoon. The class size is relatively small, ranging from 10 to 24 learners. The duration of each course is 9 weeks. During the social distancing period from May 2021 to January 2022, all the classes were converted from onsite to online learning, using Zoom for instructions. Since February 21, 2022,

Vietnamese government has permitted most educational institutions to settle their activities in the new normal with flexible, updated, and reformed modes of teaching and learning. The new situation of post Covid-19 pandemic has presented a need for empirical research to understand the possible changes of learner engagement characteristics in the new context.

3.2 Research Design

In the current study, the descriptive survey design with an online questionnaire on Google Form was employed with a group of EFL teachers of young learners at a center for foreign languages. The survey method is feasible as it is a relatively inexpensive research tool that can help to collect data from a large population within a limited time. A questionnaire based on the literature review of learner engagement is useful in this study because of its feasibility to deliver, respond, and produce reliable data.

3.3 Research Instrument

The teaching staff were invited to respond to an online questionnaire on the Google Form. There were three main sections. The first section consisted of the participants' demographic information. The second section comprised 10 items of assessing learner engagement in classroom, asking the teacher participants to compare the level of learner engagement at present with that before the pandemic. Most of these items were modified based on the existing literature of learner engagement (Palia, 2021). The last section had two open questions, asking the participants to present typical challenges of online flipped learning and suggest effective ways to improve this type of learning approach.

3.4 Participants

The online survey was handed out to all teachers currently teaching groups of young learners at the Center. The basic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 23).

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	20	87%
Male	3	13%
Teaching experience		
1-2 years	5	21.7%
3-5 years	5	21.7%
More than 5 years	13	56.6%

4. Results

The results and discussion are presented based on a detailed analysis of the data resulting from the main parts of the questionnaire.

4.1 Levels of Learner Engagement

From the results shown in Table 2, the level of engagement of young learners evaluated by the teacher participants in this study was almost the same as before the pandemic in most of observed behaviors.

Table 2. Levels of Engagement (N = 23)

	Less than before the pandemic	Almost the same as before the pandemic	More than before the pandemic
• Asking questions about the lesson.	2 (8.7%)	17 (73.9%)	4 (17.4%)
• Taking good notes during the lesson.	2 (8.7%)	17 (73.9%)	4 (17.4%)
• Raising hands in class.	3 (13%)	16 (69.6%)	4 (17.4%)
• Being confident to do well in the class.	3 (13.1%)	15 (65.2%)	5 (21.7%)
• Really desiring to learn the material.	3 (13.1%)	14 (60.9%)	6 (26%)
• Participating actively in small group discussions.	4 (17.4%)	13 (56.6%)	6 (26%)
• Listening attentively in class.	5 (21.7%)	13 (56.6%)	5 (21.7%)
• Coming to class on schedule.	9 (39.1%)	12 (52.2%)	2 (8.7%)
• Having fun in class.	1 (4.4%)	11 (47.8%)	11 (47.8%)
• Helping classmates with exercises or lessons.	6 (26%)	10 (43.5%)	7 (30.5%)

With the two items “Asking questions about the lesson” and “Taking good notes during the lesson”, the young learners were recorded to engage in these activities as high as before the pandemic. It can be explainable in the way that with online learning during the pandemic, these classroom routines were frequently practiced and these young learners were familiar with teachers’ instructions.

It is an interesting fact that 39.1% of teachers in this study reported the percentage of “coming to class on schedule” in the new normal period was not as high as before the crisis. It is speculated that parents and young learners in this study were still concerned about their wellbeing due to the pandemic and

their reluctance to join onsite classes was not exceptional nationwide (Pham & Ho, 2020).

It is somewhat unexpected that almost half of the teachers reported that their young learners had fun in class more than before the pandemic. The reason can be that after long pandemic isolation, the school children were more eager to go back to school and enjoy social interaction with friends and teachers.

4.2 Suggestions of Engaging Activities

In the current study, the teacher participants were invited to suggest any specific way or activity to keep the young learners more engaged. The suggestions of engaging strategies were various and can be classified into several key themes including using games and engaging activities, asking questions, organizing collaborative work, applying technology in teaching, and increasing interacting activities.

It is not unexpected that most teachers were keen on the use of games as an effective tool to enhance learner engagement. The results were much in accordance with extensive literature indicating that learning or educational games can help to enhance learners' motivation and their active participation in the learning process. A game-based learning environment is proved to be practical for enhancing young learner engagement (Noem í& M áximo, 2014).

Designing games and funny activities are necessary to attract my learners to go to class everyday. Playing games and giving awards (gifts) should be emphasized for effective classroom engagement. I always organize fun game as possible as I can so that students can involve in class. I realize that students like participating mental and physical games in class instead of studying by book. Let students play some games both in individual and in team to encourage them act and work.

Another impressive way to encourage learner engagement is to ask good questions in a classroom. Good questions are usually open-ended questions which are open to answers of varying depth and complexity. It is important for teachers to engage with learners' responses even if the answer is incorrect or misinformed. The learners' efforts should be recognized and encouraged for further discussions.

To begin the lessons, I choose to elicit some guiding questions to get my learners involved. In my class, I usually ask questions to stimulate learners' thoughts. Then, I encourage them to share their ideas/answers freely (not to get worried about whether the answers are right or wrong). I suggest playing "passing the ball" among learners to encourage them to answer the questions. This activity is always fun and useful.

Using group work or collaborative learning is also a common suggestion to enhance learner engagement (Bharucha, 2017). Collaborative activities may be particularly important for young learners after the remote online learning period to help learners maintain relationships with classmates during remote learning.

My learners, especially young girls, tend to be shy and we need group work to get their involvement better. Sharing ideas is always supportive.

I let my students work in groups and promote their autonomous learning as well as possible.

Grouping techniques were also a common theme for improving learner engagement, especially with

young learners. Some common ways to assign groups can include asking the learners to count off and grouping them according to number, grouping them alphabetically by first or last name, or asking them to pull straws out of a hat. Alternatively, teachers can ask the learners to suggest various topics of their interest and group them according to their related topic preferences (Chiriac & Frykedal, 2011).

Technology is an effective tool for engaged learning, especially for the young learners in the era of digital evolution. Teachers should take advantage of technology, rather than viewing it as a distraction, to increase learner engagement (Nguyen, 2021). Appropriate use of technology in the classroom can help learners collaborate with each other more effectively and gain a deeper understanding of topics of interests (Ahmed & Ismail, 2021). In this study, some participants commented:

I make use of technology like TV or Ipad to show them more input in the visual forms.

Online quizzes or something related to Internet search are very engaging for young learners.

Classroom interaction always helps to enhance learner engagement. Respectful relationships and good interactions, either virtual or personal, are proved to improve engagement (Havik & Westergård, 2019). There is no doubt that when learners are supported and encouraged by their teachers, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their learning. In this study, the teacher participants suggested some useful interactive strategies including remembering the learners' names, listening and responding to individual class members, and recognizing the learners' efforts.

To engage my students, I should remember everyone's names and their strengths.

I've tried my best to do everything good for them.

My young learners prefer to have feedback from teachers and friends.

5. Discussion

From the results of this study, it can be assumed that the level of learner engagement in post pandemic was almost the same as that before the crisis. However, the importance of learner engagement should not be underestimated because effective engagement can predict learners' success, and it can potentially help to close learning gaps during the crisis (Nugroho et al., 2021). In the new normal, when learners can return for face-to-face instruction, teachers need to provide a balanced student engagement strategy to be effective during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. An interesting finding of this study is that some observed engagement behaviors were reported to happen rather frequently when learners are back to physical classroom such as "desiring to learn the material", "helping classmates with exercises or lessons", and "participating actively in small group discussions".

In line with a previous study on learner engagement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018), the results reassured that it is vital to develop effective classroom interactions to enhance the learner engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. Interaction and engagement are closely related and in many contexts these terms can even be used interchangeably. Learner engagement can be developed through interactions of three types: learner and teacher, learner and learner, and learner and content. It is important to note that it is teachers who can increase or decrease learner engagement. It is natural that

young learners generally need teachers who are not only responsive but supportive. The importance of teachers' role in promoting positive learner engagement in this study is much in accordance with existing literature, highlighting the teachers' responsibility in implementing engaging strategies for behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement (Pedler et al., 2020).

While engaging learners in the classroom can be important at any time, it can be especially necessary after the pandemic when the learners, especially those who have been disengaged during the pandemic, need to catch up on their learning in the new normal.

6. Recommendations

The pandemic crisis has presented numerous challenges, but also created a promising opportunity for positive change in educational world in general and in the field of learner engagement in particular. For enhancing learner engagement in the new normal, educators and teachers need to introduce appropriate practices of engagement adaptation. Good practices, introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, can be continuously applied in the new normal, but teachers need to adapt to new learning environments to foster high levels of learner engagement and importantly, bring joy back into the classroom. The following practices such as adapting to new teaching mode, establishing a positive learning environment, and fostering collaborative learning are worth adapting to ignite learner engagement in the post-Covid-19 crisis.

Adapting to new teaching mode in the new normal is necessary as the combination of both onsite and online courses can be widely acceptable. Hyflex courses or programs are the new trend which can integrate physical instruction with virtual synchronous sessions through video conferencing software, or asynchronous content delivery.

Establishing a positive learning environment is the key to guarantee learner engagement, especially after the long period of social distancing. Young learners need a climate of safety, trust and respect, authentic conversations, and positive interactions with teachers and among friends.

Collaborative learning can help both teachers and learners work together to learn new information, explore new ideas or practice new skills. Fostering collaborative learning is always important in both physical and virtual learning, but as online or hyflex programs are mainly designed for independent learning, teachers can consider applying technology in support collaborative learning (Resta & Laferrière, 2007).

7. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the learning environment in post pandemic times is much safe and positive and learning engagement of young learners is still much emphasized in the behavioral, affective and cognitive development. However, it is important to note that the Covid-19 pandemic has created a new opportunity for appropriate adaptations of engagement practices in classrooms. These adaptations can redefine engagement in the new normal in which teachers and learners can have more

flexibility in learning modes, in interactions and in learning materials. There is certainly no going back to “before the pandemic”, and for both educators and teachers, to promote and improve the level of learner engagement, identifying and implementing more engaging and interactive methods for teaching are always recommended.

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